

Neoliberal Policies, Distance Learning, and Teacher Agency

A Critical Narrative of Pedagogical Decision Making in Urban Schools Serving Marginalized Communities During COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID19 pandemic accelerated the expansion of distance learning and intensified the influence of neoliberal policy logics in U.S. public education. This critical narrative inquiry examines how such policies shaped teachers' agency and pedagogical decision-making in urban schools serving marginalized communities. Drawing on educator-generated vignettes and reflective accounts, the study analyzes how platform-based surveillance, scripted curriculum, data-driven accountability, and digital inequities restructured teachers' daily instructional choices. Findings show that educators were frequently compelled to prioritize practices that aligned with visibility and compliance metrics, even when these conflicted with students' needs. At the same time, teachers exercised constrained forms of agency through adaptive, relational, and humanizing pedagogies that challenged dehumanizing policy pressures. The study concludes that distance learning environments do not eliminate teacher agency but

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reshape it, requiring educators to negotiate policy demands while sustaining student dignity, equity, and care. Implications highlight the need for teacher voice in decision-making, democratic curriculum processes, and structural investments in equitable digital access.

Keywords: teacher agency; distance learning; neoliberalism; COVID-19; urban education; critical narrative

Introduction

In March 2020, school closures compelled educators to transition rapidly to distance learning with limited preparation. In urban schools serving marginalized communities, this transition magnified existing inequities in technology access, broadband stability, and institutional supports. Teacher agency is central to understanding distance learning during COVID-19 because pandemic schooling demanded continuous pedagogical decision making: how to interpret “engagement,” structure participation, implement curriculum under scripts, assess learning under unequal access, and respond to student trauma. Rather than framing distance learning as a neutral technical response, this paper treats it as a policy moment in which neoliberal governance intensified through platform dependence, standardization, and performativity demands (Anyon, 2005; National Education Association, 2020; Stelitano et al., 2020).

Research Question: How do neoliberal policies shape teachers’ agency and pedagogical decision-making during distance learning in urban schools serving marginalized communities?

Literature Review

This literature review situates the study’s research question—how neoliberal policies shape teachers’ agency and pedagogical decision-making during distance learning in urban schools serving marginalized communities within scholarship on neoliberal education reform, platform governance, digital inequity, and humanizing pedagogy. Across these literatures, policy power is shown to operate through accountability systems, standardization, and market logics that redefine professional judgment as compliance with measurable outputs. During the COVID-era distance learning, these policy technologies were increasingly embedded in digital platforms, concentrating surveillance, visibility, and documentation demands into everyday teaching practice (Allen et al., 2025; Ball, 2003, 2016; Williamson, 2016, 2019).

Neoliberalism, Performativity, and Teacher Work

Research on neoliberal education reform emphasizes performativity as a mode of regulation in which teachers are governed through targets, indicators, and evaluations. This literature shows how performative accountability narrows pedagogical possibilities by privileging what can be audited over what can be humanized. Recent work in urban contexts during COVID further demonstrates that high-stakes accountability and technocratic policy solutions (e.g., fidelity to scripted curricula) remained dominant even as communities faced crisis conditions, prompting educators to seek humanizing alternatives through collective professional learning (Allen et al., 2025; Ball, 2003, 2016).

Platform Governance and the Datafication of Pedagogy

Critical studies of digital education argue that platforms are not neutral tools but governance infrastructures that shape what counts as teaching and learning. Datafication research describes how dashboards, analytics, and platform-based engagement metrics transform pedagogy into data production. Attendance logs, timestamps, and visible participation become proxies for learning and teacher effectiveness. Global trend analyses point to expanding AI and analytics in education, suggesting that platform-mediated governance and the risks of inequity and surveillance will remain central features of schooling (Citron, 2024; OECD, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office, 2020; Williamson, 2016, 2019).

