# NEOLIBERALISM AND SPECIAL EDUCATION:

# AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY IN AN

# URBAN CHARTER SCHOOL

By

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Title of Study: NEOLIBERALISM AND SPECIAL EDUCATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY IN AN URBAN CHARTER SCHOOL

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Abstract: In this study, I ask, "How are neoliberal education reforms shaping the experiences of special education students?" More specifically, I ask, "What is the classroom environment and school culture for special education students at Colina Cedro Charter High School?" This study examines neoliberal market-based school reforms and disability. More specifically, it explores neoliberalism and special education in an urban charter school context, and the (re)production of social inequality. At a time when public schools and teachers are blamed 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. There are many implications for the students, as well as for those with financial motivation to promote charter schools; there are also implications for inclusive education success in a neoliberal environment. Future research directions include case studies and ethnographies situated at the intersection of special education, neoliberalism, and inclusion in the United States.

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## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY

Over recent months and years, countless news stories declare that public education needs serious attention, with stories of so-called failing schools, attacks on teachers' unions, teacher strikes over closing schools and financial constraints, and teacher and student walk-outs to protest standardized testing. In response, lawmakers have advanced various federal mandates and legislation promising change and progress. Additionally, wealthy corporations and philanthropists have also entered the discussion and poured in billions of dollars. The discourse and reform efforts increasingly reflect neoliberal ideology (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). In other words, recent educational reforms have included rationale for the privatization of the public sphere of education and for the inclusion of free market ideology into schools. Giroux (2012) lists the ways neoliberal ideology affects public education while serving corporate interests:

> privatization; downsizing; outsourcing; union busting; competition as the only mode of motivation; an obsession with measurement; a relentless attack on teacher autonomy; the weakening of tenure; educational goals stripped of public values; teacher quality defined in purely instrumental terms; an emphasis on authoritarian modes of management; and a mindless obsession with notions of pedagogy that celebrate memorization and teaching to the test. (p. 17)

Charter schools represent one of the market-based educational reform efforts to privatize public education (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Giroux, 2012). They have been tremendously popular and are "promoted as a kind of magic wand that will dramatically upgrade public school performance and, in turn, the economy" (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 13).

Originally, progressive educators in the 1980s developed charter schools in order to create educational alternatives in poor communities of color, but it wasn't long before "the social justice motor was appropriated and reengineered by philanthropic, corporate, hedge-fund and real estate interests" (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 2). Today's charter schools no longer represent the original ones that were rooted in the community and mainly educator run. Today, the charter landscape includes three types of charter schools: free market charters, Mom and Pop charters, and franchises (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Free market charters (e.g.: Edison Schools, Inc.), which can be run for profit, are seen as "a vehicle to transfer public dollars to private hands" and "a market opportunity for entrepreneurs and business" (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 21). Mom and Pop charters are usually smaller, single schools, while franchises (e.g.: KIPP, Green Dot) are cookie-cutter schools across a district or nation (bringing charters "to scale") and differ very little from free market charters in terms of ideology. Charter schools have been a popular option in the market-based

educational reforms because they represent educational choice. Various attempts at offering parents and students educational choice include magnet schools, vouchers, and now charter schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2012).

Magnet schools, started in the 1960s, were some of the first schools of choice. Magnet schools organized around a certain theme, such as science or the arts, in an attempt to attract a diverse student body. Rather than attempt to serve a certain racial group that way that charter schools often do, magnet schools were an attempt to promote court-ordered desegregation. Magnet schools remained fully public and were not an effort to privatize.

Fabricant and Fine (2012) divide the history of charter schools into three movements:

1. Charters as progressive, experimental, public education alternatives
2. The philanthropic / hedge-fund movement
3. Steroids from Obama

During the first movement, charter schools were guided by social justice principles with hopes to improve access to quality schools, as well as academic performance. In return for autonomy in teaching and curriculum, the charter schools were willing to offer increased accountability, presumably through student test scores. During the second movement, charters were no longer alternatives *within* public education, but rather, "an alternative pitched *against* public education" (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 20, emphasis added). Corporate interests increased and foundations such as the Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation joined to provide funding. In the final stage, charters cemented themselves as legitimate and popular options and have even received "federal government sponsorship" from the Obama Administration (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 21). Race to the

Top, announced in 2009, required states to lift the cap on the number of charter schools in the state in order to be eligible for grant money, in addition to other requirements related to attaching test scores to teacher promotion, tenure, or salary. More recently, in October 2015 when U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced he would be stepping down, he also announced a grant of $249 million to the charter school industry, despite the fact that in September 2015, *The Washington Post* reported that an audit by Duncan's own department revealed that a lack of oversight resulted in widespread misuse and mismanagement of funds awarded to charter schools and charter school operators.

How do students with disabilities fit into the national dialogue surrounding charter schools and student achievement? Discourse regarding disability and special education students often remains in a separate sphere, as a separate issue that is not affected by what is happening with regular education. Likewise, scholars in education have produced important work regarding the impact of neoliberal market-based school reforms in the realms of race, class, and gender, but this scholarship remains largely silent on issues of disability (Bale & Knopp, 2012; Giroux, 2012; McLaren, 2007). This study aims to address this gap and to attempt to bridge these two bodies of scholarship in order to gain a better understanding of special education in the neoliberal environment, focusing on charter schools as a specific space that inhabits these neoliberal forces. It will explore special education not as an independent entity, but as an integral part of the school system. It also will examine special education not through medical or rehabilitative lens, but through social, historical, political and economic lenses.

*Research Question*

In this study, I ask, "How are neoliberal education reforms shaping the experiences of special education students?" More specifically, I ask, "What is the classroom environment and school culture for special education students at Colina Cedro Charter High School (pseudonym)?"

*Purpose Statement*

This study examines neoliberal market-based school reforms and disability. More specifically, it explores neoliberalism and special education in an urban charter school context, and the (re)production of social inequality.

*Problem Statement*

In the face of neoliberal market-based school reforms that encourage competition and cost-cutting, students with disabilities face new challenges. Neoliberal market-based school reforms is directly at odds with the tenets of inclusive school reform for students with disabilities (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Stangvik, 2014; White, 2014). More information is needed about the interaction of free market school reform and inclusive education. Researchers and educators must understand the implications of these two paradigms fighting against each other in order to better educate both students with and without disabilities in the neoliberal environment, such as urban charter schools.

*Significance*

Currently, the literature that explores the intersection of neoliberalism and disability is heavily focused on issues in the post-secondary sphere, such as college access, work, and unemployment (Goodley & Lawthorn, 2011; Hall, 2001; Hall & McGarrol, 2013; Harris,

Owen, & Gould, 2012; Soldatic, 2011; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012; Vandekinderen, Roets, Vandenbroeck, Vanderplasschen, & Van Hove, 2012). Researchers have also explored neoliberalism and the privatization of public education (Bale & Knopp, 2012; Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2012; Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2013), but they only mention disability or special education briefly. With neoliberal ideology so prevalent in public schools, it is imperative to explore special education in a neoliberal context. Understanding this dynamic is paramount in the age of increased standardization, accountability, and austerity. Current research on charter schools and students with disabilities focuses primarily on disabled students' access to enrollment in charter schools, the exclusion of students with severe disabilities from enrollment, and possible explanations and remedies (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Drame, 2010; Estes, 2001; 2004; 2009; 2010; Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; Guarino & Chau, 2003; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007; Zimmer & Guarino, 2013). Very few examine charter schools as an arm of neoliberal policy and the school environment and culture this creates for students with disabilities.

*Context*

Overview and History of Charter Schools

Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991. The U.S. Department of Education created the Public Charter School Program (PCSP) in 1995 to assist states, districts, and others in founding charter schools. Charter schools proved to be extremely popular as 43 states and the District of Columbia have since adopted charter school legislation; Alabama was the most recent to join, passing legislation in March 2015. The seven states without charter school legislation are Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North

Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in thirteen years (school year 1999-2000 to 2012 – 2013), "the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased from 0.3 million to 2.3 million."

Charter schools operate as publicly funded and autonomous schools that have a contract that specifies its educational program and its desired student population. For example, the school may cater to students who live in a specific neighborhood or students who are interested in particular schools subjects, such as science or art. Most charter schools are in low-income neighborhoods where traditional public schools are defined as failing or low-achieving. As public schools, tax dollars fund charter schools (although they may also receive funds elsewhere) and are therefore, accountable to the same federal and state laws as traditional public schools, such as IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004), ADA (American with Disabilities Act, 1990), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973. In addition, they must have open-enrollment policies, meaning that any student in the district cannot be denied enrollment. They differ from traditional public schools in its management – rather than a district office and an appointed school board, charter schools are managed by charter boards which are self-appointed. Charters are granted through a process in which applicants must prove their qualifications to operate a school, as well as the strength of their proposed program to be implemented at the school. These charters, once granted, are limited to 3 – 5 years, in which the school must demonstrate the achievement of goals, such as achievement gains; if such achievements are not evidenced, the charter may be revoked. Which organizations have the authority to grant charters vary state by state.

Charter Schools in California

Following Minnesota, California passed the Charter Schools Act in 1992, with the first charter school opening in 1993. According to the California Charter Schools Association, charter schools in California have since grown considerably, from a handful in the 1990s to roughly 700 schools in the 2008 – 2009 school year. By the 2013 – 2014 school year, the number of charters rose to 1,130, representing an estimated 519,000 students. California has more charter schools than any other state in the country. In the city of Colfax (pseudonym) specifically, there are currently 119 charter schools in operation, ranging from schools that offer site-based instruction, independent study, or a combination. Colfax claims the second highest growth of charter schools in California. Colfax has a number of major corporations and universities, some of whom are involved in the operation of charter schools around the Colfax area. Charter school laws in California stipulate that charter school petitions must include 16 specific elements that regulate a variety of issues ranging from the schools structure to employees' rights to unionize. If charters are granted, they are approved for five years and given renewals for another period of five years. Charters may be revoked for the following reasons:

- A material violation of the charter;
- Failure to meet or pursue the pupil outcomes described in the petition;
- Violation of generally accepted accounting standards of fiscal management; and
- Violations of the law.

Charter schools are held accountable to all of the same standards for performance and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as traditional public schools in California.

SELPAs

SELPAs, or Special Education Local Plan Areas, are consortiums that provide special education services. In 1977, California mandated that all school districts and county school offices form such consortiums to determine how special education services will be provided. These SELPAs should be formed regionally and within each district, if the district is large enough. SELPAs are charged with 1) providing special education services, 2) distributing federal and state funds for special education, 3) providing professional development for special education teachers, and 4) assisting schools in the event that legal issues arise.

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). California is one of only two places (Washington, D.C. is the other) that allow charter schools to choose their legal identity. 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, which includes everything from homebound services to monitoring / support in the general education classroom, plus other services such as physical, occupational, or speech 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. According to the California Charter School Association (CCSA), in 2013 - 2014, independent LEA charters increased more than 25%. Schools have the option of joining a consortium or regional Joint Powers Authority (JPA) which further expand their options for special education services as well as increase autonomy over special education in their school.

Introduction to the School, Staff, and Students[1]

On a busy road that ran through the Eastwick community, a working class community of mainly people of color, a small collection of tan portable trailer buildings (referred to as "bungalows" by the school principal) sat sandwiched between a traditional public school and a medical supply store. Behind a chain link fence, these portable trailers occupied a small space that would not be traditionally recognized as a high school. There was no flagpole, gym, or athletic fields. The small space had no grass or trees.

The vinyl sign that hung on the side of the buildings closest to the road was the only thing that distinguishes these buildings as a school. This sign read "Colina Cedro Charter High School – Preparing Students for a Future in Science and Math – Enrolling Now!" Even this sign, however, was confusing because these portables seemed to be a section of the public middle school next door, Julietta Middle School. Since these portable buildings were enclosed by a chain link fence and sat on the same lot, they appeared to be only accessible by going inside Julietta. There was no circle drive or parking lot designated for Colina Cedro, only a gate for students and teachers to walk through at the beginning and end of the day, and during lunch. Otherwise, the gate was closed and appeared to be a fence with no opening when driving past. In fact, this property did belong to the middle school and yet, was a separate entity, leased to the charter school. Upon my first visit, I actually drove right past Colina Cedro, missing this small collection of buildings the first time. The second time, I failed to recognize it as its own school, separate from the middle school.

[1] all names (people and locations) are pseudonyms

Colina Cedro did not have its own space and was occupying its second location since opening less than ten years ago. Dr. James described the previous location:

> We were four years, um, just right across the freeway…well, you can't really tell what it looks like now, but it's the back of a car dealership so it was one huge open room that wrapped around a building and all of our classrooms were there and they were just divided by these temporary walls.

He admitted the location was challenging, calling it "crazy" and "awful." The school administration began looking for another location and filed a Prop 39 Request. Passed in 2000 in California, Prop 39 ensues "that public school facilities should be shared fairly among all school pupils, including those in charter schools." This means that school districts have a mandatory duty to provide facilities to be used by charter schools. The provided spaces should be "reasonably equivalent" to public school facilities and is provided to eligible charter schools. Eligibility is determined when charter schools can show through "reasonable projections" that at least 80 students of the charter school's average daily attendance are in-district students. It is further stipulated that the space given to charter schools must be contiguous, similarly furnished and equipped, and located near the are in which the charter wishes to be. School districts may charter charters for use of facilities.

It appeared that such competition for space created tension and headaches for both sides involved.

> Dr. James: We did a Prop 39 request; they're required, the district's required to find a space for us and they found something for us out by Lincoln High School but our charter says we're called to be in Eastwick, that's what we want to do, so we couldn't

use that. So then they offered us a few classrooms at Julietta, but like, three down here, three way up there, two in the middle and they were just like, "Oh yeah, come down. Check it out." And it's just, "Wow, you guys really want high school students going all, you know, it's going to be a mess!" "Well, that's what we have" so I left kind of discouraged. Then about 11 in the morning one day, I came over for a tour and left, and then they called me that evening and said, "Hey, we might have a better solution" because I think it freaked out their principal a little too, and um…

Researcher: Yeah, that would be crazy!

DJ: It was a good thing, um, she was not happy we were coming, which I don't blame her at all; we'd try to be really good guests and all, but they said, "We might have another plan. Why don't you come back this evening?" So they showed me all of this and I said, "Oh my gosh. That would be wonderful!" you know, so that's what we did and we're here.

The two schools seemed at ease with one another, although there was occasionally a bit of tension. Since Colina Cedro students used Julietta's cafeteria during lunch, sometimes Julietta teachers and janitors complained of Colina Cedro students who were unaccompanied by the teacher on duty or if they left a mess. The mess was left to the staff of Julietta to handle and Colina Cedro teachers returned to their campus after lunch duty. The students, however, seemed to interact with each other without problems.

Even after all the work of securing this location, Dr. James said that the school will have to relocate again if the student population grows more than 200 since these facilities cannot accommodate more than that. So while there was always the push to enroll more

students, the school simply could not hold very many more students than they had. Regardless of the enrollment, they will move again after two more years because the property (which currently houses both Colina Cedro and Julietta Middle School) will be demolished. Due to the poor condition of the school, the school district has slated the demolition and reconstruction of Julietta to happen within the next few years. At that time, Colina Cedro will again begin the process of locating an existing school facility in a densely populated area. Additionally, they will face losing some of their already small school population, as they did with the first move. Dr. James explained,

> We lost a few students, just because of location – which it's only .2 miles, but I just think they didn't know, or they say when a charter school moves, you lose about 25% but I thought there's no way that's going to happen here – we're right there, you know, but it did. We went down a little bit and now, we're back up.

The six bungalows, along with a large metal storage container, made up the campus of Colina Cedro Charter High School and housed 10 teachers and approximately 150 students (see Figure 1). All of the bungalows were tan with large windows on the walls that faced towards the enclosed lot, and small windows that ran along the top of the opposite wall, or the walls closest to the perimeter of the school (except for the building with restrooms.) These windows were usually opened for ventilation, especially in the few classrooms without air conditioning, but were caked in dirt and dust so teachers and students complained with the windows were open and debris fell or blew inside. Some of the buildings had ramps; others just had stairs. One building served as the school office and teacher's lounge, and another had the school restrooms. Water fountains were along the outside wall of this building, where

teachers could not see the students, unless they walked over to that wall. The remaining buildings served as classrooms.

In a far corner near the street, there was a small garden, planted and maintained by the biology teacher and some of her students. This small garden was a wooden planter on top of the asphalt and was the only greenery on the campus. The garden produced a few vegetables and herbs, such as carrots and basil. The bungalows were arranged around the perimeter of the fencing, covering three to four of the sides. The remaining side, adjacent to Julietta, was empty, except for a metal storage unit. It afforded a full view of the two-story concrete middle school. The metal storage unit had been painted light blue with graffiti style letters spelling out "Colina Cedro" on one side. This storage unit provided the only pop of color on an otherwise drab campus; the only other color was the tan of the bungalows, and the dark gray of the asphalt and chain link fence. Occasionally, students hung hand-drawn posters on the fence or an outside wall for a rare school event, such as prom, but with no interior walls as community space for the entire school (rather than interior walls of a particular classroom) and few school activities to promote, this was usually pretty rare. Additionally, signs posted outside usually did not last long due to the sun, wind, rain, etc. There were two picnic tables outside the classroom buildings, but no other benches or tables.

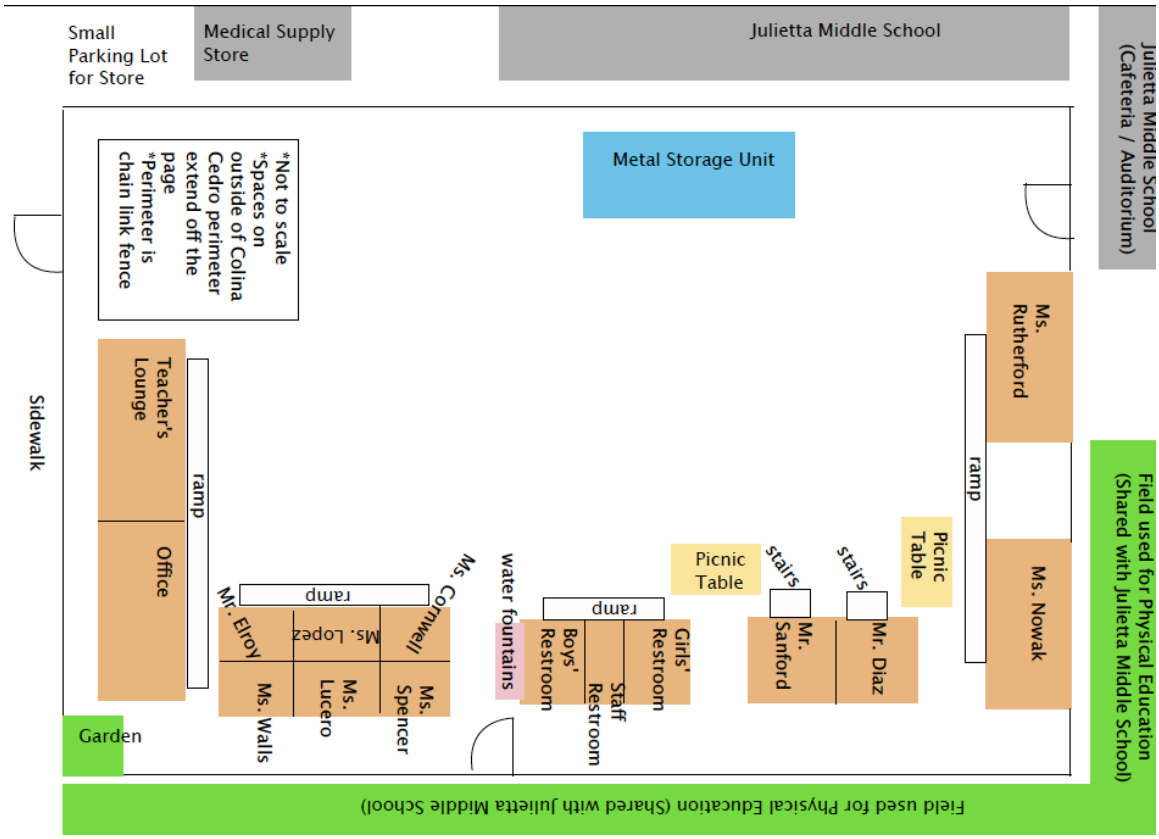


Figure 1: Colina Cedro Charter High School

The bungalow closest to the gated entrance served as the office where the school receptionist, principal, counselor, and school secretary had partitioned cubicles under fluorescent lighting. There was also a small waiting area with a few chairs and bulletin boards with school pictures and inspirational posters. Behind the waiting area sat a copier and a few file cabinets. The second half of the trailer was separated by a wall and had to be entered through another door; this was the teachers' lounge. It had a few round tables, a refrigerator, microwave and small couches. Teachers had posted California state standards for each subject along with classroom activities for achieving each standard on the walls. It appeared a new standard and activity was to be posted each month, but only October was hanging from the wall, the following months apparently forgotten.

Noticeably absent were the typical institutional fixtures: a cafeteria or all-purpose room, a library, a media center, or a computer lab. Instead, Colina Cedro's students shared the cafeteria, auditorium, and soccer field with the middle school next door. With no gym, students used this field for Physical Education, simply walking laps along the worn-out grass or playing soccer games. 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 the classrooms where students ate during their first period. 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 were to return to the Colina Cedro campus, but with only two picnic tables, students often stood or found places outside the school fence to sit to eat.

*Classrooms*

The classrooms were small, carpeted rooms, some with air conditioning, others without. The larger buildings shared walls between classrooms, and the noise from one side spilled into the other. The buildings without another classroom on the other side were also noisy, as they backed up to where the middle schoolers played soccer. Teachers often had to combat screaming, cheering, and the sound of the ball being kicked against the outside wall, especially when the weather was warm and the windows had to be opened for ventilation. Additionally, since the portables sat on Julietta's campus, their bell schedule competed with Colina Cedro's. During my first visit, I heard bells ringing, indicating the end of class, but I didn't see the students leaving or the teachers stop teaching. I soon realized I was hearing Julietta's bells, indicating *their* class change, not Colina Cedro's.

Each classroom, including the special education class, had three to five desktop computers along one of the walls. These computers did not always function well and sometimes the Pre-Calc class went to the Special Education class to use the computers there. Some classrooms featured student work on the walls, but others did not. Some teachers posted the school rules on the walls. All the classrooms, except for the Special Education classroom, had a projector and Smartboard. I mostly saw teachers use the Smartboard simply as a screen to display Powerpoint presentations, but I did see a few use the specialized features such as the document camera or writing on the board. Class sizes varied, with some small classes of only four or five students; larger classes hovered around twenty students.

*Special Education Classroom*

The special education classroom (see Figure 2) had a separate room built into the corner that the teacher used for private meetings, such as IEP (Individual Education Plan) meetings, counseling, and speech therapy. This room barely fit one horseshoe table, an ancient copier, which worked occasionally, and a file cabinet. In the opposite corner, there was another small room, but the door always remained shut with a sign that reads, "Do Not Open – the mirror is not there anymore!" Ms. Rutherford, the special education teacher, told me the room was a small closet with a sink and mirror. I do not know why she wanted the closet to be closed off.

Connecting the walls of these two rooms was a small countertop with a small sink on one end; Ms. Rutherford brought in a small fridge and microwave for the other end of the countertop. Two teachers' desks, one for the special education teacher and one for the special education assistant sat on opposite sides of the room and faced each other. Rather

than individual student desks, students sat at tables in groups. The classroom had two whiteboards, one of which Ms. Rutherford used for teaching; on the other one, Ms. Rutherford tried to keep track of everyone's regular education assignments. In each column, she wrote a regular education teacher's name. Underneath the teacher's name, she wrote the current unit for that class; and below that, she wrote the corresponding assignment. It was difficult to keep up-to-date, so it was often a few weeks behind. She divided it into columns using blue painter's tape.

| Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name | Teacher Name |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unit 7 | *Speak* | | | | | | | |
| *Read pgs 14 - 25 | *Essay on plot and characters | | | | | | | |

In the same corner as this whiteboard was a small bookshelf which held an assortment of items: a tub of markers, colored pencils and pens, blank paper, five to ten books used in other classrooms, such as an Algebra textbook, as well as novels, and perhaps most importantly, two binders which held papers from other classes, divided by subjects. Upon Ms. Rutherford's request, I organized stacks and stacks of paper into these binders because for the first semester, the papers from various classes were just stacked together with no order or organization. These papers were a variety of things: copies of blank assignments, Powerpoint slides, and tests and quizzes; there were also handwritten notes taken by the special education assistant. A few assignments were copied after a student completed it

already so the answers were written there. The special education teacher and assistant would collect these papers when they attended class in the regular classroom.

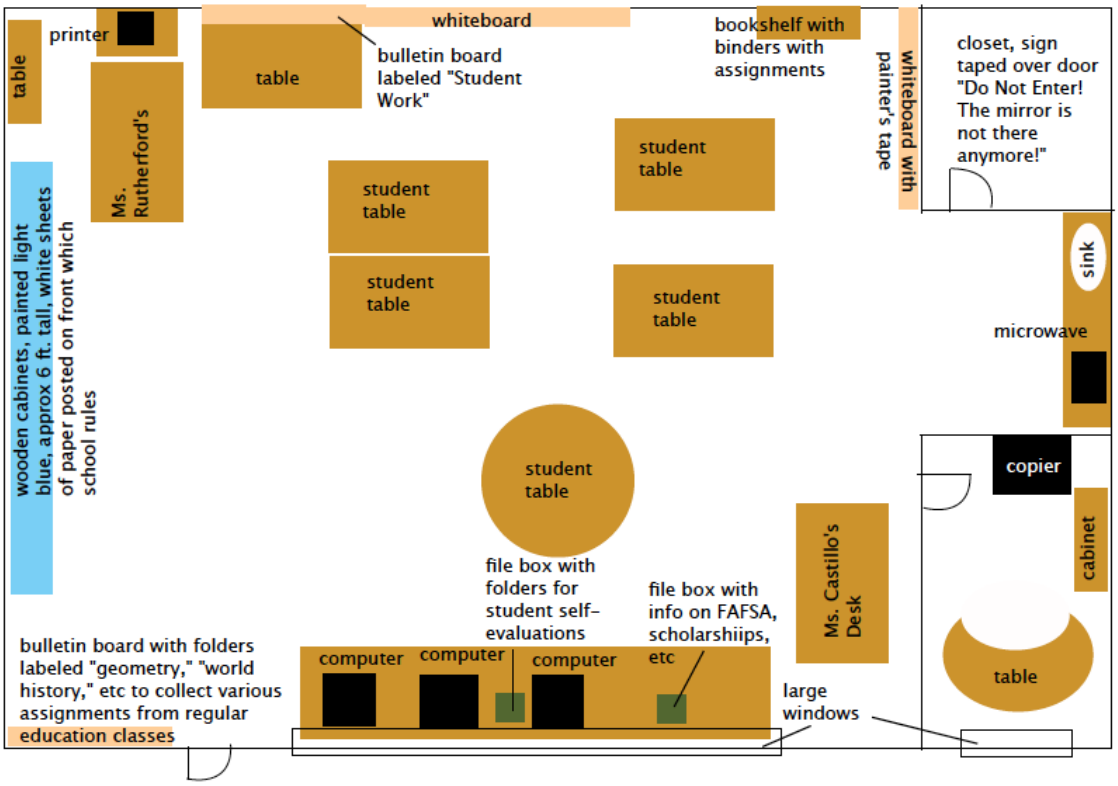


Figure 2: Special Education Classroom

It was evident which courses received the most attention and which received the least. Some courses, such as Government or World History had the most assignments, practically a complete set of what was used in that class, along with handwritten notes to accompany the class handouts. Other classes, such as Biology or Chemistry, had maybe one or two sheets, maybe none. Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo, the special education assistant, sometimes used these to help students study for upcoming quizzes or made copies of certain worksheets for students who were missing that particular assignment. Sometimes students used the

completed notes to fill in answers they had missing. After I organized these papers, Ms. Rutherford's intent was to continue to add assignments, quizzes, etc. to these binders as the papers came in, but she apparently didn't have time to keep up with the filing. Instead, she used another bulletin board to collect incoming assignments and notes – she stapled up 8x10 sheets of paper on three sides, leaving the top side unstapled, creating folders on the board to collect assignments. She wrote the class names across the front of the "folder" and just stuck papers in there.

During the 2013 – 2014 school year, the special education classroom was used for three periods of the day: second, fifth, and sixth. During these class periods, called Study Skills, special education students came to work on assignments, homework, or make-up work. Both Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were present during these class periods to assist students. Only four or five students came during second period, two of whom were Super Seniors (Second-year seniors who only needed to complete previously failed coursework in order to graduate) who only attended school for two periods per day. These students worked on "packets" from these courses, which were to act as the equivalent of an entire semester's work. The other students attended very sporadically. When they did come to class, they were compelled to work on homework and make-up work, but often slept or wandered around the school instead. Fifth period was the largest, 8 students, and also the noisiest. A majority of these students had Algebra Extended during 4$^{th}$ period, so they usually worked on Algebra assignments while the others worked on Geometry, sometimes Earth Science or whatever other work they had. There was no set curriculum for Study Skills, so the students either worked on homework or make-up work, or in the case that they didn't appear to have any, which was often, did nothing at all. The students would be asked if they had other

assignments and occasionally worked on things such as English assignments or Art assignments, but they often did the same assignment over and over if these assignments never got turned in. For example, one student had a missing English assignment, a persuasive argument paper, which she never completed. I saw her write and re-write the same paper a few times because each time she would finish it to turn into her English teacher, it would get lost or she would leave it at home and it would never get turned in. So she just wrote it multiple times. The same thing happened with another student with an English assignment – he typed the same sentence on the computer for a few days in a row. During sixth period, three students attended, two of whom were very gregarious and one who was extremely shy and quiet. Again, as with the other periods, they were asked to work on their assignments, but I saw very little being accomplished. The shy student mainly read novels for his own pleasure. Other students sat with their work in front of them, but spent much of the class period socializing and using their cell phones to text, listen to music, watch videos, check Facebook, etc.

