

“We Just Ask You to Listen”: Public Voices and Neoliberal Policy in New York City School Reopening Debate

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Abstract

This case study examines the ideological tensions surrounding the reopening of public schools in New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s theoretical concepts of conjuncture and articulation, the study analyzes the proceedings of Panel for Education Policy (PEP) meetings to explore how these discussions both reflect and actively reproduce broader neoliberal dynamics in education policymaking. The findings illustrate a complex interplay between health and safety concerns, equity issues, and the neoliberal agenda, highlighting the power dynamics at play and the ways in which marginalized voices were both expressed and stifled. This study contributes to the broader literature on crisis, education policy, and social justice by offering a nuanced account of how public forums serve as key sites where competing ideologies are articulated, contested, and normalized in times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, school reopening, neoliberalism, conjuncture, articulation, education policy

In the spring of 2020, as COVID-19 cases surged across the United States, the majority of PK-12 schools were shut down to implement social distancing and decelerate the transmission of the virus (Christakis et al., 2020). The nationwide school closures led to educational disruptions, forcing students, families, and educators to rapidly adapt to remote learning (Hooper et al., 2020). The sudden shift exposed critical issues, including inadequate Internet access, limited teacher training for online instruction, and insufficient family support systems. Moreover, the closures had severe mental health and economic impacts on students and their families, exacerbating existing inequalities and causing long-term educational setbacks (Dorn et al., 2020). These disruptions highlighted the complexities and far-reaching consequences of school closures during the pandemic, setting the stage for the contentious debate around school reopening.

Reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic was marked by several significant tensions. A primary tension was between the need to protect public health and the necessity of resuming in-person education (Freidus & Turner, 2022; Woulfin & Jones, 2022). Parents, teachers, and policymakers grappled with fears of virus transmission within schools against the backdrop of the detrimental effects of prolonged remote learning on students’ academic progress and social-emotional well-being. Additionally, decisions about reopening were influenced by political leaders’ stances and the broader political climate. New York City (NYC), as the largest public school district in the United States, presents a particularly salient site for examining these dynamics. With over one million students served by a highly diverse and deeply stratified school

system, NYC offers a microcosm of national debates around equity, governance, and educational accountability. The city’s centralized mayoral control over public education further heightens the stakes, concentrating decision-making power in the hands of political actors like Mayor de Blasio, whose reopening plan drew both fervent support and pointed criticism from educators, families, and community advocates. Thus, the city’s unique demographic complexity and political structure make it a compelling case for exploring how crises can expose and exacerbate longstanding inequalities, and how public deliberations can illuminate the ideological and material forces shaping policy responses.

To explore the intricacies of the policy debate around school reopening, in this article, I have chosen to focus on Panel for Education Policy (PEP) meetings as the primary site of analysis. PEP meetings, held monthly, provide a unique and transparent forum where diverse stakeholders, including parents, educators, students, and policymakers, can voice their perspectives and concerns. These meetings are rich in discourse and offer valuable insights into various communities’ responses to the reopening plan. The debates at PEP meetings highlighted the intersection of neoliberal governance, community advocacy, and stakeholders’ pursuit of educational equity.

By analyzing the recorded transcripts of these meetings, I aim to uncover the ideological forces and competing narratives that typically remain beneath the surface, focusing on how these narratives shaped the decision-making process. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How did different stakeholders (e.g., parents, educators, students, policymakers) articulate their reasoning around reopening NYC public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did the power dynamics within PEP meetings reflect broader social inequities in the context of educational policymaking?

In my analysis, I draw upon Stuart Hall’s conceptual framework, particularly his work on conjuncture and articulation, to explore the narratives and power relations evident in PEP meetings. Hall’s framework is particularly effective for analyzing the nuanced ways in which power, ideology, and social dynamics interact during moments of *crisis*. On the one hand, there were stakeholders who advocated for reopening as a way to maintain economic stability and ensure that students did not fall further behind due to remote learning. On the other hand, voices from parents, teachers, and community members expressed a counter-narrative that focused on the health and well-being of students, especially those from marginalized communities who were most at risk. The articulation of these competing perspectives indicated the conjunctural nature of the school reopening debate, as different social, political, and economic tensions intersected to create both a challenge and an opportunity for transformation.

As such, PEP meetings can be seen as a site of ideological struggle where differing conceptions of what constitutes a “good” education and a “safe” community were contested. My findings illuminate the influence of neoliberal ideologies in prioritizing economic stability, efficiency, and objectivity at the expense of addressing deeper social inequities. Through examining the discourses emerging from policy debate around school reopening, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how neoliberal ideologies shape policy responses and how community advocacy can resist these forces. It illustrates

the critical interplay between ideology, policy, and community engagement in responding to crises and highlights the importance of transparent stakeholder engagement in shaping equitable educational policies.

Educational Policy and The Politics of Crisis

The fundamental disruption of COVID-19 to education, the economy, and healthcare systems makes it a crisis. While the tragedy of the pandemic has no precedent in magnitude in modern times, the contentious role of crisis within public education is not new to educational reform and critical policy studies (Lingard, 2022). Historically, crises have often served as catalysts for significant educational reforms, prompting policymakers to address longstanding issues within the system. For instance, hurricane Katrina's aftermath exposed profound racial and socioeconomic disparities in New Orleans' education system, leading to a controversial overhaul that prioritized charter schools and privatization (Buras, 2011). Similarly, Di Pietro (2018) suggested that L'Aquila earthquake not only resulted in severe damage to infrastructure but also caused widespread school closures and disrupted the continuity of education for many students.

