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EDITED BY

Brahm Norwich,
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REVIEWED BY

Kevin Cahill,
University College Cork, Ireland
Lauren Stentiford,
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE

Federico R. Waitoller
fwaitoll@uic.edu

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Can research help to deliver the promises of inclusive education? The case of students with disabilities in the education marketplace

Federico R. Waitoller*, Letrice Beasley, TaMia West and
Stacy Randle

Department of Special Education, The University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, United States

In this paper, we engage with the question that frames this special issue: Can research help to deliver the promises of inclusive education? We argue that the answer is not so much a resounding and unquestionable “Yes!” but more of a “yes but...” it depends on what we consider and privilege as research evidence. Using the case of market-driven reforms and their impact on inclusive education for students with disabilities, we question the overemphasis on quantitative research as unbiased rationale for distributing economic and human resources, closing schools, and expanding private/public partnerships to deliver public education. We recommend that policy decision-making account for the history and geography of school districts and the intersectional forms of exclusion experienced by students and families, particularly those who experience interacting forms of oppression at the intersections of disability, race, and class.

KEYWORDS

disability, special education, educational polices, charter school, market-driven education

Introduction

In this paper, we engage with a question that seems to have an easy answer: Can research help to deliver the promises of inclusive education? Any educational researcher in their right mind and in preservation of their own job, will answer with a resounding yes! Though we agree with this quick answer, our enthusiasm is more cautious. We argue that the answer is not so much a resounding and unquestionable “Yes!” but more of a “yes but...” it depends on what we consider and privilege as research evidence.

Using the case of market-driven reforms in the city of Chicago and their impact on inclusive education for students with disabilities, we problematize the overemphasis

on quantitative research to make sweeping policy decisions. Such a form of decision-making has important consequences for inclusive education. We recommend that policy decision-making account for the history and geography of school districts and the intersectional forms of exclusion experienced by students and families, particularly those who experience interacting forms of oppression at the intersections of disability, race, and class.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, we define inclusive education and describe the promises of market-driven education reforms. Then, we challenge the ways research is utilized to implement such reforms. We conclude with recommendations for the use of research evidence to support an inclusive education agenda.

Defining inclusive education

Inclusive education emerged as a cluster of efforts to remediate inequities for minoritized students who were left out from accessing, participating, and benefiting from education. While inclusive education has been interpreted in different forms as it travels through cultural and geographical boundaries (Clough, 2000; Slee, 2005), there are some common features that have characterized it. Moving toward greater inclusivity demands the transformation of exclusionary school policies, practices, and culture; generating a place where all students can have a sense of belonging while learning together and experiencing positive educational outcomes (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, inclusive education efforts around the globe have become a “tale of selective inclusivity” (Waitoller, 2020a), in which students whose differences are “tolerable” are offered “inclusion,” while those who experience intersecting forms of oppression (e.g., compounding racism, classism, ableism, genderism) or cannot conform to the ways “inclusion” is implemented are further marginalized. For instance, in the U.S, even though the overall rate of inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom has increased, students with extensive support needs (e.g., students with severe disabilities) and Black and Latinx students with disabilities are more likely to receive educational services in separate classrooms than students with milder disabilities and White students with disabilities (Grindal et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2019).

In the last decade, Waitoller and Artiles (2013), Waitoller and Kozleski (2013), and Waitoller and Annamma (2017) have fine-tuned a definition of inclusive education that encompasses major social justice principles and addresses intersecting forms of marginalization. Using Fraser’s (2009) three-dimensions of justice and work on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1992; Collins, 2000), we defined inclusive education as an ongoing struggle toward “(a) the redistribution of access to and participation in quality opportunities to learn

(the economic dimension), (b) the recognition and valuing of all Students’ differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools (the cultural dimension), and (c) the creation of more opportunities for non-dominant groups to advance claims of educational exclusion and their respective solutions (the political dimension)” (Waitoller and Artiles, 2013, p. 322). According to this definition, researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and activists need to attend closely to how injustices based on maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation based on one social marker (e.g., disability) interact with those of other social markers (e.g., race, ethnicity, immigration status).