All students who came to Study Skills had IEPs, although not all students with IEPs came to Study Skills. These other students remained in regular education throughout the day. When students came to class each day, they were supposed to evaluate themselves on what they accomplished, their attitude, how hard they work, and things of that nature. These grading sheets were kept in folders, and I very rarely saw these folders being utilized – one or two conscientious students used them, but none of the others, nor did Ms. Rutherford urge them to do so.

*Students*

For the 2013 – 2014 school year, Colina Cedro had a student population of about 150 students. The students were predominantly Latino/a (81%). Other ethnicities included African American (10%), Asian, (4%), and White (4%). The 9th grade class had the fewest students, with only 24. The 10th and 11th grade classes had 41 and 42 students, respectively. The senior class had 37 students. Ms. Rutherford told me that the enrollment numbers fluctuated with students leaving or enrolling at different times of the year. The school's charter states that they would have a lottery system if more students apply than can be accepted; however, this has never happened and the lottery system had not been employed.

The school had a fairly large percentage of special education students, approximately 20% (25 – 30 students) of the school population. The majority of these students carried the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) label; the only exceptions were two students with an Emotional Disability (ED) label and two labeled Other Health Impaired (OHI). Of all the students labeled with a disability, only four students remained in regular education class all day long and were considered "monitor only" meaning that Ms. Rutherford was to monitor these students in their regular education classes, but she did not see them in Study Skills.

I interviewed three students for this study, Isabel, Santiago and Royce. Isabel was a sophomore Latina student who was labeled OHI. Her IEP stated she was diagnosed with Turner Syndrome, a chromosomal condition. Isabel was friendly and outgoing. She had a stated career interest in both a lawyer and doctor; she couldn't decide which. Santiago was a senior Latino student who was labeled SLD. He lived with his uncle, as his parents resided in Mexico. He was an extremely gregarious student, joking with both students and teachers. He had somewhat of a reputation of being a "lazy" student. Santiago had expressed interest in joining the military after high school. Royce was a Super Senior Latino student. As a

Super Senior, he was required to repeat two failed courses in order to graduate. His school day consisted of two class periods: he attended Government first period, then Study Skills second period, where he worked on packets for credit in US History. He worked a part-time job at a fast food restaurant on the campus of a university. Royce had many interests; he wanted to be "the next Mario Lopez," an actor, model or both; he also wanted become a chef.

*School Staff*

The teachers of Colina Cedro represented both Caucasian and Latino/a ethnicities. Teachers who were bilingual in English and Spanish sometimes used Spanish with the students in conversation. Many of the teachers were very service-minded, having volunteered in various capacities, before coming to Colina Cedro. Two taught in international contexts with the Peace Corps. The special education teacher, Ms. Rutherford, had never taught in public schools prior to coming to Colina Cedro. She had special education experience in small private school settings where all the students had disabilities, so she had no experience in either pull-out or push-in models. She was a Caucasian woman and could not speak Spanish. Ms. Castillo, the teacher's assistant, was bilingual in Spanish and English and has plenty of experience working as an assistant in special education settings, although she did not have experience with co-teaching either. At the beginning of the school year, both the special education teacher and assistant quit unexpectedly. Ms. Rutherford was hired in October; Ms. Castillo came even later. Ms. Nowak taught Algebra Extended (remedial Algebra 1) and Algebra 1. Her Algebra Extended class contained half students with IEPs. It was her second year teaching; both years were at Colina Cedro. She came to the United States from Poland, and she received her teaching degree in New Jersey.

Interestingly, many teachers at the school seemed uninformed about what charters are, how they function, how they are different from private schools, or even about Colina Cedro's charter. Many thought some characteristics of the school, such as being small, were defining characteristics of charter schools. While many charters are small, it certainly is not a requirement. The founders seemed more focused on creating a business environment and a strong foundation in science and technology, but without actually reading the charter, these aspects would not be evident since the school has not lived up to these aspirations. In fact, some of the teachers seemed unaware of Colina Cedro's own charter. Ms. Nowak seemed surprised that the school was set up as a STEM school. The teachers and the assistant interviewed could not name the differences between this school as a charter and a traditional public school.

Several of those working at Colina Cedro had no prior experience or knowledge of charters prior to coming here. Dr. James had no prior experience with charter schools, even though the charter states that the principal should have extensive experience with charters. Ms. Nowak similarly had no experience with charters, although her experience with traditional public schools was also limited. She completed her student teaching on the East Coast, moved to the West Coast and her position at Colina Cedro was her first teaching position. She had little knowledge of charter schools – in fact, she believed Colina Cedro to be a sort of parochial school. Ms. Castillo and Ms. Rutherford didn't have experience in charters either, although they each had experience either teaching or attending private schools. In addition to mentioning size, they also noted that Colina Cedro seemed more like a private school because of its size and intimate feeling.

The principal, Dr. James had worked as principal in elementary settings, but not at the high school level or at charter schools. He also worked briefly at a local university. He was a Caucasian man and father of (adopted) children with disabilities, so although he had no teaching experience in Special Education, he has experience with IEPs as a parent. He spent some time in Mexico and was also bilingual in English and Spanish. He was an energetic, friendly, and verbose man who always seemed to be running from task to task, meeting to meeting. He became principal of Colina Cedro in 2010.

*School Board*

According to the school's website, the school board consisted of 7 individuals; all but one held a Ph.D. mainly from STEM fields, such as biomedical sciences, zoology, physiology, pharmacology, supercomputer. According to the bios of board members posted on the school website, only one board member listed experience related to education: one board member's dissertation topic was Integrating Science Learning and Language Acquisition for English learners via Scientist-Teacher Partnerships. Two board members were male; the rest were female.

*Founders of Colina Cedro*

A husband-and-wife team founded Colina Cedro in 2007, their second charter school. Mr. Fanning had a Master's degree in Education Administration and had experience teaching at both elementary and middle school levels. He served as principal (or CEO as he called it) at Colina Cedro. Ms. Fanning did not have experience with public school teaching, although she did homeschool their son. She completed her teaching credential in Science / Biology while writing the charter for Colina Cedro and just recently received her Master's in

Educational Technology. Ms. Fanning did not have very many good things to say about public education or its teachers; she said she never really intended to be in education. During interviews, she referred to her own schooling as "thirteen gruesome years of public education" and "useless." It was her experiences that led her to homeschool their son, not the more typical religious reason of other homeschoolers. According to her, her teachers at community college changed her view on education and teachers because they were "good" teachers, compared to the ones in public schools. Nevertheless, she took on teaching positions at both Brookside and Colina Cedro, aiming to be like the transformative teachers she had in college.

They first founded Brookside Charter School in 1997 in a suburb of Colfax to meet the needs of their homeschooled son who would be entering high school. After a while, Mr. and Ms. Fanning felt they wanted "a new challenge" and set about starting a new charter; they decided the Eastwick neighborhood of Colfax would be a good place. According to Ms. Fanning, although Colina Cedro was started with Brookside in mind because of its success, she and her husband understood that they would have to make changes in order for the school to fit its neighborhood and demographics.

The Fannings stayed at Colina Cedro only three years; they left in 2010 stating frustration and being overwhelmed. They had some part in finding the new principal, although apparently not too much sway. Ms. Fanning did not hold Dr. James in high regard.

> He was just second rate and we never should have taken him. And I was absolutely and utterly opposed and I, that was one of the times I made a complete, utter fool out

> of myself. He was inept, incompetent, and a lot of other things that I'm not at liberty to say…No, seriously. He should have never been allowed near those children.

Ms. Fanning made her feelings very clear about the current principal and her frustrations. She did not share a good relationship with the remaining staff at Colina Cedro, or Brookside, for that matter. She admitted that she is estranged from them.

*Colina Cedro School Charter*

Mr. and Ms. Fanning's original vision for the school never materialized, as the school was quite different than what they wrote in the charter. They envisioned a school focused on technology, and while the school still promoted this on their website and school banner, there was hardly any technology at the school. Ms. Fanning wanted teachers at Colina Cedro to focus on "blended learning," which she described as "leveraging computer technology and learning." She continued to describe what blended learning should look like:

> In a regular, standard classroom, the teacher is doing all of the teaching. In a blend learning classroom, a computer is, technology is leveraged to do that teaching. Okay, it can be done all the way inside a classroom, okay, it can be in a situation where we had like at Colina Cedro where, um…where the kids would rotate between half time in the classroom and half time at the computers…It can be like that, three-quarters of the time at the computer, and a quarter of the time doing all the things you can't do on a computer, like chorus, and band, and, um, laboratories, like science lab.

This obviously was not the model currently followed at Colina Cedro as there were not enough computers for a single class, let alone any computer labs or engineering equipment for students to use. Following the receipt of grant money, students did receive Chromebooks

at the very end of the 2013 – 2014 school year. One teacher referred to it as "a joke," though, since students and teachers were not trained on how to implement these computers into the curriculum and classroom environment. Students used them primarily for their own personal use. Although sites such as Facebook were blocked during the school day, Youtube was accessible. I observed a few students watching music videos on Youtube, using headphones or ear buds, while the teacher lectured.

It seemed this blended learning model was not followed even when Ms. Fanning was at Colina Cedro because, according to her, the teachers were either unwilling to implement it or they simply didn't know what blended learning was. She also took responsibility for taking the teachers at their word during job interviews when they acknowledged understanding blended learning. She herself just finished a Masters in Education Technology when I interviewed her in 2014 and had come to fully understand how blended learning works. No matter the reason, the blended learning, as set out in the school's charter, never came to fruition and as a visitor at the school, in its seventh year, I would have never even guessed this was part of the school's charter and mission. The school now differed greatly from its original charter and I am unaware of a newer version. I asked for a copy of the charter in the school office and received the original charter written by Mr. and Ms. Fanning, the current science teacher Mr. Elroy, and one other person.

The charter referenced Brookside and its success multiple times and held it as a model for Colina Cedro to follow. It stated that Colina Cedro targeted

> all students, especially students who qualify for free and reduced lunch and are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, to pursue

those careers at all levels by providing a rigorous, standards-based, educational program designed to support the academic success of all learners.

They proposed to do this through a small school environment and small class sizes which, theoretically, would provide for "numerous opportunities for individual attention." They also proposed the use of an "innovative schedule," although it is unclear what this schedule is or how it was innovative. I only learned what this meant after interviewing Ms. Fanning because the term "blended learning" was not used in the school charter. She explained it as a reference to the blended learning, as described above. The charter also stated that the school staff believed it could achieve success through a "Whatever It Takes" attitude.

The charter stated the school size to be approximately 225 – 300 students, although they have rarely exceeded more than half of its projected enrollment. Indeed, their current location cannot even hold this many students.

The development team envisioned Colina Cedro as implementing a program that included opportunities and strategies that proved to be successful at Brookside. A few of the things listed include:

- The extensive use of technology
- Community involvement
- Relevant and frequent field trips
- Mentors who are reflective of the target student population
- Innovative scheduling that allows for personal attention to student needs

During my time at Colina Cedro, I saw no evidence of any of these things. Senior students did take one field trip to area community colleges, but it was at the end of the school year,

past the Spring deadlines for FAFSA and enrollment. The charter also listed classes that they envisioned providing, but again, there was no evidence this ever came to fruition, or if it did, it no longer existed while I was at the school. 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," but again, I never saw such a class being taught, nor did I see it on transcripts of students who had attended Colina Cedro for their entire high school career. Students were also supposed to develop a portfolio which teachers would evaluate, but this is something else I never saw during my time at the school.

The charter addressed the route the school would take for both low- and high-achieving students. For low-achieving students, the school proposed that students will be referred to the "Student Success Team (SST) process." This was apparently intended for special education students as well, not just low-achieving students who were not labeled with a disability, as the charter stated, "Refer to Special Education below for details of SST." Throughout my time at Colina Cedro, I never heard this term or anything like it, even as I sought information specifically about special education. Of the several listed responses the school staff would take to address low-achieving students, pulling students out of the regular classroom was not one of them. The list included several things already listed in other parts of the charter, such as innovative scheduling, individual and small group attention, and "technology assisted learning through web-based programs." Because of the school's proposed innovative scheduling, where students were to be rotating from instruction to

computer time, the school proposed providing extra, specialized services during the time when the students were to be at computer workstations.

*SELPA*

While originally a part of Colfax United School District's SELPA, Colina Cedro eventually joined a SELPA, Meade County SELPA, in another part of the state, almost 600 miles away. Dr. James told me the local district's SELPA was "expensive" and services were "horrible." This specific SELPA was one of the few charter-only SELPAs, meaning only charter schools can join. Many charters in Colfax used this SELPA even though it was quite far away.

Meade County SELPA started in the 2006 – 2007 school year with only 10 charter schools, or 2,600 K – 12 students. By 2013 – 2014, the SELPA had grown to 192 charters, serving 85,000 students. In an annual report, Meade County SELPA admitted that their special education funding of $630 per ADA (Average Daily Attendance) did not "compare favorably" to $1,200 per ADA state average special education funding. They claimed this was due to the fact that the state average included services for infants, preschool, adults, and transportation.

*Brookside Charter School*

I visited Brookside because I wanted to see the differences and similarities between the two charter schools. I wanted to see how a charter in the suburbs with a predominantly White, middle class population compared to an urban charter with a predominately poor, Latino/a population. I assumed the two would share at least some similarities since the

Fannings chartered both schools, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Brookside was also a small school, but its similarities to Colina Cedro end there.

For starters, Brookside had its own campus in Springdale, a suburb of Colfax. It was near some other school buildings, affiliated with the Springdale Public School District, but it was not as close to Colina Cedro was to Julietta. Brookside definitely felt distinct and separate from those other school buildings. The campus also utilized portable trailers for classrooms, but they were painted bright colors. The campus itself had much more color, from a student and family painted mural to mosaic tiles around the flagpole. There was a small outdoor stage overlooking a hill where students could perform or for school assemblies. According to Ms. Fanning, there was once a pond that she and her students used for science projects, but I did not see a pond there. Ms. Fanning suspected it may have been paved over. The campus was also quieter, since it is in a residential area, near apartment complexes, rather than on a main road filled with businesses. Brookside also had a Media Center that housed books and enough computers for a single class to use.

Although the classrooms in these portable trailers were also small, they seemed to be more colorful and have more personality than at Colina Cedro – one classroom was decorated in a Hawaiian or Island theme, with colorful paper flowers and leis decorating the walls and bulletin boards. The students, unlike at Colina Cedro, were apparently not allowed to use their headphones while teachers were teaching. During my visit, I did not see any student using a cell phone or headphones. The classrooms averaged about 18:1 student to teacher ratio.

Despite the small class sizes and small school size (not quite as small as Colina Cedro – 275 students), Brookside offered a variety of sports for students, such as Girls Volleyball, Track and Field, Cross Country, Boys and Girls Soccer, and Golf; they also offered activities such as Yearbook. The classes offered also represented more variety, as the students were required to take two years of Foreign Language and one year of Art, as well as 4 years in all core subjects. The school was small, but popular, requiring the use of a lottery system to determine who would fill the open spots.

Brookside was named a high performing California Distinguished School, with an Academic Performance Index (API) of 888. According to the school, it had been the top ranked high school in Colfax County for several years. The principal was very proud of the students' behavior; he told me that he only had one suspension last year.

According to the current principal, 50% of the students at Brookside had backgrounds in homeschool, private, or other charter schools. The school's schedule allowed for the hybrid independent study, where students were on campus about 40% of the time. The students attended school according to a schedule that designated which grades come on which day. For example, on the day I visited, 9th and 10th grade students were on campus, while 11th and 12th graders were at home for independent study time.

Special education at Brookside differed as well. There was no Study Skills or Resource room. Instead, special education students were supported on a non-class day, once a week. This meant special education students came to the school for special education support on a day when their peers were doing independent study at home. The special education teacher at Brookside told me that they "review a student's IEP to see if they are a

good fit" for the program, which was considered to be rigorous and for students of high academic achievement. This made Brookside's special education population much smaller than Colina Cedro's – only 11 out of the 275 students had an IEP, representing only 4%.

# CHAPTER II

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature surrounding charter schools and students with disabilities paint a fairly dismal picture. Research is mainly focused on the following areas: enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools, the potential for conflict between the stated goals of charter schools and of inclusive education, and specific case studies of charter schools. Literature regarding neoliberalism and inclusive education show that neoliberal policies in public schools are a barrier to inclusive education.

### *Enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools*

Research in this area quite clearly indicates that, on average, students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools, though the numbers vary from state to state (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). Numerous studies conducted in the early years of charter schools point to either an overall under-enrollment of students with disabilities or under-enrollment of students with more severe disabilities (Guarino & Chau, 2003; Henig, Moser, Holyoke, & Lacireno-Paquet, 1999; McKinney, 1996). Under-enrollment lessened slightly in 2009 - 2010 as enrollment of students with disabilities rose to 8.2% of total charter school student population, closer to the average for in traditional public

schools (11.2%). This is up from the previous year when only 7.7% of students enrolled in charter schools were identified with a disability. It is important to note that these numbers do not list specific disability categories and still represents an under- enrollment of students with more severe disabilities. In fact, researchers have determined that of the students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools, most have mild to moderate disabilities (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Estes, 2004). Moderate to severe disabilities are considered to be low-incidence, meaning they happen less frequently; therefore, there may be fewer students with severe disabilities enrolled in charter schools simply because there are fewer of them.

As stated before, numbers vary from state to state, and in some areas, charter schools enroll above average numbers of students with disabilities; however, on the whole, students with disabilities, especially those with more severe disabilities, are still under-represented in today's charter schools. In addition, these numbers may be slightly skewed due to the fact that schools with over 20% students with disabilities are usually schools that cater specifically to students with disabilities, such as learning disabilities or autism.

Reasons for this underrepresentation are less clear, although scholars speculate that charter schools are 'counseling-out' students with disabilities, meaning that students with disabilities were discouraged from enrolling for seemingly well-intentioned reasons such as the focus of the curriculum being misaligned with the student's specific (read 'expensive' and 'difficult) education needs (Estes, 2003; Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnigan, 2000; Grant, 2005; Rothstein, 1998; Zollers, 2000). In addition to the widespread practice of 'counseling-out' students, Estes (2000)

notes "clauses within state educational statues that allow charter schools to exclude students with a history of behavior problems" (p. 374). Other critics are concerned about charter schools pushing out low-performing students. A recent study by Zimmer and Guarino (2013) sought to determine whether or not low-performing (not specifically students with disabilities) were pushed out of charter schools. After examining data from a major urban school district over the course of 7 years, they concluded that "generally…no evidence consistent with the claims of pushing out low-performing students" (p. 15). Their analysis only focused on data of students already enrolled and did not account for students who may not have enrolled in the first place.

Some researchers have attributed this underrepresentation to fact that charters may not be equipped to educate students with disabilities due to lack of expertise or funding (Estes, 2000, 2001; Fiore, Warren, & Cashman, 1999; Glascock, Roberston, & Coleman, 1997; Hill, 1999; Lange, 1997; Matwick, 1996; McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998; Rothstein, 1999; Urahn & Stewart, 1994; Vernal, 1995). They seem to excuse charter schools for not providing federally mandated services to disabled students, simply because many charter schools are small or new, with little experience. Others point to more ominous explanations for under-enrollment, such as rejecting students with disabilities because they are more costly to educate (Bulman & Kirp, 1999; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Ramanathan & Zollers, 1999; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998). The issue of the cost of educating students with disabilities is not a new issue, but one that appears to be more and more problematic in market-based school reforms such as charter schools.

Of those inclined to give charter schools the benefit of the doubt and assume the underrepresentation of students with disabilities is not discrimination, but rather technical and logistical issues, researchers have proposed a number of ways to remedy the problem. They suggest external assistance from national entities including the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, and also state and regional educational agencies or even through special education cooperatives (Estes, 2006). In addition to garnering additional funding, they also advocate for creating the infrastructure necessary for the success of students with disabilities in charter schools (Davis, 2005). These recommendations, of course, suggest that charter schools only struggle with educating students with disabilities because the schools are relatively new and haven't quite figured it out or because they are not funded properly. This analysis does not consider the free market ideology behind charter schools that make it impossible for these schools to regard students are anything other than commodities in an educational marketplace competing for the 'best' students (i.e., high achieving).

*Charter School and Special Education Law*

Szabo and Gerber (1996) found that of 12 state charter laws, only 4 of those laws mentioned special education. Likewise, in 1997, students with disabilities were under-represented in charter schools in 8 out of 10 states (U.S. Department of Education). Multiple studies revealed that up to half (25% - 50%) of early charter schools enrolled no students with disabilities at all (Carruthers, 1998; Estes, 2001; Henig, 1999). Unfortunately, a study conducted in 2007 reflects little improvement in charter school laws. Rhim, Ahearn, and Lange (2007) reviewed the 41 existing state laws regarding

charter schools and determined that "few of the existing charter school laws and regulations resolve or provide clarity regarding the myriad of issues raised related to educating students with disabilities in charter schools" (p. 57). Even in 2007, 10 states fail to mention funding for special education at all.

*The Potential for Conflict Between Stated Goals of Charter Schools and of Inclusive Education*

Despite the history of charter schools' discrimination of disabled students, the neoliberal ideology is so pervasive that charter schools are seen as positive choices for students with disabilities. Researchers have documented that parents of students with disabilities seek out charter schools for many of the same reasons as parents of nondisabled children (Lange & Lehr, 2000; Rogers, 2003; Shields, 2005). Parents cite dissatisfaction with traditional public schools and smaller class sizes as reasons for seeking charter school enrollment for the student with a disability; most also report specific special education curriculum as their primary reason (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Parents also say that they are satisfied with their child's placement, progress, and overall experience with the charter school (Estes, 2006; Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007).

Again, it is essential to note that these responses come, by and large, from parents of students with mild disabilities. As a matter of fact, of the 135 parents in the study conducted by Lange and Lehr (2000), 36% reported their child's disability as a learning disability and far fewer reported more 'severe' disabilities such as multiple handicaps (2%), autism (.07%), and intellectual disabilities (0.7%). These parents also represent

those who successfully enrolled their student in the charter school, not parents of those students who were counseled out and were unable to secure enrollment.

While these studies of parent perceptions seem to point to an overlap of the interests between charter schools and education for students with disabilities, other studies point to a very distinct and irreconcilable difference between the two parties. Charter schools' rally for deregulation and autonomy is in direct opposition to many regulatory policies that define inclusive education. These regulations protect students with disabilities and guarantee them free, public education as well as the right to accommodations and the services necessary to make the student successful. This can become costly for the school, sometimes leading to friction between parents and schools, who may have differing opinions on what services are appropriate for the student. This creates both policy tensions and challenges (Green & Mead, 2004; Heubert, 1997; O'Neill, Wenning, & Giovannetti, 2002). Rhim and Lange (2007) write that "the extensive responsibilities of special education mandated by federal legislation and regulations and the consequent interpretation by state and federal courts pose unique practical challenges for charter schools" (p. 52). Again, this excuses charter schools from their responsibilities and assumes benign ignorance or lack of resources, rather than discrimination and hostile attitudes towards students who seen to be expensive to educate. Thus the difference between stated goals is positioned as perhaps a misunderstanding that needs clarification. However, it seems inconceivable that an environment which advocates for deregulation would be keen to follow the regulations which stipulate the rights of students with disabilities, regardless of how much training and education takes place to make charter schools aware of their responsibilities. It

seems much more likely that charter school administrators are in fact aware of these regulations, but see them as a hindrance to the progress and success of the school. Thus, as evidenced above, schools are finding ways around these regulations through 'counseling out' students whom they do not wish to educate – for me, this points not to a misunderstanding or ignorance of the law, but to a more complete understanding and immersion in market-based ideology which decries regulation as harmful and detrimental. Additionally, studies found that charters are more likely to engage in political lobbying and creating positive public relations (Henig, Holyoke, Lacierenо-Paquet, & Moser, 2003; Lubienski, 2006).

*Specific Case Studies of Charter Schools*

While the majority of the research mentioned to this point has focused on charter schools on a national or state level, a section of the research devotes itself to case studies of specific charter schools. The following articles focused more specifically on certain states, as well as specific schools such as a public cyber charter school.

New Orleans presents an interesting case because of its extremely high number of charter schools – more than any other city in the United States. Case studies of charter schools in New Orleans presented data similar to the nationwide surveys – students with disabilities were sometimes denied admission to charter schools despite charter school laws that specifically bar such exclusions (Wolf, 2011). Wolf (2011) attributed the discrepancy to be due to "financial and academic contingencies infringing on the charter school system," (p. 390), not to problematic market-based ideology. In fact, many tout New Orleans' Recovery School District (RSD) and charter school takeover as a "once-in-

a-lifetime opportunity to create a unique public school system that could provide noteworthy guidance for others" (Morse, 2010, p. 179) despite RSD's and other charters' "struggle with addressing the needs of the incredibly diverse group of students who are protected by the IDEA" (p. 172).

An analysis of charter schools in Wisconsin conducted by Drame (2011) echoed the same concerns found in national studies regarding special education and charter schools. The author wrote that "overall, the content of the nine charter school applications was rated as only vaguely addressing the considerations of special education" (p. 58). These charter school applications did not address important issues such as legal and compliance issues regarding special education, the transportation of students with disabilities, or the funding for special education. Also similar to the national data, Drame (2011) reports that the majority of students with disabilities enrolled in Wisconsin charter schools have mild disabilities (Learning disabilities – 88%) with more 'severe' disabilities reported less frequently.

Spitler, Repetto, and Cavanaugh (2013) present a case study of a public cyber charter school. The authors praise the potential for students with disabilities attending virtual schools and write "students with disabilities who are considered at risk for dropping out prior to school completion may benefit from distance education opportunities, such as online courses, that can be designed to meet their unique needs" (p. 5). This case study centered on a cyber charter school in the Northeast region of the United States which has been in operation for over a decade. During the 2010 – 2011 school year, the school enrolled 2,353 students, K – 12. Students identified with a disability accounted for 13% of student enrollment. This school is committed to the "5

Cs": Connect, Climate, Control, Curriculum, and Caring Community." According to the CEO of the school, "the school is becoming known as a school that is successful in educating students with disabilities" and that "the school has a high completion rate for students with an IEP" (Spitler, Repetto, & Cavanaugh, 2013, p. 11). Additionally, state data confirms that students with an IEP at this school have increased academic achievement across content area. Nonetheless, the authors admit that very few virtual educators have experience working with students with disabilities and make no mention of accessibility issues related to cyber schooling.

*Neoliberalism*

While many studies regarding charter schools and students with disabilities note charter schools' poor performance thus far on educating students with disabilities, many do not point to the underlying political ideology as the problem. As mentioned before, the problems are seen to be a result of other logistical issues. Many do point out that charter schools follow a business model of sorts, or is grounded in market theory, but they do not go the next step and point to the problems inherent in such a model. For example, Ramanathan and Zollers (1999) wrote passionately about the dirty politics behind charter schools when they wrote that "for-profit charter schools in Massachusetts have 'engaged in a pattern of disregard and often blatant hostility toward students with more complicated behavior and cognitive disabilities'" (p. 299). This criticism, though, does not go very far if it does not analyze the foundation that creates this hostility in the first place. Similarly, Zollers and Ramanathan (1998) wrote of the "the sordid side of the business of schooling," but they concluded that "in the right circumstances, for-profit charter schools could also represent a powerful opportunity for students with complicated

disabilities and their families" (p. 304). All the while lamenting the unethical practices of for-profit charters, they ultimately recommend that these issues can be solved by making for-profit charter schools more accountable.

Additionally, Wolf (2011) who documented the sad state of affairs for Wisconsin charter schools recognized 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. The decision to spend more money to support a single student with disabilities posed a quandary for the charter leadership. Functionally, the charter system has been disincentivized to include difficult and costly students. (p. 390)

In the end though, she came to the same conclusion as the others – not that this ideology itself is flawed but that charter schools simply needed more time, more education regarding special education issues, and more funding.

On the other hand, Howe and Welner (2002) argue that "schools are rewarded, often financially, for students who score high on tests, and they are punished for their students who score low on tests" (p. 217 – 218). Theoretically, then, students with severe and multiple disabilities are the most unwanted by charter schools, whereas students with a slight learning disability might be seen as the most desirable (of the undesireables, at least) in terms of cost and profitability. For-profit charter schools, by nature, are then 'justified' in their exclusion of students with disabilities. Even charters run by non-profits are shielded from claims of being exclusionary since they can rely on application

processes in order to declare disabled students not to be a "good fit" with their academic program or that the school simply does not have a program to serve students with disabilities (Howe & Welner, 2002). In the end though, there simply is not overwhelming data that support charter schools' superiority over public schools or that disabled students would be better served there, despite reform measures that seek to close community schools in favor of opening charters.

Other researchers examine the implications neoliberal ideology has for special education and students with disabilities. Hardy and Woodcock (2015) focus directly on neoliberalism and inclusive education. They argue that, "while issues of equity are central to inclusion, under current neoliberal conditions, equity is being rearticulated within more economistic parameters" (p. 144). They see neoliberal policies as a barrier to fully inclusive school environments, concluding that, "concerns about resource provision, and gaps and silences about the multiple needs which characterise issues of genuine inclusion all point to the effects of broader neoliberal conditions" (p. 162). Stangvik (2014) also focuses on the effects of neoliberal policies on inclusion. He argues that "neoliberal policies create a new context for education" (p. 101). Education policies are "based on fiscal imperatives and the principles of efficacy and accountability" that ultimately, "do not compare well with what happens in the field of practice where special education decisions have to be taken" (p. 101). Slee (2011) also argues that truly inclusive education is difficult in the "competitive education marketplace" where "schools compete to attract those students whose academic potential will improve and sustain the school's position" (p. 43). 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).

Lastly, although they do not address neoliberalism and special education specifically, researchers who have examined neoliberalism and disability have documented the ways that this ideology has shaped rhetoric surrounding disability. Neoliberalism has shifted the responsibility from the state to the individual so those who require special services or benefits are seen as lazy and morally fraudulent (Apple, 2001a; 2001b; Grimaldi, 2012; Liasidou, 2012; Soldatic, 2011).