Viewing the impacts of critical events on a broader scale, scholars have examined how crises such as economic recessions, environmental jolts, or unsettled times profoundly shape education systems. Foundational works by Meyer (1990) and Swidler (1986) propose that critical events create opportunities for cultural reorganization and the renegotiation of institutional norms. During such unsettled periods, the reconfiguration of policies often reflects a broader ideological struggle, as stakeholders with varying interests seek to redefine the priorities and values of the system. For example, post-9/11 security concerns spurred policies aimed at ensuring the safety and surveillance of school environments (Giroux, 2003). Similarly, the financial crises of the 1980s caused budget cuts and resource reallocations (Olliff & Leachman, 2011), leading to the rise of neoliberal educational policies that emphasize efficiency, accountability, and market-driven approaches (Ball, 1990; Apple, 2004; Apple, 2006). Such instances demonstrate how crises can be leveraged to implement radical changes, often reflecting broader ideological shifts (Saltman, 2015). Collectively, these studies reveal the dual nature of crises. While they present opportunities for rethinking and rebuilding, they can also become moments where certain interests leverage the situation to implement policies that may reinforce existing power structures and inequalities.

A dominant ideological force in many of these crisis-driven reforms, particularly those following economic shocks, has been neoliberalism. Neoliberalism prioritizes market-driven approaches, emphasizing efficiency, competition, and individual responsibility over collective welfare and social equity (Harvey, 2005; Newman, 2014). The influence of neoliberalism on public education is often framed around the idea of schools being essential to economic productivity (Connell, 2013). By positioning education as a mechanism to produce future labor for the economy, neoliberal logic treats schooling less as a public service and more as a means of sustaining economic growth (Davies & Bansel, 2007). In the context of NYC public schools, the influence of neoliberalism can be observed in its emphasis on standardized testing, school choice, and accountability measures (Bacon & Kim, 2018; Castillo & Debs, 2025; Ravitch, 2020). These policies reflect a broader trend of neoliberal governance that prioritizes economic

rationality and managerial efficiency over democratic participation and educational equity (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Gandin, 2015; Lipman, 2017).

In addition to interrogating the influence of neoliberalism, scholars have increasingly turned to the role of stakeholders as policy actors in shaping crisis responses. In particular, community groups, educators, and parents play critical roles in influencing policy decisions and advocating for equitable solutions during crises (Dumas & Anyon, 2006). Research has shown that these stakeholders often bring unique perspectives and local knowledge that can help tailor responses to meet the specific needs and demands of affected communities (Ervin & Gannon, 2024; Fu & Blissett, 2025; Fu & King, 2021). These actors often mobilize to resist top-down reforms that do not take into account the needs and experiences of marginalized communities. They advocate for policies that address the root causes of inequities rather than merely providing temporary fixes. This body of work underscores the importance of considering the unique voices, insights and experiences of stakeholders in the policymaking process, especially during times of crises.

In this context, my analysis of PEP meetings during the reopening debate in NYC contributes to the literature on crisis and education policy by providing an empirical examination of how a major urban school district navigated a crisis-induced policy challenge. Building on prior research that demonstrates how crises often serve as catalysts for educational reforms, this study adds an important perspective by highlighting the enduring influence of neoliberal forces in shaping ideological reconfigurations. In the case of the NYC reopening debate, neoliberal agendas leveraged economic instability to justify significant educational reforms that prioritized efficiency and accountability over inclusivity and equity, foregrounding how crises, while providing opportunities for change, are frequently dominated by neoliberal interests that align policy decisions with market imperatives, often at the expense of marginalized communities. In this way, moments of crisis not only expose systemic vulnerabilities but also create opportunities for neoliberal forces to dictate the trajectory of educational governance in ways that serve market-driven priorities.

The study also focused on how different stakeholders, including parents, educators, policymakers, and community members, articulated their perspectives during this critical conjunctural moment. By uncovering the narratives and perspectives presented in PEP meetings, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how different groups interpreted and responded to policy messages during a time of crisis. As such, my study adds to the growing body of work on the role of community actors as policy agents. It extends the existing literature by not only documenting the outcomes of crisis-driven policy decisions but also by shedding light on the participatory and contested nature of policymaking during precarious times.

Conceptual Perspectives

In this analysis, I draw on the concepts of conjuncture and articulation as theorized by Stuart Hall. These concepts provide a robust theoretical grounding for examining the complex socio-political dynamics at play in the debates surrounding public school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike other frameworks that may isolate single causal factors, Hall’s approach allows for a layered analysis of how economic,

political, and cultural contradictions converge during moments of crisis (Clarke, 2014; Hall, 1988). Conjuncture helps identify the historical and ideological conditions that shape a particular moment, while articulation offers a lens to trace how different social forces, interests, and discourses are selectively linked together to produce dominant or oppositional narratives (Hall & Massey, 2010; Grossberg, 2010). Together, they enable a nuanced understanding of how competing visions of safety, equity, and governance were constructed and contested in the reopening debate.

Conjuncture

A conjuncture, as defined by Hall and Massey, is when “different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come to give [a period] a specific and distinctive shape” (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57). Conjunctures are characterized by the convergence of multiple tensions, antagonisms, and contradictions as various domains come together to create points of uncertainty and possibility (Clarke, 2014). They occupy spaces between particular events and broader epochs, with their duration and outcomes being inherently unpredictable. Hall explains that “a conjuncture can be long or short: it’s not defined by time or by simple things like a change of regime—though these have their own effects” (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57). Thus, conjunctures are contextually grounded and formed by the interaction of multiple forces rather than being the expression of a single dominant force (Clarke, 2014).

The concept of conjuncture is particularly valuable for analyzing the multifaceted tensions and forces in a given period, shaping policy decisions and outcomes. Integrating the concept of conjuncture into analysis guides researchers to move beyond simple explanations and instead focus on the interrelations between different elements that define a specific moment in history. In other words, conjuncture allows us to recognize the intersecting factors and dynamics at work, situating them within a broader historical and social framework. In the context of NYC school reopening debates, the pandemic exposed and intensified tensions around public health, racial and economic inequities, educational access, and governance. These tensions did not unfold in isolation but converged to form a conjuncture where competing visions for public education were publicly negotiated and contested.