Nevertheless, a core struggle of inclusive education efforts has been translating theory and research to practice and policy implementation. This is important considering that inclusive education efforts are implemented amid other larger policy initiatives. In such crowded policy contexts, inclusive education efforts are sometimes co-opted, backgrounded, or ignored (Waitoller and Thorius, 2015). A prominent group of education policies that have been adopted around the globe and affect inclusive education efforts are the so-called market-driven education policies.

Market-driven education reforms: The promises

Market-driven education reforms are a cluster of educational policies that rely on principles of capitalism to deliver public education services (Scott and Holme, 2016). Market-driven reforms have taken many shapes and forms according to national and cultural contexts where they are designed and enacted (Edwards and Means, 2019), sometimes implemented in pieces and sometimes as a whole package of reforms (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Yet, despite such local interpretations, market-driven educational policies share some common assumptions. One of the primary assumptions of these policies is that parents act as rational, informed, and independent decision-makers who weigh different educational options and select the best school for their child. This hyper-individualization of school choices is supposed to increase the quality of schools and their competitiveness within a consumer-based market. Supporters of market-driven policies assert that, over time, this consumer behavior and competition among schools will increase access to quality schools for those students whom traditional public schools failed. To this end, schools will (1) seek to improve their quality to compete for students, and (2) schools that are of poor quality or have low student enrollment will close; thus, only the best schools will continue in operation (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Manno et al., 1999).

Serving students with disabilities has played a major role in debates about market-driven policies as they aim to deliver some of the most essential promises of inclusive education: access

to quality schools and improved educational outcomes for all students (Ainscow et al., 2006). On the one hand, supporters of market-driven policies have claimed that parental choice and school competition will improve services for students with disabilities as schools strive to innovate and improve to attract students (Lake, 2010). However, on the other hand, scholars and activists have raised concern about market mechanisms that entice schools not to enroll or not to provide services for students with disabilities (Mommanti and Welner, 2018). Therefore, research has been produced and used to argue in favor and against market education policies. In the following sections, we examine and critique such utilization of research.

Research utilization in market-driven education reforms

The production and utilization of quantifiable data have been significant features of market-driven reforms. In the last decade, countries around the globe have invested in the massive production of quantitative measures of school “quality” to make policy decisions (McDermott et al., 2011). Standardized assessments, for instance, have exponentially grown both globally and locally, with Latin-American, Caribbean, and the Asian and Pacific regions experiencing the most considerable growth (Benavot and Köseleci, 2015). School districts and state departments of education utilize such data to evaluate schools. It is assumed that parents consider these quantifiable indicators to act as consumers and decide where to enroll their children.

Research plays an important role in the production and analysis of quantifiable indicators. We use a broad definition of research in this paper. By research, we refer to the various kinds and levels of systematic investigation intended to establish “facts” and draw conclusions for policy decisions. We include in this definition of research (a) descriptive analyses of quantifiable indicators (e.g., test scores, graduation and dropout rates, enrollment demographics) such as those produced by school districts or states to evaluate schools and to make policy decisions about opening new schools and closing others as well as to empower parental choice and (b) systematic inferential analysis used by researchers in universities or other non-governmental organizations to compare the effectiveness of market-driven reforms. As these reforms become widespread, descriptive data and their conclusions are framed as unbiased rationales for shifting resources, closing schools, and expanding Public Private Partnerships (PPPs), such as charter schools, for the delivery of public education. Below we discuss and challenge the use of research on three kinds of policy decisions that: (a) punish schools, (b) evaluate PPPs, and (c) empower parental choice.