*Conclusion*

The literature on charter schools and students with disabilities speaks to overall under-enrollment of students with disabilities at charter schools. Researchers have pointed out to possible "counseling out" of students who may be perceived to be expensive to educate or may lower standardized test scores. The literature also shows potential areas of conflict regarding special education law and charters, as well as between market ideology behind charters and inclusive education. Lastly, case studies which have studied neoliberalism and inclusion have demonstrated that overarching neoliberal ideology can be a barrier for truly inclusive education.

# CHAPTER III

# THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

## *Theoretical Grounding*

This research study uses Critical Theory as lens to understand the relationship between neoliberal market-based school reform efforts and disability. Employing this critical lens on these reform efforts requires exploring economic, political and historical perspectives. Therefore, schooling, the special education system and disability will be interrogated in ways that incorporate these three perspectives. Such a theoretical framework makes certain assumptions. Research will be conducted with these basic assumptions in mind:

- All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted;
- The facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscription;
- The relationship between concept and object, and between signifier and signified, is never stable and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;
- Language is central to the formation of subjectivity, that is, both conscious and unconscious awareness;

- Certain groups in a society are privileged over others, constituting an oppression that is most forceful when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable;
- Oppression has many faces, and concern for only one form of oppression at the expense of others can be counterproductive because of the connections between them;
- Mainstream research practices are generally implicated, albeit often unwittingly, in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression (Kincheloe and McLaren, as cited by Crotty, 1998, p. 157 – 158).

More specifically, this study draws on critical education theorists such as Giroux (2003) and McLaren (2003). Critical education theorists

> challenge the assumption that schools function as major sites of social and economic mobility. Instead, they suggest that schooling must be analyzed as a cultural and historical process in which students are positioned within asymmetrical relations of power on the basis of specific race, class, and gender groupings. (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 23)

While these fundamental assumptions of Critical Theory have most often been ascribed to differences such as race, class and gender, (Erevelles, 2000; 2011; Gabel, 2002) critical disability theory builds on this by including disability in its analysis. Using this theoretical framework, this research will consider disability as a similar constructed difference that marginalizes and oppresses. Disability will not be considered as a biological characteristic of students, but rather as a historical, political, social, and cultural construct which has deleterious implications for those whom such a label is assigned. 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 and, as a result,

persons are *manufactured* as disabled" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 5). Regarding the current era, these theorists also content that "neoliberal policies of downsizing and retrenchment, for example, have resulted in increased marginalization and impoverishment of many persons with disabilities" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 6). Devlin and Pothier (2006) write that "two key political insights undergird critical disability theory: power(lessness) and context" (p. 9).

Additionally, disability studies will serve as a guiding framework. Disability studies relies on the social model of disability, rather than the medical model which seeks to rehabilitate and 'fix' people with disabilities. Social models of disability offer a different way to examine disability. 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.' More specific to this project, Disability Studies is critical of special education and the role it plays in separating, excluding, and limiting students with disabilities.

Lastly, this research will also utilize a framework developed by Tomlinson in 1982 – Sociology of Special Education. This little used framework in special education builds on the sociology of education literature, including Neo-Marxist conflict theory and theorists such as Bourdieu, and Bowles and Gintis, and then applies it to the system of

special education. In this light, special education is neither benevolent or humanitarian, but rather another mechanism to create a labor class, to sort and stratify students, and to maintain the interests of those in power. Tomlinson examines the structural inequalities that come when one part of mass education is regarded as "normal" and the other as "special." She also examines the problems that arise when some individuals, such as the medical field, have a vested interest in labeling some students as deficient or lacking in some way.

*Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach*

This project lends itself to qualitative research because "qualitative research is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 7 – 8). I was not interested in simply tracking the test scores of students with disabilities or in the cause-and-effect relationship of a specific curriculum or pedagogy, but instead, I was interested in exploring the complex intersections of neoliberal market-based school reforms, urban schools, and disability. This was accomplished best through qualitative inquiry.

*Rationale for Ethnographic Case Study*

I chose to conduce an ethnographic case study in order to answer my research questions: 1) How are neoliberal education reforms shaping the experiences of special education students? and 2) What is the classroom environment and school culture for special education students at Colina Cedro Charter High School? A case study "focuses on the dynamics present within single settings" (Eisenhardt, 1989). Yin (2003) describes

when the use of case is appropriate: (a) the focus of the study I to answer "how" and "why" the phenomenon and context. All of these conditions related to my study. A case study of a special education classroom in an urban charter school provided an opportunity to examine neoliberal market-based school reforms and special education. The contextual conditions of special education are relevant to understanding neoliberalism and inclusive education. Neoliberal policies have become so pervasive in public schools the boundary between the phenomenon and context (charter school) is not clear. Stake (2005) states that a case study "concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts" (p. 444). A case study was appropriate because understanding special education in a neoliberal context required close attention to the social, political, and economic contexts of special education and disability. Baxter and Jack (2008) describes a descriptive case as "the type of case study…used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred" (p. 548). A descriptive case study was suitable for this study because I sought to describe neoliberalism in the real-life context of a special education classroom in an urban charter school.

In *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, LeCompte and Schensul (1999) argue that ethnographies are not appropriate for every project and outline cases in which it would be useful. Among other scenarios, they argue that ethnographic work would be helpful in order to "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" (p. 29 – 30). Because this research 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 for me to investigate these systems in a particular school culture. This allowed me simply to investigate and explore since "…ethnography emphasizes discovery; it does not assume answers. Ethnography uses open-ended methods that allow investigators and others to gather information identifying the source of the problem, rather than simply assuming that it is known from the start" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 33). Given the lack of data surrounding disability, special education, and neoliberal market-based school reforms, such open-ended discovery and exploration is crucial. Moreover, since "…[ethnography] means writing about the *culture* of groups of people" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 21, emphasis original), ethnographic work is suitable for a research project which seeks to understand the culture of urban special education classrooms in the neoliberal environment.

Ethnographic research is also applicable in this study because of "…its commitment to 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. Thus, I have chosen ethnography as a methodology in order to highlight the views and perspectives of special education students in the neoliberal environment, rather utilizing other methodologies which would limit the researcher from fully exploring and discovering the participants' meanings, views, and perspectives. Furthermore, the long-term nature inherent in ethnographic work makes ethnographic

work suitable for this research study because it allowed me to document the lived experience. Understanding the lived experiences of special education students in urban charter schools is essential as charter schools continue to grow in number and influence.

*Research Sample*

This study employed purposeful sampling because it was important to choose "information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation" (Bloomber & Volpe, 2008, p. 69). Colina Cedro Charter High School had a relatively high percentage of students with disabilities (20%, compared to an average of 8% in other charter schools) and its declared commitment to poor and underrepresented students in a highly rigorous, standards-based environment focused on STEM fields. Additionally, as a charter school, it was part of the neoliberal market-based school reforms that I wished to study.

I contacted the local university's research and partnership development center. The center had ongoing projects and relationships with schools in the Colfax area. A director connected me with Colina Cedro Charter High School, whereupon I met with the principal to discuss the possibility and logistics of conducting research at Colina Cedro.

Participants included students enrolled in special education, the special education teacher, the special education teaching assistant, a regular education teacher (Algebra), the school principal, and the two founders and charter writers of Colina Cedro, for a total of 9 participants. This diverse group of participants was designed to encompass as much of the school culture as possible: from the student level to the administration level, and both regular and special education. Special education can neither be understood simply

from the viewpoint of the teacher, nor from only the students'. Moreover, I chose to examine special education as a counterpart to the regular education system, rather than a single system in a vacuum that exists on its own. These two systems do not exist separately, but rather they function in tandem, especially in the face of neoliberal market-based school reforms that places more and more emphasis on proving competency through standardized testing, accountability, and competition.

I chose to include the principal since he often is responsible for the directives that students, teacher's assistants, and teachers must follow; therefore, he was also an important part of understanding the special education culture at the research site. He had a different experience of the district, local, state, and federal policies, rules, and regulations from an administrative standpoint than those (teachers and teacher's assistants) who were required with actually carry out these directives out every day. I chose to interview the founders of Colina Cedro in order to better understand the school's mission. I wanted to understand why charters were important to them, as well as why they chose to charter a new school.

*Research Design Overview*

I conducted the case study in a small, urban charter school (grades 9 – 12) in a large city in California. This case study was intended to take place over the course of one academic school year (2013 – 2014), but the special education teacher quit at the beginning of the school year, and her replacement did not arrive until October. As a result, the study lasted less than one academic year, November through June.

In order to increase the credibility and validity of the study, I considered several data sources. Triangulation can be used to "reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 72). I used a variety of methods, including participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, as well as provide opportunities for participants to share their narratives. I analyzed documents and artifacts such as assignments, tests, and quizzes used in the regular education classroom, school- and district- level data regarding disability enrollment and diagnoses, standardized testing data, student work, student IEPs, the school charter, and the school employee handbook. These varied documents supplemented the observations and interviews so that a more complete picture emerged.

## Data-Collection Methods

### *Participant Observation*

I conducted participant observations as a classroom volunteer. I assisted students in both the regular and special education classroom. I conducted these observations in the special education classroom, as well as the regular education classrooms where students with IEPs were present. I observed a variety of classes, including English, Biology, Chemistry, U.S. History, World History, Government, and Algebra. I attended an Open House in October where parents met with the new special education teacher. I also observed a school-wide awards assembly. Lastly, I observed a student participant's IEP meeting.

As a classroom volunteer in the special education classroom, I supervised students, helped them with class work, and did administrative tasks (copy, file, organize).

In the regular education classroom, I helped students (special and regular education) with their work, as the teacher asked. A few times, I was also asked to substitute for the special education teacher or teacher's assistant when they were absent. I was paid for these occasions. Participant observation provided an opportunity to interact directly with students, teacher's assistants, and teachers, rather than simply observing them. By working as a volunteer, I gained more of an insider perspective, as well as created rapport and familiarity with the participants.

*Semi-structured Interviews and Narratives*

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants individually. The interview protocols were semi-structured in order to provide opportunities for both structure and flexibility. These interviews lasted 30 minutes to an hour, and were followed by a 30 minute member check in which the participant and I had an opportunity to read through the interview transcript to ask for clarification, modification, or deletion. The interviews with the student participants took place in the small room within the special education classroom. We were able to close the door for privacy since the interviews happened during class time. Interviews with the teachers and assistants happened in their classrooms or in the teacher's lounge before or after school when students were not present. I interviewed the principal in his office. Finally, I interviewed the two founders over the telephone. All interviews were voice recorded.

These semi-structured interviews and participant observations were a springboard into participant narratives. Chase (2010) writes that "a narrative may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a naturally occurring conversation" (p. 209). She continues and states that,

> a narrative may be (a) a short topical story about a particular event and specific characters such as an encounter with a friend, boss, or doctor; (b) an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma, or participation in war or social movement; or (c) a narrative of one's entire life, from birth to present. (p. 209)

These narratives were important because they allowed the voices and stories of both the participants and the researcher to emerge. Although narratives have been used in a variety of disciplines for a myriad of reasons, Chase notes that contemporary narrative inquiry requires, among other things, that researchers "view narratives as verbal action – as doing or accomplishing something…narrators explain, entertain, inform, defend, complain or confirm to challenge the status quo" (p. 214). This action component correlates with the critical theoretical grounding of this project and is particularly important for contributing a critical perspective to the existing body of literature of medicalized special education research that positions students with disabilities as needy, helpless objects to be cured, trained, or rehabilitated. Such research is lacking because it is filled with 'expert knowledge' rather than student voices and stories.

*Document / Artifact Analysis*

I collected a variety of items to be used for document and artifact analysis. These items covered a wide range in an attempt to appropriately encapsulate the neoliberal school environment from policy to practice. Document and artifact analysis also included student assignments, tests, and quizzes, as well as the school charter and school standardized testing data, as these are an important part of the neoliberal school

environment, as well as the classroom culture. I analyzed the three student participants' IEPs.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Subjects were given pseudonyms and no identifying information was used. Pseudonym were be used in all recordings, audio or visual. Similarly, the school was given a pseudonym and indentifying information removed. I also changed the name of the neighborhood and city. Physical data was stored in a locked drawer (with the researcher possessing the only key) in the researcher's office for a period of two years, after which it will be destroyed; recorded sessions were stored in a protected file on the researcher's personal computer. Audio and video recordings will also be destroyed after a period of two years. The researcher was the only person accessing the data.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data analysis for such a large amount of data required organization and sensibility. Analysis and synthesis was not a linear process, so the process consisted of analyzing, going back for clarification, coding, and re-coding before it was synthesized. While there is not one "right" way to analyze data, it is important to maintain the integrity of the data without imposing exogenous meanings or making claims that the data cannot bear (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 2011).

I used the coding strategies set forth by Saldana (2009) and Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) in order to do open and lump coding in order to generate empirical assertions based on robust evidentiary warrant (Erickson, 1986). These assertions and analytic questions were used to create memos which later aided me in synthesizing my

data into unified, meaningful work. I utilized index cards and color-coding in order to organize my data into useable sets after I have allowed themes to emerge. I also located "critical incidents" in my data in order to make empirical assertions.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning, I asked the school principal for his permission to conduct research at the school for the duration of an entire school year. All participants (and sparents / guardians if students were under 18) reviewed, with the researcher, an Informed Consent Form which outlined the study and explained its purpose and how it may be used; provided permission for the researcher to audio tape interviews, activities, or meetings; provided permission for the researcher to access school and student data; provided permission for the researcher to be included in any relevant Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings; informed participants of their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences; and provided them with an opportunity to ask any questions they may have had. After the participants agreed that the terms were satisfactory, s/he signed the Informed Consent Form.

Throughout data collection, I took steps to be continually aware of participant privacy and confidentiality, especially protecting the privacy of students and student records. Additionally, in building relationships with faculty and students, I was aware of the difficulty in balancing these close relationships and exploiting them. Holland (2007) raises these issues and argues that while emotions no doubt play an important role in qualitative research, they can also cause problems if the researcher is not careful. She draws upon several examples in which emotions become problematic for the research or

instances in which the close relationships were exploited for the sake of the data or the research. While it is important for the classroom volunteer to maintain close relationships with both the student and teacher (and any assistants), it is equally important to remember that the researcher must remain objective.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

### *Credibility*

I ensured credibility by being clear with any bias I may have held, as well as through triangulation and member checks. Reflexivity was an important part of bringing credibility to the research study. I am a former special education teacher, so I may be considered an insider in the special education world as a teacher; however, as a special education student, I would consider myself an outsider since I was never placed in special education as a student.

I also pursued credibility through triangulation and member checks. As mentioned before, several data sources were considered in order to triangulate data and to increase credibility. Additionally, spending almost an entire school year ensured proper incubation at the research site in order to make claims about the participants and their culture. Member checks were performed not only for clarification, but also to make certain that no researcher bias had influenced participants' meanings and intentions.

### *Dependability*

In order to achieve dependability, I created an "audit trail" to make it possible to "track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 78). Such a trail was constructed through detailed and thorough

descriptions of the ways in which the data were collected and analyzed so that others may review it as well.

*Transferability*

Transferability was ensured through rich, thick description and being as detailed as possible about the participants, their school, their communities, and any other information that would help readers to understand their mindsets more fully.

*Limitations*

The small sample size posed limitations to the study. Of the nine regular education teachers, I was only able to interview one, Ms. Nowak. She had a high concentration of special education students in her Algebra Extended class (about half). The other teachers either declined to be in the study, or agreed but never showed for interviews. Even though I did not conduct interviews with the other regular education teachers, I did observe in almost all of their classes. I was positioned as a volunteer at the school, so I was seen more as a participant than a researcher.

Of the 27 or so special education students (numbers fluctuated throughout the school year), I was only able to get three students to participate in the study. Only one student, Isabel, was under the age of 18; other students who were required to seek parental participation did not want to participate. The other two students, Royce and Santiago, were over 18 and were able to participate without parental consent.

Additionally, the small number of clubs and extracurricular activities at Colina Cedro limited my observations to inside of the classroom. Outside of the classroom, I attended an awards ceremony and an activity put on by the Garden Club, but these were

the only non-class related activities I observed. I did not the chance to observe lunch periods in Julietta's cafeteria. Colina Cedro students were required to head over to Julietta to pick up their lunch, but since I did not have a school badge, I did not cross the fence into Julietta. Other students left campus for lunch since Colina Cedro had an open campus policy; others sat in various places such as the sidewalk. As a result, my observations were confined to mostly classroom interactions.

*Conclusion*

In order to answer my research questions about neoliberal educational reform and special education at Colina Cedro Charter High School, I chose qualitative case study research. This methodology was appropriate because it allowed me to explore the phenomenon and contexts of neoliberalism, special education, and charter schools. My research sample include students, teachers, teaching assistant, principal, and school founders. Data collection methods included participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. I detailed issues of confidentiality, ethical considerations, and issues of trustworthiness.

# CHAPTER IV

## FINDINGS

In this study, I asked 1) How are neoliberal education reforms shaping the experiences of special education student, and 2) What is the classroom environment and school culture for special education students at Colina Cedro Charter High School? I organized my findings into five themes. These five themes are as follows: 1) "It's More Personal": Smallness, Relationships, and Caring; 2) "The Neediest Population in Colfax": Deficit Thinking and the Creation of the Individual Problem; 3) Classes in the Back of a Car Dealership: Implementing a Business Model at School; 4) "Floating Around": Problems with the Push-In Model; and 5) "You Just Waste So Much Time": Problems with the Study Skills Class.

As described in this chapter, the original founders of Colina Cedro deliberately structured the school to foster an educational climate conducive to students' participation in the capitalist market, including course offerings, the school's dress code, even the interior design of the classrooms to reflect a commercial enterprise. Ironically, however, it was Colina Cedro's own viability in the capitalist marketplace that overwhelmingly dictated curriculum and daily practices. Understaffed and poorly regulated, teachers

resorted to ideas and practices that were less than ideal for their students. These issues surface in the themes discussed below.

## Theme 1: "It's More Personal:" Smallness, Relationships, and Caring

### *Introduction*

Colina Cedro, in addition to advertising itself as a school that promoted science and technology, proudly touted its small school size as an alternative to very large public high schools. School staff asserted that the small size lent itself to more individualized attention and a "family" feeling. Students and teachers at Colina Cedro often spoke about the small size of the school and how its size provided an opportunity for better relationships between teachers and students, as well as peer relationships. They also frequently mentioned how the smaller class sizes benefitted students, especially special education students, because they were able to receive more attention from their teachers. School staff felt strongly that the small size automatically equated to a caring attitude on the part of the teachers, which, in turn, fostered good relationships. Small size, however, did not prevent some students from falling through the cracks. the small size of the school also meant a lack of opportunities for students of Colina Cedro.

### *Small Size Equals Caring and Relationships*

Students and teachers alike often spoke of the small school size as a positive. Ms. Rutherford commented,

> I feel like here if a student has a behavior problem, they have, they have, you know they're talking to two or three adults a day about it, whereas at Lincoln

> High School, they'd just be kind of, warehoused somewhere…they wouldn't be, they wouldn't get the personal attention. It wouldn't be the same.

Here Ms. Rutherford compared Colina Cedro to Lincoln and their respective sizes. She equated the small school size of Colina Cedro with more attention and a more familiar and comfortable environment; at the same time, she equated larger school populations with a more cold, unfeeling environment saying that the students would just be "warehoused somewhere." She also stated that the smaller teacher-to-student ratio means that a student has more than one teacher looking out for his or her best interests.

Students also frequently mentioned the small size of the school as a factor in their choice to attend Colina Cedro instead of their neighborhood school. For instance, Santiago said that he chose Colina Cedro over Lincoln because of a family member who also attended who told him "that they help you a lot, and, like, the, the students in class, they were less, little and I like that 'cause I need help." He also mentioned that one of the perks of the schools was

> the classrooms are, like, smaller. So, like, if you need help, the teacher is there to, like, and in other high schools, there's, like, fifty students in each period, class. So you ask the teacher a question and they don't really pay attention to you.

Santiago acknowledged that he needed help and he figured the smaller school and class sizes were a way to receive that extra help and attention. He also mentioned the large class sizes at other schools and automatically equated this with uncaring teachers who "don't really pay attention to you."

For Royce, the small school also appealed to him as a student who attended some of the larger high schools around Colfax and its suburban areas. Royce attended several high schools before coming to Colina Cedro, so many in fact, that he had troubling listing them all for me. At the urging of his mother, he transferred to suburban schools because of their good reputations, even though he is a resident of the Eastwick community. He wished to attend a school in his own community, but not Lincoln because of its repuation, so he came to Colina Cedro. According to Royce, Colina Cedro "has a repuation for being, like I said, small and filled with a lot of smart students." He liked the small school size school because he said he "didn't want to be a part of a big crowd. 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; I don't know them.'" In addition to the familiar feeling, Royce also stated that he felt the smaller classes and school size would lead to more attention and help. He said,

> like, if you ever have a bad day, people can actually say, 'Oh, what's wrong?' because you actually get noticed because it's such a small school. But, like, I said, if you're in a big school, you don't notice things like that. People can be depressed; people can be this, that; they can be failing and they [teachers] don't even know. But here, it's like, as soon as they see, like, a grade falling down, the teachers wanna know, 'Hey, man, like, what's goin' on?', like, you know?

Here, Royce compared small and big schools and felt that students who are struggling in larger schools simply do not get noticed. He also equated teacher's caring with noticing when grades fall. Royce also praised the school as one of the most friendly and generous he has ever attended. He said, "When I first came in here, everybody was friendly. I've

never been to a school where people are just so generous. It's just a big welcome mat in front of the school." I asked if he was referring to the teachers or the students, and he clarified, "The students!" So while, he believed that teachers care because they inquired about falling grades, it was the students he identified as friendly and generous.

*Small Size Did Not Prevent Some from Falling Through the Cracks*

The students were quick to point to the small size of the school as a positive, but could it be because they were repeating what they always hear teachers or parents say? For example, while Santiago mentioned the small school size as something he liked about the school, he also mentioned not receiving as much help from the special education teacher as he would have liked, despite being enrolled in a Study Skills class in the special education classroom with only two other students. For instance, he mentioned that one of the perks of the Colina Cedro was "the classrooms are, like, smaller. So, like, if you need help, the teacher is there to, like, and in other high schools, there's, like, fifty students in each period, class. So you ask the teacher a question and they don't really pay attention to you." Santiago wanted to attend Colina Cedro because he thought he'd receive more attention, but in the interview, Santiago described not getting as much help from Ms. Rutherford.

> Santiago: I liked my last year [special education] teacher 'cause she was more, like, she helped me more than anyone.
>
> Researcher: Like, helped you more…
>
> S: Like, doing my work, she'd be there…instead of sitting down in the desk.

Santiago associated Ms. Rutherford as always sitting at her desk and openly acknowledged that she did not help him as much as last year's special education teacher, Ms. Flynn. 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."

I asked Santiago whether or not the time of day that he attended Study Skills affected his behavior at all because I often observed that when Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo would ask Santiago to work during 6th period (the last period of the school day), he would say he was sleepy. He acknowledged that last year, he came to the special education room earlier in the day and that he often was tired of "doing too much work" by last period. Whether or not he truly was more tired this year during his special education class or not, he was never pushed to do his work or to pay more attention. In fact, the opposite: he was often allowed to lay his head down and rest / sleep or just generally goof off. Santiago knew that if he didn't push the limits, he could essentially do whatever he wanted in class. He apparently worked hard for Ms. Flynn and enjoyed her help, but this year, he had resigned to not doing much work because no one was really expecting him to do so.

Later in the interview, I asked Santiago if he felt supported by this teachers:

Researcher: Do you feel supported by your teachers?

Santiago: Mmm, yeah.

R: Aides?

S: Mostly my senior year.

R: You didn't feel supported the other years?

S: Yeah, I did, but I feel like more support 'cause I'm going to graduate.

R: Okay.

S: People are supporting me now.

This exchange showed that while on the surface, Santiago appeared to support the commonly held belief that he received more help at this school because of the lower teacher-to-student ratio, he also stated that he received more help his Senior year. Why would he receive more help his Senior year compared to other years? He seemed to be able to feel the difference in levels of support distinctively. So while he stated that Ms. Rutherford did not help him as much as Ms. Flynn did, he still felt an extra push this year to help him graduate. 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. He was not identified until nearly the end of his first year of high school.

In observations of Santiago in both regular and special education settings, it seemed as though teachers were willing to allow him to do the bare minimum to graduate and then become someone else's problem. While the option was certainly there for him to be a Super Senior and retake his failed classes in order to meet graduation requirements, Santiago graduated in June, despite failing some courses. He struggled tremendously with chemistry – or more accurately, perhaps, he didn't struggle at all because he told me that he was so lost that he didn't know why he should even try. In fact, on one multiple-choice test in Chemistry, he did not even attempt to mark any

answers on a single question. He didn't guess; he didn't mark answers arbitrarily. He wrote his name on the test and turned it in blank. He made a zero. When I asked what happened on the quiz, he stated that he didn't know any of it. I asked if he asked Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo for help; he said there wouldn't be any point because they didn't know the content either. Obviously, as a special education teacher, it is not Ms. Rutherford's fault that chemistry is not her subject area of knowledge, but it seemed she did little, if anything, to help Santiago with chemistry. Rather, she seemed resigned to the fact that he would fail that one course, so she did what she could to make sure he had a passing grade in other courses to ensure his overall GPA didn't suffer too much. In fact, she once told him to focus more on his English project because he was going to fail Chemistry anyway. During sixth period Study Skills, she asked him about Government or English assignments, never Chemistry. Additionally, I never saw her attend 3rd period Chemistry, despite the fact that two other special education students were enrolled in that period, along with Santiago. In Santiago's case, this omission proved to be very detrimental as he was essentially allowed to fail Chemistry as long as the rest of his GPA remained high enough for him to graduate.

Royce also suffered from lack of adequate attention even though he too stated the small size of the school as a reason for transferring to this school. As a Super Senior, he only attended two periods a day, first and second period, in order to make up classes he previously failed. He took Government and then attended Study Skills in the Special Ed classroom to make up US History and English. During second period, he worked independently on his US History packets and rarely received help from either Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo. If he had questions, he was usually directed to the Internet.

How had he failed previously with all the individualized attention and help in a small school setting? Even now, he sat alone and filled out worksheets. He worked on these all semester long, although it shouldn't have taken that long at all, so it all seemed an enormous waste of his time. Obviously, some responsibility belonged with Royce and his work ethic, but how was he allowed to fall through the cracks in a school which has a stated attitude of "anything possible" and prided itself on providing individual attention to all students? Royce chose Colina Cedro for the small environment and what he saw as a fast way to get all of his credits to graduate, yet he ended up a Super Senior because he failed so many courses. 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.

While teachers and students both extolled the small school size as a way to know their students better, it seemed that the typical teenager-teacher relationship did not lend itself to a great amount of transparency regardless of the school size. While teachers no doubt had good intentions and have good relationships with a good number of their students, it is not reasonable to expect this of every high school student. For example, Isabel, also stated the small school size as a reason for wanting to attend Colina Cedro; however, as demonstrated in her IEP meeting, she appeared to be struggling with something no one knew about, despite the purported good relationships between teachers and students. This was probably through no fault of anyone at the school, but just a typical teenage response to adults. During her meeting, the principal stated that Isabel had approached him with some questions regarding independent study. Throughout the meeting, the principal prompted Isabel to explain her reasoning for wanting to study at

home – was someone bullying her? Was she struggling in a certain class? Was she having difficulties with one of her teachers? Isabel shrugged her shoulders throughout and never gave a clear answer on why she didn't want to attend school on campus anymore. Perhaps it was a larger problem, or perhaps she just found the idea of staying home all day to be enticing, as it probably is to plenty of other teenagers. No one knows, and maybe that is something that should remain personal to Isabel. The point is that if Isabel herself had not approached the principal about independent study, it is quite possible that none of her teachers or the principal would have known that something was going on at all. And even with the issue raised, Isabel's problems remained as anonymous as they would have in a larger school where she supposedly would have just been shuffled about and lost in the crowd. Regardless of her reasoning, Isabel remained in school and I did not see a difference in the amount of attention she received before and after the IEP meeting when it was brought to the school's attention that she might have had a problem with someone or something at school.

Interviews with Ms. Nowak, the Algebra teacher, also reflected on the struggle between being a small school and meeting the needs of every single student. While she said that she enjoyed this small school more than the large public school where she completed her student teaching, she also spoke to the difficulty of spending as much time as she'd like with each student, especially during her fourth period class where she had the largest concentration of special education students (nearly half of her class). She stated, "Even though the classes are *smaller*, it's not *easier*," because "it's so many students that need help and one-on-one time that I'm just not able to give them all that time. It's just too many of them." This revealed a problem of lumping all the special

education students together in Algebra Extended, a kind of remedial course for students whom teachers feel are not ready for Algebra I. There was a fairly large number of students placed in Algebra Extended compared to other math classes (around twenty), making it a large grouping of students who, by definition of being placed in Algebra Extended, needed extra help or attention. Ostensibly, this homogenous grouping was for ease, so that Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo could more easily provide push-in support for the special education students since they would be in one class. In reality though, help or even in-room presence of either the special education teacher or aide was spotty. Ms. Nowak expressed several times her frustration that she did not have more help during fourth period. Without the extra help, Ms. Nowak felt that not all students could be helped, even in this small environment.

Ms. Nowak was not the only teacher to struggle with feeling unable to help all the students. Even in such a small school, it proved difficult for Ms. Rutherford to balance it equally as well. She seemed overly focused on a few courses (Government, English 10 and 12, Geometry, Algebra Extended) and less so on other courses (Chemistry, Biology, English 9 and 11), despite the fact that special education students were evenly dispersed throughout all the regular education courses. As a result, plenty of special education students were overlooked.