Conjunctures can lead to progressive change by exposing and challenging existing inequalities. As Hall sees it, “history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis” (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57). The notion of crisis within conjunctural analysis is intrinsically organic, devoted to challenging dominant authority and exposing forces for social change (Grayson & Little, 2017). During periods of disruptive crisis, it encourages us to reflect on how social forces interact, reinforce, and inflect each other while pushing us into implementing radical changes that may otherwise not happen. However, conjunctures can also open the door for a move in a conservative direction. The uncertainty and instability emerging from crisis can be leveraged by conservative forces to push for policies that reinforce existing power structures and limit transformative change (Hall & Massey, 2010; Harvey, 2007). Such dual potential makes the analysis of conjunctures essential for understanding the full spectrum of possible outcomes in policy-making processes.

In the present study, the pandemic itself can be viewed as a conjunctural moment, marked by the intersection of public health crises, economic instability, and social

upheaval. This conjuncture has also profoundly impacted the education sector, revealing and exacerbating existing inequalities while also prompting policy debates and responses. It uncovers not only the progressive possibilities that emerged in response to the crisis but also the conservative moves that aimed to reinforce neoliberal ideologies. By situating the analysis within the conceptual framework of conjuncture, this study provides valuable insights into the complexities of policymaking in times of crisis, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and critically examining the multiple forces at play.

Articulation

Articulation, as described by Hall, refers to “the forms of the relationship through which two processes which remain distinct—obeying their own conditions of existence—are drawn together to form a ‘complex unity’” (Hall, 1997, p. 48). Articulation is a dynamic and contingent process, meaning that the connections between elements are not fixed but can be reconfigured based on changing contexts and power relations (Hall, 1980). Each element in this relationship retains relative autonomy, and through strategic practices in exceptional circumstances, these linkages can be disarticulated or rearticulated, challenging normative understandings and creating new configurations (Hall, 2012; Slack & Wise, 2007). Articulation allows us to understand how certain ideologies and social practices are constructed and maintained, as well as how they can be challenged and transformed.

Articulation highlights the potential for reconfiguring seemingly fixed relationships within society. In the context of the present study, articulation helps analyze how various stakeholders in PEP meetings constructed and negotiated meanings around school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. These meetings became a site where diverse stakeholders (e.g., parents, educators, students, and officials) expressed different understandings of public education, health, safety, equity, and economic recovery. Rather than presuming a unified public discourse, articulation helps unpack how conflicting demands were selectively linked or disarticulated in ways that reflected and reinforced existing power dynamics. For example, economic arguments about reopening were articulated with narratives of racial equity and student well-being, while counter-narratives attempted to disarticulate these claims by emphasizing community safety and historical mistrust. Thus, articulation foregrounds both the constructed nature of hegemonic narratives and the potential for their disruption in moments of political struggle.

In sum, by taking up the conceptual framework of conjuncture and articulation, the discourses swirling around the controversy can be seen as a negotiation of different concerns such as racial struggles, economic hardships, medical difficulties, and financial problems. These key issues were taken by stakeholders to frame the school reopening debate and were linked together to support particular policy positions.

Methodology

Data Collection

In this study, I employed a qualitative single-case study design (Stake, 2005; Patton, 2015) to explore the tensions and narratives illustrated during PEP meetings in the context of NYC's school reopening debate during COVID. The data source consisted of video recordings of PEP meetings from March 2020 to October 2020. PEP meetings were traditionally held in person, but starting March 30, 2020, they transitioned to a virtual format via Zoom due to the pandemic. This transition impacted the length of the meetings, which typically lasted no more than 2 hours but extended significantly in the virtual format. In total, I collected and archived recordings of seven PEP meetings held from March 2020 to September 2020. Below are the details of the data:

- March 30, 2020 (1 hour 10 minutes)
- May 7, 2020 (5 hours 28 minutes)
- May 20, 2020 (2 parts: part 1, 5 hours 35 minutes; part 2, 1 hour 48 minutes)
- June 18, 2020 (4 hours 20 minutes)
- July 15, 2020 (3 hours 19 minutes)
- August 19, 2020 (2 parts: part one, 5 hours 5 minutes; part two, 4 hours 22 minutes)
- September 30, 2020 (5 hours 17 minutes)

Glancing through these meetings provided me with contextualized information about the format of PEP meetings, PEP voting and non-voting committee members, and the decision-making process. However, I selected the August and September meetings for in-depth analysis because they contained the most concentrated and extensive discussions related to the reopening of NYC public schools. These two meetings were also temporally situated at a critical juncture, just prior to and during the city's decision to resume in-person instruction, making them especially relevant for analyzing the ideological and political dynamics at play. Thus, while the findings were largely drawn from these two meetings due to the significant discourse on reopening, insights from other meetings also informed my overall understanding of the broader context and provided valuable background.

Data Analysis

Guided by my conceptual framework, I conducted the data analysis both inductively and deductively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). I began by watching and transcribing the video recordings of the August and September PEP meetings. Initial transcripts were created with the computer-based speech to text program Kaltura, and I used recorded files to review and edit those transcriptions for accuracy. Although PEP meeting recordings are publicly available, I chose to anonymize all participants' names and mask any personal identifiers that could potentially reveal their identities. This decision was made to uphold ethical integrity and protect participants' privacy, especially given the sensitive nature of their testimonies. During the transcription process, I continued to write down analytical notes on what stood out to me from watching the recorded meetings, such as

tone of expression, pauses, emotional intensity, as well as speakers' race, gender, and approximate age.