We aim not to pit quantitative and qualitative studies against each other or to argue that qualitative studies have no role in policy making. There has been continuing debate

about the usefulness of quantitative and qualitative research in education that is beyond the scope of this paper (see Hammersley, 2013). Instead, we argue that the most sweeping and consequential policy decisions informed by market-driven educational reforms have heavily, if not solely, relied on quantifiable indicators and reports, and that these decisions are made, at least in rhetoric, to achieve better access and educational services for all students. Yet, the idea that there is a neutral and all-purpose research methodology is misleading at best and produces negative consequences at worst (Hammersley, 2013), particularly for those students and families who experience intersecting forms of exclusion based on disability and other forms of social difference (e.g., race, ethnicity, class).

Punishing schools

Following strict accountability measures, school districts in the U.S have continuously examined quantifiable data from schools, including Students’ test scores, dropout rates, graduation rates, and enrollment demographics. Research on such quantifiable indicators has served to determine the fate of schools. Take the case, for instance, of Chicago Public Schools (CPS). CPS is the third largest school district in the U.S, serving over 330,000 students (Chicago Public Schools [CPS], 2021). Students receiving special education services account for 14% of the enrollment, and the students are largely Latinx (46%) and Black (36%; Chicago Public Schools [CPS], 2021). CPS has been a pioneer of market-driven education policies since the mid-1990s, opening more than 120 charter school campuses since then (Lipman, 2011).

Additionally, CPS has punished schools as a policy tool for school improvement. For example, CPS closed more than 100 schools from 2003 to 2014 (Weber et al., 2020). While school closures between 2000 and 2013 were rationalized as weeding out ineffective (i.e., low performing) schools in a competitive school market, the last 50 school closings occurring between 2013 and 2014 were justified by schools’ low enrollment. That is, schools that did not have enough enrollment to justify the utilization of a building were closed. Both kinds of rationales used statistical formulas to determine school effectiveness or building utilization as an unbiased measure to make policy decisions (Weber et al., 2020).

Yet, research representations are not just “innocent bystanders.” They are authored texts, infused with a host of assumptions and perspectives (Lynch, 1990). Thus, the selection of data to be evaluated, the analysis, how it is represented, and more importantly, how it is narrated demands a great deal of agency and authorship. Meaning is “emplotted” (Wertsch, 1998) in the discourse of policy decisions and represents the ideologies and points of view of the researchers and narrators. While researchers, with ties to particular policy ideas and theoretical

commitments, aim to maximize the impact of their research, policymakers search for the “right” kind of research evidence that supports their agenda (Asen et al., 2011; Hammersley, 2013). Quantitative indicators can be used to obscure key information about a school (e.g., history of the school in the neighborhood and family relationships with the school), while only highlighting its poor performance or limited student enrollment, universalizing a particular truth about the school and its community and constructing a policy decision as inevitable and just (e.g., closing the school; see Waitoller and Radinsky, 2017).

Qualitative and historical research provide a more nuanced understanding of the situation and challenge those “unbiased” mathematical formulas utilized to close schools. Ewings’ (2018) ethnographic work, for instance, demonstrates how the rationales and meaning-making process of policy makers are not the same as the rationales and perceptions of communities affected by education policies. When in 2014, CPS hosted community gatherings to discuss the closure of schools, the contrast between the administration and community discourse was striking (Ewing, 2018).

The school district administration presented different graphs, tables, and quantitative rationales to justify the closure of schools. Using a student per classroom formula to justify the under enrollment of a school and the underutilization of a building, they presented their decision as scientific and neutral. However, families did not perceive schools as underperforming or under enrolled. Ewing writes,

Community members are fighting for an acknowledgment of past harms, an honest reckoning of present injustice, and an acceptance of the reality- a reality in which a school’s value is about much more than numbers (p. 124).

To families, schools could not be reduced to a mathematical formula. Families view schools as anchors of community and places in which generations of family members had studied. Schools acted as glue for Black communities; gave breakfast and lunch to students, hosted community events, provided needed services for their children, and served as living memories of their struggles and joys (Ewing, 2019).