*Small Size Means Fewer Opportunites for Students*

Lastly, the small school seemed unable to provide students with the opportunities of larger schools. In addition to the lack of a media center, library, computer lab, cafeteria / auditorium, the school had a shocking lack of student clubs and activities. For

example, Santiago stated that he wished the school had more sports as it currently only has a boys' soccer team, and no sports at all for girls. A few seniors served on something of a student council and a few students helped the Biology teacher with the small garden, but I never saw the presence of any other clubs and activities, such as Newspaper, Yearbook, Honor Society, Choir, or Spanish Club. With only one sport but no cheerleaders or band, there were no Pep Rallies or Spirit Days or Homecoming activities that are such integral parts of other high schools. Other activities and clubs were apparently non-existent or inactive. The school did hold a prom off campus for the students and a small fair for the community regarding health and sustainability one Saturday.

Ms. Nowak, when speaking about the reputation of the school, commented that the lack of sports was a negative, but she also stated,

> So now we have some health club, some garden club, I'm thinking about doing math club…I don't know [laughs] 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.

Ms. Nowak noted that some girls were leaving the already small school because, for them, the trade-off is not worth it. Athletics are an important part of many students' lives, especially those who wish to obtain a scholarship to college through his or her sport. For other students, though, such as Royce, the extra activities presented unnecessary distractions and were not worth the hassle of being in a school so far from his home. For him, the choice was pretty clear:

> I always wanted to go to a school around my house, my community because I felt like, it'll be more, um, like it'll benefit me more because I get to stay after school more longer; I don't have to worry about finding a way home or stressing out because I'm far away and I'm stuck here and, I just wanted to get down to business. I was, like, you know, I don't need any of the football, activities, any of the cheerleading; I don't want none of those distractions…And I mean, it's very helpful to me because it's more of, like, a calm school.

Royce wanted a school without the activities, so Colina Cedro seems to be a good choice for him, at least in that regard. It was more important to him for the school to be quiet and free of those "distractions," as he called them and to not have to worry about the logistics of attending school so far away. For other students, though, it was more important to have multiple opportunities for students, either for enrichment or for practical reasons – those who will have to apply to college, work, or other post-secondary options will have to do so without the benefit of high school activities, leadership or volunteer opportunities on their résumé.

## Theme 2: "The Neediest Population in Colfax": Deficit Thinking and the Creation of an Individual Problem

### *Introduction*

Gorski (2010) defines deficit thinking as "approaching students based upon our perceptions of their weaknesses rather than their strengths" (p. 2). The staff at Colina Cedro displayed this deficit thinking through well-intentioned, although patronizing

ways, such as the way that they positioned themselves as saviors to the "needy" students at Colina Cedro. They also employed a rhetoric of hard work and overcoming these "deficits" and as the way out of poverty and out of the Eastwick neighborhood. Using this rhetoric also meant that when students failed, the staff blamed individual students or their family for it. Lastly, the staff also displayed deficit thinking when they spoke about students with disabilities, infantilizing them and while also expecting them to work hard to "overcome" their disability.

*School and Staff as Saviors*

During interviews, I felt a sense that the teachers and principal pitied the students and their families, and they felt that working at *this* school with *these* students was valuable, meaningful work that made a difference. This was certainly true for the husband-and-wife team who chartered the school. They purposefully looked for "the neediest population in Colfax." After they established a successful charter in a suburban area of Colfax, they were looking for "a bigger challenge" and thus started Colina Cedro in the inner city. Teachers were similarly service-minded, with two teachers who previously served in the Peace Corps before coming to teach at Colina Cedro. Additionally, the principal Dr. James stated that he came from a much more affluent district and also taught at a local university. He worked in the master's program for education administrators and he felt his students just "wanted to move on the salary scale." So he felt that a change was necessary since he didn't feel he was "really helping anyone with anything really, except to make more money."

It seemed that the staff felt this was meaningful and important work because the students' circumstances were "sad." For example, the special education assistant, Ms. Castillo, spoke about her feelings regarding working at Colina Cedro:

> It's kind of sad because they [the students] have other issues and stories. And I used to work for, just a normal school, and not, you know, and here's their backgrounds, their upbringings, there's a lot of *things*. You know, personal things going on with them. And that, to me, makes it, like, they're special kids…You know, I just feel so bad, you know, I'm reading their IEPs and whatever, and it's just sad. The other kids, they just had learning disabilities or whatever, but they weren't, like, homeless – they didn't have issues like that.

She distinguished her former school as "normal," making this school with its high-need population "abnormal." She felt that the students' poverty and extreme circumstances made them "special," and it made her feel "bad." She was well-intentioned, but she seemed to pity the students and positioned them as needing to be rescued.

The school and the teachers served as this rescue. For example, when students applied, Dr. James said he asks them to write a letter to him explaining their academic past (grades, behavior, and attendance, or "the big three" as he called them) and where they want to go, as well as how Colina Cedro can help them with those goals. He told me about some students who had all Ds and Fs or excessive absences (100+ days) at previous schools; he described coming to Colina Cedro as the turning point. He said things such as, "they come in and they just change everything" and described the school as "a place to come where they can change" and "go forward."

The staff spoke about being "willing to go the extra mile" in order to make a difference in the lives of these students. Ms. Fanning had a seemingly altruistic goal when she started the school because "those are the kids I wanted to reach." She said she wanted the school motto to be "whatever it takes" and her personal vision was "whatever they need." This mission was very simple as she described it: "whatever they needed to learn" because she felt that poor, low-achieving students needed "radical alternatives." The current special education teacher, Ms. Rutherford, also spoke positively about how hard the teachers work. She stated, "Everybody here is pretty positive and just working towards, I mean all the time, the teachers are willing to stay after school, and just kind of go the extra mile." Dr. James also praised the teachers' willingness to "try anything."

*Bootstraps Mentality*

The staff placed heavy emphasis on individual effort and overcoming obstacles through hard work. Dr. James described students who he felt were straying from their promise when they enrolled to work hard and to "change." He felt these students weren't "staying true to that, you know, they get lazy." Dr. James was very willing to go the extra mile for students, including driving to a student's house to drive him to school the morning of our interview, but Dr. James also expected the student to work hard. Of this student, he said,

> He's just got so many crazy life things going on, can't concentrate on school, so I keep trying to, like, knock on his door, his head, remember what you said? Remember how you wanted to have a future and all that? This is the way to do it.

> I know you're distracted by not having maybe breakfast or dinner or whatever, whatever, whatever, but let's remember what's important.

While he acknowledged the very real struggles of this student's life, he then minimized them by implying that they were somehow not as important. He suggested that working hard was the way for this student to "have a future." Similarly, while Ms. Castillo acknowledged the lack of resources at the school and even wished for more technology to help special education students, she still believed that "if they [the students] really want to try, they can get *very* far, you know? And it's up to them because they just have so many options and the attention."

The staff celebrated hard work and determination at an awards assembly that highlighted the work of the previous fall semester. In addition to awards for perfect attendance and honor roll, teachers chose two students from each of their classes to award. The criterion was open (i.e., not necessarily highest grade in the class) and often, the winning student was not the one with the highest average, but the one who the teacher determined to have worked the hardest. In their brief introduction to each award and student, most teachers mentioned words such as "hard work," "effort," "spending extra time," and "a strong work ethic." One award went to a student whose "approach to work is infectious." The teacher said, "Just take a moment…we all come to school with obstacles, whether inside or outside of the home, or whatever…despite obstacles, geography, [this student] not only has a strong work ethic, but came every day to do the work." In another example, Ms. Nowak recognized Veronica, a special education student, for improvement in Algebra Extended. She announced, "I've had students who improved a lot, but not this much. 95% on a test is not good enough for her." Veronica attended

both Algebra Extended and Study Skills during 5th period. Even after she was recognized for making huge strides in Algebra at the end of the fall semester, she continued attending both Algebra Extended and Study Skills, where I rarely saw her working on schoolwork.

*Negative Stereotypes and Blaming the Individual*

Since the school focused so much on hard work and effort, it made sense the staff saw students' failures and lack of achievement as exclusively as the fault of the students themselves or their families. Even when they found out that Santiago failed to mark even one answer on his Chemistry quiz, Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo didn't ask him why he did that or admonish him to ask for help the next time; they just laughed it off as another story of how lazy Santiago was. Santiago undoubtedly could have at least marked random answers, but I questioned why his regular and special education teachers didn't bear some responsibility for it as well. In order to at least get some points, I watched Santiago copy another student's correct answers – "correcting" his quiz for half credit. His failure did not appear to bother them.

Despite being seemingly well-intentioned about starting Colina Cedro in the Eastwick neighborhood, Ms. Fanning said some shocking things about the students. She explained to me how her Entrepreneur class worked with the on-campus café. She allowed the students to run all aspects of the café, including collecting and counting the money. She said,

> And I would sit there with them whenever they handled money, you know because this was, these were poor kids – the temptation would have been huge.

> Um, and I didn't want to even tempt them, you know, they were good kids; I liked all of them. But you know, they're poor.

She offered the explanation of "they're poor" as a completely reasonable explanation for not trusting them to count the money on their own. She assumed their temptation to steal would be "huge" since the kids were poor. She attempted to claim that she wasn't disparaging the students because they were "good" and she liked them, but she ultimately made demeaning statements about her students that revealed the negative stereotypes she held about poor students. When she was telling me about the café, she told me about one student who did extremely well in that setting. She told me how great he was at calculating costs and called him an "incredibly bright kid," but then she began talking about him going to jail, "and someday he'll run his own restaurant, if he ever gets out of jail. I mean, he'll probably be in and out of jail for a while and then he'll run his own restaurant." It did not appear that the student actually ever went to jail, but she just assumed it to be a part of his career trajectory. She thought he'd "probably" go to jail before owning a restaurant. This was all pure speculation on her part, her assumption of where a kid from Eastwick would go. In another instance, she lamented that "these kids" would "end up on the street as drug users because they don't have *any* skills." While she made these statements with sentiments of caring for the students and why she wanted to "reach" them, it revealed some dangerous negative stereotypes.

The staff did not limit their stereotyping to only the students. They spoke of students' bad behavior as an extension of their family and home life. Teachers spoke of low parental involvement and families who were not involved as a reason for students'

low-achievement. For example, Ms. Nowak said that the students' poor behavior was "completely understandable."

> They don't come from perfect families. Ummm, a lot of them, they live with their sisters only, cousins, aunts. They don't have that, like, kick from home: 'Go, child, do good in school. If not, then I'll yell at you' or something, right? Or 'I'll take the computer away.' Umm, so it, obviously it goes into their behavior.

Ms. Nowak was not the only one who felt this way. Ms. Rutherford, the special education teacher shared these feelings:

> A lot of them come from low-income families and, you know, their families didn't go to college a lot of the times so maybe expectations isn't, just – it isn't as high and the support isn't as high. A lot of them have responsibilities at home, take care of siblings, earn income, and the priority's more on, like, survival or making money.

The two teachers held these ideas and stereotypes even though I saw there were parents at Colina Cedro who cared a great deal. During Open House when parents of students with IEPs came to meet Ms. Rutherford for the first time, I observed passionate parents. They displayed anger and frustration that their children had not been receiving special education services during the time of transition from Ms. Flynn, who quit, and Ms. Rutherford. A father complained about his son's low grades and what would be done to make sure that he didn't fail the first semester. On another occasion, at Isabel's annual IEP meeting, both parents attended and displayed a great deal of interest in her education. Isabel was a 10$^{th}$ grade student who was labeled OHI (Other Health Impaired.) Her

parents asked questions about her placement in Geometry and her failing grade in PE. When Ms. Rutherford informed them that the failing grade in PE was due to lack of participation, they turned to her and said, "Isabel, you have to participate. There's no choice." Throughout the meeting, her parents made several similar comments, telling her she needed to participate and "you gotta do your work." Her parents asked if Isabel's cell phone was an issue, and Ms. Rutherford answered that Isabel did play on it frequently during class. Her mother immediately said, "Oh, it won't be a problem anymore" and Isabel dejectedly indicated that she wouldn't have her phone for a little while. Isabel's parents seemed attentive and interested in her education, as did the other parents of students with IEPs who came to the Open House to meet Ms. Rutherford.

The founders of the school, Mr. and Ms. Fanning, felt strongly about starting a charter in an area of high-need, but then felt that the high-needs were, at least in part, to blame for the relative lack of success at the school. Both founders noted that frustration stemming from the school not taking off as they'd hoped. Mr. Fanning stated that he felt

> overwhelmed…dealing with, uh, you know all kinds of discipline problems…high student turnover, uh, student, uh, lack of preparation. You know, they were very poorly, uh, I mean, students who have a very poor academic history. And so, we were overwhelmed there.
>
> It was mainly the population that was, that we were dealing with there. And uh, it was, uh, you know, just a big challenge, getting the students to school. And then it was a challenge, uh, keeping them in class, since we didn't have a fence around.

Mr. Fanning admitted to a steep learning curve and to mistakes along the way, but seemed to feel that the students' deficits limited the school's opportunities for success. He did not mention outside factors that might prohibit the school from becoming successful, but only problems within the students, such as behavior and academic history.

I also observed how teachers placed weight on individual responsibility. While talking about the lack of opportunities at Colina Cedro, Ms. Rutherford stated, "I think the students kind of, you know, could take the initiative if they really wanted to start something and they would definitely have the staff support to get something going." She placed the onus on the students. It seems that to Ms. Rutherford, the lack of student activities is not only due to the small school size or teachers' responsibilities, but also due to lack of student initiative.

Ms. Fanning, one of the school founders, had strong feelings about the responsibilities of teachers' responsibility and how she felt it corresponded to the lack of success at Colina Cedro. She explains why she left the school after three years,

> Because here I was at the tail end of three years at, well, five years for me because, you know, two years getting Colina Cedro started. Um, total frustration at the end of five years. The first two years weren't frustrating. Um, uh, with, with teachers just *not* being willing to do what it took, you know?

She was not shy about her frustration that the program at Colina Cedro was not working, but she attributed it all solely to 'bad' teachers. During our interview, she never acknowledged any other factor that might prevent the new school from succeeding. She

spoke disparagingly of the teachers she knew at Colina Cedro, calling one "worthless." This idea that the teachers were not good enough came up several times:

1. The teachers refused to do it.

2. They didn't have good management skills; they were too young in their teaching…would NOT meet the needs of, of low-performing students. You know, they would *not* go the extra mile. They would, they refused, all the years.

3. You know, it [professional development classes] was free and they wouldn't go. And so it's just like standard teachers everywhere; they wouldn't go to anything as a *professional*.

Ms. Fanning complained about the teachers being unwilling to both 'go the extra mile' and attend professional development. Both Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Fanning emphasize individual responsibility, either the students or the teachers, for the school's shortcomings.

*Deficit, Ability, and Poverty*

In addition to holding negative stereotypes about poor students, the staff also held some stereotypes about students who were both poor and disabled. Ms. Nowak often conflated issues of the students' poverty with their behavior and ability. In the earlier quote about not coming from perfect families, she demonstrated that she believed the students' behavior and poverty were related. When speaking about her difficulty teaching Algebra Extended (in which half of the students had IEPs), she connected behavior and ability. She stated that, "Basically, in Algebra Extended, you have the

lowest kids, usually with a very poor behavior." She commented several times on this class' lack of motivation and poor behavior as complements to their low achievement in math.

> You can go as low as you want with them, slow, as slow as you want with them, and they still don't do anything. So it is all about motivation and, like, [pause]. They're not the best students. They're students with, like, usually behavior problems. They're not, you know, it's not all about their skills. Their skills, they can be low, but if they want to, they can, like, really push them. And these students, they have skills. A lot of them, they know math. But they just *do not* do math.

Ms. Nowak's statements appear to show that she felt that the ability to succeed in math was connected to their behavior. She felt so strongly that her students' abilities were basically dependent on motivation because she believed they had skills, but the students just did not "do math." Poverty and disability intersected in such a way to construct a deficient student who was either so unable or apathetic s/he was supposedly beyond reach. Ms. Nowak felt that "they [special education students] need a lot of in depth explanation, not the, you know two minutes you explain and then you move on – you can't do that with them." She seemed pleased with students who she felt were trying really hard and disappointed with the others.

> There are IEP students, students who are really, really trying super, super hard…and they make such an incredible progress; it's just a highlight for my day.

> And there are students, uh, who I feel, no matter what I do, I'm not able to get through to them.

Ms. Nowak viewed effort and determination as virtues of a 'good' student, while students who struggled were seen as problematic and troublesome. She appeared to be pleased with students who could "overcome" their disability and demonstrate "incredible progress." Ms. Castillo displayed this inclination towards those students who struggled, but were seen as "good" students.

> Some kids, I'm like, ugh, why…I don't want to be mean, but you know it's, they, they don't want to pass. But for Alejandro's case, I mean, he's such a nice kid and I really wish him well, and I feel bad you know when he's struggling. And he really doesn't get it, so yes, I, you know, for those kids, I kind of go out of my way to help them because I think they deserve that help.

Alejandro was a well-mannered and well-liked student who was not perceived as a behavior problem. He struggled as much as some of the other students in Algebra Extended, maybe more, but since he was seen as a 'good' student, he had the benefit of the doubt that his struggles were "real" while other students' struggles were self-made by their perceived laziness and poor behavior.

Students with mild disabilities were already often seen as lazy, and coupled the negative stereotypes regarding poverty, it appeared that Ms. Nowak and Ms. Castillo saw some students with disabilities as troublesome and problematic. These things combined to create a 'bad' student who was failing because of his or her own fault. Additionally, it appeared that Ms. Nowak believed that disabled students took her time, energy, and focus

away from the regular education students who deserved it more. She stated that, "I understand that they [special education students] need help, but it's just not fair to the other students." Ms. Nowak, Ms. Rutherford, and Ms. Castillo often spoke of just how much help and attention the students needed and how it created an almost impossible task for them. Ms. Castillo often spoke of the special education students as wholly dependent and incapable on their own. When speaking of her role in the regular education classroom, she said,

> I'm the one listening for the kids, I guess. So I take all the notes and I help them, you know, like, I write the notes in such a way so that when were back in the classroom, they can understand better…because sometimes these kids can't understand, like, the questions and they just, they have a hard time.

In this statement, she appeared to infantilize the students and took the notes for them, rather than helping them learn to take them on their own. She made assumptions about how much they can understand and their ability to answer questions.

## Theme 3: Class in the Back of a Car Dealership: Implementing a Business Model at School

### *Introduction*

For schools, the injection of free market principles collides with the institution of public schools as a public good. The staff often used buzz words such as "autonomy" and "flexibility" during interviews. Proponents of charter schools and privatization praise the autonomy given to charter schools and the fact that the school retains control

over many important decisions at the school. Original charter schools envisioned using this freedom to create innovative curriculum or practices. I found, however, that the staff at Colina Cedro used their control to create not an innovative school, but rather a lax and lenient school culture. While they similarly praised autonomy and flexibility they felt the school afforded them, they also described situations where they had no autonomy at all. Additionally, the founders of the school were deliberate in modeling Colina Cedro in a particular way; they consciously set about creating a business environment at school, through the location, dress code, and course offerings. Ironically, the implementation of this business model appeared to create problems for both the staff and students at Colina Cedro. Despite having the control to create their ideal school, Colina Cedro had surprisingly few choices for students, and teachers were forced to teach in less than ideal ways in order to remain competitive in the education marketplace created by the very free market principles the founders had hoped would create a successful school.

*Autonomy, Freedom, and Authoritarian Control*

Teachers and Dr. James appeared to enjoy the fact that at charter schools, they had a certain amount of freedom. They spoke of "autonomy" and "flexibility" as reasons why charter schools appealed to them. Dr. James said that after working at a local university, he "just wanted to go back to public education and was always intrigued with the autonomy you had with charter schools…because at a charter you have so much more leeway than you do, um, say at a traditional high school." Ms. Nowak also spoke of the freedom she believes she has at Colina Cedro compared to the high school where she did her student teaching. She said, "Overall, I like, uh, the fact that I have a lot of freedom here. There's no pacing guide, um, there is no, um, like, supervisors that would just

come and if I'm not teaching specific lesson that I should, that I would be in trouble." While she felt she had a significant amount of freedom in her lesson planning, it seemed that there was still a feeling of authoritarianism in the way important decisions were made. Ms. Nowak apparently did not have any say at all in whether she would be asked to assist in the push-in model for students with disabilities. It seemed the teachers did not have input on whether or not they did push-in or pull-out at all. Ms. Nowak stated on two different occasions the lack of clear communication surrounding the push-in model:

> I don't know. I didn't ask questions. I know they, they didn't want to do it. But who didn't want to do it, why they didn't want to do it, I don't know that.

Later she went further, saying,

> Well, I asked Ms. Rutherford, you know, if we can do it this [pull-out, like last year]. Because whatever it was here [current push-in], it didn't work. It clearly did not work. And she said that, uh, our principal didn't want to. Uhh, actually, you know what, I take it back. But basically, she said she can't. Because the principal doesn't want that – yeah. I think he's really pushing for, like, the in, the in class. Ahh, so yeah. So that was, that was the end.

She noted with finality that "that was the end" and that the decision was made, regardless of teachers' opinion, questions, or concerns about implementing a school-wide policy. This authoritarian control exercised by the administration over the teachers resulted in teachers attempting to successfully implement the push-in model even though they may have felt that it "clearly did not work." The special education teacher, Ms. Rutherford, was not enthusiastic or optimistic about the push-in teaching model, telling me that it was

challenging and overwhelming. Yet, according to Ms. Nowak, Ms. Rutherford indicated that the principal wanted things do be done in a certain way; both teachers seemed to feel that they had no choice. Thus, in this case, control over the design of the special education at Colina Cedro resulted in weak and ineffective implementation, rather than an innovative or collaborative special education design.

Charter school proponents often point to autonomy as a way to innovation and achievement, but what do schools do with all this freedom and flexibility? It seemed, at Colina Cedro, that this "flexibility" manifested as a lax and lenient school culture at the school. For example, when Ms. Castillo stated that she enjoyed the flexibility at the school, I asked her to give me examples. She struggled to come up with concrete examples, even though she mentioned the flexibility as an aspect of Colina Cedro that she liked.

> Researcher: Can you give me some examples of how you've seen either teachers or principal or just overall school policy be really flexible?
>
> MC: Well, that's one example [open campus lunch]. Um, another example…let me see [pause] pretty much, I'm trying to think [pause]. Now this is not just special ed, but in general, the charter…
>
> R: Okay.
>
> MC: I'm trying to think, [pause] like, the rules in general. Like, the listening to, having your phone, texting. I just remembered that one. I, I, like, some teachers don't mind, like, if they're wearing their headphones. Ahh, I've never seen that.

R: I never have either. I was very surprised.

MC: I don't know if that's a charter school thing. Like the other school, public school they weren't allowed. So I don't know if it's a new thing. And, my son, he's not allowed, you know, he goes to public school and I asked him, and he can take his cell phone but he can't take it out all day. Like, it's only after school, before school.

R: Right.

MC: And that, that seems normal to me. Here it's like everywhere. So that's the flexibility I'm talking about in the classrooms.

R: Do you think it's distracting?

MC: Very. Very. Yeah. Because, ah, I don't know, maybe some people learn better that way, but I have no idea how you can learn, even if you have one –

R: You can't hear the teacher, yeah.

MC: One on, and the other, "Oh, I'm listening." I can't learn that way, still listening to music, you know. I think it's very distracting.

R: But you think the flexibility is…

MC: It's good because it's there. But I, I wouldn't, I wouldn't – to me, if I was in charge here, I would never allow that. I would have certain rules, you know, stricter rules, so.

Ms. Castillo had difficulty naming specific ways that Colina Cedro was flexible and the example she gave of using headphones in class seemed to be more of an example of the teachers not following the school's own rules, rather than the flexibility and innovation that the first charter promoters envisioned. Colina Cedro stated in its school rules that electronics were a privilege in classrooms, and many teachers had this and the other school rules posted on the classroom walls. Some teachers enforced it; others did not. Mr. Elroy, the Chemistry teacher, threatened to take students' phones and lock them in a designated safe in the office, but I never saw him do it. In other classrooms, students used their phones freely and frequently. They listened to music, texted, used the Internet, and watched music videos. Ms. Castillo herself, while praising this flexibility, stated that she would never allow this if she were the one to make the rules. She admitted that it was distracting, but she still viewed it as a positive. She fully acknowledged that she would be more strict and would have rules in place. At Colina Cedro, it did not seem that they used their control to be innovative, but rather to be loose with their own rules, sometimes to the students' detriment.

Ms. Castillo appeared to be misinterpreting "flexibility" and why initial charter promoters wanted to have room to be flexible. Flexibility and staff control in charter schools was intended to refer to the ability to re-think traditional ways of operating, such as the way classes are structured (for example, not necessarily by age) or scheduled. For example, in the school charter, in several places, the writers referenced "innovative scheduling" to be a part of the school. Ms. Fanning, one of the founders, envisioned a school where students were involved in "blended learning" where students "rotate between half time in the classroom and half time at the computers." This never

materialized at Colina Cedro, though, and flexibility appeared to refer to a flexibility with stated school rules, rather than innovation. Nothing about the school schedule or how teachers taught or even the curriculum used by the teachers was any different than what it would be at a traditional public school. Despite having more autonomy and control in the operation of the school, the school culture at Colina Cedro was not one of innovation or creativity, but one where teachers did not appear to have as much autonomy as they thought and where "flexibility" was used to justify a lax and lenient attitude.

Dr. James did exercise autonomy in one important way. Stating dissatisfaction with the district SELPA, he chose to apply for Colina Cedro to be its own LEA and to apply to a charter-only SELPA. As its own LEA, Colina Cedro took full responsibility for the school's special education, including being able to provide the full continuum of services to students with disabilities. If Colina Cedro remained under Colfax United School District, 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. Instead, Dr. James claimed the district's special education services to be subpar and applied to join a SELPA on the other side of the state. While the state of California allows charters to act as an independent LEA, it seemed that, at least in the case of Colina Cedro, the choice to become fully autonomous did not result in any innovation or creative schooling practices. 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.

*Creating a Business Environment at School*

The founders of Colina Cedro had control over exactly what type of environment they wished to create for their students when they started the school. While some charters use this freedom and control to create schools with a certain pedagogy or curriculum, Colina Cedro created a school that 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 classrooms and campus had very little color or liveliness. Mr. Fanning noted that in choosing the first school location, they wished to

> have the school in an office building not too far from where it is now, in a commercial building. And, uh, our idea there was, uh, for kids to have sort of a not, a non-school setting to see how that would, uh, to see if that would change their point of view. Uh, and, uh, you know we wanted to, uh, the original idea was to give it, you know, uh, [pause] a feeling of, uh, you know, sort of being in the business world…be a little more focused on, uh, uh, you know on careers and that kind of thing.

Rather than seek a school as a location for a school, the founders sought a business environment, even the back of a car dealership as described by Dr. James. The founders intentionally sought out an office setting and required 'business casual' as the dress code. The assumption was that these students' poverty stems from a lack of understanding and immersion in the business world, and that the solution (and prosperity) laid in business models and free market principles.

Ms. Fanning said that in the early days of the school, she taught a class called Entrepreneurs. She said,

> I had an entrepreneur class because a lot of those kids were *not* going to go to college. I don't care how much people will cram college down their throats, um, they're not going to go until they're 25 or 30, if they do, you know. But they were *very* interested in starting small businesses. And their families started small businesses. They were mostly immigrants and they started small businesses, you know? And so, I had an entrepreneur class that was really popular for the first semester and we, um, we had a little café that we ran at school.

Here, Ms. Fanning made assumptions about the students and their propensity to attend higher education, predicting that they either will not attend or will attend much later. This seemed like an odd statement from someone who founded a charter intended to help underrepresented students join STEM fields, which requires at least some higher education. It also seemed that a school focused on STEM areas would teach choose to teach entrepreneurial skills through other means, rather than a café. I found these statements did not match up with the school's stated charter, and it seemed that it reflected some stereotyping on Ms. Fanning's part, either regarding their desire (or lack of) to attend college or their ability to run a business other than something in the service industry, rather than something such as a technology start-up.

Nevertheless, in the Entrepreneur class, Ms. Fanning allowed her student to run a café on the school campus. They handled all aspects of pricing, collecting the cash, preparing the food, etc. A hands-on, project-based class definitely stood alone compared

to the mainly lecture-led courses. Students surely learned a great deal through this interactive format, but the overarching theme of the inherent goodness of business models and principles was evident. It perpetuated the myth of the American Dream, along with the fallacy that free market principles create equal opportunities for everyone. This class no longer existed when I was at the school, although I don't know if it's because Ms. Fanning left or the interest waned.

The school's staff used language that reflected the business model. Staff used words such as "efficiency" and "marketing." Ms. Fanning referred to her husband, the previous principal, as the CEO. Mr. Fanning attributed the shortcomings of the school, at least in part, to "marketing problems." He said, "We had to put a lot of effort into marketing," and yet, "we never, uh, the school, those first couple of years didn't grow like we were expecting it to grow." Additionally, a lot of talk was characterized by the efficient use of money. Dr. James spoke of originally belonging to Colfax United School District's SELPA, which he called "extremely expensive." He eventually switched the school to another SELPA headquartered in another part of the state 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 was 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." It was obviously within the Principal's purview and obligations to maintain the school budget, but also while maintaining quality and excellence of services provided to his students because schools are not businesses.

Additionally, while Dr. James remained adamant that the quality of special education services was not only cheaper, but also better, I found this claim questionable due to the inadequately trained personnel and lack of special education services. As Ms. Rutherford recalled, the school tacitly discouraged the enrollment of students that require outside providers, which would ostensibly cost more money. On the other hand, she also mentioned in passing the haste to enroll a student who qualified for mental health services, which translated to some extra money. While the school undoubtedly had the students' interests in mind and would not deny them the mental health care they need, it seemed contradictory that the school was anxious to contract a school counselor but was not as open to bringing in outside provider to provide physical or occupational therapy.