Using an inductive approach (Saldaña, 2016), I continued the analysis with an open coding phase. During this phase, I read the data multiple times to familiarize myself as I began coding. Line-by-line analysis was conducted to identify significant words, phrases, actions, and expressions within each speaker's testimony. I generated codes based on the recurring topics and ideas that emerged during this process, capturing initial concepts such as "economic efficiency," "health and safety concerns," and "equity and inclusion,"

Following the open coding phase, the next stage of my analysis involved focused coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). During this stage, I refined the initial codes and grouped them into broader categories. At this stage, codes were reviewed and compared to identify overlapping or redundant codes, then consolidated into more comprehensive categories (Williams & Moser, 2019). Throughout the focused coding process, I used Hall's conceptual framework deductively to interpret the data and explore how the convergence of multiple forces (e.g., economic pressure, health concerns, and community resistance) shaped the narratives at play in PEP meetings. For instance, codes related to economic efficiency, data-driven decision making, and budget constraints were grouped into a broader category labeled "Neoliberal Influences on Policy." These factors were not analyzed in isolation; instead, they were examined as parts of the conjunctural moment that drove policy decision making during a period of heightened uncertainty. By applying Hall's concept of conjuncture, I was able to position the policy decision within the broader ideological tensions that were evident at the time. This categorization helped in constructing a clearer and more organized understanding of the key dynamics shaping the school reopening debate. It also ensured that the analysis was aligned with the conceptual framework, specifically focusing on articulations of power, resistance, and the hegemonic forces at play. Below I listed the major categories and the codes that fell within these categories (see Table 1).

Table 1
Major Categories and Codes

Major Category	Code
Stakeholder response	Counter Narratives
	Community advocacy
	Historical distrust of authorities
	Suppression of opposing voices
Neoliberal Influences	Budget cuts
	Performance-based funding
	Accountability
	Economic efficiency
	Survey responses
	Data-driven decision making

The final phase of analysis involved the development of key themes that linked the coded data to the broader conceptual framework of the study. This involved moving from the categorized codes to abstract, conceptual themes that could help answer the research questions and show the findings in relation to Stuart Hall's theoretical concepts (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Three overarching themes were developed during this phase. Specifically, the theme "neoliberal influences on policy" captured the role of economic efficiency and accountability in shaping school reopening decisions. "Stakeholders' responses and resistance," pointed to the voices of parents, educators, and community members who pushed back against the dominant policy narratives. Finally, the third theme, "suppression of opposing articulations during PEP meetings," highlighted the limitations and constraints faced by stakeholders in expressing their views during PEP meetings. Throughout the development of these themes, I also continually reviewed the research questions to ensure that they were adequately addressed.

Since PEP meetings are public and the recordings are accessible to anyone, the use of this data aligns with ethical guidelines for public domain data (Connor et al., 2018; Sugiura et al., 2017). Given the public nature of these meetings, obtaining explicit individual consent from each participant was not feasible, as the discussions were intended for open access. However, this raised important methodological considerations regarding ethical research practices. Future studies could benefit from incorporating additional data sources, such as interviews with participants or surveys, to gain deeper insights into their perspectives. In these cases, researchers would need to ensure informed consent by explicitly informing participants of their involvement in the research and obtaining their agreement to use their responses. This triangulated approach would allow researchers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the issues while maintaining rigorous ethical standards, particularly ensuring that participants are fully aware of and agree to their role in the research process.

Findings

In what follows, I present the findings from this case study, examining how public debates over school reopening in NYC reflected and reproduced broader ideological tensions and power dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I organize the findings into three overarching themes that emerged from my analysis of PEP meetings: neoliberal influences on policy, stakeholders' responses and resistance, and suppression of opposing articulations. Each theme demonstrates a distinct aspect of the discussions and its implications for educational equity and social justice. The findings show the complex interplay of narratives, power structures, and ideological influences that shaped the dynamics of decision making in the context of a public health crisis.

Neoliberal Influences on Policy

In examining the reopening of NYC public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes evident that these decisions were deeply influenced by a broader neoliberal framework that prioritizes economic rationality and efficiency. While the stated goal was to ensure the health and safety of students and educators, the implementation of necessary measures depended heavily on substantial state and federal funding. Within the political-

economic context of the time, decisions were largely shaped by neoliberal values, where economic imperatives often overshadowed the well-being of the school community (Clarke & Newman, 2010; Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022). My analysis reveals that, despite the centrality of health and safety concerns in public discourse, the reopening policies were ultimately guided by a governance approach that placed economic considerations at the forefront.

For example, there were numerous testimonials from parents and teachers expressing their concerns and proposing to delay the date of school reopening. Despite acknowledging the importance of health and safety, the NYC Chancellor emphasized that delaying school reopening was not feasible within the neoliberal framework. Hewing to market-oriented logic, the Chancellor said:

Let's be honest with you, if I say tomorrow, tomorrow we're going to take two weeks, we are going to delay the start of in-person learning for two weeks. We're going to socialize with our teachers, we'll make sure we have everything in place. That sounds like really good practice, but is the state going to allow us to take the two weeks and not take away our funding because we haven't done the 180 days of learning? So, it's not a matter of funding, but it is a matter of funding and I have to be fiscally responsible to the taxpayers of New York City. (R. Carranza., PEP meeting, August 19, 2020)

The Chancellor's emphasis on financial pressures and budget cuts due to COVID-19 revealed a governmental refusal to consider alternative recommendations from the public. His interrogative tone further signaled his attitude of denial and reconfirmed funding as an essential component to keep the education system operating, even when there was huge health risks involved. As examined, what the neoliberal agenda did was create a new episteme that reshaped the education system into an economic apparatus. In other words, neoliberalism positions monetary factors as common sense, as something crucial and unnegotiable (Crouch, 2011; Gershon, 2011). To continue, the Chancellor further justified his stance by saying, "I have to be fiscally responsible to the taxpayers of New York City," reinforcing a neoliberal mindset that imposes moral obligations on individuals to support the reopening plan or risk being seen as neglectful. With this form of moral obligation, parents and teachers were burdened with the responsibility to support the plan for school reopening, otherwise, they'd be seen as not "responsible". Hence, the power of the neoliberal agenda successfully reinforced versions of values that prioritize economy and efficiency, establishing a new episteme of moral obligations.

