STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Neoliberalism and Inclusive Education

Students with Disabilities in the Education Marketplace

Sylvia Mac

NEOLIBERALISM AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In this brilliantly and beautifully researched and written book, Sylvia Mac traces the history of neoliberal reforms in education as running parallel, yet antithetical to the inclusive education movement. Fueled by disaster capitalism and the corporatization, Mac draws on DisCrit and critical disability studies to carefully and thoughtfully lay bare the illusion of school choice for minorized and disabled students. I can't wait to teach this important and timely book.

–**Beth A. Ferri**, PhD, Professor, Syracuse University

In a time of increasing movement towards privatization of schools without critical examinations of the impact of that privatization (and the subsequent standardization of notions of "success" and "achievement") on many subgroups of students, our field needs more thoughtful analyses that encourage deep interrogations of the impact of charter schools on our most vulnerable (and often most overlooked) groups of students. Dr. Sylvia Mac has written a beautiful ethnographic case study of a small charter school, exploring neoliberal ideologies as they intersect with notions of inclusivity and equity for disabled and neurodivergent students of color living in low-income situations. Her book provides important analyses of legacies of inequality throughout the histories of the school choice movement in education and the evolving frameworks for education of students with disabilities, leading to a deep analysis of ways in which ideals of equity and inclusion in a small charter school are irreconcilable with the realities of neoliberal ideas of success within a market of "choice." Dr. Mac provides important recommendations for policy makers, teacher educators, and researchers interested in best supporting historically marginalized students to truly more towards more egalitarian and supportive educational settings.

–**Betina Hsieh**, PhD, Associate Professor of Teacher Education, California State University, Long Beach

Sylvia Mac debuts the intersection of disability, inclusive education, and neoliberalism in a critical ethnographic portrayal of a small California charter school. Mac critically questions the concept of inclusion in this setting, showing that neoliberal values and inclusion are mutually exclusive. Inclusion conceals many social issues and neoliberal values,

such as independence, profit accumulation, and competition, which Mac unfolds as she shares her interviews, observations, and review of school documents. Mac deftly illustrates how free market reform has raised the ante for low-income, especially nonnative English-speaking children of color to succeed in an increasingly competitive and standardized schooling environment. We feel Santiago's abandonment by special education staff in the study skills class when he says he's "lost." The general teachers are in a similar situation without help. In the end, children who need differentiated instruction instead become deficient, instead of the system that labels them as so. *Neoliberalism and Inclusive Education* provides a poignant account of charter schooling, revealing that neoliberal values are smokescreened with cost–benefit analyses, strategic plans, and educational outcomes, manufacturing failure for the disabled.

–**Denise Blum**, PhD, Associate Professor,
Oklahoma State University

With her unfailingly trenchant analysis, Dr. Mac critiques the deployment of capital and power in the service of neoliberalism against vulnerable and underrepresented populations. She brings a critical ethnographic lens on a charter school to address how neoliberal ideology and inclusive education discourses spectacularly fail poor students of color with disabilities, addressing key gaps in what we know about how inclusive education is experienced by underrepresented students.

–**Shabana Mir**, PhD, Associate Professor,
American Islamic College, Chicago

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Series Editor: Professor Rodney Hopson, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, USA

Studies in Educational Ethnography presents original research monographs and edited volumes based on ethnographic perspectives, theories, and methodologies. Such research will advance the development of theory, practice, policy, and praxis for improving schooling and education in neighborhood, community, and global contexts.

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NEOLIBERALISM AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Students with Disabilities in the Education Marketplace

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For my little peanut, who makes me better every day and without whom, this book would not exist.

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My most sincere gratitude for my teachers and mentors, Denise Blum, Shabana Mir, and Beth Ferri, who opened the world for a simple public school teacher. They inspired me, gave me the language to articulate something I didn't know was always inside of me, and challenged me to think deeper, more critically: all the things the best teachers aspire to do. They generously gave me their time, their energy, and their support. I certainly would not be here today without them.

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Thank you to those who strengthened this work by providing thoughtful and instructive feedback and to the many scholars whose work informs mine.

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To my mother and sister, thank you for all the many ways you've supported and encouraged me. My light bulb is on now!

And, finally, to my husband, for the countless things you did to make this possible, thank you.

