

Disaster Capitalism, Charter Schools, and the Reproduction of Inequality in Poor, Disabled Students: An Ethnographic Case Study

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Abstract : This ethnographic case study examines disaster capitalism, neoliberal market-based school reforms, and disability through the lens of Disability Studies in Education. More specifically, it explores neoliberalism and special education at a small, urban charter school in a large city in California and the (re)production of social inequality. The study uses Sociology of Special Education to examine the ways in which special education is used to sort and stratify disabled students. At a time when rhetoric surrounding public schools is framed in catastrophic and dismal language in order to justify the privatization of public education, small urban charter schools must be examined to learn if they are living up to their promise or acting as another way to maintain economic and racial segregation. The study concludes that neoliberal contexts threaten successful inclusive education and normalize poor, disabled students' continued low achievement and poor post-secondary outcomes. This ethnographic case study took place at a small urban charter school in a large city in California. Participants included three special education students, the special education teacher, the special education assistant, a regular education teacher, and the two founders and charter writers. The school claimed to have a push-in model of special education where all special education students were fully included in the general education classroom. Although presented as fully inclusive, some special education students also attended a pull-out class called Study Skills. The study found that inclusion and neoliberalism are differing ideologies that cannot co-exist. Successful inclusive environments cannot thrive while under the influences of neoliberal education policies such as efficiency and cost-cutting. Additionally, the push for students to join the global knowledge economy means that more and more low attainers are further marginalized and kept in poverty. At this school, neoliberal ideology eclipsed the promise of inclusive education for special education students. This case study has shown the need for inclusive education to be interrogated through lenses that consider macro factors, such as neoliberal ideology in public education, as well as the emerging global knowledge economy and increasing income inequality. Barriers to inclusion inside the school, such as teachers' attitudes, teacher preparedness, and school infrastructure paint only part of the picture. Inclusive education is also threatened by neoliberal ideology that shifts the responsibility from the state to the individual. This ideology is dangerous because it reifies the stereotypes of disabled students as lazy, needs drains on already dwindling budgets. If these stereotypes persist, inclusive education will have a difficult time succeeding. In order to more fully examine the ways in which inclusive education can become truly emancipatory, we need more analysis on the relationship between neoliberalism, disability, and special education.

Keywords : case study, disaster capitalism, inclusive education, neoliberalism

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