Black families affected by school closings knew what was at stake. The school closures had disproportionately affected their neighborhoods (Weber et al., 2020). Eighty percent of students affected by the school closings were Black (Waitoller and Radinsky, 2017). Further, a third of the closed schools had special education programs serving Black students with extensive support needs (i.e., autism, intellectual dis/abilities, multiple dis/abilities, sensory impairments; de la Torre et al., 2015). Such patterns were not a coincidence nor the mere consequence of a mathematical formula. These are neighborhoods in which state-sanctioned policies and private real estate practices established and supported the

segregation of Black communities in the South and West sides of Chicago, a process that dates to the early 1900s when Black families moved from rural areas of the Southern U.S to urban centers in the north. Moreover, these areas of the city have experienced persistent poverty and have been marked by economic disinvestment, including the closing of public schools and the opening of charter schools that contributed to further shrink the enrollment of traditional schools (Lipman, 2011; Waitoller, 2020b). Black families’ testimonies provided a more accurate narrative of school closings that accounted for historical legacies of racism, which were absent in the school district’s rationales based on mathematical formulas.

Thus, though families who experience intersecting forms of exclusion (i.e., race and disability) were particularly affected by the school closures (Waitoller and Super, 2017), their voices were silenced by quantitative rationales. Ball (2012) reminds us, drawing from Foucault, that some groups are positioned as knowledgeable while others are silenced in decision-making processes. Ewing’s (2019) work highlights the importance of amplifying the voices of the communities most affected by policy decisions.

Evaluating public private partnerships

Diversification of school options is crucial for developing a competitive education marketplace. One way this diversification is achieved is with the development of PPPs to deliver public school options (Zancajo et al., 2021). There are different kinds of PPPs around the world, e.g., “academies” or “free schools” in England, “escuelas concertadas” in Spain, and charter schools in the U.S, to name a few. Though there are differences among them, they have a common denominator: they are privately run schools funded by public funds (Zancajo et al., 2021). Since their inception, there has been an ongoing debate about the efficacy of these schools as well as equity issues regarding access for minoritized populations. We focused on two relevant debates regarding inclusive education: (a) the effectiveness of PPPs in comparison to traditional public schools and (b) access for students with disabilities. These debates have relied heavily on quantifiable indicators.

Debating the effectiveness of public private partnerships through quantitative indicators

Claiming that charter schools academically outperform traditional public schools has been the main argument for charter school expansion. In general, charter schools produced larger academic gains than traditional public schools, but these findings depend on the methodology and context of the study and tend to be minimal (Miron, 2010). In the U.S, for instance, some studies concluded that African American students and students from low socioeconomic households benefited most from attending charter schools as

they experienced the sharpest increase in math and reading scores (Shakell and Peterson, 2021). However, researchers could not parse whether the relative steepness of the gains was attributed to differences in student proficiencies or from different schooling and teaching efficacy (Shakell and Peterson, 2021). Other studies indicate that students exiting traditional public schools and enrolling in charter schools require 5 years of continuous enrollment before their academic performance and attendance outpace students enrolled in neighboring public schools (Clarke and Burt, 2019).

The so-called “no-excuses” charter schools had also been controversial regarding academic gains. No-excuses charter schools are based on (a) rigorous academic expectations that rely on standardized assessments as a measure of progress, (b) a college-going culture, and (c) strict and narrow disciplinary codes attached to punitive consequences (Cheng et al., 2017). Research suggests that this charter school model produces academic gains for low-income students from racial minoritized backgrounds (Angrist et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2017). A few studies have also indicated that students with disabilities perform better academically in charter schools than in traditional public schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2015; Setren, 2015). As a result, students with disabilities are more likely to meet critical academic benchmarks that will help improve future life outcomes.

While students with disabilities may demonstrate better performance outcomes in charter schools, qualitative work shows that academic and discipline rigor comes at a high cost for students with disabilities. Waitoller (2020b) demonstrates that the pressure of academic rigor in charter schools tends to come with limited academic support, flexibility, and access to specialized services. Such school practices have severe consequences for students with disabilities that are not limited to parents moving their child to another school. Students with disabilities attending schools in such conditions experience an exacerbation of their mental health and behavioral struggles (Waitoller, 2020b). Waitoller (2020b) documented that some students pull their hair and nails out of anxiety, while others experience depression and rejection to go to school, and in others, aggressive behaviors worsen. In specific circumstances, some students were moved to a therapeutic clinic.