Concerning such moral obligations, the neoliberal governance of the Chancellor and his team further framed school reopening as an action motivated by goodwill towards the city's most vulnerable students and communities. While defending the decision to reopen schools, the Chancellor encouraged public cooperation to achieve a successful reopening by saying:

I've cut a billion dollars from our budget, I can't afford to cut any more from our budget, I can't. Because it's gonna actually affect our schools. I have to be very cautious about what's gonna happen to the decisions we made and how that's going to affect what we are going to do with our children and our school system... I want every one of our senators, every one of our assembly members, every one of our city council members that have spoken tonight, to join me and say, "Do not defund New York City public schools" (R. Carranza., PEP meeting, August 19, 2020).

The persuasive rhetoric demonstrates how politicians use this “good sense” to shift responsibility from the government onto parents, schools, communities, and teachers (Lipman, 2011). The frequent use of the first-person singular (i.e., "I can't," "I have to," "I want") is a persuasive tactic to garner public and political support for his rationale. By framing the reopening of schools as the only viable path to prevent further budget cuts, he appeals to a neoliberal “common sense” that prioritizes economic pragmatism over public health or social equity.

Hall emphasized that when ideology operates as common sense, humans lose sight of the fact that “sense is a production of our systems of representation” (Hall, 1985, p. 105). The Chancellor’s framing works to present budgetary survival with the moral imperative to reopen schools, thereby foreclosing alternative possibilities such as sustained remote learning or expanded social supports. The construction of this “good sense” is important, especially for building an allyship for the common good. As Italian political philosopher Gramsci (1971/2000) noted, common sense can co-exist with good sense. But to replace common sense with good sense, people have to understand the ideologies of the other side and be able to make arguments at a more sophisticated level. As such, analyzing these moments of articulation illustrates how political discourse works to secure consent for contentious policies and reassert hegemonic control amid uncertainty.

The influence of neoliberal ideologies in the debate and decision-making process was also evident in the reliance on quantitative data to justify policy decisions. The use of data as an objective measure reflects a neoliberal emphasis on accountability and efficiency, often overshadowing qualitative concerns and the nuanced realities of affected communities. For example, despite many meeting participants requesting to delay school reopening or move to fully remote learning for the fall semester of 2020, a city-wide survey conducted by the NYC Department of Education (DOE) in June 2020 showed that 74 percent of families preferred either fully in-person or blended learning over fully remote instruction.

The survey, which was online, anonymous, and available in all DOE-supported languages until June 30th, 2020, gathered 301,138 responses from families and 117,700 responses from students. It covered topics such as the importance of health and safety precautions, comfort with wearing masks in DOE buildings, scheduling preferences, and prioritization of activities for remote and in-person learning. Despite significant resistance to reopening during PEP meetings, the survey data provided a tangible metric that supported the decision in favor of school reopening and blended learning. The results were taken to demonstrate that the government’s decision to reopen schools was responsive to the preferences of most stakeholders. Although the methods of data

collection and interpretation were not entirely transparent, the numeric data powerfully defended the decision to reopen schools. The Chancellor stated:

The data is the data. People voted with their fingers. They clicked the button that says 'I want remote learning' or 'I don't want remote learning.' So all I have is what people said. So that might be true, and I agree with you. But at this point, data is data. And that's what people indicated (R. Carranza, PEP meeting, August 19, 2020).

In the Chancellor's speech, statistical data was used to reinforce the government's policy decisions. Many people view data as objective and factual, providing unbiased measurements of educational processes and practices. However, the processes of data collection, calculation, and interpretation can be complex and potentially manipulated. Neoliberal frameworks often prioritize seemingly objective, quantifiable measures to make complex policy decisions (Davies, 2016), and in this case, the survey response was used to rationalize the decision to reopen schools. Thompson, Sellar, and Lingard (2017) argue that data is not lifeless; rather, it influences and reshapes political systems and educational structures. While the use of numeric data and statistics in politics is valuable, it is essential to ensure stakeholder accountability and transparency in data collection processes (Thompson et al., 2017).

One board member expressed skepticism about the survey's validity, suggesting it could be manipulated by respondents to influence outcomes. She stated, "I'm one of the parents who gamed the system. I was told that if I selected remote by the 7th, I was stuck. But if I select blended, I can opt-out anytime. I'm one of those parents who gave false information" (S.R. Waite, PEP meeting, August 19, 2020). This perspective challenged the Chancellor's view that statistical data is indisputable. The board member emphasized that relying solely on statistics can produce biased and misleading information. By explicitly claiming "I am one of the parents who gamed the system... that gives some false information," she highlighted the need to consider the voices of stakeholders and remain sensitive to how statistics are interpreted and perceived. Factors such as how the survey questions were framed, the timing of the survey, and the incentives or pressures on respondents to answer in certain ways all influence the results.

As observed from the debate, the relationship between quantitative data and neoliberal governance is deeply intertwined. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market efficiency, accountability, and performance metrics, often relies heavily on quantitative data to justify and drive policy decisions (e.g., Fu & Aubain, 2023; Schmeichel et al., 2017). This approach can streamline complex issues into manageable numbers, ostensibly providing a clear, objective basis for decision making (Merry, 2011). However, this reliance on data can also obscure the qualitative, nuanced realities of affected communities (Lupi & Posavec, 2016). In the context of PEP meetings, the use of survey data to support the decision to reopen schools illustrates this dynamic. As Nichols and Berliner (2007) note, "the more any quantitative social indicator is used in social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures" (p. 27). Therefore, transparency and accountability must be emphasized in the use of data, ensuring that data usage serves the interests of all stakeholders rather than reinforcing existing power structures.