Teacher Agency Under Constraint in Crisis Online Teaching

Teacher agency scholarship conceptualizes agency as situated and contingent, formed through educators' responses to institutional demands, material constraints, and ethical commitments. In crisis-driven online teaching, teachers' agency often appears as negotiation: adapting instruction, reinterpreting mandates, and finding spaces for relational work within accountability conditions. Studies of pandemic teaching highlight varied response patterns (resistance, adaptation, transformation) shaped by uneven institutional support, labor intensification, and intensified monitoring (Bartell et al., 2019; Damşa et al., 2021; Pathiranage & Karunaratne, 2023).

Digital Inequity, Austerity, and Remote Learning

Empirical research during and after COVID documents that remote learning amplified long-standing inequities in broadband, devices, and

participation, particularly in high-poverty schools and communities of color. Teachers in higher-poverty contexts reported that limited internet access constrained instruction, disrupted communication with families, and complicated assessment. Post-pandemic analyses indicate that recovery remains uneven and multi-year, with lower-income and non-White students often recovering more slowly, conditions that continue to shape teachers' instructional decision-making and labor (Chen, 2025; Goldhaber et al., 2022; National Education Association, 2020; Ong, 2020; Starr et al., 2022; Stelitano et al., 2020).

Humanizing and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy as Counter-Hegemonic Practice

Humanizing and culturally sustaining frameworks emphasize dignity, dialogue, relationship-building, and cultural affirmation as core instructional work. This scholarship positions humanizing pedagogy as a counter practice to dehumanizing schooling conditions shaped by standardization and accountability. In pandemic-era urban contexts, humanizing professional learning and relational pedagogies have been documented as ways in which educators resist technocratic, output-driven expectations and reassert the democratic purposes of schooling (Allen et al., 2025; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Synthesis and Contribution

Taken together, the literature indicates that neoliberal policies shape teacher agency by narrowing legitimacy toward what is measurable (compliance, visibility, completion) and by embedding governance into platforms that intensify surveillance and documentation. Simultaneously, unequal access conditions in marginalized communities compel teachers to make ethical adaptations, flexible participation, varied evidence of learning, and interpretive reframing of engagement. This study contributes a critical narrative account of how these forces converge at pedagogical decision points and how teachers enact constrained resistance through care, adaptation, and humanizing practice in the midst of neoliberal distance learning conditions (Ball, 2003, 2016; McGuire & Wilka, 2024; Parker, 2025; Stelitano et al., 2020; Williamson, 2016, 2019).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Neoliberalism and Schooling

Neoliberalism is conceptualized as a market-oriented rationality that restructures public institutions through privatization, efficiency, competition, and reduced collective responsibility. Foucault's account of neoliberal governmentality clarifies how market logics become normalized as a governing rationality, shaping institutions, subjectivities, and definitions of "effective" practice (Foucault, 2022).

Neoliberalism in Practice: Policy Mechanisms That Shape Teaching

In practice, neoliberal governance appears in education through concrete mechanisms that reorganize teaching and learning: (a) privatization via corporate platforms and outsourced instructional tools; (b) standardization through scripted curricula, pacing mandates, and routine-driven instructional programs; (c) accountability/performativity through measurable outputs and evaluation metrics; and (d) surveillance through digital monitoring and platform analytics. These mechanisms amplify efficiency-driven decision-making and narrow professional autonomy.

Teacher Agency as Constrained and Contested

Teacher agency is defined as educators' capacity to exercise professional judgment and ethical decision-making in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and relationships. Under neoliberal governance, agency is constrained when teachers are positioned as implementers of standardized scripts and evaluated through auditable outputs rather than professional expertise (Ball, 2003, 2016). Agency is also contested: teachers may enact constrained resistance through adaptive decisions that protect student dignity and community learning.

Humanization and Democratic Principles

Humanization refers to educational practices that affirm students' dignity, voice, culture, and lived experiences, resisting dehumanizing schooling practices that reduce learners to passive recipients of content (Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994). Democratic principles refer to dialogic, participatory, community-centered educational practices grounded in shared power and collective meaning-making rather than compliance and surveillance (Giroux, 2004). These concepts guide analysis of how distance learning shaped opportunities for dialogue and how

teachers attempted to sustain humanizing democratic practices within neoliberal constraints (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 2004; hooks, 1994).