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PREFACE

Sylvia Mac's book, *Neoliberalism and inclusive education*, extends her foundational dissertation analysis and brings more into focus the difficulties faced by students who face realities of urban school reform and disability by juxtaposing and presenting lives and experiences of students with disabilities in systems that promise educational excellence and innovation. Especially timely, Mac's book both interrogates the one-size-fits-all educational planning and mechanisms at place in the state of California and offers nuanced ways to think about ways to approach interdisciplinary, ethnography research in schools. It presents thoughtfully carved arguments, building on theories and epistemologies in the fields of education (broadly defined), educational anthropology, urban schooling, and especially where inclusive and special education are critical vessels to situate her work.

Mac's book (Volume 17) further entrenches the movement of the *Studies in Educational Ethnography* book series from the United Kingdom (founded in the mid-2000s by Prof. Geoffrey Walford) to the United States. Walford is credited with birthing the series, and the volume has been a catalyst for ethnographic research, perspectives, and methodologies featured that would extend our understandings of sociocultural educational phenomena and their global and local meanings. Since the move to the United States, we have now published:

- Volume 13: New directions in educational ethnography: Shifts, problems, and reconstruction (Rodney Hopson, William Rodick, Akashi Kaul, eds.)
- Volume 14: Native American Bilingual Education: An ethnography of powerful forces (Cheryl Crawley)
- Volume 15: Racial inequality in mathematics education: Exploring academic identity as a sense of belonging (Thierry Elin-Saintaine)
- Volume 16: Black boys' lived and everyday experiences in STEM (KiMi Wilson)

Now located in the Quantitative and Qualitative Methodology, Measurement, and Evaluation (QUERIES), Department of Educational Psychology, the

College of Education has been the academic home to multiple traditions of research and evaluation scholarship in humanities and social sciences for decades. Just as Walford had built a community of qualitative and ethnographic researchers through venues such as through Ethnography and Education conferences initially held at St. Hilda's College and other venues such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA), we too on this side of the pond have venues to extend the scholarly work for greater discovery and engagement, such as the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) which hosts hundreds of scholars and practitioners who travel from around the world to the cornfields of Illinois or others such as the Ethnography of Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania, Council on Anthropology and Education/American Anthropological Association and the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and other associations in the United States and North America.

The primary objective of *Studies in Educational Ethnography* is to present original research monographs or edited volumes based on ethnographic perspectives, theories, and methodologies. Such research will advance the development of theory, practice, policy, and praxis for improving schooling and education in neighborhood, community, and global contexts. In complex neighborhood, community, and global contexts, educational ethnographies should situate themselves beyond isolated classrooms or single sites and concern themselves with more than narrow methodological pursuits. Rather, the ethnographic research, perspectives, and methodologies featured in this series should extend our understandings of sociocultural educational phenomena and their global and local meanings. Studying classrooms and educational communities without concomitant understanding of the dynamics of broader structural forces renders ethnographic analyses potentially incomplete. We welcome the opportunity to engage colleagues who have ideas that may contribute to our series!

Rodney Hopson, *Volume Editor*

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, California passed the Charter Schools Act, and its first charter school opened in 1993. Charter schools in the state have since grown considerably: California now has more charter schools and charter school students than any other state in the country (Network for Public Education, 2017). In the 2018–2019 school year, more than 1,300 charter schools served approximately 628,849 students, or about 10 percent of California's public school population (California Department of Education, 2020). Across the nation, more than 7,000 charter schools serve over three million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Although they represent a small number of all public schools, charters have garnered outsized attention. Celebrities from Kristen Bell to Oprah to Andre Agassi serve on charter school boards, donate millions of dollars and supplies, or open charter schools of their own.

For every charter school success story of increasing opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students, there are stories of gross mismanagement and failure. For example, in 2010, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg went on Oprah, along with then-Newark mayor Cory Booker and then-New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, to announce an investment of $100 million in creating a foundation aimed at "reforming" Newark's public schools. Other so-called venture philanthropists matched Zuckerberg's donation, giving the Foundation for Newark's Future a total of $200 million. Charter school expansion represented a major component of the foundation's reform plan with $60 million going to support charter schools. What started with incredible hope and enthusiasm ended five years later with many in the community upset and disappointed. Zuckerberg's plan to use Newark as a model to reform education in other cities did not materialize, and both Booker and Christie moved on to other political aspirations. Analyses of Newark's student achievement since the effort are mixed (Barnum, 2017).