Stakeholders' Responses and Resistance

The second major finding from my analysis of PEP meetings centers on the responses and resistance from various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, students, and community members. These stakeholders voiced significant concerns and objections to the proposed school reopening plans, reflecting a deep-seated distrust of the DOE's promises and highlighting broader issues of equity, safety, and representation. Their testimonies emerged during a critical conjunctural moment defined by the convergence of multiple crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader racial justice movement. As Hall (2010) and Clarke (2014) explain, conjunctures reveal underlying contradictions within society, where competing social and ideological forces collide to expose deep-rooted inequities and possibilities for change. In this moment of public reckoning, stakeholder voices at PEP meetings revealed not only dissatisfaction with immediate reopening plans, but also systemic critiques shaped by historical patterns of neglect and exclusion.

Many stakeholders' responses were rooted in a historical distrust of the DOE's ability to address longstanding issues. For example, a parent articulated skepticism about the effectiveness of proposed health and safety measures, given their past experiences of unresolved problems. They said:

What I and many parents are trying to understand is that if this issue couldn't be resolved in the three and a half years since I started working on this, why do we now think it can be fixed in three or four months? (Parent, PEP Meeting, September 30, 2020).

What the parent said illustrated how the COVID-19 outbreak brought to the forefront long-standing issues that have been neglected or inadequately addressed. The parent's skepticism was not merely about the immediate response to the pandemic but was deeply rooted in historical patterns of neglect and unfulfilled promises. It reflected a broader conjunctural moment where past experiences and current crises intersect, revealing deeper structural problems. In other words, the pandemic serves as a moment that exposes these ongoing structural inequities, creating a conjunctural crisis that demands attention and action. By articulating these elements together, the parent's statement built a coherent narrative that was deeply informed by past experience of neglect and challenged the DOE's credibility and effectiveness. It highlighted a continuity of neglect that spanned across different time periods, thus providing a powerful critique of the current policy approach.

Another parent's testimony further illustrated these points by highlighting a specific, long-standing issue that only received attention due to the pandemic:

As a member of CEC 3, I spent approximately 4 years since 2015 working with the special music school on their ventilation issue at the MLK campus. Unfortunately, it took COVID for the ventilation issue to get the attention it deserves (Parent, PEP Meeting, September 30, 2020).

This parent's statement reflected the convergence of historical and contemporary issues at a critical conjunctural moment. The ventilation problem, a long-standing issue,

only garnered the necessary attention due to the heightened focus on health and safety brought about by COVID-19. This parent’s testimony effectively articulated the past neglect of infrastructure issues with the current urgency driven by the pandemic. By linking the prolonged struggle to address the ventilation problem with the present COVID-19 pandemic, the parent’s testimony emphasized the systemic nature of neglect and the reactive rather than proactive approach of the educational authorities. As such, the articulation of these issues served to mobilize resistance and demand accountability from policymakers. By linking past and present issues, stakeholders like these parents highlighted the need for a more comprehensive and historically informed approach to policymaking.

Moreover, responses during the meetings exemplified the disconnect between administrative decision making and the everyday experiences of teachers and students. For instance, one teacher said during the meeting:

These are not new issues. We’ve been fighting this fight, for class sizes, for school buses way before the pandemic. So to pretend that we have the resources now out of thin air is not real. We sit in our local school leadership teams; we look at what we have directly, Sir. We know what’s actually happening within our schools. So we just ask you to listen to the people who are actually on the ground, not those people sitting in the office, crunching numbers of debt. But listen to the people who actually serve it and are doing this work (Anonymous Teacher, PEP Meeting, August 19, 2020).

Similar to what the parents have said before, the teacher’s words highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical conjunctural moment, bringing to light long-standing issues such as class sizes and transportation that have been neglected. In the meantime, the testimony spoke to the disconnect between administrative decision making and the everyday experiences of teachers and students. For instance, the teacher’s appeal to “listen to the people who are actually on the ground” emphasized the importance of understanding the lived realities of those directly involved in the education system. Their articulation of ground-level realities with policy decisions challenged the top-down approach often seen in neoliberal governance (Giroux, 2018), advocating for a more inclusive and responsive decision-making process. By highlighting the real, tangible experiences of those working in schools, the teacher challenged the Chancellor’s argument that the current policy responses were adequate and effective, instead highlighting the need for greater recognition and inclusion of the voices of those directly affected by policy decisions.

This broader critique was further reflected in individual testimonies that illuminated how systemic neglect and policy decisions manifested in the everyday realities of schools. Viewed through Hall’s conceptual frameworks of conjuncture and articulation, stakeholders’ responses at PEP meetings serve as a powerful critique of the disconnection between symbolic support for racial justice and the lived experiences of minority students in schools. One teacher said in the meeting:

We have a mayor that is willing to paint Black Lives Matter on the street but is unwilling to protect my students and my black students. Instructional lunches? In recess sitting at the desk with the mask on five hours a day? Not being able to get up and being six feet apart from their friends that they haven't seen since March? And being criminalized when they do. This is not trauma-informed and culturally responsive education that all students deserve! (Anonymous Teacher, PEP Meeting, August 19, 2020).

The teacher's testimony occurred at a critical conjunctural moment, where the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and broader struggles for racial justice. This period of crisis revealed deep-seated social and racial inequities, particularly in education (Grooms & Childs, 2021). In the teacher's testimony, they highlighted the contradiction between symbolic gestures, such as painting "Black Lives Matter" on the streets, and the lack of substantive action to protect and support Black students in educational settings. This moment of conjuncture exposed the gap between rhetoric and reality, where public declarations of support for racial justice were not matched by policies that address the systemic issues faced by marginalized communities. By connecting the struggles of Black students during the pandemic to the broader context of racial injustice, the teacher challenged the legitimacy of the current educational policies and advocated for a more holistic approach that addresses the needs of all students, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Hall (1997) suggests that articulation must be grounded in complexity and relationality. In this vein, the teacher's testimony reflected this complexity by situating the current educational challenges within the broader social and racial context of the BLM movement. Furthermore, their articulation was relational, linking the individual experiences of Black students in the classroom with the larger societal struggle for racial justice. Such grounding allowed the teacher to construct a narrative that was not only critical of current policies but also deeply connected to the historical and social forces that shaped these policies.