Methodology

Research Design: Critical Narrative Inquiry

To investigate how neoliberal policies shape teachers' agency and pedagogical decision-making during distance learning, this study uses a critical narrative inquiry design. This approach is well-suited to the research question because it treats teachers' lived experiences as analytic evidence of structural forces, rather than as individualized accounts detached from policy contexts. Through critical narrative, the study examines how neoliberal mechanisms, such as accountability mandates, standardized pacing, performance metrics, and platform-embedded surveillance, are felt, interpreted, and navigated by teachers in their everyday instructional decisions.

By foregrounding teachers' voices, the study positions narrative as a methodological tool that exposes the material consequences of neoliberal governance in digital learning environments. Teachers' stories reveal how policy expectations shape choices about curriculum, care, assessment, engagement, and relational work, directly addressing the research question.

Context and Participants

This study focuses on urban public schools serving marginalized communities, including low-income families and students of color disproportionately impacted by digital divides. These contexts are essential for answering the research question, as neoliberal policies often intensify existing inequities through inflexible curricular structures, accountability demands, and assumptions of universal access, all of which became more visible during distance learning.

The data are presented through two composite educator vignettes, each representing common patterns reported by teachers during the shift to virtual instruction. The choice to use composite narratives allows the study to protect individual identities while illuminating broader systemic conditions. Both vignettes highlight teachers working under district mandates, digital monitoring, inequitable technological conditions, and intensified labor expectations. Their contrasting experiences offer multiple angles for understanding how neoliberal policies shape pedagogical agency in real time.

Data Sources

The data for this study draw primarily from educator-generated vignettes and reflective accounts that document teachers' experiences navigating distance learning during the COVID19 pandemic. These narratives illuminate the pressures created by curriculum pacing calendars and district-mandated standardization, which required teachers to follow tightly scripted instructional sequences despite the complexities of virtual learning. They also surface the intensification of administrative oversight and digital surveillance, including expectations around login tracking, camera use, and platform-generated engagement metrics that monitored both teachers and students in real time.

Across the vignettes, teachers describe uneven patterns of student participation, including disengagement related to structural inequities that disproportionately affect students in marginalized communities. These inequities were compounded by technological access barriers, limited devices, unreliable WiFi, and inadequate hotspot support that shaped whether students could attend class, complete assignments, or appear "engaged" according to platform metrics. Additionally, the narratives highlight increased labor expectations placed on teachers, such as expanded professional development demands and the continual troubleshooting required to sustain digital instruction.

Together, these narrative accounts offer rich insight into how policy-driven structures intersect with teachers' professional judgment, values, and instructional choices. They provide the textured qualitative evidence necessary to address the study's research question regarding how neoliberal policies shaped teacher agency and pedagogical decision-making within distance learning contexts.

Analytic Approach

A critical thematic analysis guided the interpretation of the narratives, with analytic attention centered on pedagogical decision points, specific moments in which teachers negotiated the tensions between neoliberal policy expectations and their commitments to more relational, humanizing, or culturally grounded practices. This analytic orientation allowed the study to illuminate not only what teachers did in response to policy pressures but also how they made sense of these pressures and the ethical considerations embedded in their decisions. The analytic process unfolded in four interconnected stages. First, key decision points were identified within each narrative where teachers confronted explicit or implicit policy demands such as rigid pacing calendars, mandated screentime structures, or platform-embedded

engagement metrics. Second, responses from teachers were coded to these moments, noting instances of compliance, negotiation, reinterpretation, or resistance. Third, these codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected the mechanisms through which neoliberal governance shaped instructional work, for example, data-driven accountability, efficiency imperatives, and platform-mediated surveillance. Finally, a critical lens was applied to examine how these structures constrained, redirected, or reshaped teachers' professional autonomy while still permitting forms of constrained resistance. This analytic approach directly addresses the research question by tracing how neoliberal policies operated within teachers' daily decision-making during distance learning and by revealing the nuanced ways educators retained or reimagined agency within these constraints.