Again, a central irony was that while the school founders felt that the freedom to create a business environment would be beneficial to students, it turned out to have some detrimental effects on students. The special education students felt the effects of cost cutting not only in the lack of classroom resources, but also in the assistance they received in the regular education classes. Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were stretched impossibly thin, no doubt the case for special education teachers and assistants across the

country; however, their overbearing workload was especially evident in a school that prides itself on small class sizes and extra attention for students. They were expected, as a part of the push-in model, to help special education students across campus in general education classes, while also teaching three Study Skills classes per day. A proper co-teaching model or schedule for seeing all IEP students was never instated, and without this structure, they just tried to see the kids they could, and as a result, some students were simply not seen. As a rule, they tried to attend 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. Both Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo commented on the increasing number of special education students and their anxiety in being able to see all the students who needed to be seen. First, Ms. Rutherford discussed the increase of special education students from the previous semester and how the school might address this increase:

> Ms. Rutherford: So I have heard, if we get to a certain number that we might be able to hire somebody or extend her [Ms. Castillo's] hours or something like that.
>
> Researcher: Yeah, thirty people [students], that's a lot.
>
> MR: I think it's more than thirty now, so…
>
> R: What do you mean extend her hours?
>
> MR: 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.

R: Yeah, that's what I mean; she's already here for the whole day.

Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were not shy about voicing their struggle in juggling the growing number of special education students in general education classes. Clearly they needed more support if the number of students with IEPs continued to grow. Ms. Castillo was already present for the entire school day, but she wasn't paid full-time. Paying Ms. Castillo for a full-day work, especially since she was present for the same amount of time as Ms. Rutherford, was obviously the right decision, but it wasn't a remedy for the current problem. Paying her as the full-time employee that she was didn't increase the number of hours she was on campus or the number of students she could see. Even if it did increase her hours on campus, she would have been on campus alone because she already came a bit before the school day begins and stayed until the end of the day. Regardless of its logic, it was definitely cheaper than hiring another special education assistant or teacher. Ms. Rutherford readily acknowledged that it was unlikely to accomplish the goal, but she didn't seem to have much of a say in the matter so she just saw the ones she could and assumed the others were doing okay. Ms. Castillo shared similar concerns:

if more kids keep coming, like thirty kids for one person – it's, it's a lot. Maybe, they could hire? I don't know if it's in the budget or whatever. Or, or someone that could come part-time or you know, someone that has the credentials, yeah,

> whatever. Because I hope, but it's, I can only go up to a certain, you know. So, yeah. Maybe more people.

Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were trying to make their situation work, but it is unclear how much longer this set-up would be tenable. Colina Cedro was obviously not the only ones who struggle in this era of budget cuts to education, but its lack of resources was felt more acutely since the school prided themselves as a much better option than the neighborhood schools and in being able to provide more individualized attention to students. Colina Cedro struggled as most other schools because of severe budget cuts and this was no fault of their own, so it seemed frivolous to use money to lease out old portable buildings when both the students and money could have stayed with the local school. Perhaps it would have been justified if the students were doing exceptionally well at Colina Cedro, but there was no evidence that that's the case. Furthermore, the lack was exacerbated when the school was treated as a business and cutting corners was regarded as necessary and justified.

*The Illusion of Choice in the Education Marketplace*

The staff spoke frequently about the choice parents had in sending their children to Colina Cedro. 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.

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 regular 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. This generally was not acknowledged though, and teachers repeated the rhetoric of the power of choice in an educational 'marketplace' for parents. 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.

Ms. Rutherford believed that since it was a choice for students to attend Colina Cedro, this made it more "personal." She also used language that seemed to indicate that choosing was better than "just being dumped in your neighborhood [school]." She also suggested that schools are like a marketplace where parents can shop and, thus, are in competition for the community's patronage. Using this logic, the school staff appeared to think that, of the available options, Colina Cedro was the most appealing, most desirable school in the neighborhood, but for some students, that was not the case. It also seemed

that the staff believed that simply being able to choose the school made it a better option. Colina Cedro's lack of basic resources made it difficult to see why this option was any better than any other public school.

One of the founders, Mr. Fanning, used similar language. He said, "because, you know, special ed parents, at least the engaged ones, they like to shop and they, they were attracted by the smaller environment." He spoke here about parents of special education students in particular and alluded to the small class sizes as a way for more individualized instruction for students with disabilities. He also assumed that only "the engaged ones" were showing that they care by "shopping" around for different schools. It seemed, though, that this school would not be a choice for parents of students with a disability that required even more than a moderate level of support. Ms. Rutherford reasoned the school did not have students with moderate to severe disabilities because they are not as common, and also because specialized services were not available at Colina Cedro. She said,

> 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 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.

Charter schools cannot turn away students, but this counseling saves them from enrolling students who might be seen as even more of a "drain on resources" than other special education students. Additionally, parents who may not be fully informed of their student's rights under IDEA or charter schools' obligations, would indeed find this school, with barely enough basic resources for its students, an unsuitable choice and choose to enroll their student elsewhere. Staff at Colina Cedro insisted that being a school of choice was beneficial for disabled students, but they seemed to exclude some more severely disabled students. Thus, despite the way that Colina Cedro positioned themselves as a good alternative for those in the neighborhood, it was simply the illusion of choice. The staff used their autonomy and control to conveniently ignore federal legislation and to exclude certain students. They viewed bringing in service providers as a hindrance, and this seemed to frighten away some parents and students. This characterization, though, seemed a bit dishonest since all special education services, including the special education teacher, were provided through the SELPA and not the school itself, making even the special education teacher an "outside" service provider.

The illusion of choice can also be seen in the rhetoric for regular education students as well. 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. Sure, they had the option to take Algebra Extended or to do two years of twelfth grade as a Super Senior, but can those be considered praiseworthy or fundamentally different from what traditional public schools might do? Moreover, despite its stated goals to prepare students for careers in the STEM fields, the school did not have a proper science or

computer lab. As previously discussed, other opportunities, such as Band or Choir or sports or Yearbook or other clubs, or even a variety of classes that were not required courses, simply were not available. It seemed that rather than a plethora of choices, the small school was only able to offer fairly limited options, but still this rhetoric of choice persisted.

## Theme 4: "Floating Around:" Problems with Push-In Model

### *Introduction*

Colina Cedro was proud of their push-in model, where special education students were "pushed in" regular education classes, rather than pulled out. The staff seemed to use "push-in" and "co-teaching" interchangeably; they primarily used these terms when referring to the purported inclusive environment. All special education students attended core classes in regular education, but some also attended "Study Skills" in the special education classroom as an elective, meant to be a supplement to their course work. This was not required of all IEP students, but the class was only open to those with IEPs. Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were to co-teach and to provide support, respectively, in the regular education classroom, but there were issues with both co-teaching and with the support provided. I saw several issues with the current model and those I interviewed readily voiced concern about problematic issues regarding special education at the school.

The school had seen a startling amount of turnover in the special education department, causing special education support to be inconsistent in both how often it was

provided and the manner in which it was provided. Other problems included the school's push-in model, the implementation of accommodations and modifications within the regular education classroom, confusion of the special education teacher's and assistant's roles, their knowledge and competence in all high school subjects, struggling with their work load, and communication between special education and regular education.

*Turnover within Special Education Department*

In Colina Cedro's short history, it had seen tremendous turnover in the special education department. I intended to start my research in the fall of 2013 at the beginning of the school year, but the school did not have a special education teacher in place because the teacher, Ms. Flynn, had quit right at the start of the year and moved to another charter school. The new teacher, Ms. Rutherford, came on board in October, and a new assistant followed shortly after since the previous assistant had also quit following Ms. Flynn's departure. Parents of special education students were invited to Open House to meet Ms. Rutherford, and I heard a few parents voice concern and anger that during the interim, their students had apparently not received any special education services. The students' grades were suffering and parents wanted to know how this would be rectified. This turnover is apparently not specific to the 2013 – 2014 school year and the department has seen plenty of turnover and chaos. The principal, Dr. James, described the turbulent beginning when Colina Cedro was a part of the district SELPA, before the school joined another SELPA in the northern part of the state.

> You know because the ones [special education teachers] they had before that, um, didn't really do anything. We were, we were part of the other SELPA. They

would come and they would leave – from what I hear from them and the previous teacher, and not be around until 2:00, and like what in the world, they call our district, uh, 'Our ed specialist left. We don't know where they are.' And 2:00, they'd show up and never hear back. I think the director told me they came at every, when he came, when he got, started the school and brought the person in, first year there wasn't anybody special ed, but then the ones they had the next year, all out of compliance. Couldn't use a single IEP, so he asked for that person to leave, had another one from the same SELPA, same situation, every single IEP, we couldn't get the meeting before, you know where they were supposed to, totally out of compliance; it was a mess.

Dr. James admitted he heard this from previous teachers since he was not here during that time. Ms. Fanning, one of the school's founders, also spoke about the disorder in special education in the beginning years, saying the teachers changed "endlessly." I take her comments with a grain of salt, though, because she sounds a bit like she's discussing a conspiracy theory:

Ms. Fanning: That was – I think the district [Colfax] – I'm sorry I have such a bad attitude towards the district. They probably did that intentionally.

Researcher: Oh?

MF: Put their worst ones [teachers] in. They did that with charters. They probably are still pretty nasty.

R: Oh, gosh.

MF: The politics was rife. They didn't like me. They didn't like me at all.

I have no idea if the original special education teachers were as awful as described, but nonetheless, even in recent years, the school had seen lots of changes in the special education department. When Dr. James joined the school, it was also Ms. Flynn's first year and by all accounts, she was a positive change for the department. Santiago claimed Ms. Flynn helped him more than Ms. Rutherford did, and according to Dr. James, Ms. Flynn worked hard to get IEPs compliant and "worked with teachers, very, very proactive and supported the teachers who were sick of hearing, you know, going to an IEP and I don't have information from one of those teachers." All of that catch-up work apparently took a toll on her though – Dr. James said she would still be at the school at 10 pm some nights – and she got "really burned out" and moved schools. She moved to that same position at another (larger, more prestigious) charter school, so it seemed she was not burned out from special education in general, but possibly just special education at Colina Cedro.

This constant change meant that special education services were inconsistent, or even non-existent, at times and that practices changed from teacher to teacher. When asked to describe her experience and interaction with the special education teachers, Ms. Nowak said,

> I know there have already been two aides here so, and I don't know who the aide was last year…Um, the, about the special education, uh, like the department, it's hard for me to say, uh, because last year, we had a different teacher and this year, we have different teacher, so it's not been very steady; and the aides are changing a lot.

This was only Ms. Nowak's second year at the school and she already saw a near constant rotation of both teachers and assistants. The assistant from last year apparently was not present very often, at least in any Algebra classes, since Ms. Nowak didn't even know who she was, despite such a small school population and the fact that her classroom was adjacent to the special education classroom. Ms. Nowak also said that last year, Ms. Flynn pulled out for math (after briefly trying push-in), but this year, it went to full push-in and she didn't know why. The program was changing again for the 2014 – 2015 school year after trying push in for only one year – Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo both spoke of pulling students out for math for the next school year. So far, they stated they are only going to pull out for math and not for other subjects.

*The Push-In Model*

At Colina Cedro, the staff used the term "push-in" to designate that all special education students were in general education; the students were not "pulled out" to receive education in the special education classroom. For example, the special education teacher did not teach a math class specifically for students with IEPs. They also sometimes used the word "co-teaching." Ideally co-teaching means that both the general education and special education teacher (or assistant) are involved in lesson planning and teaching. During class, they work collaboratively to teach the lesson. Each relies on her strength in either the subject matter or making the lesson accessible to all students, across abilities and learning styles.

The most obvious problem with the special education program was the advertisement as push-in and co-teaching, when that wasn't the case at all. Special

education students were most certainly pushed into regular education classrooms, but I never saw any evidence of co-teaching. I visited a variety of courses (Algebra, Government, US History, World History, Chemistry, Life Sciences, English) and without fail, there was never any co-teaching. In fact, throughout my time at Colina Cedro, I never saw Ms. Rutherford co-teaching. During the few times I saw her in the regular education classroom, it was to inquire about a student or assignment, or in a passive role: sitting with the students or walking around. It was evident that Ms. Rutherford did not collaborate with the regular education teachers' lesson planning since Ms. Rutherford had to visit the classrooms in order to know what the assignments are. So while Colina Cedro was doing a very good job at just pushing special education students in with the rest of the student population, it was far less successful at co-teaching or supporting the students who were pushed in there. As a result, students were physically included in the regular education setting, but special education support, as far as a co-teaching model, was non-existent.

Perhaps the disconnect between co-teaching in name and in actual practice stemmed from the fact that it seemed that the school decided to do push in, but teachers and assistants did not receive proper training on how that was supposed to work exactly. Both Ms. Castillo and Ms. Nowak seemed to have never heard of co-teaching when I mentioned it and asked if they think it would work with both [regular and special education] teachers teaching and using their strengths, rather than the special education teacher being present, but in the background. I did not specifically use the word "co-teaching," but just asked them what they thought about having both teachers collaborate

to teach a certain class, instead of the special education teacher or assistant remaining more or less in the background. Ms. Castillo said,

> I never thought about that. That's uh, [pause] that would be a good idea, maybe? Uh, I don't know how the teachers would feel because, you know, it's kind of like, *I'm* the teacher, you know and they're both teachers. But for the kids, I think it, it *might* work. Especially if it's such a big, like, math class that she's having this year. Ms. Rutherford should totally teach there because I think, like, half of the class is special ed, so, I think that would really work.

Ms. Castillo was hired to support teachers and students in a co-teaching model, yet she had never really heard about it, although she thought it was worth a try and that it might work, especially with such a high number of special education students enrolled. Ms. Nowak described co-teaching with Ms. Flynn last year, saying,

> Umm, I don't know. I never tried that. Umm, actually I think we tried that with Ms. Flynn in the beginning. I really did like Ms. Flynn as a person and it was easier. We kind of became friends so it was easier for us to…like, collaborate. So we were coming out with, like, different ideas. And we started that she would come to the class and she would work with a group of four or five students. And she would explain, but, ummm, like, it was difficult for *me* to, like, teach and hearing her talking. That was a challenge for me. Maybe because English is not my first language. And maybe it's because I need to, like, really focus more and a little things, like, they, they throw me off. Like, I'm like, 'Oh, man, I can't focus.' So it was difficult in that case, but it was really good. Umm, so I don't

know. Maybe if they would – but they, they did sit on the front of the class, just, like, on the side. Like, I had my desks over, like, here and I was using this board last year. So she was sitting, like, at the end, but in front, on the left. And I was, like, you know, in the front. But her talking and them asking questions – that was bothering, like, it wasn't *bothering*, but it was making difficult for me to focus. So maybe if they would be, like, on the back. Maybe? I don't know; we didn't try that. Because those students were kind of getting out of control from behavior. So we decided to, like, pull them out. Like, we tried to pull them out and it worked better.

She acknowledged it was difficult for her, as an immigrant from Eastern Europe, but that it was "really good." It seemed, though, that what she was describing is not co-teaching as much as it is teaching special education students in the same physical space as regular education students, but still essentially separately. In the end, they resorted back to pulling the students out of the regular education classroom.

Interestingly, in both vignettes above, Ms. Castillo and Ms. Nowak both admitted that co-teaching was probably good for the students, but a struggle for the teachers. Dr. James also shared similar sentiments that it was difficult for teachers who were "used to being sort of the kings of their domains in their rooms" and that it "was really, really hard to do without training if there was any kind of a personality, if there was a strong personality in the room, it didn't work. Period." He acknowledged that training is most definitely necessary, although it seems from Ms. Castillo's and Ms. Nowak's comments that such training had never been implemented. The struggle, again, was attributed to teachers who are either untrained or unwilling. It is unclear how the transition to push-in

happened after a period of it being "probably detrimental to students," but Dr. James says the teachers were willing to try anything, so they gave it another shot.

While the others seemed to be positive about co-teaching and push-in, Ms. Rutherford seemed less enthusiastic. She called it "challenging" saying,

> I feel like maybe at the high school level, maybe it's because I'm new here, but it's just been challenging trying to integrate myself into high school classrooms where the teachers, it's lecture-led and they don't maybe have the smaller group projects or activities that maybe you might see at elementary school classes. It's just harder to co-teach, especially with so many other teachers. If I just had to do with *one* elementary school teacher, for example, we could meet and you could plan, but with so many other teachers, it's harder.

Ms. Rutherford indicated that co-teaching was difficult at the high school level because there were so many teachers to work with, but at Colina Cedro, whose hallmark was being small, there were only ten teachers total, including her. Additionally, she said there are not as many small group projects or activities, but that actually was more a characteristic of Colina Cedro than of high schools at large since many high schools do use projects and activities with their students. In fact, Ms. Walls, the Biology and Earth Science teacher did lots of hands-on activities, but rather than this making her class more amenable to co-teaching, the opposite was true. When I asked Ms. Castillo if she didn't attend Ms. Wall's classes because there were fewer special education students there, Ms. Castillo replied, "They do [have special education students enrolled], but, uh, like Life Science, most of the special ed kids go to Life Science and, uh, but she's great because

she does a lot of, uh, projects. So it's, you learn, but with hands-on." This seemed to point to the fact that Ms. Rutherford felt students do not need special education support in those classes simply because Ms. Walls did hands-on activities. Life Science was a required course, so it is inevitable that the course would have special education students enrolled; however, for whatever reason, special education support was rarely provided in the regular education classroom. Students might bring an assignment over or study for an upcoming quiz and received support in the special education room, but these students did not receive help during the actual class itself.

*Grades and Passing*

It is indisputable that Ms. Rutherford supported her students, but it is inaccurate to call what she does co-teaching. She primarily provides pull-out support in a resource room (euphemistically named "Study Skills" instead) and provided very little support in the regular education classroom. She indeed worked tirelessly to make sure the students were successful in the regular classroom, but mainly in a segregated setting. Rather than collaborating with the other teachers to make the curriculum more accessible to everyone, she worked primarily with students making sure they complete and turn in assignments, or pass tests. Ms. Rutherford worked diligently to ensure special education students were passing, since it seemed at Colina Cedro that passing grades were an indication of the success of school's special education model. She often corralled students who were failing in "Geometry Jail" as she called it, or whatever the subject it may be. She took students out of the regular classroom setting periodically if they were missing several assignments and sat with them in the separate room in the special education room and locked the door. Somehow they completed several assignments together over a single

class period and when it was over, the students' grades had almost instantaneously gone from failing to passing. I once saw a student's math grade go from an F to a B in a matter of minutes, as a result of "Jail" whereupon he completed several missing assignments and turned them into the teacher. It is true that Ms. Rutherford worked hard to keep track of all the students and their grades in their regular education classrooms, but that seemed to be as much as she feels she has time for. She was successful at helping special education students maintain passing grades, but it is disingenuous to call this successful co-teaching or really, any type of teaching. What I saw Ms. Rutherford do seemed to fall more in the category of tutoring or remediation.

It seemed that Ms. Rutherford was not the only one who felt significant pressure to make sure special education students pass. Ms. Nowak felt pressure with both special education teachers with whom she had worked. Last year with Ms. Flynn, during the time when they were doing pull-out, Ms. Flynn gave the math grades. Again, this was marked by the confusion and lack of concrete guidelines as many other things in Colina Cedro's special education program. Ms. Nowak explained,

> It was, uh, we had, we had a discussion because, at first, I was supposed to give the grades. And they were taking the test over there, and all of a sudden they were coming with, like, really high scores. And, [pause] I know how much they can do and to me, just giving them straight As to those students, it wasn't just fair. I, you know, I understand that they need help, but it's just not fair to other students. Uh, so I talked to, uh, Ms. Flynn and I asked her, you know, 'Can you just please tell me the honest grade, what they should get.' Because I know what they should get in my eyes, and it's not A. So, yeah, we kind of had, like, a talk

> and we were going over each student and we did, we did kind of, like, did the grade together. But it was, she was, she was giving more suggestions to the grade.

As they switched from push-in back to pull-out, there was some confusion over who was the one to assign grades since it was never really in the plan for math work to take place solely under Ms. Flynn. Once the students were pulled out for math in the special education classroom, Ms. Nowak felt unsatisfied with what she saw as grade inflation. The grades were a subject of some contention, as neither felt it was a true reflection of the students' abilities or they felt pressure for the student to receive a passing grade no matter what. In the end, it did not appear that they graded student work and gave the appropriate grade, but rather that they just came to a consensus on what they felt the student "deserved." No doubt the resulting grades were subjective and balanced out to make sure no student failed.

This year, with the students fully pushed in her class, Ms. Nowak had control over the grades and while she was more confident that the grades were now more representative of the students' work, she also sounded slightly apologetic that "a lot of them didn't pass." She pointed out her frustration in two separate instances:

> From the special ed, like, point of view, I always feel pressured. He needs to pass. He needs to pass because that's his, like, fifth year taking Algebra. He needs to pass. Well, maybe that's the reason why he's taking Algebra fifth time. He should be in Pre-Algebra…So, so yeah he passed. I don't know how they, I don't know, how they are going to do this. I will be, I will be pushing for giving

him math credit, but putting him, I guess, *again*, in the same class. Because [pause] he's not ready to move on for the next class. He's not.

And again:

Ms. Nowak: It's all about pass / fail.

Researcher: Where does that pressure come from?

MN: Uhhh, special ed teacher. That's how I feel. I'm not pressured by principal; I'm not pressured by other teachers; I'm not pressured by their parents. Um, it's, if I feel that pressure, it's from the special ed teacher. And it's not just Ms. Rutherford. It's, it's, uh, it was before also.

Ms. Nowak's frustrations were evident here from her exaggeration of how many times a student re-takes a class to the number of times she stated "he needs to pass." She spoke to the ineffective nature of the program that allowed a student to receive passing grades only to ask the student to retake the course, as well as to no one acknowledging her opinion as a math teacher, that the current placement is not the right one. This student, Alejandro, was a well-mannered and quiet student whom all the teachers regarded highly, even though he struggled significantly. The random assignment of grades does not give parents, teachers or students an accurate picture of the student's achievement or abilities and it created confusion regarding proper placement for the student.

*Accommodations and Modifications*

In addition to teachers not being fully prepared to co-teach, it seemed just the presence of students with disabilities in the regular education classrooms was somewhat

of a struggle, at least for Ms. Nowak. She mentioned several times that she felt she needed more help in understanding special education students' needs and accommodations, as well as implementing those things. She stated that she received a sheet for each student with an IEP that listed that student's goals and modifications and accommodations. She called it "just a paper" that is "very similar to every student."

> Ms. Nowak: I just wish I would have, like, more suggestions, what exactly to do…what I can do to help them and, like, with examples. Like let's say, "Make the directions more…clear." Give me an example, something almost like a script. When you're solving equations, how can I, how can I bring it down the direction more than "solve the equation?" Like, something that, because I don't know. Like, solve for variables, solve for unknown letter, I don't know. So I wish I would have, like, a little bit more specific [pause], like, suggestions, more examples, I think.
>
> Researcher: So the information they *do* give you, is just what?
>
> MN: Um, [pause], the goals. And [pause] something like, "Use more specific, clear directions."
>
> R: Okay, but then you don't know how –
>
> MN: "Student is to have preferable seating or special seating," and it doesn't really, like, specify, like, do you want it in a group, do you want it more in a corner quietly, so I wish I would have, I would like to have more, mmmm, this right away, but it's kind of, I talk to the special ed teacher so we kind of, like, collaborate, I think."

Ms. Nowak seemed very confused about these sheets of paper she received every year regarding the special education students she would have in class. She also showed that without an understanding, these papers were pretty much useless to her. She was unable to provide these accommodations to students because she didn't know how or what it meant exactly. She seemed willing to try and wished for the special education students to be successful, but she wasn't really doing anything different for them than she was for the regular education students, because she didn't really know what that entailed. Moreover, she is legally bound to provide these modifications and accommodations listed on the student's IEP, but it seemed she cannot because she was unclear on how to do it. She obviously had read over the sheets in an interest to attempt provide the necessary supports for students with disabilities, but her willingness to try can only go so far. Lastly, she mentioned collaborating with Ms. Rutherford, but it is unclear how helpful these talks and collaborations were, since Ms. Nowak still expressed frustration at not knowing how to implement it for students.

It seemed, though, that rather than raise a fuss about it, Ms. Nowak either did whatever she thought was best, whether or not it was listed on the student's accommodations page, or she just didn't do it if she didn't know how. Ms. Rutherford seemed to take this lack of complaints as a willingness to implement them in the regular education classes. She said, "That's really a strength in terms of the teachers are willing to work with me and [pause] uh, use the accommodations in class. I don't get a lot of resistance in that area." Ms. Rutherford didn't get "resistance" or hear complaints, so she assumed they were being implemented fully and successfully; however, Ms. Nowak's comments showed that it was not the case. Certainly Ms. Nowak wasn't resistant to

providing modifications, but that doesn't mean they were implemented successfully, or even at all. The teachers at Colina Cedro certainly were willing to adapt to the needs of the students, but it seemed to be a decision made on the spot, rather than according to the student's IEPs. Ms. Nowak mentioned that on tests, she shortened it for special education students.

> What I do, I make one test for every student and then I circle, um, about 60% of the test, like, you know, the question and I give them to the special ed students. If they need more time, they have, they have as much time as they need and very often, um, very often, it depends on the student. Some want to go to the special ed room and take it over there; some students don't want to do it.

In addition to shortening the tests, Ms. Nowak also admitted to having

> completely different rules, basically. If I give my students [pause] like, I don't give them a chance to retake something, or, or, there's no extra time for this, uhhh, for these students [special education students], they could retake and retake and retake and *retake* and retake until they *finally* make it.

This certainly isn't in the spirit of accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities, but Ms. Nowak had not been told any differently, and she was doing what felt was necessary for the student to pass. It is clear from her comparison of regular ed to special ed students, she did not feel it was fair to allow some students to take a test as many times as necessary (with help in the special education room) to receive a passing grade, but she apparently felt she had no choice. Additionally, the shortening of tests, extra time, and taking the test in a separate setting are specific accommodations and are

definitely helpful, but they are not listed on every student's IEP. She did it for all of them regardless, which certainly doesn't hurt the students, but it spoke to the unorganized and unstandardized manner of providing accommodations. Some she skipped over entirely because she didn't know what to do, and others she provided wholesale to all students with disabilities.

Even in other classrooms, I never witnessed specific accommodations being implemented. If modifications were used, such as shortening an assignment, they were typically done for every special education student in that class. However, I saw Ms. Castillo read the test to students in Government, but she tended to help just a few students and not the other special education students sitting on the other side of the classroom. I also observed that in addition to reading the test questions, she also paraphrased, hinted, and guided. She was able to help significantly on tests in Government since she attended and took notes daily; however, on an English test brought to the resource room over the book *Speak*, she stated she could not help since she hadn't read the book or attended class to hear discussion. The test consisted of content questions regarding the plot and its characters. This indicated that she felt she had to know the correct answers to help guide the students, rather than just reading the test to them or allowing them to test in a separate location. In other classrooms, such as Chemistry, I saw no accommodations or modifications used on the test that Santiago failed.

The extra time accommodation and the lax school culture mixed together to facilitate problems. I saw more than one student take tests home with them for a few days. I am unsure if there was some miscommunication where the regular education teacher believed the student was taking the test to work on in the special education room,

but then Ms. Rutherford was unaware so she didn't ask the student about it, or if there was no miscommunication at all and this was standard practice. It is also unclear why the regular education teacher did not ask for it to be returned, even a few days later. When I asked one student to return a test to regular education teacher, since it was the end of the school day, Ms. Rutherford impatiently told me not to rush the student. I was not rushing him, but I was surprised that no one seemed concerned that the student was going to take the test home with him. The student put the test in his backpack and went home for the day.

*Special Education Teacher's and Assistant's Roles*

Proper implementation of accommodations and true co-teaching could not occur when there appeared to be some confusion regarding Ms. Castillo's and Ms. Rutherford's roles, both in the regular and special education classroom. As stated previously, Ms. Rutherford did not appear to be engaged in teaching as much as she seemed to be managing each student's file or 'case.' She sometimes called herself a "caseworker" and when first asked about her role at Colina Cedro, she answered,

> Basically just making sure that all the students who have been qualified for special education or could potentially qualify for special education services, all the laws are being followed for those students that attend the school, including in-class support, pull-out support, scheduling annual meetings within, you know, the timeline given.

She never mentioned teaching directly but focused primarily on administrative tasks. She mentioned "in-class support" and "pull-out" support" but in regards to following the

laws, not in providing those services herself. While these administrative tasks are definitely an important part of a special education teacher's job, it makes it quite difficult to have a successful co-teaching program when the teacher first identifies as a caseworker, rather than a teacher.

It seemed this identification as a manager, rather than a teacher, manifested itself in how she divided her time. Ms. Rutherford told me she found it difficult to balance the many tasks she had: seeing all the students in various regular education classes and managing IEPs for anywhere from twenty to thirty students. From observations, it appeared that she felt keeping IEPs compliant was her first and most important duty as I saw her spending the most time on these activities. She spent her planning period exclusively on these activities since she didn't have to plan lessons or grade classwork. During second period, when most students were Super Seniors working on packets, she mainly allowed them to work independently while she worked at her desk. That is not to say that she ignored them; she did answer their questions if they came up (or directed them to use the Internet), but she sat at her desk and worked by herself unless a question arose. The same happened during sixth period, but not fifth period when she had the largest number of students. During the remaining periods (third and fourth), she stated she would go into regular education classrooms if she had time, but I mainly saw her in her own classroom. She handled the caseworker aspect well, keeping IEPs in compliance, but sometimes maybe to the detriment of her other duties. Perhaps after the school's history with IEPs all out of compliance, she felt significant pressure to maintain those first and foremost. She said, "I end up doing a lot, I end up doing a lot more of the administrative part, like, I can do that at home." But she insisted that during class time,

she is able to focus "close to 100% of my energy" on teaching. She said, "But when we have IEP meetings *during*, you know, there's gonna be times where I'm not teaching 100% of the time. But I feel, like, still 80-100% of the time, I'm trying to teach." Ms. Rutherford was no doubt well-intentioned, and I'm sure she would love to have more time to devote to teaching, but more often than not, when she wasn't working on administrative tasks at her desk, she was running to various classes to retrieve failing students or to see what assignments were missing. She definitely felt it was an important part of her job to keep students from failing, but this cannot be categorized as time spent teaching. The reality is, she did not have time to teach, after running after each kid who was failing or trying to get current grades or reading levels for upcoming IEP. She cannot be faulted for this when she believed, for whatever reason, that her first job was as a caseworker, and then to make sure students are passing, regardless of if they are learning or not.