To be sure, this example is not the norm, and there are other less flashy examples of charter schools succeeding in improving education for many students. The wide and varying results from charter schools have led to them being a hotly debated school reform topic. Clarity around charter schools adds

another confusing layer to the debate. Are charter schools public, private, or something in between? Can charters deny admission? How are charter schools different than magnet schools? Despite the fervor on either side of the charter school debate, their seemingly ubiquitous nature in school reform debates, and high-profile support from celebrities and philanthropists, many parents and families are still unclear on what constitutes a charter school.

Charter schools are publicly funded but independently operated schools. As a public school, they are bound by the same state and federal legislation as traditional public schools. For example, they must be free to attend and open to all who wish to attend. They are, however, granted more autonomy, for example, in staff hiring choices, in return for demonstrated performance and academic achievement. Charter schools represent an embrace of corporate culture in the previously public sphere of education, with the adherence to principles such as deregulation, profit-making, and competition. Proponents argue that through the power of these free market principles, public schools will thrive. Critics argue that an equitable and democratic education is not possible in such an environment.

As a former public school teacher who has long been interested in issues of urban school reform, this national debate on charter schools has captured my attention from the beginning. For me, the promise of charter schools to improve the lives of historically marginalized students is alluring, but the results often diminish that allure. After 30 years of increased autonomy and decreased regulation and oversight, the charter school experiment has not significantly improved the public education landscape. Many close within a few years of opening, leaving students to find another school to attend (Burris & Pfleger, 2020).

I am also curious and skeptical about the large sums of money spent by celebrities, venture philanthropists, and others (most of whom have no background in education) in the name of public education reform without actually being directed at public schools, its students or teachers. For example, the Foundation for Newark's Future gave more than $20 million to various consulting firms, with some of those consultants earning $1,000 per day (Russakoff, 2014). Meanwhile, Cami Anderson, the new Superintendent appointed by Christie, closed schools, cut $18 million from school budgets, and laid off personnel. She acknowledged the irony, stating, "We're raising the poverty level in Newark in the name of school reform" (Russakoff, 2014). Additionally, the charter lobby spends exorbitant amounts of money in elections to sway legislation, oftentimes without much to show for it. For example, during the 2018 midterm elections, the contest for California State Superintendent of Schools proved to be the most expensive, exceeding senate and

congressional races, with more than $50 million spent (Mahnken, 2018). Marshall Tuck, supported by charter advocates, received $34 million in funding, while his opponent, Tony Thurmond, supported by teachers' unions, raised about $15.7 million (Fensterwald & Willis, 2018). Marshall formerly served as President of Green Dot Public Schools, a network of charter schools, whereas Thurmond previously served as a social worker, school board member, and assemblyman. Thurmond narrowly won the race. Prior to that, the lobby spent $50 million in Antonio Villaraigosa's bid for California governor, which ultimately failed (Lecker, 2019). Ref Rodriguez, a former charter school operator, was elected to the Los Angeles school board after the lobby spent $2.4 million to support him in the most expensive school board election in history (Jackson, 2015). He later resigned when he pled guilty to felony conspiracy charges. All the while, students, primarily students of color, languish in schools decimated by budget cuts in communities damaged by decades of divestment. As one community leader in Newark put it, "Everybody's getting paid, but Raheem still can't read" (Russakoff, 2014).

Additionally, I often wondered about a demographic that didn't seem to be a part of this conversation about equity and achievement: students with disabilities. Just as charter schools entered the public lexicon in the 1990s, so did inclusion, which called for "the larger goal of reducing special education" with the inclusive classroom as "a setting essentially devoid of special education" where general education is restructured to meet the needs of all students (Kavale, 2002, p. 205). Proponents argued that mainstreaming, or placing "eligible" students with disabilities into general education classroom for specific classes, violates students' civil rights because segregated settings are still used to educate a large number of students with disabilities; in other words, they argued that inclusion in the general education classroom is a right, not a privilege. So much of the debate is on charter schools as education reform centers on raising standards, improving achievement, and ensuring that *all* students have a chance to succeed – goals that mirror the goals of inclusive education. And yet, I rarely heard about how students with disabilities, who would ostensibly benefit from these objectives, fit into this picture. How are charter schools, who often implement regimented academic programs with strict behavioral guidelines, adapting to students who have additional needs? Is the promise of educational excellence also extended to students who do not fit neatly into one-size-fits-all education plans? Are charter schools, who often promise creative, unconventional methods, creating innovative programs for students who would benefit most from these varied approaches, or are they keeping these students with diverse abilities out in favor of students they perceive are capable of high academic achievement?