Findings and Analysis

A note on voice and attribution: Findings are presented through alternating first-person vignettes by two educator voices, followed by third-person analytic commentary and reported reflections that capture meaning-making while maintaining an academic analytic voice.

Theme I —

Platform Surveillance Restructured Pedagogical Decision Making

Vignette: Teacher A

I experienced the virtual classroom as a space of constant visibility. Administrators could enter Zoom unannounced, and instruction felt like it had to look productive at all times. In one synchronous lesson, I began with small-group discussion using breakout rooms, but I hesitated because I could not fully monitor every room; I shifted back to whole-group instruction so participation would be visibly documented. I relied on the chat and quick-response prompts—'type your answer' or 'react with an emoji'—because those actions produced visible evidence of engagement that could be tracked.

Vignette: Teacher B

I noticed distance learning created a type of monitoring that changed how teaching was evaluated. The pressure was to document everything—emails, logs, engagement, while also teaching. During a lesson that was supposed to be discussion-based, I structured the class around a predictable sequence (attendance in chat, brief mini-lesson, then a submission in Google Classroom) because it created a clear

record that students participated. I found myself weighing decisions against the question, ‘Will this be seen as effective?’ and that pressure influenced how much unstructured dialogue I allowed.

Analytic Commentary

These vignettes illustrate how platforms function as governance tools that extend neoliberal accountability into daily instruction. Increased visibility and documentation expectations constrained teacher agency by privileging pedagogical choices that are easily audited (visible compliance and task completion) over dialogic learning and community-building that are less measurable. Pedagogical decision-making becomes shaped by surveillance when educators anticipate evaluation and adjust instruction toward what the system can count (Ball, 2003; Williamson, 2016, 2019).

Teacher Reflections

- Teacher A reflected that surveillance pressures shifted instructional priorities from dialogic learning toward audit-ready routines, resulting in decisions that emphasized visibility rather than community dialogue.
- Teacher B reflected that the perceived need to prove effectiveness narrowed instructional risk-taking and encouraged predictable lesson structures that generated documentation, even when those structures reduced opportunities for student-led dialogue.

RQ Tie-Back

This theme shows that neoliberal accountability and surveillance embedded in distance-learning platforms shaped teachers’ agency by steering pedagogical decision making toward what could be visibly monitored and documented, thereby narrowing instructional choices and limiting dialogic risk-taking in urban schools serving marginalized communities.

Theme 2 —

Standardization and Scripted Curriculum Narrowed Teacher Autonomy

Vignette: Teacher A

I watched the district move toward a routine-driven curriculum and pre-packaged materials with limited teacher input. The expectation was to follow the pacing. In one week, I was expected to deliver

a district-aligned lesson sequence and assign an online activity that fit the pacing guide, even though students were struggling to sustain attention on screen. I defaulted to a more scripted structure, direct instruction followed by a short online task, because it aligned with the pacing expectations and was easier to manage within platform constraints than a student-led inquiry discussion.

Vignette: Teacher B

I experienced curriculum as something handed down through platforms and guidelines rather than something shaped with students. Decisions about what mattered were already made, and my role became implementation. For example, instead of building curriculum around students' lived experiences during the pandemic, I was expected to use standardized digital tools for engagement, like quick checks, packaged videos, or platform-based tasks, because those fit the accountability structure. It was difficult to build the kind of learning community that depends on dialogue when instruction was organized around standardization and measurable completion.

Analytic Commentary

These narratives show how neoliberal standardization constrains teacher agency by positioning teaching as compliance with pacing, scripts, and pre-packaged lessons. This narrowing of autonomy reinforces banking-model tendencies by increasing teacher-centered delivery and reducing opportunities for student voice and co-construction of knowledge, especially in virtual contexts where scripted instruction is easier to monitor and control (Ball, 2003, 2016).

Teacher Reflections

- Teacher A reflected that pacing requirements constrained professional judgment and often forced decisions that privileged coverage over responsiveness to students' needs during crisis schooling.
- Teacher B reflected that the scripted curriculum blurred the line between teaching and compliance, reducing opportunities to center students' lived realities and limiting democratic agency in curriculum making.