Fifth period, with its large size, provided her largest opportunity to teach, and indeed, I did see her a few times utilizing the white board to go over a concept from Algebra Extended. More often though, fifth period was spent answering individual questions from primarily Algebra or Geometry, and occasionally English or Life or Earth Sciences. She mainly encouraged students to finish current or missing assignments, or do homework; she also used this time to pull students from regular education classes to come finish assignments or to Geometry Jail. So it is definitely true that she was present and working with students, the time was not necessarily spent teaching. Ms. Castillo, when comparing this special education program to ones where she previously worked, said, "Not, not like here. Ms. Rutherford, she doesn't really teach a class." In addition to

these Study Skill sessions, she was supposed to provide push-in support throughout the day in various regular education classes. When asked what her role is during those times, she responded,

> I would just work at supporting the teacher in there, kind of walking around and helping all students, not just students with special education needs, but everybody, making sure people are on task, making sure, um, they initiate activities…just kind of floating around the room…just making sure people are doing what they are supposed to be doing, kind of prompting if needed, not over-prompting, but prompting if needed.

She seemed clear that a co-teaching role requires helping all students, but the various tasks she named are monitoring activities, performed as a background person who is present, yet not intrusive. She also seemed concerned about the amount of prompting she did, as if she felt that she would be intruding or overstepping her bounds in the regular teacher's classroom.

The overwhelming amount of administrative tasks also fell to Ms. Castillo and similarly took away from her time spent with students. She also spent about half of her day doing administrative tasks, such as making copies and translating IEPs from English to Spanish. Ms. Castillo had worked as a teacher's assistant for many years and said Colina Cedro was "the first time I've worked in this kind of environment, like, uh, doing all the paperwork and all that so it's kind of new to me. So, basically, I worked in the classrooms with the kids." At all previous positions, she spent her time in the classrooms

with the students, but here at Colina Cedro she found that she was spending at least an hour a day doing paperwork. I asked her what this paperwork entailed:

> Ms. Castillo: It's, uh, well, it's the IEP thing. I help Ms. Rutherford, you know, fill out all the paperwork.
>
> Researcher: Translate it?
>
> MC: Yeah, I translate it. I've done that before but never IEPs. Like, I translated, like, just general paperwork that they would mail to parents or whatever. I would do that. This is kind of challenging because it's very repetitive but each student has, you know, their own story, so you know, it's *a lot* of writing.
>
> R: So really specific.
>
> MC: Yeah, uh huh, uh, but I like it. And, I like it because, uh, before I would be with kids all day. Here it's like part of the day, I'm doing, like, office work and then part of the rest of the day, I'm working with kids.

Ms. Castillo spent just about as much time as Ms. Rutherford did on IEPs since she was translating it word-for-word. This task had never been given to her at other schools, but at Colina Cedro, it was an important part of her role as teacher's assistant and she dedicated herself to it. She completed this work instead of spending time in the regular education classroom, or she did it in the special education classroom during Study Skills instead of helping students.

When asked about her role, she spoke equally about supporting the students and doing paperwork. Ms. Castillo was clear that her role was assisting Ms. Rutherford in

both supporting students and completing paperwork, but she seemed less clear about what push-in support looks like. When asked what her job is in the regular education classroom, she laughed and stated,

> Just like going to school! I take notes. I'm the one listening for the kids, I guess. So I take all the notes and I help them, you know, like I write the notes in such a way so that when we're back in the classroom, they can understand better. So pretty much I just take a notebook and I feel I'm back in school – I take all the notes and you know…uhhh, what else do I do in the classroom? Pretty much, they're so distracted – just help them be focused and, like, pay attention [laughs]. Uh, babysit.

She described her role as both a student and then as a babysitter. She was taking the role she believed she has been asked to, and she did it conscientiously; however, this meant that the students were primarily receiving her help in the special education classroom after the fact, rather than immediately in the regular education classroom, which is the whole point of push-in support. It is unclear where the directive to take notes as a student came from, but nevertheless, it makes clear the miscommunication or misunderstanding of how co-teaching works and how teachers and assistants can support students. In her own words, she felt she was there to babysit, to "know what is going on in each classroom and…make sure that they have all their work and that they understand the lesson that was given to them."

In regular education classes where a large number of special education students were present, Ms. Castillo sometimes took an even more passive role. She said, "Like

math, there's so many kids this year that you have to sit there and just be there." Simply sitting there and being present certainly does not provide very much support. Perhaps realizing that she could not provide support to everyone, Ms. Castillo had a habit of helping only a few students, rather than providing co-teaching support. During Government, with only four special educations students during that period, she focused primarily on two students. Ms. Nowak noted that she did the same during Algebra Extended as well:

> When I have an aide coming, uh, she would help one student, Alejandro, only…and she would just focus on him. Um, lately she would not come at all, or she would come for ten minutes and leave. Um, so I asked her if she could just work with three students in group and just make sure they do work.

Ms. Castillo seemed to take an active role in some courses (even if it as a student), but then during Algebra, she didn't attend or if she did, she only helped one student even though, nearly half of that class were special education students. Her role then was just to "make sure they do work." She didn't take notes in Algebra, as she stated previously was her role, and as she did in other courses.

*Knowledge and Competence in All High School Subjects*

Such a push-in and co-teaching model required that Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were able to demonstrate competence in all high school subjects. The resource room set up, by which students come to a separate setting for help completing assignments, necessitated that those in the resource room are competent in all of the courses taught at the school. Colina Cedro had a co-teaching model in name, but

according to both Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo, in the regular education classroom, they mainly provided support through prompting and monitoring, rather than providing their expertise on making the lesson accessible to all students. The rest of the support was provided in a separate setting. Whether it is fair or reasonable to expect this broad level of competence of Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo, that was the current situation at Colina Cedro. Other high school teachers are experts in their subject, such as English or Science, but the current model required that those helping special education students are well-versed in every subject taught at Colina Cedro, including upper level math and science courses. Ms. Rutherford claimed that she enjoyed the challenge:

> It's all about attitude a little bit, um, if you're willing to, to learn it and, some people are going to have to try harder and there's subjects people are going to have to try harder, but, um, I enjoy it…you just kind of have to embrace it a little bit.

A good attitude is absolutely necessary, and even admirable in the face of such a challenge, but is it enough to cover the deficit of not studying these subjects in college as the other teachers have? For Ms. Castillo, a good attitude and a willingness to learn was not enough. She was very open about her struggle in math and that she had basically forgotten all of the math she learned several years ago, as well as the impact it had on her ability to help students struggling with algebra or other math courses.

> I never liked math, and um, I think the last math class I took, I was, like, twenty, twenty-one maybe, and I never, ever opened a book again. So right now, I'm really struggling with that because I've forgotten so much stuff, just the basic

> stuff. And Ms. Rutherford knows this. So it's a struggle for me because it's like I forgot everything. And, uh, so what we're doing, that's my weakness and Ms. Rutherford's pretty good at that, so she's trying to take that class. History – I love history. So, for me, I, I'm totally in the classroom. I enjoy it; I know a lot about it.

Ms. Castillo simply felt unable to help students in math, but that was one of the areas where students struggled the most. The creation of Algebra Extended was a direct result of the number of students struggling. Additionally, the majority of the students in 5th period were Algebra Extended students, so most of their time was spent completing Algebra assignments. How is it possible to assist all the students in Algebra if Ms. Castillo cannot herself understand and complete the content? She also plainly stated her preference for history over math. Most people probably have similar preferences based on which subjects they struggle or excel in, but it becomes problematic when this preference begins to affect the quality of support provided. Ms. Castillo was consistent in attending Government and World History; she took thorough notes and kept track of all the assignments. On the other hand, she was barely present in Algebra and did not take notes when she was there. Her skewed presence meant that she was always aware of what was going on in some classes, but completely unaware in others, and arguably the one where she was needed the most. Ms. Nowak confirmed that even when Ms. Castillo did come, she could only offer the students limited support:

> Well, the new, the new aide, she was a *very* nice lady, but she was not strong in math. You could see that. Umm, and she, I think, like, she didn't feel confident. You know, students would ask her questions and sometimes she would give them

> wrong answers…so, they, they [the students] kind of, you know, they, they, they [pause] they said that to her…So I guess at some point, she, she didn't feel, like, comfortable walking around then and, um, helping others because she didn't know the answer.

Obviously, no one wanted to embarrass Ms. Castillo, so it appeared no one said anything at all. She was not asked to attend more frequently or consistently, and no one filled in that empty space either. Ms. Castillo stated that Ms. Rutherford had agreed to take on the math courses, but in practice, that didn't happen. Ms. Nowak said that Ms. Rutherford quit coming for whatever reason, and Ms. Nowak had "nobody." As a result, students received no special education support at all. Ms. Rutherford did, of course, help students with their math assignments during 5th period in the special education classroom, but not in the regular classroom.

If Ms. Castillo had difficulty in Algebra Extended, she would not be able to help with any of the other math courses or courses that require math, such as chemistry and physics. A few special education students were enrolled in Chemistry, including Santiago, but in-class support was not provided and pull-out support focused on English. Again, the tag-team approach where Ms. Rutherford was to attend the classes that Ms. Castillo did not, failed. Ms. Rutherford voiced her dislike of and ineptitude in Chemistry and was happy when I would attempt to help Santiago with his Chemistry. The other two students enrolled in Chemistry did not attend Study Skills so they effectively did not receive any special education support at all for Chemistry. In the end, students simply did not receive support in subjects with which Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were uncomfortable. Unfortunately, these courses coincided with courses that the students

needed the most help, leaving a huge gap in the services provided to the students. Furthermore, it seemed that employing a special education assistant with a range of competencies was not of critical importance. When I asked Ms. Rutherford what she was looking for in hiring a new assistant, she focused more on compliance and general agreeability rather than knowledge and experience.

> We want to make sure that people have, had some academic experience working with this age group. Ideally, you know, not necessarily students with disabilities, but um, just kind of see if it's the right fit for the personality or, you know, their demeanor [laughs], you know, um somebody who's willing to work with others because we're pushing in all those classes and we have a variety of students and we're working together – you don't really work alone – so somebody with that kind of personality is good. So, yeah, I mean, we just kind of asked people how they would respond in certain situations if a teacher had given them a direction maybe they didn't agree with, so you just kind of want to make sure that the person you're hiring is open to feedback and approving and kind of playing that assistant role.

According to these criteria, it appeared that compliance weighed more than school subject competency in a variety of high school subjects. It seemed more important than even experience working with students with disabilities or experience working in a co-teaching environment. Ms. Rutherford mentioned experience working with high school students, but then she points out that it didn't have to be in a special education capacity. When she mentioned the push-in model, she stressed compliance and submissiveness but not experience or understanding of how co-teaching works. Essentially, it sounded as if

the hiring process was seeking someone who would stay in the background and not create any trouble. Dr. James stated the importance of having an assistant who was bilingual in Spanish and English when he told me they were seeking to hire an assistant after the previous one quit. As a result, they hired someone who was bilingual and very amenable, but someone who could not help students in many of the courses at Colina Cedro.

*Struggle with Work Load*

Whether because of a lack of understanding of co-teaching, the roles they should play, a lack of firm understanding of high school subjects, or simply because the work load was too heavy, Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo demonstrated that they struggled greatly with juggling all the various push-in support. Some students didn't get seen at all; some were seen but in subjects that were not the same as the ones where they needed help, for example, special education presence in World History, but not in any of the science courses. Ms. Rutherford kept a checklist on which she listed all the special education students and ticked off when she had seen them in the regular classroom each day. Looking at the list, it would appear that each student got his or her push-in support everyday, but it might just be Ms. Castillo or Ms. Rutherford poking her head into the classroom for a few minutes or perhaps the student was seen in one class, but not all the classes listed.

A few times, I filled in for Ms. Rutherford when she was absent for the day. On these days, she gave me a copy of her schedule that I was to follow in her absence. I attended a 9$^{th}$ grade English class during 1$^{st}$ period. The long-term sub, who covered the class while the teacher was out on paternity leave, approached me and asked if I needed

help. I explained that I was covering for Ms. Rutherford and was there to provide special education support. She appeared confused and told me that Ms. Rutherford had never come in before so she couldn't tell me what she typically did or what she wanted me to do while I was in there for the class period. On another occasion, when the regular English teacher returned, he was also confused by my presence and told me that Ms. Rutherford never came into his classroom. I saw the checklist though; and English was always checked off everyday.

*Communication between Special and General Education*

This spotty and skewed presence in the regular education classrooms could sometimes create some communication problems. Communication between Ms. Rutherford and the regular education teachers is extremely crucial for not only the monitoring of special education students, but also for the success of co-teaching. When I asked Ms. Rutherford how she primarily communicated with the regular education teachers, she said,

> You know, it's just kind of, I tried a lot of different things. I wouldn't really say it's email. On occasion it's through email, but for the most part, it's me being on campus and floating around and just being in and out of, like, all the classrooms.

We have seen, though, that while it was her intention to be in all the classrooms, it just hadn't come to fruition so far. She was unable to attend all the classes and while she was extremely informed and up-to-date in some classes, she was completely uninformed in others, regarding current assignments and student progress (besides just for grades.)

I spoke with Ms. Nowak regarding her communication with Ms. Rutherford because it seemed that Ms. Nowak had many frustrations regarding the special education program and that simple communication might clear up some of these things – such as why Ms. Castillo stopped attending or what some of the accommodations and modifications mean. Her responses showed that there was not really a system, or even an environment, that was conducive to sharing feedback or concerns.

> Researcher: So when things weren't working with the aide or you had an issue with one of the special ed students, was there, um, a system in place for you to communicate with Ms. Rutherford about those things?
>
> Ms. Nowak: Yeah, I told her. I didn't really be, like, you know, it came out in a, like, in some kind of, like, conversation. I didn't go there and tell her, 'Listen…' It's not really, like, I don't get much help. I don't where we, we just talked about something and, and, um, it's uh, yeah, so basically we were talking about something; it was just random conversation and she, I think she asked, like, 'Oh, how is Ms. Castillo?' and I'm like, 'You know what? I'm not really getting much help out of her.' So that's, so yeah.
>
> R: So it was just you guys talking? There's not like…some sort of system set up for…
>
> MN: Mmmm…I don't know. I honestly don't even know. I…even if that would be a system, I wouldn't really…I think first, I would just make it a little bit more informal. I wouldn't just go and snitch on her.

R: Yeah, yeah, yeah, not snitching, but I mean, like, whenever I was a teacher, I always thought it was really difficult to be involved in all the students' classes so I tried to send, like, weekly emails, just to, like, check up with people. And so, I mean, not snitching, but just you know, checking in on things and seeing how they're going. So I just didn't know if…

MN: Uh, no. I don't, you know, she sends a lot of emails about, like, meetings and, and we need this, we need the grade, we need this, but mmm, I don't think we have…anything about, like, you know, is everything on both ends good.

Ms. Nowak jumped immediately to "snitching" on Ms. Castillo, rather than seeing it an open communication about whether or not the push-in program was working how it was currently operated. This seemed to indicate that if she commented negatively, there would be adverse consequences for either herself, Ms. Castillo or the both of them. She appeared to accept the fact that she didn't get much help and didn't really see what good it would do to voice her concerns, or that perhaps she would receive even less help as a result. And perhaps rightly so, since she did tell Ms. Rutherford, but it doesn't appear that anything really changed as a result of that conversation. Ms. Castillo still did not help in a meaningful manner, even when she did attend. Ms. Nowak was also careful to note that when she did speak with Ms. Rutherford, it was "random conversation" and "informal," perhaps again fearing the consequences for formal complaints about the push-in system. And in the end, she acknowledged that there was not a system that ensured that things were good on both ends. It seems that this very thing – ensuring that things are going well for both parties involved – should be the center of a co-teaching model. Yet, it seemed the focus of the communication was meetings and grades, as an

indicator of student success in the classroom, not any other information that might paint a more developed, richer picture.

## Theme 5: "You Just Waste So Much Time:" Problems with the Study Skills Class

### *Introduction*

With the many problems that plagued the push-in model at Colina Cedro, there were just as many problems with one of its main component, Study Skills. Not technically considered pull-out since students received core education in the regular classroom, Study Skills was considered an elective for special education students. Despite its name, students did not learn skills that might help them study or be more successful in the regular classroom, such as note-taking skills or organization skills. Study Skills had no set curriculum, but rather was supposed to operate as sort of a study hall or catch-all course where students would work on current assignments / homework or catch up on missing assignments. This open format, however, produced several problems such as wasted time, lack of rigor, and warehousing and segregation.

### *Wasted Time and Opportunities*

Students wasted lots of time simply because they sometimes had nothing to do. The only students who consistently had work were the students who were consistently failing to turn in their regular education class assignments. The students who used their class time to complete assignments often had nothing to do during Study Skills. A student during sixth period read fiction novels for his own pleasure just about daily. During 2nd period, the two Super Seniors mainly worked independently and accomplished very little with no one really checking on their progress or how much they were actually

accomplishing. They spent an entire school year filling out a few packets, even though Royce said that it didn't matter what he wrote as long as it got finished. He showed me his packet where, indeed, he had written nonsense or something completely unrelated on his packets. The other Super Senior was to be reading a novel for English, and when I inquired as to how far he was, he showed me he had read two pages over the course of several days.

Veronica, a 9th grade student in 5th period Study Skills, had one of the highest grades in Algebra Extended, and received an award for her accomplishment. She always had her work completed, so she was always compelled to work on "Art Articles" because she had nothing else to do. For Art Articles, students were to summarize an existing piece of writing regarding something in art. These writings were simple one-paged writings, such as news stories pulled from the Internet. Students just needed to write a short summary, not develop an essay or communicate a position and defend it. Usually this "summary" that the students produced was a paraphrased version of the article pulled from the Internet. Veronica worked on the same four Art Articles the entire semester when she was asked to work; otherwise she wrote notes to her friends, doodled or played on her phone. She was usually quiet, though, so Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo generally left her alone.

The other students who had Algebra Extended usually dutifully pulled out their Algebra assignment and if someone worked on the white board with them, they would complete the assignments. More often than not, though, they were expected to work independently, because Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo were helping other students with

other subjects or running "Geometry Jail." With no one asking them to do work, the students would socialize and end up leaving class with nothing accomplished.

The lack of a set curriculum or any sort of expectations meant that the students were often rowdy and unsettled. It was simply the classroom culture in Study Skills that seemed to make students relax, sleep even, or do anything else besides study. In 6th period, Santiago frequently napped, laid his head down on the table or joked and talked the whole class period, despite his failing grades. He definitely recognized that he could get away with plenty and knew exactly how far to push. Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo often threatened to send him to the office, they but never did. Otherwise, they basically allowed him to goof off, as long as it was not too loud or disruptive. Mr. Elroy, Santiago's chemistry teacher, had said that Santiago could go to his classroom during 6th period for extra help since he had a small class that period, but no one ever asked Santiago to do that, even though he was failing Chemistry. He and another student, Carlos, were usually very loud and made jokes; they were also fond of making barking sounds and good-naturedly teasing of the shy student in the class. They referred to themselves as "bad boys" and encouraged the third student to be "bad" with them. The first fifteen or twenty minutes of class carried on like this, until Carlos would calm down and begin to work with Ms. Castillo. Santiago then would either put his head down and nap or continue to try to goad the other two students to join in the antics. He would sometimes work on assignments or study for an upcoming Government test, but more often than not, it was wasted class time for him.

One student attended 2nd period pretty infrequently and I never knew where he went when he didn't come. Students would ask to go to the restroom and be gone for

five, ten, sometimes fifteen or twenty minutes. Another student, Esmeralda, laid her head down to sleep while I was trying to speak with her about an English assignment. As I read questions from the worksheet, she continued to have her head on the table. Later, Ms. Rutherford told me that I didn't have to try so hard and that, "Sometimes you can't do anything about it. It's frustrating. You do what you can but I can't do anything about it, so I'm not going to worry about it. That sounds bad but…" Esmeralda was failing several classes, but Ms. Rutherford apparently felt that this student was beyond her reach. Thus, she continued this behavior and no one really asked for more from her.

Ms. Castillo noted that computer games might be more productive for the students when they had down time.

> They should have more programs on the computer. Uh, like, when I work with Ms. Rutherford, it's, it would be great if the kids could have access, like, to programs on the computer that would help them. Instead of just, like, sometimes, uh, they really have nothing to do…And it's just like, 'read a book.' And I wish they had, you know, a fun program or something that could help them.

Here Ms. Castillo acknowledged that sometimes the students didn't really have anything to do. They were asked to "read a book" but the special education classroom did not have a class library (and the school had no library,) so they couldn't read a book unless they brought one with them, which was very rare. Ms. Castillo went on to describe computer-based programs she saw students use in other schools and noted how these programs helped students with basic math skills, which in turn helped students in the regular education classroom. She also spoke about the chaotic nature of Study Skills,

how sometimes students legitimately don't have anything to do, but other times, they do but she doesn't know about it.

> It's, uh, the first fifteen minutes – you remember, getting them settled down. [laughs]…Just, and some never settle; it's hard. Um, and then just basically just *forcing* them to tell you what their homework is, what their work is because they *never* have anything to do, you know. And, helping them. It's, it's a struggle. You just waste *so* much time.

Ms. Castillo's assessment lined up with my observations – Study Skills class periods were unproductive (students napping or leaving the classroom, or repeating the same assignments several times) and disorganized. When Ms. Castillo or Ms. Rutherford didn't attend the regular classroom and didn't know what the assignments were, they were unusually unable to get it from the students. So if the students didn't have work in World History or Government, the two classes attended most frequently by Ms. Castillo, or Algebra Extended (since it was expected they would have homework everyday), the teachers did not really know what to ask them to do. Students used it basically as a social period, using their phones to text or listen to music and talk to their friends. They had work before them on their desks and would usually complete a few problems, but mainly, it was a wasted class period.

In Study Skills classroom, a file box sat on the table with the desktop computers. Early in the year, Ms. Rutherford asked me to organize the file box left behind by the previous special education teacher. This file box contained various brochures, leaflets, and print-outs of things helpful to junior and senior students – items from area colleges,

information on financial aid and scholarships, FAFSA, how to prepare a resume, career interest inventories, etc. I organized all this information thinking it would be used or accessed by students, perhaps when they did not have any work to do, but I never saw it being used. Most students had transition goals listed on their IEPs that they would learn to write a cover letter or résumé, or that they would research a career of interest to them, so I expected this box to be used during Study Skills, but it never was. Instead, the box sat there untouched, another wasted opportunity.

Additionally, although named Study Skills, students did not, as I had expected, learn any study or organizational skills. All students can benefit from learning to take notes in a way that fits their personal style or learning to organize their class binders, and this would seem especially helpful for students with so many missing assignments. I expected that Study Skills would emphasize these skills or that time would be spent on tasks that would help students to better access the general education curriculum, such as learning to highlight important info in the class texts or working on class vocabulary. Instead, students continued along in sort of a learned helplessness – Ms. Castillo took detailed notes for them during Government and World History; Ms. Rutherford asked me on two separate occasions to organize a student's Math binder for him – to locate missing assignments as well as to just organize it for him.

During Isabel's annual IEP meeting, the teachers mentioned that she should work on vocabulary word lists from her general education classes, such as Earth Science, in order to help her understand class readings better. I expected to see her working with her teachers on compiling these lists and studying them during down time in Study Skills, but no one ever compelled her to do this after the meeting. Other students would have also

benefitted from supplemental work such as vocabulary, basic math skills, or reading skills during their frequent free time in Study Skills, but there was nothing in place for this work to occur. It seemed this would have been beneficial in helping them to access the general curriculum, as well as meeting stated IEP goals.

Not all students wasted time during Study Skills; those who actively sought help from Ms. Rutherford or Ms. Castillo received it, but very few students did this. A small handful of students worked diligently on assignments and proactively asked for help or asked questions. Carlos, the student who frequently joked with Santiago, would spend part of the class period joking with Santiago, but then he would take out his assignments and ask for help. He became defensive when someone told him that he needed to settle down and work or that his behavior seemed to show that he wasn't serious. Even though he would spend a great deal of time goofing off with Santiago, he would also genuinely ask for help and work on his assignments when someone sat next to help and helped him with every step. Ms. Castillo became in the habit of helping him the most, both in Study Skills and in Government. She helped Santiago far less, even though they were enrolled in both Study Skills and Government at the same time. This was the case with other students as well – some received quite a bit of attention and help while others did not.

*Lack of Rigor*

Isabel and Royce admitted that things are Colina Cedro were all around more relaxed and "easier." Royce, who had attended several different high schools, stated that a previous school's "standards were higher." He said it was one of the reasons he wanted to transfer – he felt overwhelmed with the amount of work and credit recovery, so he felt

he should attend another school where he could catch up quickly and graduate. When asked which school she liked more (previous school or Colina Cedro) and why, Isabel answered immediately, "This one – it's easier. Everything's more relaxing." Additionally, when asked if she enjoyed attending Study Skills, she stated that she would rather come to Study Skills than Art or another one of the few electives, "'cause this is easier and more relaxing. You just gotta be on time." Isabel stated that the only requirement is to be on time, and that definitely seemed to be the case.

Students were given grades for Study Skills somewhat subjectively since there was no set curriculum or work to turn in for the class. Even Ms. Rutherford seemed a little fuzzy on how grades were assigned. During an interview we had at the end of the school year, she told me, "I had categories in the computer; I was setting that up yesterday, and it's based on attendance, um, effort and participation, and work completion, I think that's another category I did." She stated that she was just setting that up at the end of the school year, so I do not know how she was assigning grades before that. Additionally, she did not even seem certain that these are the categories she created. While the students were supposed to grade themselves in these categories each day, only one or two students actually did it, so there was really nothing on which to base a student's grade. Santiago received a B, which hardly seems an indication of his effort, participation or work completion and all the times Ms. Rutherford threatened him and pleaded with him to work, although he did have good attendance.

Isabel was enrolled in Geometry, not Algebra Extended, so she frequently had geometry homework to complete during 5$^{th}$ period. She usually spent the class period socializing with her good friend who was also supposed to be working on geometry.

During her interview, Isabel mentioned both working on assignments and talking to her friend as what she does on a daily basis during 5th period. She seemed to see 5th period, and school as a whole, as much as a social endeavor as an academic one. Rather than just listing assignments she works on during 5th period, she gave equal representation to the socializing she does as well. She also said she liked her teachers because "they're very friendly. They like to play around with the students, mess around." Additionally, Isabel said being a special education student was sometimes a struggle, but "it's very good too because it helps you; you're not just struggling, you know, the other kids have to do a *whole* lot more than we do." This statement seemed to indicate that Isabel felt being in special education meant one had less work to do and that it was made easier. She did not indicate liking special education because it helps her to understand better or gives her extra help on assignments, but she liked it because it gave her *less* work than the other students.

There were a few instances in which Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo basically did the work for the student, either in the interest of time or ease. Once during 6th period, Carlos was supposed to be making a Powerpoint presentation about World War II. Ms. Rutherford was ostensibly helping him to find information (from the Internet, rather than from class materials) and to organize it into a presentation, but she ended up dictating the information while Carlos typed it. She dictated exactly what to write, indicated where to make new bullet points and indentations, punctuation, everything. Needless to say, Carlos finished the entire project quite quickly when it was supposed to be a research project that took some time and effort to prepare. The next day, Ms. Rutherford said after she went home and thought about it, she realized she shouldn't have done that, but the

project was already completed, and she did not ask Carlos to complete one on his own. He just turned in the one Ms. Rutherford dictated to him. This also happened with Carlos and Santiago on their Senior English Project. This was a large project to be completed outside of class that had several components: researching a potential career interest, shadowing someone in that career, interviewing them, and ultimately writing a paper about it. Carlos and Santiago both seemed at a loss as to where to start, who to contact, etc. Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo helped them a great deal on this project, sometimes providing guidance and sometimes dictating exactly what to write. Conversely, Royce had this same Senior English Project, but he never received this amount of help on his project during 2nd period; during 2nd period, the students worked independently. Lastly, I never witnessed "Geometry Jail" as Ms. Rutherford conducted in the separate room built into the Special Education room, but students emerged with several assignments completed in a short period of time, leading me to wonder how much of the work was actually completed independently by the student.

Students took advantage of the lack of rigor of Study Skills and enrolled in it rather than taking other courses. One shy student preferred to be enrolled in Study Skills so that he didn't have to attend P.E. He rarely had work to do because he stayed on top of his assignments, so he basically just "hid out" in Study Skills, but didn't actually receive any specialized instruction or special education services since he was usually reading his own novels and not studying. He enrolled in the middle of the school year, so he was supposed to be working independently on the first semester's work for Geometry. He had a copy of the first half of the workbook and was to work on these so that he could receive credit for the first semester of Geometry. He worked on these a few times, but

then he decided he didn't want to anymore and returned to reading his novels. I asked him about it once, and he told me he didn't want to do it. No one pushed him to do it or even asked him about it, so he just didn't. He used Study Skills as a place not to receive special education services, but as a free period where he wasn't asked to do anything he didn't want to do. Isabel also admitted that she wanted to be enrolled in this class rather than a Computer class, which took place in Mr. Elroy's science classroom since there was not a computer lab or media center at the school. Mr. Elroy's class had just a few computers, four or five. Isabel told me that she didn't pay attention during that class because it was "hard." I asked what she did in that class and she replied, "I wouldn't be able to tell you," but Isabel did pass with a C. She preferred to be enrolled in Study Skills and stated that she would like to continue to be enrolled in it for upcoming school years as well, instead of other courses that are available to her.

*Warehousing and Segregation*

While Colina Cedro purported to have a push-in model where students were fully educated in the general education classroom, special education students were segregated in other ways. Study Skills was the most obvious separate location for special education students, but even a class such as Algebra Extended served as a way to track all low-level students, some with IEPs and others without, by ability. Ms. Nowak, Algebra teacher, was adamant that Algebra Extended was "not working." When I asked what she meant, she said,

> Basically, in Algebra Extended, you have the lowest kids, usually with a very poor behavior, so even if you have a student who came right away and was very

> low, but tried, by looking what's around that student, like, nobody tries, no motivation, they feed off each other and they become the same. So this year, I suggested that instead of putting those lower students all in one class, spread them…Let them work with someone who is more motivated. Because when they see this, if they see, oh Johnny takes notes, I think I have to do the same, so it's like a better influence on them.