It seemed to me that two major conversations in education, charter school expansion and inclusive education, were happening simultaneously yet separately, even though they both claim similar civil rights and social justice orientations. While the two movements appear to have shared goals for equality, they also have opposing methodologies and ideologies. Charter school reform, rooted in neoliberal ideology that trusts free market principles of competition and standardization principles to transform the public school sphere, runs counter to inclusive education tenets of collaboration and individualization. How do educators committed to equity reconcile these two opposing viewpoints to ensure that *all* students receive quality educational opportunities? Student identities overlap even if these conversations typically do not; therefore, these discussions cannot remain in separate realms.

These questions led me to study a special education program at a small charter high school in Southern California. Unlike the highly publicized charter school expansion effort in Newark, Colina Cedro Charter High School (CCCHS) was not supported by a billionaire and its opening was not announced to millions of viewers on Oprah.[1] Like many other charter schools in the United States, CCCHS operated without celebrity fanfare or millions of dollars at its disposal. This "Mom and Pop" charter school was started by an ordinary couple who thought they could do some good in an underserved neighborhood. They served a high proportion of students with disabilities, more than the neighborhood district, and sought to educate the ones for whom traditional education does not work. How did the neoliberal environment shape Colina Cedro's story and the stories of students with disabilities who chose to attend? This book explores this question.

THE NEED FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY, ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Neoliberalism is pervasive and governs the landscape of today's schools, as evidenced by the privatization of public schools. Even so, 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). 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. At the same time, important works in critical pedagogy

1 Names of all people and locations are pseudonyms.

or neoliberal school reform seldom address disability or special education, as if special education is not a part of public schools. Just as special and general education has long operated as two parallel tracks of education, rather than one education system, research in education in these two areas has also remained largely distinct and separate.

Ethnographic research can help us to bridge this gap because it helps us "define the problem when it is complex and embedded in multiple systems or sectors" as well as to "explore the factors associated with the problem in order to understand and address them, or to identify them when they are not known" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, pp. 29–30). Thus, utilizing ethnographic research allows us to examine the multiple systems of special education, neoliberal market-based school reforms, and one particular school in a larger system of schools. Additionally, "ethnography emphasizes discovery; it does not assume answers" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 33). Given the paucity of research surrounding disability, special education, and neoliberal market-based school reforms (Stangvik, 2014), open-ended discovery and exploration is crucial. Furthermore, ethnographic research allows for the "accurate reflection of the views and perspectives of the participants in the research" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 12). Often in the field of special education, research tends to be *on* the participants, rather than *with* them, and the voices of those in special education are seldom heard since they are positioned as objects of the research, rather than subjects. The long-term nature inherent in ethnographic work allows us to document the lived experience. Understanding the lived experiences of students with disabilities in the neoliberal context is vital. Educational ethnography presents opportunities to explore how schools define success and failure and how these constructions "are consequential only to the extent that they are made to fit within a cultural system that identifies them" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 17).

Critical ethnographic work focuses on social inequalities, the nature of social structure, and power to work toward positive social change (Carspecken, 1996). Carsepecken (1996) argues that critical ethnographic methodologies work to "refine social theory rather than to merely describe social life" (p. 3). This critical ethnographic work led me to conduct participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. Over the course of the school year, I spent three days a week at the school as a volunteer, assisting students in both general and special education classrooms. I observed throughout the school in classrooms and school events, as well as conducted interviews with students, teachers, the principal, and school founders. Lastly, I analyzed public records, personal documents, and physical evidence. For more on methodology, please see the Appendix.