Suppression of Opposing Articulations

PEP public hearings are intended to provide a platform for stakeholders to express their opinions and engage in educational policymaking. However, in my analysis of these meetings, I found that the structure and dynamics of PEP public hearings, while ostensibly democratic, often limit the ability of dissenting voices to challenge the dominant discourse. Through mechanisms such as time limitations and language barriers, PEP meetings systematically marginalize certain voices and stifle opposing articulations.

One of the key mechanisms through which PEP exerts control was the structuring of meeting agendas and the management of time allotted for public comments. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, the transition to online PEP meetings has encouraged greater public participation, leading to an increase in the length of these meetings. Pre-pandemic PEP meetings rarely exceeded two hours, but from May to July 2020, the average meeting time stretched to 5.2 hours. This surge in participation reflected the public's desire to engage more deeply in educational policymaking during a time of crisis. However, this increase in participation also prompted a regulatory response from PEP limiting public speech time to two minutes per individual. While PEP officials

justified this action as necessary to ensure the efficiency and practicality of meetings, the regulation can also be viewed as a mechanism of control designed to suppress dissenting voices. The limitation of speech time curtails the ability of stakeholders to fully articulate their concerns, reinforcing existing power dynamics and ensuring that opposing voices are heard but remain contained. One parent captured the tension between increased participation and PEP’s regulatory response by saying:

I think it’s really; it speaks volumes about democratic institutions in our country because I think about what has been said tonight which is because the pandemic using remote technology to have meeting online and encouraging greater participation is the reason that PEP is deciding to limit the participation and quiet voices and in such a way really speaks to the initial problem and the overall problem. So to say what we want to, to push back on that and limit voices in this way, I think speaks to the suppression of democracy and we need more of it, not less of it (Parent, PEP Meeting, September 30, 2020).

The parent’s statement was a powerful critique of how democratic institutions, which should foster open participation, can paradoxically become mechanisms for suppressing voices. By limiting speech time, PEP not only imposed procedural regulation but also engaged in a broader strategy to maintain control over the narratives and stifle opposing perspectives. This aligns with Hall’s perspective that hegemonic power is maintained through the strategic articulation of different elements to form a dominant narrative (Hall, 1988). In this case, PEP regulation frames public participation as something that needs to be managed and controlled rather than fully embraced.

In addition to the limitations on speech time, other critical issues regarding equity, access, and inclusion were also brought up during PEP meetings. For example, language access emerged as a significant barrier, excluding linguistically minoritized communities from participating in educational discourse. One parent highlighted this issue in their testimony:

Lack of language access has excluded communities, where parents are not using emails and social media. As a DOE parent, I know I haven’t received any information from the DOE in the mail about reopening school buildings. This speaks to the absence of considerations for equity and inclusion no matter where this fall learning takes place. In this meeting for example, where is the Arabic translation? The composition of this meeting tells us that the voices are being surfaced, and those left out. That’s audible. We can hear the absence of parents who speak other languages other than English. We are about 6 and a half hours in, and this is almost entirely an English-only event (Parent, PEP Meeting, September 30, 2020).

The parent pointed out that the lack of language access has effectively excluded non-English-speaking communities from participating in these critical discussions. In a diverse city like NYC, where many parents do not use English as their primary language, the absence of language support (e.g., translations or alternative communication methods) revealed a broader failure to consider the diverse needs of all communities, particularly

those who are already marginalized. The issue of linguistic marginalization within PEP meetings was further highlighted by another parent's testimony:

Last PEP meeting I delivered my testimony in Bangla first as I did today. And that was perhaps the first time the city of New York I've ever heard in Bangla. And to sort of indicate that my testimony should be limited to two minutes because I'm not somehow being a representative of my entire council seems discriminatory (Parent, PEP Meeting, September 30, 2020).

This parent's statement touched on the intersection of linguistic diversity, representation, and exclusive practices within the meeting's structure. By delivering their testimony in Bangla, the parent brought a language that was often marginalized in public discourse into a prominent, official setting. This act of speaking in Bangla was significant not only because it asserted the parent's cultural and linguistic identity but also because it challenged the dominant English-only norms that pervaded public forums.

The limitation of testimony time to two minutes was particularly problematic in the context of non-English testimonies. Speaking in a language other than English often requires additional time for translation or for ensuring that the message is fully understood by an audience unfamiliar with the language. The parent's observation that their testimony was limited because they are "not somehow being a representative of my entire council" suggested that PEP's decision to impose time limits on non-English speakers was inherently discriminatory. It implied that the value of their testimony was judged based on the language used and their perceived ability to represent a broader group, rather than the content of their message. This practice diminished the value of linguistic diversity and perpetuated systemic inequities that prioritize English over other languages. Essentially, the parent's critique highlighted the need for greater recognition and inclusion of non-English languages in public forums, where all voices should be valued equally, regardless of the language in which they are delivered.

Discussion and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge to educational systems worldwide, forcing policymakers, educators, and communities to navigate complex and often conflicting priorities. Examining the reopening of NYC public schools during this global crisis revealed the intricate interplay of neoliberal governance, stakeholder resistance, and the suppression of dissent within the public decision-making process. By applying Hall's conceptual framework of conjuncture and articulation, the study demonstrates how the crisis not only magnified existing systemic inequities but also provides a critical lens through which to analyze the dynamics of neoliberal governance and stakeholder resistance within the educational policy-making process. The findings offer valuable insights into the broader sociopolitical dynamics and foreground the need for rethinking how educational policies are developed and implemented, especially in times of crisis.