So, how can we make sense of the paradox that some students with disabilities have positive academic outcomes in charter schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2015; Setren, 2015), while others experience severe consequences? Students with disabilities who can succeed in charter schools become the new “tolerable,” while the rest occupy a further marginal position. Mitchell (2015) calls the latter group peripheral embodiments: students who cannot be included because of the narrow normative expectations of what it means to be a student that informs school practices. Interestingly, this selective form of “inclusion” appeals to parents and ignites a sense of hope that better educational

experiences are obtainable for students with disabilities after so many past frustrations with schools. Charter school advertisements boasting achievement slogans such as “100% college acceptance” give parents hope that their children will achieve similar educational success. That is, those who are “included” reify the efficacy of market-driven forms of “inclusion” (Waitoller, 2020b). Yet, students who become peripheral embodiments experience further marginalization and even, in some cases, pay the cost of “inclusion” with their own mental health. Thus, policy decisions supporting charter schools based on narrow quantifiable school outcomes for minoritized students can reify and reinforce practices that have lifelong consequences for students with disabilities struggling with mental and behavioral health.

Access to public private partnerships for students with disabilities

PPPs have been critiqued for enrolling lower proportions of students with disabilities compared to traditional public schools. Such enrollment difference is more prominent for students with more severe dis/abilities (Waitoller et al., 2017) and varies depending on the locale, disability categories, and grade level (Rhim et al., 2015). There has been an ongoing concern that students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools due to pushout practices (Mommandi and Welner, 2018). That is, implicit or explicit practices schools deploy to get rid of students who struggle to learn in charter schools and/or demand specialized and costly services (e.g., speech therapy).

Emerging research utilizing statistical analysis of parents’ school preferences and school applications indicates that the low enrollments of students with disabilities in charter schools are not due to pushout practices. Research (Zimmer and Guarino, 2013; Setren, 2015; Winters, 2015) found that low-performing students exited traditional and charter schools at a similar rate. These studies also indicate that the main reason for the special education enrollment gap between charter and traditional public schools can be attributed to students with disabilities enrolling at much lower rates in charter schools in kindergarten, to neighborhood schools identifying students with disabilities at higher rates than charter schools, and to charter schools exiting students from special education at higher rates than traditional neighborhood schools. Finally, attending a charter school reduces the likelihood of being identified with a disability (Winters, 2015; Winters et al., 2017).

Qualitative studies challenge some of these findings. First, steering away practices occur before parents enroll their child with a disability in a charter school. Charter schools use a variety of strategies to shape the demographics of their student enrollment, including marketing strategies advertising rigorous and intensive academic curriculum, communicating to parents that they do not have the services their children may need, requiring parents to volunteer in schools, and having a thematic

focus (e.g., access to prestigious universities) that may not appeal to parents of students with disabilities (Mommadi and Welner, 2018). Thus, students with disabilities may not even enroll in a charter school in the first place, raising equity issues regarding access.

Further, Waitoller (2020b) found that a pushout practice of charter schools consisted in denying or delaying an evaluation to qualify for special education services. In many cases, the children of parents requesting such evaluation received special education services in district-run public schools before moving to a charter school. Studies examining the impact of pushout practices in charter schools' enrollment are not sensitive to this form of pushout as they only account for students who already receive special education services in charter schools. Finally, Waitoller (2020b) found that even when parents and their children with disabilities experience pushout practices and hostility, they may still decide to stay in the charter school. This is because parents do not perceive any other school as a viable option for their child, their child was close to graduation, or they had already moved from school to school too many times and wanted to provide some stability for their children. Such findings raise issues about the kind of educational opportunities students with disabilities experience in charter schools. Further, considering that in urban areas, Black students are disproportionately represented in charter schools, pushout practices (and steering away practices) have special implications for students experiencing interacting forms of exclusion at the intersections of disability and race (Waitoller, 2020b).