Despite the promise of ethnographic work to enhance our understanding of disability and school cultures, there remains a dearth of ethnographies in this area. Educational ethnography has focused heavily on issues or race, class, and gender, with rare attention paid to disability. Certainly, many books exist detailing the neoliberal agenda, capitalism, and urban school reform, but few are ethnographic in nature. Moreover, most do little more than briefly acknowledge disability and special education. Similarly, works situated in the field of special or inclusive education tend to focus on individual students/families or school sites, rather than recognizing special education as part of a dual system of education that exists in a larger neoliberal context. This lack of interdisciplinary research results in an incomplete understanding of school experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities in the neoliberal age. Richardson and Powell (2011) argue,

> *…ignoring special education systems' interconnectedness with other fields promotes discrepancies between levels, particularly between the micro level of the classroom and the macro level where collective outcomes result. For example, a conspicuous and enduring feature of special education is the discrepancy between the best intentions of teachers, psychologists, counselors, parents, and administrators and outcomes that were neither wanted nor entirely anticipated. Analyses of individuals in school are often insufficient to explain the outcomes of special education and the effects of resources on the one hand and stigmatization on the other.*
>
> *(p. 8)*

This book aspires to contribute an intersectional and contextual examination of disability, special/inclusive education, and neoliberalism to the field.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Like most charter schools, Colina Cedro resided in a underresourced neighborhood populated mainly by people of color. The Eastwick neighborhood is known for the high number of refugees who settle there. In the city of Colfax, there are currently more than 100 charter schools in operation, ranging from schools that offer site-based instruction, virtual or independent study, or a combination. Colfax has a number of major corporations and universities, some of which are involved in the operation of charter schools around the city.

CCCHS's original charter laid out an ambitious plan for the school. The charter listed several exciting and enriching ideas, such as the extensive use of

technology, community involvement, relevant and frequent field trips, mentors who are reflective of the target student population, and innovative scheduling that allows for personal attention to student needs. The charter listed, in addition to core classes, specialized classes such as Theater Arts, Biotechnology, Multimedia/Advanced Technology, Internships/Exploratory Projects, Yearbook, Newspaper, and Music, as well as AP level courses. The charter also stated that "each year all students are required to take a two-semester course in college and career preparation." The charter proposed a small school environment (225–300) and small class sizes through which they could provide numerous opportunities for individual attention. It also proposed the use of an "innovative schedule," although the charter did not lay out what this schedule looked like or how it was innovative.

The school targeted students who qualify for free and reduced lunch and are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). In addition to the STEM focus, Colina Cedro's charter imagined a school focused heavily on the business world. At its inception, they were very intentional about creating a business environment for the students. This included location, dress code, course offerings, as well as the managing principles used in the running of the school. As a result, Colina Cedro, in many ways, very closely resembled a business environment. The founders intentionally sought out an office setting and required "business casual" as the dress code.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, I explored special education, not as an independent entity, but as an integral part of the school system. I also examined special education, not through a medical or rehabilitative lens, but through a social, historical, political, and economic lens. In order to do that, I relied on the work of theorists who examine disability as a historical, political, social, and cultural construct that advantages or disadvantages students who are labeled abled or disabled. I draw from a variety of related frameworks, including DisCrit, critical disability theory, and Tomlinson's (1982) analysis of special education as a sorting mechanism that reproduces social inequality, or sociology of special education.

DisCrit

DisCrit marries Disability Studies with Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze how "the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy" (Annamma

et al., 2013, p. 11). Disability Studies relies on the social model of disability, rather than the medical model which seeks to rehabilitate and "fix" people with disabilities. Baglieri and Shapiro (2012) explain,

> *…they focus not only on a disabling feature, but also on the social context in which disability becomes meaningful. Social models aim to understand disability as a total experience of complex interactions between the body and physical, social, and cultural environments.*
>
> *(p. 25)*

In the social model, researchers recognize differences in ability, but argue that it is the meaning ascribed to those differences that makes a person "disabled." For example, these differences are socially constructed as deficits in social contexts (such as schools), giving advantage to some and disadvantage to others. Disability is understood as a "political identity, socially constructed in tandem with race and class, rather than an objective medical condition" (Annamma et al., 2018, p. 48). Lastly, Disability Studies is critical of traditional special education and the role it plays in separating, excluding, and limiting students with disabilities.

As an intersectional framework, DisCrit recognizes that people hold multidimensional identities, not singular ones (Annamma et al., 2018); therefore, examination of disability as a singular identity is not sufficient. DisCrit

> *…emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norm.*
>
> *(Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11)*

Additionally, this framework "considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens" (Annamma et al., 2018, p. 59).

Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory aims to understand the structural inequalities that have material consequences for those who are labeled disabled. While these fundamental assumptions of Critical Theory have most often been ascribed to differences such as race, class, and gender, (Erevelles, 2000, 2011; Gabel,