Ms. Nowak saw how grouping these students together leads to students learning to be the "bad" and "low" students. She suggested that they do not have the motivation to become better students because it was known as the class for the lowest and worst students, and there really wasn't any expectation to become better.

Algebra Extended was essentially another way of segregating low-achieving students (half of whom, in Algebra Extended, have IEPs) without removing them from general education, while also setting them a whole year behind their peers who will have moved onto Geometry. It also meant that special education students who chose to complete only the required two years without moving onto Geometry or Algebra II would never be exposed to any other math, other than Algebra. This, in turn, positioned them at a disadvantage should they choose to enroll in courses that require upper level math skills or, after high school, to enroll in college.

Ms. Castillo also spoke to how students' placement can lead to poor behavior and attitudes. She didn't believe it was doing them any good to be in the general education classroom all lumped together, but for a different reason:

> They're just wasting – like I don't want to sound like…it's just, it's just wasted time. I don't, I don't know because they're sitting there and they're so lost. And they…I mean their confidence also I think affects them because they, they feel like, I don't know, like a failure because they can't understand anything. And it's not like they *can't*; it's that they were lost somewhere along the line and they're just totally lost. And now, they act as if they don't care. And then they just start playing around and whatever, wasting time and I think it's sad. It's sad. So if someone had the time, like, uh, you know math, reading, writing, just make them feel like you know, you can do it. And, uh, I think that would really help them.

Ms. Castillo felt the students were wasting time in Study Skills when they have nothing to do, and she said they were wasting time in the general education classroom as well. Without proper special education support, she felt these students were "so lost" and as a result, disengaged from class and "start playing around and whatever." Ms. Nowak saw this behavior as a lack of motivation, but Ms. Castillo saw it as a result of being lost in class. Whatever the underlying reason, the students' behavior was cyclical, either because other students feed off of it, as Ms. Nowak suggested or because students will continue to act out as long as they are disengaged from their education, as Ms. Castillo mentioned. Either way, both agreed that it was a waste of time and that the situation was not good for students.

Ms. Nowak also spoke about how she would like to do peer tutoring during Algebra Extended, but she felt unable to do so:

> I don't have, I have two strong students in that class, so even if I want to put them in a, you know, peer tutoring, group where one student can help another one, it's not enough strong students.

Rather than grouping all the low students together, Ms. Nowak appeared to believe that mixing ability groups, rather than sorting students by them, would be more beneficial to the students because they could help each other. She believed that this would help not only their behavior, but also their math skills as they all work together.

Ms. Rutherford told me that for the 2014 – 2015 school year, the lowest students would be pulled out for math, in addition to also coming to Study Skills, thereby reducing these students' time in the regular classroom even more. Of course, since Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo will also be in the special education room during the time they pull students out for math, it will also limit their time in the regular classroom, helping the special education students there. During the school year when I was at Colina Cedro, out of the six class periods, three were Study Skills, and one was Ms. Rutherford's planning period. As it was, she only had two class periods per day designated to be in the regular education classrooms. If they begin pulling out for math, she will be left with one. Ms. Castillo already spent half the day in regular education and half in special education (three periods each) so she would be reduced down to two class periods for regular education. The push-in model was already floundering and cannot be expected to flourish when the two special education representatives spend more time inside the special education classroom than outside of it. Moreover, it seemed that pulling out these students may end up doing more harm than good. Ms. Castillo said during the pull-out time, she and Ms. Rutherford will be "just teaching them how to multiply and add and

subtract." Presumably, removing these students to teach these basic skills will help them to be more successful in the regular education classroom, but by removing them completely from the general education curriculum, the students will only fall further behind in Algebra. They cannot be expected to do well on state tests when they have not even seen Algebra concepts and vocabulary. It seemed that working on these basic skills in conjunction with algebra, rather than separately from algebra, would benefit the students most. This could be accomplished during Study Skills, rather than removing special education students from general education for two periods a day. Furthermore, how can the students be expected to do well in Geometry the following year if they have not learned Algebra concepts?

In addition to math, Ms. Rutherford said she was going to focus on the English classes as well in the next school year. Citing her juggle with attending general education classes, she said she would be "getting creative with, um, some of the students that are English Language Learners; they might be able to be more successful in the ELD [English Language Development] class." So rather than seeing the special education students in regular education English, she was hoping that removing them from general English and placing them in ELD, apparently whether they actually qualify or not, would suffice and somehow count as special education services. It is true that perhaps some English Language Learners will be more successful in an ELD class, but it seemed they [the teachers] were just coming to a consensus on who they *feel* would be more successful in ELD. Additionally, I fail to see how ELD services can count as special education services. It seemed also that Ms. Rutherford was hoping that the students'

grades would be higher in ELD ("be more successful"), thus, I suppose, removing her need to be in the regular education classroom with them.

Similar to how the low-level students were grouped together in Algebra Extended, in the upcoming school year, Ms. Rutherford wanted to try to schedule kids together in groups in other classes as well so that she could attend one or two classes and see several students at once. This may be the most efficient way to do things, but it means that if one student's schedule doesn't work out that way and happens to end up in a class with few other special education students, s/he will likely not be receiving special educations services at all. Ms. Castillo said,

> Pretty much we're, like, where the most kids are – that's where we have to go. And then there's other classes and it depends on the, on the kid, you know, like the student. Um, but pretty much, other classes, it's like, there's gonna be a world history class, there's only two students there so I'm gonna go there, like, once a week maybe? And just ask the teacher what they're doing, but I'm not gonna sit there.

Thus, Colina Cedro was in a situation where grouping the kids together was not good, but not grouping them meant some students simply got left out. In the upcoming school year, Ms. Castillo would only attend World History with only two special education students once a week, and she will not even have any interaction with the students, just the teacher. The contact with the teacher will consist solely of knowing what the assignments are. If these students do not come to Study Skills, they will receive no help at all.

Students felt this segregation from their peers, and, in fact, Royce said that he approached the teachers at Colina Cedro about being placed in special education, even though he said that he was considered "gifted" at his previous schools. He approached them because he said he couldn't focus, so he was labeled a variety of things:

> Well, I was diagnosed with, um, first Bipolar Disorder, but then they said that I didn't have that; it could be something else. But then, um, I went through a certain trauma phase which impacted me, uh, and they diagnosed me with social anxiety, uh, no, no, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which I did have…I think that the best thing for me to do is to, to alienate myself from the rest of the groups and just to focus on my work…

He described wanting to alienate himself from the groups and decided the best course for that was Special Education. Of course, the individual help was nice too since, as he said, "I felt like I couldn't learn like the other students," but he primarily wanted to be alienated. During his interview, he talked constantly about being removed with the rest of the students and student activities, calling them distractions. That was another appeal of Colina Cedro for him: a small school with no activities, sports, pep rallies, etc. So while the school promoted themselves as a school with a push-in, co-teaching model, Royce knew that being labeled special education would automatically separate him from the rest of the students.

*Conclusion*

Five themes emerged from the data: Small and Relational; Deficit Thinking; Neoliberalism; Problems with the Push-In Model; and Problems with the Study Skills

Class. Though Colina Cedro prided itself on its small size and how it allowed them to build relationships with their students, it ultimately wasn't enough; some students still fell through the cracks. The small size was sometimes a negative because of the limited resources, activities, and sports for the students; the small size was also used as a reason to counsel out some special education students. The staff engaged in deficit thinking and blamed failures on the individual, rather than systematic inequalities. They embraced the bootstraps mentality and encouraged hard work to overcome. I saw aspects of neoliberalism at Colina Cedro through competition, efficiency, and cost-cutting. Colina Cedro was also very intentional about creating a business environment for the students. Problems with the push-in model included high turnover, ineffective use of accommodations and modifications, teachers' confusions over their role, and knowledge and competence in all high school subjects. The special education staff also struggled with the work load and communication with the regular education teachers. Lastly, the Study Skills class was also problematic because students often wasted time in that class. There was also an overall lack of rigor. The Study Skills class was problematic because of how it segregated students with disabilities.

# CHAPTER V

## ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which neoliberal education shapes the experiences for special education students at Colina Cedro Charter High School and the ways in which neoliberalism prevents the successful implementation of inclusive education. I organized the data into five themes: 1) "It's More Personal": Smallness, Relationships, & Caring; 2) "The Neediest Population in Colfax: Deficit Thinking and the Creation of the Individual Problem; 3) Classes in the Back of a Car Dealership: Implementing a Business Model at School; 4) "Floating Around": Problems with the Push-In Model; and 5) "You Just Waste So Much Time": Problems with Study Skills. Together these themes showed that the small, relational model used by Colina Cedro and other small charters is ultimately not enough to make a serious difference for students who are the most disadvantaged. These themes also demonstrated that ironically, the business model that the school founders hoped would be beneficial actually was detrimental to students. Lastly, the themes showed the need for intersectional analysis of disability, neoliberalism and inclusive education.

For this study, I used Critical Theory, Critical Disability Studies and Sociology of Special Education to guide me. Critical Disability Theory and Historical Materialist views of disability expand on existing Critical Theory to include disability as a socially constructed categorization that can marginalize and disenfranchise (Erevelles, 2000; Gleeson, 1997; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Similarly, Sociology of Special Education (Tomlinson, 1982) adds to Sociology of Education by discussing the ways special education specifically is used as a tool to sort and stratify students and to maintain existing class structure and racial segregation. Therefore, while the themes seemed to indicate that the special education program at Colina Cedro was problematic, using these lenses, I argue that the program is doing precisely what it was designed to do by the dominant class – maintain the interests of those in power and to marginalize others (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; McLaren, 2007, Tomlinson, 1982).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) argue, "Perpetual urban school failure is tolerated because deep down our nation subscribes to the belief that someone has to fail in school…the general public acknowledges, sometimes explicitly and sometimes tacitly, that schools are this country's de facto socioeconomic sorting mechanism" (p. 2). Their analysis did not focus on disabled students specifically, but on poor students of color; however, their analysis can be applied to disabled students as well. Just as society is unsurprised at the failure, or at least low achievement, of students in urban schools, society usually does not question the failure of students with disabilities. In fact, disabled students, especially black and brown disabled students who are labeled, have particularly poor transition outcomes, including high drop-out rates and difficulty transitioning to

post-school life leading to high unemployment and high incarceration rates (Altman, 2005; Harris, Owen & Gould, 2012; Smith & Routel, 2010). The dismal outcome for students with disabilities has become even more dire given the emergence of the global knowledge economy.

Tomlinson (2013) states that knowledge economy refers to "advances in information and communication technologies, especially the speed with which information can be processed and passed around, and increased digitalisation of information" (p. 18) which ultimately leads to an "increased demand for higher-level skills and diminished demand for lower-level work" (p. 21). Employment in these higher-level skills areas requires increasingly more higher education, and various credentials and certifications. With such of a large number of disabled students dropping out of high school or not attending higher education, low attainers, as Tomlinson (2013) calls them, are increasingly marginalized as they are unable to participate in the knowledge economy. Of course, not being able to participate in higher-skilled areas means either unemployment or working in low-skilled areas. Using this understanding of both general and special education, as a stratifying tool in a global knowledge economy, I argue that the special education program at Colina Cedro worked as designed by those with a vested interest – to reproduce inequality and to reify disabled students' marginalized status.

*Persisting Issues with Small Schools*

Colina Cedro took pride itself in being a small school that is able to provide its students with more attention and better instruction than the average public school.

Supporters of small schools claim that small schools also lead to increased attendance, higher graduation rates, and higher college attendance after graduation (Clinchy, 2000; Meier, 2004; 2006; Tasker, 2004). The Small Schools Initiative defines small schools as less than 400 students and declares the ideal to be about 200 students. Colina Cedro falls slightly under this optimum number, with only 150 students. They are a very small school, even by small school standards. Overall, Colina Cedro performed about the same as area schools despite being much smaller. This matches with existing data regarding the performance of charter schools that finds there is no clear evidence that charter schools perform, on average, better than traditional public schools (Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010).

Increased attention for students is, obviously, never a bad thing, but it is not enough to level a very uneven playing field caused by problems outside of the school. The staff at Colina Cedro were certainly well-intentioned, but ultimately, the small school model and caring from the teachers were not the panacea to the many problems at an urban school. Knopp (2012) reminds us "it remains true that even quality education cannot be the antidote for the social ills of the majority without a dramatic restructuring of the economic power structure" (p. 10). The staff's good intentions are simply not enough without a serious inquiry into the unequal, neoliberal system within which they operate. Being a small school with a caring staff may certainly make a difference in the individual lives of students in terms of feeling as if someone is there for them, but it cannot combat the entrenched inequalities that keep students impoverished. The reality is, the smaller school did not address or alleviate the problems plaguing those large traditional public schools. Colina Cedro still suffered from a lack of resources, a hyper

awareness and focus on standardized testing, and a fear of being labeled a "failing" school and closing. These issues are similar to issues faced by other urban public schools and are indicative of an unequal system, not of school size or class size. In the neoliberal environment that punishes so-called failing schools, villainizes teachers, and slashes budgets, it is difficult for urban schools of any size. The data showed that Colina Cedro faced these same issues, and being small did not do enough to combat it. In fact, while the teacher to student ratio is indeed smaller than it would be at a larger high school, students such as Santiago and Royce still "fell through the cracks," something that proponents of small schools claim can be prevented. Both these students were still failing classes. Royce did indeed spend an entire class period in a class with less than five students for Study Skills for special services, but he primarily spent this time working independently while Ms. Rutherford worked on administrative tasks.

*Lack of Adequate Supports*

Even though Colina Cedro is a small school, Ms. Rutherford, as the only special education teacher, was overburdened by keeping up with the paperwork of 20+ students, as well as trying to properly implement a successful push-in model, despite the fact that she had no experience with inclusion or co-teaching at all. Existing data show that charter schools have a history of employing inexperienced teachers or teachers without proper credentials; additionally since charters are usually in urban areas, these already inexperienced teachers are placed in high-stress environments, leading to quicker burnout rates and higher teacher turnover (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Lipman, 2011). Ms. Rutherford used a lot of classroom teaching time, especially during 2nd period, to work on administrative tasks. Because her only teaching experience was in private schools, she

faced a learning curve related to properly handling the paperwork in a public school setting while keeping up with her other tasks. Additionally, she worked with far fewer students at the private school, and her former students were fully segregated from general education. Although she tried various things to keep up with all of the students in general education, Study Skills, as well as all of their IEPs, she could never seem to really manage all of these responsibilities. As a result, she did not write lesson plans for the Study Skills course and rarely spent much time in the general education classroom. The time Mrs. Rutherford spent on administrative tasks intruded on her teaching time enough for Santiago to comment that he liked the special education teacher from last year more because, "Like, doing my work, she'd be there…instead of sitting down in the desk."

Ms. Castillo was similarly unfamiliar with inclusive education. She had worked in special education classrooms in public schools before, but never one that purported to be fully inclusive. She was also inexperienced at providing help for students in high school courses such as Chemistry and Algebra. She was unable to help students enrolled in those courses, which of course meant that she was unable to help all the students with IEPs. Ms. Rutherford admits, though, that in hiring a new aide, they were not looking for someone with experience with inclusive education or competency in high school level subjects, but primarily someone who was bilingual and someone who would be compliant. Ms. Castillo was willing to try to help students in courses such as Algebra and Chemistry, but she admitted she was unequipped to do so. And since she was, by her own admission, unable to help some students, she focused on only a few students in only a few courses, rather than supporting all the students with IEPs in the general education classroom. In addition to not feeling comfortable with course materials, Ms. Castillo was

also inexperienced at providing inclusion support. Stangvik (2014) argues that, "Unlike their peers, many students with special needs receive a great part of their education from teacher aides rather than teachers. Teacher aides often lack training to support children educationally" (p. 98). These teachers are not "bad" teachers, but they were inexperienced and untrained in what they were asked to do.

*Persisting Deficit Views*

Ms. Castillo appeared to choose whom she worked with based on either her level of comfort with the subject or on whether or not she felt certain students "deserved" it. Santiago was struggling (and failing) courses and needed extra help, but the staff regarded him to be lazy. They acknowledged his failing grades and chose to only focus enough to help him not fail his senior year. Another student, though, Alejandro also struggled, and the staff was eager to help him. Ms. Castillo admitted that she went out of her way to help Alejandro. On the other hand, I rarely saw her help Santiago in the same manner. She did not sit next to him during class and help him through each step or even help him with his work during Study Skills, even in subjects that she was comfortable with, such as Government or World History. I do not believe Ms. Castillo harbored any ill will towards Santiago, but it seemed that she believed that a student must be perceived good enough to "deserve that help." Despite the small school size, students like Santiago were allowed to fail because they were seen as lazy, and therefore, undeserving of extra help or attention.

If teachers perceived a student to be lazy or not a 'good' student, then s/he would be allowed to fail because failure, in these instances, was a natural consequence of poor

effort. This is especially true for students with disabilities because "once in special education, the processes will stress, explicitly or implicitly, the negative aspects bound up with handicap or needs – the *in*capacity, the *in*ability, or *dis*ability" (Tomlinson, 1982, p. 121). Students with IEPs are almost exclusively described by their deficits and inabilities, so low academic achievement is expected; success is a delightful surprise. I never got the feeling that anyone actually expected Santiago or any of the other 'lazy' students to succeed. Similarly, no one seemed to be surprised or upset about them failing their courses.

When the school staff perpetuates this myth of bad, lazy students and families as a contributing factor in low academic achievement, it doesn't matter how small the school is or how well the staff gets to know students. This deficit thinking is dangerous, too, because it reveals unacknowledged classism (Gorski, 2005) as well as ableism (Apple, 2001a). Liasidou (2012) argues that

> the gaze is squarely placed on students' presumed 'deficits' and common practice is to silence the ways in which disability is, to a significant extent, an ideologically and socially mediated phenomenon that emanates from and rests upon wider sociopolitical and cultural contextual factors. (p. 171)

Presumed deficits were either attributed to the student's disability as a biological truth, rather than a socially constructed one, or alternately, a deficit in the student's personality or temperament. Similar to the debunked culture of poverty theory, which paints poor students as lazy and morally deficient (Gorski, 2005), students in this study were seen as poor students whose families didn't care about their education. These students were

expected to "overcome" and those who were unable to do so failed. Moreover, when these students did fail, they were perceived as not trying hard enough. The narrative of overcoming is popular when speaking about both poor students of color and disabled students. Poor, disabled students are expected to overcome both their poverty and their academic problems related to their disability. They are expected to be successful in a school system that is primarily built to serve the needs of students who fit within 'normal' development parameters. Rather than complain about the special education program at Colina Cedro, these students were expected to work extra hard to succeed. Their failure in these classes meant the students were not trying hard enough. A strong work ethic is undoubtedly important to student success, but it is ignores the fact that systemic inequalities cause some students to start out much farther behind than others.

While celebrating hard work is no doubt warranted, it is short-sighted to pretend that sheer hard work erases all inequalities and that it is the only factor in a student's success. In fact, poverty remains one of the most important factors in predicting student outcomes. Knopp (2012) writes, "…according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in the United States, about half of one's income as an adult can be predicted by one's parents' income. Half may not seem like a lot, but it does mean that parent's income is the *largest* factor in predicting one's economic success" (p. 11). While many students are able to fulfill this narrative and "overcome," they are the exceptions. Knopp goes on to explain,

> of people who are born in the poorest quintile (the two in ten families with the least income) 6 percent 'make it' to the top quintile (the richest two in ten).

> Another 11 percent of those born poorest make it to the top 40 percent of the population in terms of income. (p. 11)

Knopp's analysis matches that of one in the *Salon* in 2013. The article cited Stanford researcher Sean Reardon's 2011 study, which documented the "income achievement gap" and found that "a family's economic situation is a bigger determinative force in a child's academic performance than any other major demographic force" (paragraph 10). The narrative shouldn't be about a few successful students who were able to overcome, but rather about equalizing the playing field so that *all* students have a chance to succeed. Narratives about overcoming conveniently place the responsibility of the individual, rather than questioning serious issues such as growing income inequality.

While all the teachers at Colina Cedro were well-intentioned, Tomlinson (1982) argues that the goodwill and benevolence that guide special education are patronizing and paternalistic. Students with disabilities should be regarded as capable. Tomlinson (1982) notes that the humanitarianism and apparent goodwill that spurred the creation of special education in the first place can actually be detrimental. She writes, "But humanitarianism can itself become an ideology, legitimating principles of social control within a society" (p. 7). This same humanitarianism, in the early 1900s, led to the sterilization or euthanizing of people with disabilities, as well as to their segregation. Goodwill disguised as pity means that it is not goodwill at all, since it assumes someone is less than, rather than equal. Additionally, by viewing students with disabilities through the medical model where differences are seen as deficits, the staff placed the blame on the individual, rather than the barriers in the system. Tomlinson (2000) writes that

> it is easier to study the characteristics of those caught up in cycles of disadvantage (Joseph, 1972), cultures of poverty (Lewis, 1968), and underclass conditions (Murray, 1984), than to try to explain the macro-economic conditions that create poverty, political failure over redistributive social justice or the strategies by which more fortunate groups attempt to ensure their 'inclusion', and connive in exclusionary practices. (p. 240)

Focusing on individual deficits makes it easier to ignore larger issues; it also means rehabilitation will be focused on the individual, rather than society. Individual success stories are no doubt valuable; however, as Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) note, "These efforts have produced some individual success stories, sometimes improvement across an entire school, but none of these reforms has produced systemic change in urban schools" (p. 1). Small schools, as one of many different reform efforts, may indeed produce successful outcomes for some students, but it has not been able to significantly change the landscape of urban schools because it has not addressed larger issues, such as deficit thinking that stereotypes poor students of color as lazy or bad; or special education's prevailing attitude that teachers need to "fix" disabled students and help them "overcome" their disabilities. Valle, Connor, Broderick, Bejoian, and Baglieri (2011) argue for the need to "disrupt the dominant neoliberal narrative that maintains that all 'problems' are essentially private and individual, rather than public and social or cultural, in nature" (p. 2297).

With the increased neoliberal ideology in schools, the shift of responsibility onto the individual instead of onto the state grows even more (Grimaldi, 2012; Liasidou, 2012). Apple (2007) calls it "exporting the blame" (p. 179). Tomlinson (2013) argues,

"Currently it has become part of a more intense ideology that all young people should become economically productive in some way, and not reliant on unemployment or welfare benefits" (p. 125). Special education students have long been seen as a drain on resources and teachers' time that could be used for "good" or "more deserving" students, and the current neoliberal environment exacerbates this ideology as schools are pressured into the competitive education marketplace. In this environment, students who require special education services are seen as dependent on (expensive) social services. With this prevailing attitude towards students with disabilities, it does not matter if schools are small and have good relationships with the students or not.

*Limited Options for Students*

Rather than producing better student outcomes, the small size of the school seemed to be a hindrance at Colina Cedro. The small size of the school led to a lack of several key components of most schools: sports, extracurricular activities, a cafeteria, a media center / library, a computer lab, and most relevant to this study: special education services for students with moderate or severe disabilities. Sports and extracurricular activities serve as an important part of socialization for high school students. Moreover, they allow students to develop leadership skills, to explore a variety of activities, and to engage with other students with similar interests. Participation in local chapters of certain clubs also allows for participation in district-, city-, state-, or nation-wide events. The extracurricular activities can provide opportunities for leadership and volunteer work that make students competitive for college admissions. Some students at Colina Cedro may very well have had the grade point average to qualify for prestigious clubs such as National Honor Society, but they could not join (and list it on their résumé) simply

because a chapter at their school did not exist. In an increasingly competitive post-secondary environment, students from Colina Cedro who applied to college were already at a disadvantage since they were unable to list membership or participation in sports, unless it was one of the few activities available: Boy's Soccer, Gardening Club or Senior Cabinet. Furthermore, Colina Cedro's charter stated that it hopes to prepare students for work in STEM areas, but it severely lacked technology or science lab equipment in order to actually prepare students for work or further study in these areas.

While Colina Cedro boasted an impressive percentage of special education students (20%) compared to most other charter schools (10%), I found evidence that the small school size was used as an excuse to counsel out students with disabilities. The literature (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Estes 2001, 2004, 2009; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007) suggests that most charter schools tend to under-enroll disabled students, but this school has almost twice the number of special education students as other charters, enrolling the roughly same number, if not more, than traditional public schools. In other ways, though, Colina Cedro closely followed data regarding special education students and enrollment. Researchers have found evidence of charters counseling out disabled students (Estes, 2000, 2003; Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; Grant, 2005; Lipman, 2011). This appeared to be the case at Colina Cedro, as well, using the school's size as an excuse for why more specialized services were not available for students with more severe disabilities. Almost all of the students with IEPs at Colina Cedro had Specific Learning Disabiity (SLD) listed as their primary disability, and no one had Intellectual Disability, Autism, or physical disability. This aligns with previous research (Guarino & Chau, 2003; Henig, Moser, Holyoke, & Lacireno-Paquet, 1999;

McKinney, 1996) that shows an under-enrollment of students with moderate or severe disabilities at charter schools, except those schools that are specifically for those students. Both the principal and special education teacher stated that while they would never turn anyone away, they let parents of special education students know that, as a small school, they may not be able to provide all specialized services such as occupational or physical therapy or a one-on-one aide. Knowing they are legally bound to provide these services to students, the small school size became a seemingly reasonable justification to parents who may not be aware of their student's legal rights regarding special education. By not enrolling students who required more specialized (and potentially more expensive) services, the school may have turned away a portion of their stated desired student population: students who would benefit from a small school setting.

Even though Colina Cedro may have counseled out students with more severe disabilities, they still enrolled a higher than average number of disabled students. It seemed they were enrolling these students as a necessity, not because they had a stellar special education program that attracted students with disabilities. Some students who enrolled at Colina Cedro mid-year were students who were expelled from the neighborhood schools and needed another school; these students often had IEPs for mild disabilities. Disabled students of color are disproportionately suspended or expelled (Altman, 2005; Smith & Routel, 2010) and when they are expelled, they must find another school or not graduate. Colina Cedro was constantly advertising enrollment, and although the school charter stated using a lottery system in the event that applications exceeded school capacity, it was never used since they have never had too many applications. It seemed that they enrolled most students who applied as a necessity to

keep a large enough student population. Obviously, that is a credit to the school that they accepted other students who had been kicked out of other schools, but since they enrolled these students without the proper infrastructure to support them, it served just as another place to warehouse students until graduation.

Placing so much weight and expectation on simply the size of the school becomes problematic because it assumes that "bad" teachers and students are the major issues facing large schools: the teachers are ineffective, lazy, or indifferent; the students are likewise apathetic students who don't care about their education. This common myth of why large urban schools are failing place all the blame on individuals, keeping the focus on them, rather than fixing the underlying issues in a system that maintains hegemony for the elite. The problem is with the system that overburdens inexperienced teachers and forces them to teach in less than ideal situations because of cost-cutting measures.

*Neoliberal Contexts as a Threat to Inclusive Education*

Inclusive education for students with disabilities has become the standard for which many schools aim. In fact, Slee (2013) writes, "In an astonishingly short period of time, inclusive education has firmly planted itself in education and public discourse" (p. 896). While in many ways, this is encouraging, Slee (2013) warns that we should be cautious, arguing that, "in spite of all of this measurable activity, financial expenditure and optimistic talk exclusion remains a real and present danger" (p. 896). Reasons for schools that are unable to successfully implement inclusive education are varied, such as regular education teachers' belief that they lack the knowledge or expertise to educate "abnormal" children (Slee, 2013), and attitudes and stereotypes about disabilities

(Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). These may all be a part of the problem; however, given that "neoliberalism encourages patterns of consumption, competition and a logic of individualism rather than collaboration or collegiality" (Hardy, 2012, p. 810), I argue that since inclusive schooling and market-reforms are virtually incompatible, the pervasive neoliberal environment presents the biggest hurdle to successful inclusive education. In fact, Howe and Welner (2002) state, "market-driven school-choice policies can continue to expand only at the expense of inclusion" (p. 216). A successful inclusive environment requires a great deal of collaboration, not competition and cost-cutting. Therefore, the push-in model at Colina Cedro could never succeed despite the staff's best intentions and no matter how hard they worked.

Colina Cedro attempted to have a successful inclusion program while operating within a neoliberal environment. The program valued efficiency and cost-cutting solutions, while claiming to do whatever necessary to support the needs of all its students. I do not doubt that the teachers were willing to do whatever it takes, but the reality is, they were constrained by the neoliberal principles that governed the running of the school. For example, Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo were spread impossibly thin because of the set up of the special education program. They were essentially expected to run *both* a push-in and pull-out program simultaneously, while also supervising three resource room classes (Study Skills) per day, as well as all of the administrative tasks. As a result, they were forced to schedule students according to what would be most efficient, so that they could see the most students, rather than scheduling according to the students' needs. For efficiency's sake, some students who needed help simply could not be seen and were just left out. The school chose to neither pay Ms. Castillo full-time, nor

hire another person meaning that some students with IEPs were just not seen. Moreover, Ms. Rutherford appeared to be preoccupied with her students passing. As a charter, Colina Cedro faced pressure to remain open and to score comparably on standardized tests and overall student achievement as neighborhood public schools. She was faced with making sure her students passed at any cost, even though she didn't even have time to see some of them.

Proponents of inclusion cannot simply point to the social good of including students with disabilities or the benefits for both abled and disabled students. Of course inclusion is a social good; no one at Colina Cedro suggested that we ought to segregate and ostracize disabled students. But for Ms. Rutherford, the struggle seemed to be balancing the theory that it is good for students and actually implementing the full inclusion of her students. Therefore, it is equally important to understand (and to disrupt) the positioning of disabled students as drains on resources or as lazy students trying to beat the system in a wider landscape of neoliberalism and market-based school reforms where efficiency and competition are valued. The stigma of being a drain on resources, as well as teachers' time, must be address in order for disabled students to be fully included because that continues to be a point of contention in a neoliberal environment where schools are competing for resources and struggling with ever-dwindling budgets.