Empowering parents as consumers

While test scores, dropout rates, and other quantifiable indicators have served to evaluate schools, they also serve, at least in theory, for parents to compare schools and make the “the best” quality educational choice for their children. In the last decades, to support parental choice, school districts and states in the U.S have produced quantifiable data and research reports. Such “cold knowledge,” i.e., the official information from school district and state websites (Kosunen et al., 2015), is intended to be used to evaluate school quality. Yet, such research utilization is not as straightforward as school choice enthusiasts think. Parents construct meaning and generate “hot” knowledge through their grapevines (Ball and Vincent, 1998). That is the configurations, interactions, and influences of social networks and processes that mediates personal concerns, perceptions, and feelings, and knowledge construction about schools (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Thus, parents do not always make decisions based on concrete measurable factors such as academic quality, but on the perceptions of and feelings about the schools and the neighborhoods and communities surrounding them (Buendía et al., 2004). Parents attach meaning to neighborhoods,

communities, and schools according to the social, historical, and demographic characteristics of the school location (Bell, 2009; Goyette et al., 2012; Moschetti and Verger, 2020; Waitoller, 2020b). While some parents may conflate safety issues with the school's demographic makeup and the history of the neighborhood around it, other parents send their children to a school within their neighborhood because they identify as part of that community (Bell, 2009). Parents of students with disabilities also evaluate (or attempt to) and share with others information about the kinds and qualities of special education services and the climate toward students with disabilities in schools, information which is difficult to find (Mawene and Bal, 2018).

Further, how parents make educational choices is shaped by the histories and geographies of urban development. Again, take the case of Chicago. Parents' perceptions of safety, academics, and even special education services were influenced by the uneven economic investment from the city government, which is inscribed in the already segregated geographies of the city (Waitoller, 2020b). In the city of Chicago, charter schools are located in the same areas experiencing economic disinvestment and where most school closures occurred due to poor performance or low enrollments (Weber et al., 2020). These are segregated areas in where Black and Latinx communities live. In addition, their perceptions were shaped by austerity measures that slashed special education funds and services (Waitoller, 2020b).

Thus, parents do not act exclusively as rational consumers. Choosing a school is not a rational individualistic decision nor a decision determined by social structures. Choosing a school is a spatial phenomenon (Waitoller, 2020b). Parents experience school choice as “spatial beings” (Soja, 1996). Their decisions are in a dialogue with the history of uneven economic development and the racial segregation shaping the geographies of the city. Making policy decisions under the assumption that parents evaluate quantifiable academic outcomes to make school decisions is erroneous at best and has unintended negative consequences at worst.

Recommendations for research: A call for historical, geographical, and intersectional approach to inclusive education research

In sum, in this paper we have challenged the over reliance on quantitative indicators and research to make policy decisions that affect efforts toward greater inclusivity in schools. We conclude returning to our main question: Can research help to deliver the promises of inclusive education? Our answer to this question is “yes,” but research needs to account for the following.

First, quantitative approaches to research alone are not enough to eliminate complex forms of educational exclusion and move toward a more inclusive public education. Decisions based on quantitative research alone are many times harmful to the communities that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of educational policies. Even randomized control trials considered the “golden standard,” have significant limitations when explaining policy process or the effectiveness of a policy or practice across social contexts (Hammersley, 2013). The spaces we inhabit have histories of economic, cultural, and political injustices that haunts and subverts any superficial policy effort to remediate inequities. Such histories are inscribed into and have produced unjust geographies that shape the experiences of students and families according to their intersecting forms of social difference (e.g., disability, race, immigration, language, class, and gender). For instance, policy decisions to improve school quality based on academic performance and student enrollments alone can expand and deepen inequities in geographical areas with a history rooted in the intersections of racism, classism, and ableism (Waitoller, 2020b).