First, the analysis of the NYC public school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic exposes a clash between different ideological frameworks: primarily neoliberal governance versus more community-centered, equity-focused approaches. In particular,

these ideological differences were illustrated by the articulations of various stakeholders and the policy decisions made by educational authorities. The DOE’s emphasis on reopening schools despite significant health and safety concerns reflected a neoliberal ideology that prioritizes economic efficiency and market-driven solutions. The reliance on quantitative data, such as survey results, to justify decisions reflected a preference for metrics and measurable outcomes, often at the expense of qualitative, human-centered considerations (Mellinger & Hanson, 2021). In contrast, many stakeholders including parents, teachers, and community members advocated for a more cautious approach that prioritized health and safety over economic concerns. Their resistance was rooted in an ideology that emphasizes social justice, equity, and the demand for policies that address the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. It challenged the neoliberal focus on economic rationality, arguing instead for policies that were responsive to the lived realities of those most affected by the decisions.

This ideological clash indicates a critical need to re-evaluate the role of neoliberal governance in education. While policies rooted in neoliberalism may achieve efficiency, they often do so at the expense of perpetuating systemic inequities by prioritizing economic considerations over the well-being of students and communities (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2020; Canagarajah, 2017; Sleeter, 2008). Policymakers must consider adopting more inclusive and holistic approaches that balance economic priorities with social justice goals. This shift requires the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data in decision-making processes, ensuring that policies are not only economically sound but also responsive to the diverse needs of all stakeholders, particularly those from marginalized communities.

Furthermore, the findings also highlight the significant resistance from parents, teachers, and community members to the proposed reopening plans. This resistance was not merely a reaction to the immediate dangers posed by the pandemic but was deeply rooted in a historical distrust of the DOE’s ability to address longstanding inequities within the system. Stakeholders’ critiques, which emphasized the need for more inclusive and equitable policies, reflected a broader societal demand for educational governance that is genuinely responsive to the needs of all students, particularly those from marginalized communities (Qiu et al., 2023; Green, 2017; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). This resistance highlights the crucial role of grassroots activism and public participation in educational policymaking. PEP meetings demonstrated that meaningful change often originates from the ground up, driven by the voices of those most directly impacted by policy decisions (Freidus & Ewing, 2022). Moreover, the findings highlight the need for public institutions to actively engage with and incorporate the perspectives of marginalized communities in decision-making processes. Without such engagement, policies risk perpetuating the very inequities they are meant to address (Harman et al., 2024).

Last but not least, the findings also reveal how PEP meetings, despite being designed as democratic forums, can also function to suppress dissent and maintain the dominant neoliberal narratives. Through mechanisms such as time limitations and the lack of language access, the voices of dissenting stakeholders, particularly those from linguistically minoritized communities, were systematically marginalized. This suppression of opposing articulations raises important questions about the democratic

legitimacy of these public forums (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022). The limitations imposed on public participation during PEP meetings are indicative of a broader trend in public governance, where democratic processes are often curtailed in the name of efficiency or practicality (Hetherington & Forrester, 2025; Schmidt, 2013). This finding suggests that without meaningful reforms, public institutions may continue to reinforce existing power dynamics that exclude marginalized voices from the decision-making process. It raises critical questions about the democratic legitimacy of public institutions and their ability to foster inclusive and participatory governance. The study suggests that to create truly democratic and equitable educational systems, public forums like PEP meetings must be restructured to ensure that all voices, particularly those from marginalized groups, are heard and valued. This includes addressing barriers to participation, such as language access, and rethinking the structures that limit public input.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how crises function as conjunctural moments that reveal and potentially transform underlying social, political, and economic tensions. While the pandemic itself may be behind us, the findings of this study hold enduring significance, offering critical insights into the structural inequities and governance practices that continue to shape educational policy. One of the key insights from this study was the way in which neoliberal narratives came to dominate the decision-making processes surrounding school reopening. The focus on economic stability and quick metrics sidelined more nuanced, qualitative community perspectives that called for safety and equity. These findings are particularly important in light of today's sociopolitical climate, where many governments continue to favor market-driven solutions, such as austerity measures and privatization over public investment (Edwards, Jr. et al., 2025; Fluegel & King, 2024). In the U.S., this trend can be observed in ongoing debates over school funding, vouchers, and privatization, which tend to prioritize individual choice over collective support for public education. Policymakers must recognize that true educational reform involves not just reopening schools or balancing budgets, but fundamentally rethinking how resources are allocated to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed. This requires a commitment to equitable funding, a focus on community voices, and a willingness to invest in the public good, rather than relying on market-based solutions that inevitably leave the most vulnerable behind.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue on controversial topics, especially in today's sociopolitical context. We are living in a precarious time where public trust in institutions has eroded, misinformation spreads easily, and political debates often turn into battlegrounds. This uncertainty makes dialogue more important than ever. Without genuine spaces for exchange, such as PEP meetings or community forums, we risk deepening our divisions and missing opportunities for positive change. By recognizing conjunctures and encouraging articulation, we can foster dialogue that is not about winning or losing but about understanding complex challenges and finding common ground, even when perspectives differ.

Moving forward, the lessons from this crisis should guide us toward more inclusive and thoughtful educational reforms. Education holds the potential to be a powerful force for social change (Fu, 2024; Harman et al., 2024), but achieving this requires a

commitment to addressing the systemic inequities that have long held back marginalized students. This means building an educational system that listens to all voices, values their contributions, and works towards a future where every student has the opportunity to succeed (Fu, 2021; Fu et al., 2021; Sah & Uysal, 2022; Umansky & Itoh, 2024). Through collaboration, thoughtful policymaking, and a genuine commitment to equity, we can create an educational system that not only addresses the diverse needs of our society but also prepares all students for a future filled with opportunities and success.

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