At Colina Cedro, students who needed specialized services such as physical or occupational therapy were encouraged to enroll in another larger program elsewhere, while the school accepted students with mild disabilities who could theoretically be included in the general education classroom with little to no assistance and no added costs. In reality, though, a truly inclusive program requires much more than just pushing

students into the general education classroom. It requires the resources necessary to actually support, accommodate and ensure that all students can access the curriculum with success.

The theory of inclusion, celebrating students' differences and including all students in order to create a richer, more vibrant classroom culture, fights against the current neoliberal environment in schools where students are seen as commodities and are valued for what they *can* do and the value they bring. Yet students with disabilities are constantly evaluated for what they *cannot* do, and they cannot come out of this space, lest they lose their eligibility for special education services. Students' characteristics and abilities are weighted and sorted with varying values, often with those who are seen to cost the most or require the most work at the bottom. Consequently, these students' segregation and exclusion from the regular classroom and subsequent below-grade level performance is justified. Giroux (2012) argues that the neoliberal system relies on constructing consent that makes inequalities seem like common sense, the only way, maybe even necessary. Low achievement both during school and after graduation become naturalized and nothing to be questioned, especially for a student with an IEP. Ms. Rutherford did not seem to be too bothered by Santiago's or Esmeralda's (the student who slept in class and Ms. Rutherford told me I didn't need to try as hard with her) failures. She accepted it as the natural consequence for students who came out of that neighborhood and didn't see the point in putting in extra effort because, as she said, "There's nothing you can do." This attitude may be seen as "collective indifference" as Slee (2011) calls it; or perhaps "inequality by design" as Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) call it. Regardless, failure in school, exclusion, and subsequent low-wage work or

unemployment and poverty become expected. In addition to being expected, they also become neutral and natural as a result of individual choice or inadequacies (Apple, 2001a, 2001b, 2005; Bowles & Gintis, 2007; Soldatic, 2011). Inclusive education cannot thrive in such an environment.

All high school students in special education have transition goals written into their IEPs, intended to help them to transition from high school to post-graduation life. Santiago, Royce, and Isabel were no different; their IEPs all stated that they would complete Career Interest Inventories and would learn skills such as how to write a résumé. In fact, Santiago told me that he felt prepared for "the real world" because he made a résumé once. While these goals are well intentioned and can provide valuable skills, these skills alone are not enough to help students succeed in the current economic climate. This is another case of good intentions that fall short when inclusive education is seen to happen in a vacuum, completely apolitical. But Knopp (2012) reminds us that

> the economy these students are graduating into will only grant a minority of workers comfortable, middle-class status. From 2007-09, the real rate of unemployment in the United States (which adds to the government's official statistics people who have given up looking for work) was 17 percent, and among Blacks and Latinos, it was above 25%. (p. 11)

Tomlinson (2013) also argues that in the global knowledge economy, "education even to high levels is no longer a guarantee of secure employment" (p. 5). This is not to say that these students' lives are pre-determined and that they will definitely be unemployed, but simply having them fill out Career Interest Inventories is not enough. Students will also

benefit from legislation and action that addresses serious wealth inequality. Focusing on job creation, and not just job training, will benefit poor, disabled students the most. As Tomlinson (2013) argues, "If jobs are not available, government policies to place people in work are pointless, and governments would do better to interfere and support local and regional labour markets directly than blame individuals for their lack of skills or motivation" (p. 21).

The problems with the special education department at Colina Cedro were two-fold: the push-in model and the pull-out component – Study Skills. Not uncommonly, when inclusion doesn't work, schools are quick to fall back on the familiar pull-out system. Although Colina Cedro professed to have a push-in model where students were included in the general education classrooms, some students also spent time in the special education classroom. Both areas were problematic, as Ms. Rutherford did not co-teach in the general education classroom and was not able to have a presence in all the general education classes; the Study Skills portion was in many ways wasted time because there was no curriculum or lesson plans. Despite how hard Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo worked, the special education program had some inherent problems that are bigger than the two of them. In Tomlinson's 1982 work *A Sociology of Special Education,* she reminds us that the entire premise of special education is problematic. She 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. (Tomlinson, 1982, p. 27)

According to Tomlinson, the development of special education is rooted in particular interests, to the detriment of others. Special education at Colina Cedro, then, no matter the good intentions of the staff, by definition, cannot produce positive results for its students. Despite the named intention of special education to help students with disabilities, Tomlinson argues that special education exists to exert control over students who are determined to be different, deficient, and lacking. Special education is used to remove certain students from the general education population, not for their own benefit, but as a way of further marginalizing them. Removing them as serious effects on their post-graduation life:

> the terminology used as a legitimation for the exclusion of more and more children from the normal education system and for placing them in a type of education which does not allow them to compete for educational credentials, and subjects them to even more social control than in normal schooling, is that of special needs. (Tomlinson, 1982, p. 72)

At Colina Cedro, those students who were seen as more significantly impaired were required to attend Study Skills for one period a day. They were not technically removed from the general education curriculum and attended this course as a supplement, but inevitably missed other coursework in order to make room in their schedule for Study Skills each semester. Isabel reported replacing a Computers course with Study Skills; another student was not required to make up the first semester of Geometry. These classes are important if these students intend to leave high school and be able to be competitive when applying to college or jobs. As Tomlinson (2000) says, "…despite

assertions of inclusion, higher standards and life-long learning, young people are not being educated to be equal citizens or even members of the same economy" (p. 245).

Removing them from the general education population would be problematic even if the Study Skills class was structured, well-planned and offered exceptional supplemental instruction to the special education students. But, Colina Cedro cannot even boast that they took the students out for a good purpose. Study Skills was, according to Ms. Castillo and my own observations, a huge waste of time for the students. They repeated assignments, took naps, played on their phones, and generally did whatever they pleased. There was no curriculum to help supplement their math or reading skills, which would theoretically help them in their general education coursework. Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo helped students complete assignments when they brought them, but quite often, students did not bring in their own work and there was nothing for them to do.

Rather than anything beneficial, these students were more or less warehoused in this separate environment. Erevelles (2011) employs the term "Third World" to describe places not bound by political or national boundaries, but rather "in a much more expansive way to expose how the social, political, and economic conditions of global capitalism produces spaces of extreme exploitation and oppression in both imperialist states and their former colonies" (p. 122). Erevelles argues that Third World citizens may be found in geographic spaces such ghettos, barrios, and reservations, but also in "prison-like complexes such as special classrooms, sheltered workshops, nursing homes, and state institutions" (p. 122). Smith & Routel (2010) describe these spaces as "ghettos of disability." The lack of resources in the special education classroom definitely hurt the

students, and such a lack would not be tolerated in more affluent areas. Since there was no real curriculum for Study Skills and the students were not really asked to do anything at all, it is difficult to find a good rationale for asking these students to attend at all. In this light, it is not difficult to see that these students are a marginalized subset of an already marginalized student population, and there are serious consequences. These students become what Tomlinson (2013) calls low attainers. She states that, "In all developed countries, it is the lower attainers and the 'special' who make up the majority of students on lower-level vocational courses in schools and colleges, and they are more likely to be from lower social classes and minority groups" (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 3).

Slee (2011) also contends that the relationship inclusion and exclusion is not so simple. He rightly argues that, "inclusive education commences with the recognition of the unequal social relations that produce exclusion" (p. 39). At Colina Cedro, the understanding of inclusive education was not this nuanced; the understanding was simply that inclusive education is a social good. However, there must be an understanding of the social relations that place some students at a disadvantage (and thus, singled out for exclusion) in the first place. The hegemony of so-called "normal" markers of development and of ablebodiedness creates an environment that makes it okay to exclude those who do not meet this standard. At Colina Cedro, they claimed to include all students through their push-in model, but that clearly wasn't the case for every student. These students were pushed out, supposedly for their own good, but in actuality, it can be incredibly detrimental. Slee (2013) contends that much of what schools have called inclusive actually have exclusive effects. He writes, "We see children at the back of the classroom protected by and taught by adult assistants. Their engagement with the class is

conditional and tenuous" (p. 905). This matches with what I observed at Colina Cedro – inclusion in the regular classroom was either Ms. Castillo sitting right next to special education students or a lack of any presence from Ms. Castillo or Ms. Rutherford. The staff did not implement appropriate co-teaching or accommodations or modifications that would help students to access the curriculum more successfully. And some special education students, arguably those who need the most help, were discarded in the special education classroom, wasting their time and waiting for graduation.

Inclusion is important in creating more equitable classrooms for all students, and is considered to be liberating and empowering (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). Its goals coincide with the objectives in the global knowledge economy: students are to become self-reliant, productive, and self-sufficient. These are certainly noble and worthwhile ends; however, this overlap can be troublesome. Dowse (2009) argues that "empowerment" has become "a problematic and paradoxical concept in the way it is currently applied to people with intellectual disabilities" (p. 577). She continues,

> the exercise of empowerment in the pursuit of autonomy and self-determination has paradoxically coalesced and merged with its application to the neo-liberal drive for rationality and competence. What has emerged is a shift from the notion of an emancipated self sought by political and cultural movements to the virtuous, disciplined and responsible autonomy of the neo-liberal citizenry…the idea of empowerment as it is currently applied is itself a power relation – inspired by the market and by the promise of self-government and autonomy. (p. 578)

The merging of two oppositional ideologies definitely requires scrutiny because while autonomy is a wonderful, socially just outcome, in the neoliberal environment, it becomes a little more complicated. Neoliberal theory does not push for autonomy and self-reliance because of a desire for social justice, but because it regards those who are not self-reliant as lazy, immoral and leeches on the system. Students, and later workers, are in the predicament of proving they are disabled enough to receive services or benefits, yet not so disabled that they cannot be autonomous and self-sufficient because that would mean they are simply "lazy." Soldatic (2011) claims people with disabilities are framed as "morally fraudulent" (p. 409), seeking benefits they do not deserve. Thus, inclusion in the neoliberal environment needs to be examined carefully so as to not reify existing stereotypes of disabled people while under the guise of empowerment.

Applying the theory that education is a stratifying mechanism and applying it to the institution of special education as well, Tomlinson (1982) argues that special education is not benign or benevolent at all, regardless of whether the students were integrated or segregated. In fact, Tomlinson (2000) argues,

> A majority of them will already, through their previous school career – whether in a segregated in integrated setting – have acquired labels associated with non-competence and, possibly, an identity low in feelings of self-worth. They are likely to suffer more acutely from messages that it is their own responsibility, if they fail to acquire the competences necessary to find and keep a job. (p. 246)

Placing the students in special education creates a space for them to have low expectations for themselves and to fulfill these low expectations. Isabel stated that she

liked special education because she could do less and because passing Study Skills essentially only required her to show up. Ms. Nowak also shared that when the special education students were grouped together in a course like Algebra Extended, she felt that their behavior and expectations for themselves were lowered. They have been told multiple times throughout their school career, that they are not competent and there is a justification for their low achievement. This creates a set of students who will ultimately fill low-level jobs. Tomlinson (2013) writes, "there is general agreement that (following Moxley and Finch 2003) minority LD students are being prepared for the five Fs – low-paid, low-wage and often undesirable jobs" (p. 78). The five Fs are:

1. Food – fast food outlets, cafes, restaurant workers
2. Filth – cleaning in streets, hotels, offices
3. Folding – laundry work
4. Fetching – messenger work
5. Filing – low-level office work (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 78).

Thus, despite ambitious transition plans in IEPs, poor, disabled students of color are still largely left out of the global knowledge economy and, thus, unable to secure jobs that will keep them out of poverty. Russom (2012) writes that neoliberalism in schools has meant the "intensification of the 'sorting machine' at school. This process – of separating out a small layer of youth who can move into white-collar, 'knowledge economy' jobs from the rest of the students" (p. 113). Schools have long been a tool to sort and stratify students, special education included, and neoliberal ideologies in public education have intensified this. This was evident at Colina Cedro, where students were not, despite the school's charter, prepared to enter the specialized workforce in the areas

of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. They instead were prepared for low-level jobs that will perpetuate their poverty.

We have seen the ways in which special education programs, even progressive inclusion programs, acts as a sorting machine, stratifying students, but it is equally important to question who, then, is benefitting from it? Apple (2001b) writes about "creating profits by creating failures." As more and more students and schools are classified as failures, more and more curricula and specialized programs are created and sold. White (2014) writes that, "There is an emphasis on *topping up* individuals perceived to have a deficit by being seen to give them extra, signified by the following: 'education boost' and 'intensive education'"(p. 248). These programs are not just for students; teachers are encouraged to purchase "education Do-It-Yourself manuals" with titles such as "*Getting the buggers to behave* and *Getting the buggers to learn*" as Slee (2013) so cleverly writes (p. 896). He argues that such books are "profitable for their authors and publishing houses" and that "the cumulative effect of these books is not educational" (Slee, 2013, p. 896). In 1982, Tomlinson argued that "medical, psychological, educational and other personnel" benefitted by "encouraging new areas of professional expertise" (p. 29) and this is still true today, as we see the rise of programs such as ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) for people on the Autism spectrum. Sothern (2007) calls it the "disability market."

The privatization of public education as a whole also benefits interested parties tremendously. In *Harper's Magazine*, Kozol (2007) wrote about receiving a stock market prospectus from a friend on Wall Street. The prospectus claimed that, "the education industry represents…the final frontier of a number of sectors once under public

control" and "the K – 12 market is the Big Enchilada" (p. 2). Interest is so high that investors host conferences such as the 2013 conference titled "Private Equity Investing in For-Profit Education Companies." An ad for the conference stated, "The entire education sector now represents nearly 9 percent of the U.S. GDP."

*The Need for a More Intersectional Analysis in Special Education & Neoliberalism*

While Disability Studies in Education (DSE) scholars have long pointed to the problematic and dehumanizing nature of special education (Brantlinger, 2006; Gabel, 2005), critical pedagogy has not yet fully explored disability as a marginalizing category (Erevelles, 2000, 2011; Gabel, 2002; Goodley, 2007; Liasidou, 2012). Important works in critical pedagogy do not address disability or special education at all (Giroux, 2012; McLaren, 2007) as if special education is not a part of public schools. Erevelles (2011) also argues, "While social class does show up in disability studies narratives, it is usually conceived of as a social / cultural experience (Davis, 2002), and not as a critical analytical category" (p. 5). This is not to say that research in this area does not exist, but it is more limited and there is room for more exploration. Much of the research that I found regarding disability and issues of class in the neoliberal environment focused on post-secondary spheres, such as work, unemployment, disability benefits, and home health care issues (Goodley & Lawthorn, 2011; Hall, 2011; Hall & McGarrol, 2013; Harris, Owen, & Gould, 2012; Soldatic, 2011; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012; Vandekinderen, Roets, Vandenbroeck, Vanderplasschen, & Van Hove, 2012). These researchers informed my analysis of disability and neoliberalism, but not did not speak directly to neoliberalism and disabled students. This area of work is much smaller. Stangvik (2014) writes, "There is an expanding debate on the impact of liberal economic

theory on general education. However, consequences for special education have been much less explored" (p. 92).

It is imperative to explore the relationship between special education / inclusive education and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is pervasive and governs the landscape of today's schools, as evidenced by the privatization of public schools. Special education does not exist as a separate entity, and is therefore not outside of the reach of the effects of neoliberal ideology. Since poverty is now one of the most important factors in students' success (Knopp, 2012), it is definitely an important part of the discussion of special education students. Studies pointing to the relationship between poverty and disability (Erevelles, 2011; Grech, 2011, Sothern, 2007) need to be not only an analysis of unemployment and barriers to the workplace, but also integrated into discussions of inclusion / exclusion and barriers to education. Discussion regarding various barriers to inclusion needs to include more than teacher attitudes or school infrastructure. Hardy & Woodcock (2015) argue that, "For this work [inclusion] to be successful, greater attention needs to be paid to relevant educational policies within and across different national and sub-national jurisdictions" (p. 141 – 142).

*Conclusion*

A variety of market-based school reform efforts attempt to address overwhelming urban public schools' so-called failures. Charter schools and the Small Schools Movement represent some of the most popular efforts. Small schools that emphasize its small size and good relationships with their students, such as Colina Cedro, have been unable to overcome systemic inequalities and produce similar results as traditional public

schools. The small school size does nothing to combat outside economic factors, and in some cases can be a detriment in terms of providing proper resources for students. 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. 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.

# CHAPTER VI

## IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### *Introduction*

This case study examined a small charter school and asked: (1) How are neoliberal education reforms shaping the experiences of special education students; and (2) What is the classroom environment and school culture for special education students at Colina Cedro Charter High School? The data highlighted the threat of neoliberalism to inclusive education, as well as need for more intersectional analysis of disability, neoliberalism and inclusive education. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of neoliberalism and suggest future directions.

### *Implications*

A worrisome situation is becoming normalized in which non-education philanthropists such as the Gates Foundation are becoming decision makers with regards to public policy in the arena of education. Thus, private corporations now have direct policy implications evident in the U.S. Department's Race to the Top and the promotion of charter schools, blurring former boundaries between the private and public spheres.

Giroux (2004) has called neoliberalism "one of the most dangerous ideologies of the 21st century" (p. ix). It guides both Republican and Democratic policies, and its influence continues to grow. Giroux (2004) argues that neoliberalism "expands its reach to include all aspects of social life within the dictates and values of a market-driven society" (p. xxii). Market values trump democratic ones, and as a result, "a handful of private interests control as much of social life as possible in order to maximize their personal profit" (Giroux, 2004, p. xvi). From the increased pollution of the environment for the benefit of large corporations, to gutting public services for the most vulnerable in our society; from tax breaks for the wealthiest 1% of Americans, to the creation of the military-prison-education-industrial complex, citizens cannot escape the very detrimental, and very real, consequences of neoliberalism. Race, class, gender, and ability-based inequalities continue to grow.

The influence and scope of neoliberal policies continues to spread, from neoliberal global policies that increase Western countries' resources and wealth at the expense of Third World countries, to the thousands of public schools, large and small, in the United States. U.S. public schools remain one of the last public spheres, and they have recently begun to feel the pressures of privatization and the influence of wealthy philanthropists and large corporations. These interested parties capitalize on the fear that public schools are now supposedly failing and in crisis in order to justify opening public schools to their influence and to market forces. The so-called invisible and neutral hand of the market is now allowed to dictate the needs of students across the United States. School "reformers," such as those involved in the promotion of charter schools and Teach for America, promote the inclusion of neoliberal policies in public schools through the

push to privatize public schools and the vilification of "bad" public school teachers and "lazy" students and families in poor, urban areas.

Giroux (2004) argues that, "under neoliberalism, the states now makes a grim alignment with corporate power, transnational corporations, and the forces of militarization" (p. 45). Charter schools are promoted by some of the largest and wealthiest corporations such The Gates Foundation and The Walton Family Foundation. Together, they have poured hundreds of millions of dollars in the promotion and creation of charter schools. Hedge funds and other Wall Street players also joined in the charter school movement. Rather than purely benevolent and charitable motives, closer inspection shows that other motives exist. On May 20, 2014, Alan Singer of Hofstra University published "Why Hedge Funds Love Charter Schools" at the *Huffington Post*. In an attempt to answer a commenter's challenge on a previous article to provide evidence that corporations benefit from charter schools, Singer explains that many hedge funds benefited from the 2001 Consolidated Appropriations Act, which included provisions from the Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000. This law provided "tax incentives for seven years to businesses that locate and hire residents in economically depressed urban and rural areas" (paragraph 1). Tax credits have been reauthorized multiple times. Singer writes that as a result of these tax credits, "banks and equity funds that invest in charter schools in underserved areas can take advantage of a very generous tax credit" (paragraph 2). He also argues that investors can sometimes double their investment in seven years. This tax credit can be added to other tax breaks, such as the New Market Tax Credit as reported by Juan Gonzalez in May 2010 at the *New York Daily News*. Gonzalez reported that, "wealthy investors and major banks have

been making windfall profits using a little-known federal tax break to finance new charter school construction" (paragraph 1). The New Market Tax Credit allows "a bank or private equity firm that lends money to a nonprofit to build a charter school can receive a 39% federal tax credit over seven years" (paragraph 18). Gonzalez also reported that the same week as his article was published, JP Morgan announced "creating a new $325 million pool to invest in charter schools" (paragraph 21). Some of the wealthiest people have continued to invest money, including Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg who in 2012 donated half a million dollars worth of stock to organizations that distribute funding to charter schools. He also started his own foundation to build new charter schools – Startup: Education. A significant amount of money has also been given in the form of political contributions aimed at creating legislation that would make states a more friendly environment for charter schools. For example, on March 11, 2015, Juan Gonzalez of the *New York Daily News* reported that in New York, "since 2000, 570 hedge fund managers have shelled out nearly $40 million in political contributions" (paragraph 6). At the *New York Times* back in 2010, Trip Gabriel and Jennifer Medina also reported on hedge funds' political contributions that resulted in raising the cap on the number of charter schools in New York.

All of this money has been largely unregulated, and as a result, mismanaged. In April 2015, the Center for Popular Democracy released a report citing "millions of dollars of new alleged and confirmed financial fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement in charter schools…bringing the new total to over $200 million" (p. 3) since their previous report released in April 2014. The report divides the fraud and mismanagement into six categories:

1. Charter operators using public funds illegally for personal gain;
2. School revenue used to illegally support other charter operator businesses;
3. Mismanagement that puts children in actual or potential danger;
4. Charters illegally requesting public dollars for services not provided;
5. Charter operators illegally inflating enrollment to boost revenues; and
6. Charter operators mismanaging public funds and schools. (p. 11)

Alarmingly, the report also warns that "about 90 percent of an iceberg is underwater" (p.7), suggesting that most of the fraud has yet to even be uncovered. Despite these reports, the federal government continues to grant millions of dollars to the charter school industry; U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan granted the latest injection of money ($249 million) before he stepped down from his position in October 2015.

A lack of oversight of local charter schools has also proven to be dangerous. Since Colina Cedro acted as its own independent LEA, it assumed all responsibility for all students, including being able to provide the continuum of services to students with IEPs. This is impossible for a school of Colina Cedro's size, which employed one special education teacher and one assistant. I do not understand how such a small school would be able to demonstrate that it could provide all necessary services to students with IEPs. I did not see the paperwork Colina Cedro filed when it applied to join the Meade County SELPA as its own LEA, but it made me question how schools go about proving they can be independent and autonomous, and which schools are approved or denied.

According to the California Department of Education website,

> in 1977, all school districts and county school offices were mandated to form consortiums in geographical regions of sufficient size and scope to provide for all special education service needs of children residing within the region boundaries. Each region, Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), developed a local plan describing how it would provide special education services.

It seems now that schools are no longer required to maintain a geographic region or to maintain locality at all. A map of the charters who are a part of this SELPA shows that its members are strewn across California, the third largest state in the United States. For the 2013 – 2014 school year, this SELPA counted 192 charters as members. So while this SELPA is definitely of the size and scope to provide the continuum of services, it is difficult to see how resources and services can be shared across such a vast "region." Additionally since it is a charter-only SELPA, even those other LEAs nearby may be in the same situation as Colina Cedro. For a small school such as Colina Cedro, a SELPA, as it was originally conceived, would be a tremendous help in providing the continuum of services, but Dr. James chose to leave the local district SELPA for one on the other side of the state.

Neoliberalism's push for privatization and deregulation has meant that charters are seen in a positive light, even if the data does not support that they produce better results. Staff consistently praised Colina Cedro, while they spoke negatively about local traditional public schools, despite the severe lack of resources, services, and activities for the students their own school. Colina Cedro followed federal and state laws, if perhaps loosely, but as an autonomous body, operated with a large amount of freedom and leniency. Rather than using this freedom to create innovative and creative scheduling or

pedagogy, they created a lax school culture. The school does not even appear to be following any part of its charter, as the school I saw did not resemble the school charter at all – there was no blended learning or innovative scheduling (indeed there weren't not even enough computers for even an attempt at this), no focus on STEM education, and yet its charter has not been revoked.

Despite the large sums of money donated for the promotion of charter schools, actual charter schools do not always benefit from these large donations. For example, while companies are doubling their investments and earning interest on money used to construct charter schools, schools struggle to pay their rent as they lease or purchase building space since their budgets continue to dwindle and sometimes they never reach their projected enrollment, meaning less per-pupil money from the state. Schools, such as Colina Cedro, still struggle with having enough basic resources for their students, despite the millions of dollars spent on political lobbying and investments. Schools and students do not benefit from corporations' philanthropy; corporations do.

At a time when public schools and teachers are judged harshly as ineffective, or even counterproductive, to student learning in order to justify the privatization of public education, small, urban charters 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. This study has documented the dangerous reality of the pervasive nature of neoliberalism in public charter schools on poor, disabled students. Researchers in special education have yet to give proper attention to neoliberalism and how it shapes the experiences of students with disabilities in charter schools. This study aims to contribute to the field by focusing on macro factors, such as neoliberalism, that challenges the promise of inclusion for

students with disabilities. Neoliberalism's attack on public education has been well-documented by researchers; special education is an important part of public education that cannot be ignored.

At Colina Cedro, 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, needy drains on already dwindling budgets. If these stereotypes persist, inclusive education will have a difficult time succeeding. Additionally, Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo seemed unable to manage the large workload, and were forced to either lump students together or not see them at all, for the sake of efficiency. It seemed the administration wanted to simply increase Ms. Castillo's hours, rather than bring another assistant. Ms. Rutherford admitted that this was not much of a solution. Truly inclusive education faces serious obstructions in the neoliberal environment; a serious interrogation of neoliberalism's pernicious effects on inclusive education can hopefully help find ways to begin to disrupt and to push back on this ideology that seems ever more present in schools.

The founders of Colina Cedro tried to create a small school that would provide increased personalized attention to student populations they determined to be the most

needy. However, this case study demonstrated that despite good intentions, small schools may not always produce better student outcomes, despite smaller class sizes and increased attention. Despite repeated claims that the smallness was the best aspect of Colina Cedro, students still fell through the cracks. Royce, already a Super Senior, still did not graduate at the end of the school year. He was required to attend summer school before he could finally finish the required credits. He left a much larger school to attend Colina Cedro because he just wanted to quickly graduate high school and move on. It did not work out for him that way and, in the end, he completed two senior years, and summer school each summer.

On the contrary, small (and still underfunded) schools may actually be a detriment to students because it cannot provide basic resources for students. At Colina Cedro, students didn't have a cafeteria / multipurpose room; they didn't have a library or a computer lab; they didn't have extracurricular activities and sports in which they could participate. Students who required specialized services such as physical or occupational therapy were warned that the school would not be able to provide those services. Small schools may not hold as much promise as proponents claim. In a neoliberal environment that decries large public schools as the problem, reformers are all too eager to close down larger schools in favor of opening smaller charters. It is important to also examine other options that may benefit students more than opening small schools that cannot support their students.

Similarly, charter schools are another component of market-based school reform whose claims cannot live up to reality. Like other charter schools, Colina Cedro performed at about the same rate as area schools. Colina Cedro appeared to me to be

barely keeping afloat: its constant turnover of teachers and assistants, (and, according to the school website, the school also has a new principal for the 2015 – 2016 school year), its low enrollment, and the fact the school will need to find another location and move for the third time in less than ten years. The school started with such promise, but the founders walked away after just three years. Now the school is just operating on its own, not following its own charter and not living up to expectations. It is not a tenable solution to constantly create new schools and close down others. Despite being hailed as the answer for poor students of color, charters can act as another means of stratifying these students and perpetuating their poverty. Small charter schools celebrate educational choice and small teacher-student ratios as the panacea for our most vulnerable students. However, our haste to privatize public education means that inexperienced people can start new schools with little accountability. Marginalized children continue to be marginalized as the school sustains the cycle of reproduction for a stratified society. This study adds to the existing data that charters are just not holding up to their promise (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). It also adds to the small body of research concerning special education, neoliberalism, and charter schools.

Larger charter schools, as well as franchised chains of charters, (e.g.: KIPP, Edison) have the financial backing of wealthy philanthropists and corporate benefactors. Smaller charters, such as Colina Cedro, do not have such financial stability. Just as it is important to examine the relationship between these large charter schools and their corporate connections, it is important to study what happens in these smaller charter schools that do not have such partnerships. These school face serious pressure to remain open. Are these students worse off in these schools than if they had just remained in

traditional public schools? What happens when these schools cannot even provide the basic needs and resources for their students? How are disabled students educated in these schools? These questions need to be explored with more case studies of small "Mom and Pop" charters and their special education programs.

Considering the troubles Colina Cedro has had with the near constant rotation of special education staff, a deeper examination into SELPAs (Special Education Local Planning Areas) that work specifically with charter schools is also in order. Is there any validity to the claim the principal's and the founder's claims that the local city SELPA deliberately sent poor special education teachers who simply did not care and would leave early? Why was the principal ready to abandon the local SELPA in favor for one on the other side of the state? How do SELPAs benefit from charter schools? What is the quality of services provided at charter schools through SELPAs specifically for charters and other SELPAs for traditional public schools? Many questions remain about SELPAs that are no longer local or regional and how they function as a part of the broader neoliberal environment.

*Future Recommendations*

With these questions in mind, future directions include more research that focuses on the intersection of special education, neoliberalism, and inclusion in United States. While I was able to find literature regarding neoliberalism and disability, much of it focused on the workplace. Schools must also be investigated as sites where neoliberal ideology is shaping the experiences of students with disabilities. Furthermore, education researchers need to continue to add disability as socially constructed category to be

examined, especially in regular teacher education, not just specialized foundations courses or disability studies courses. Pervasive neoliberal ideology as a predominant ideology in public schools has serious consequences for both disabled and nondisabled students.

Additionally, much of the literature I found was centered on locations around Europe, Australia, and Canada. We need more work focused specifically on the disability and market-based school reforms here in the United States. Research should include case studies and ethnography so that we will know more than just the levels of enrollment or the academic achievement of students with disabilities in charter schools. Case studies and ethnographies will allow researchers to explore multiple systems at work (neoliberalism, inclusive education, urban schools). Furthermore, the long-term nature of ethnographic work allows researchers to document the lived experience. Understanding the lived experiences of special education students in urban charter schools is essential as charter schools continue to grow in number and influence.

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