Therefore, to promote inclusive policies, research needs to account for the powerful role of historical legacies inscribed in the geographies of urban centers. In other words, decision-making can be neither *ahistorical* nor *ageographical*. Research supporting such decision-making need to combine geo-spatial analysis, historical research, and ethnographic work that aim to understand (a) how unjust geographies have been produced across time through uneven economic development, creating areas of wealth and privilege and others of disinvestment and marginalization (Harvey, 2006) and (b) families and Students’ perceptions of and sense of belonging to the spaces they inhabit.

Second, to inform inclusive education policies, research needs to account for interacting forms of injustice and privilege. Research on inclusive education tends to be based on a unitarian approach that emphasizes “a single category of identity or difference or political tradition as the most relevant or most explanatory” (Hancock, 2007, p. 67; Waitoller and Artiles, 2013). In a unitarian approach to policy, one form of social difference (e.g., class, race, or ability) “reigns paramount among others and is therefore justifiably the sole lens of analysis” (Hancock, 2007, p. 68). The development of one form of social difference is independent of other forms of difference. Researchers, for instance, studied the effects of school choice and other market-driven policies on minoritized racial groups (e.g., Lipman, 2011; Buras, 2014), class (Ball, 2003), or students with disabilities (e.g., Collins, 2015). Yet, the examples provided in this article as well as recent research (e.g., Cahill, 2021) indicates that students and their families do not experience one form of oppression but intersecting and interacting ones based on structural forms of ableism, racism, classism, and other forms of “isms.”

Policy making for inclusive education needs to be informed by research that adopts an intersectional structural analytical

lens (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000) to understand complex forms of exclusion/inclusion in education and how they affect inclusive education efforts. Continuing with a unitarian approach to research can mask deeper inequities like the ones described in section “Access to PPPs for students with disabilities.” For instance, the closing of traditional public schools and pushout or steering away practices in charter schools uniquely affect Black and Latinx students with disabilities (Waitoller and Super, 2017; Waitoller, 2020b). Future research and policy efforts need to account for the intersectional consequences of policy implementation which takes us to our last recommendation.

Finally, a key aspect of inclusive education is the political representation of students and families and their participation in defining and explaining exclusion and the practices and policies needed to dismantle it. Fraser (2009) argues that an important aspect of justice is the right of people affected by policies and practices to represent themselves and advance claims of exclusion and their respective solutions. Young (2002) calls for a deliberative democracy that includes the ideas and voices who are the victims of injustices. As a way of example, the slogan of the disability rights movement, “nothing about us without us,” has continued to guide current disability related social struggles. Yet, disability activist Talila Lewis warns us about such political representation, “How does one represent themselves when they do not exist in society’s imagination?” (As cited in Annamma and Handy, 2021, p. 5). Lewis (2017) argues for a disability solidarity that grows coalitions amid social struggles to understand and address different kinds of “ism” (e.g., racism, ableism, classism) as interlocking forms of oppression rather than as separate issues. Thus, research must foreground the voices of the most affected: families and students, particularly those experiencing intersecting forms of injustice. They possess a unique and critical expertise on how histories, geographies, and policies are experienced on the ground, an expertise that no quantification can capture.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have engaged with the theme of the special issue: Can research help to deliver the promises of inclusive education? Our argument is informed by a definition of inclusive education based on the redistribution of inclusive education opportunities, the recognition of all forms of ability and cultural differences, and on providing opportunities for political representation for families and students (Waitoller and Annamma, 2017). We used the case of market-driven educational policies to challenge the overreliance on quantitative indicators and research to make policy decisions.

We recommend policymakers attend to research from a variety of methods and particularly to the voices of communities that are the most affected by the issues they are trying to address. Amplifying their voices in research projects will increase the likelihood of more just and inclusive policies in education. Regarding research, if researchers are to play a part in delivering the promises of inclusive education, it is imperative that they account for the histories of urban geographies, intersecting forms of injustice, and the voices of students and families. Otherwise, we will continue to engage in a cyclical discussion to explain why inclusive education has become a tale of selective inclusivity that includes only those who can conform to contemporary and narrow market-driven parameters of what it means to be a learner (Waitoller, 2020a).

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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