RQ Tie-Back

This theme demonstrates that neoliberal standardization policies

constrained teacher agency by positioning educators as implementers of scripted curricula and pacing mandates, which redirected pedagogical decision-making away from student-centered adaptation and toward compliance with routine-driven, measurable instructional outputs.

Theme 3 — Austerity and Digital Inequities Produced “Triage Pedagogy”

Vignette: Teacher A

I saw families struggle to get reliable broadband and devices. Hotspots were limited and distributed selectively, often first-come, first-served, so families competed for basic access. In one lesson, several students could only log in through a phone and could not open documents or follow multi-step digital directions; they dropped in and out because their connection was unstable. I changed the task immediately, reducing it to a single prompt they could answer in the chat or by voice, because insisting on the original assignment would have punished students for conditions outside their control.

Vignette: Teacher B

I realized my pedagogy had to be shaped by students’ access conditions. I made decisions to reduce assignments, shift expectations, and offer alternatives because the system could not guarantee basic resources. For example, when students could not stay connected long enough for a full synchronous lesson, I offered a simpler, asynchronous option: a short response submitted through Google Classroom or even a message when possible. Teaching became triage, deciding what was possible under scarcity rather than what was ideal.

Analytic Commentary

These vignettes demonstrate how austerity and unequal infrastructure investment shape pedagogical decision-making in marginalized communities. Teachers are compelled to adjust participation requirements and assessments to unequal access, reflecting ethical adaptation under structural constraint. Teacher agency appears as triage: choices made to sustain learning amid systemic scarcity and resource competition that disproportionately burdens communities of color (Ong, 2020; Starr et al., 2022; Stelitano et al., 2020).

Teacher Reflections

- Teacher A reflected that inequitable access transformed instructional planning into moral decision-making, requiring constant choices about fairness and participation rooted in structural scarcity.
- Teacher B reflected that accountability expectations assumed stable access, yet teachers were required to produce outcomes in conditions where basic resources were unevenly available to marginalized families.

RQ Tie-Back

This theme illustrates that neoliberal austerity and uneven resource distribution shaped teachers' agency by forcing pedagogical decision-making to become triage, teachers modified participation, assignments, and assessment in response to unequal access conditions that disproportionately affected marginalized students in urban communities.

**Theme 4 —
Humanizing Pedagogy Functioned as Constrained Resistance**

Vignette: Teacher A

Without training, I modified my pedagogy on the fly, and I tried to respond to students' emotional stress. Some days, the most important decision was not completing the pacing guide but making sure students felt seen and supported. In one session, I began with a brief check-in, asking students to share a word in chat about how they were doing before moving to academics, because students were carrying fear, grief, and uncertainty. Even when cameras were off, I affirmed that participation could look different during a crisis, and I prioritized connection over compliance.

Vignette: Teacher B

I noticed the district's language emphasized productivity and efficiency, but students were living through a crisis. I chose to prioritize relationship and dialogue when possible, even if it did not look like engagement in a measurable way. For example, instead of centering a gamified tool for participation, I opened space for students to talk (or type) about what was happening in their households and communities and connected that discussion to the lesson theme. Those choices felt like small acts of resistance because they centered humanization rather than output.

Analytic Commentary

These accounts frame teacher agency as a humanizing practice that resists neoliberal definitions of effective instruction as measurable output. Teachers enact constrained resistance by centering relational care, community, and dialogue despite surveillance and standardization pressures. These pedagogical decisions protect student dignity and sustain democratic possibilities within a virtual environment structured for compliance and performance (Allen et al., 2025; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994).

Teacher Reflections

- Teacher A reflected that prioritizing care and connection required intentional refusal of purely performative expectations and reframed instructional success as sustaining student dignity and community during crisis.
- Teacher B reflected that humanizing pedagogy became resistance precisely because it was difficult to quantify; choosing dialogue and relational teaching challenged accountability systems, privileging measurable participation over meaningful engagement.

RQ Tie-Back

This theme indicates that neoliberal emphasis on productivity and measurable engagement shaped teachers' agency by constraining time and space for relational teaching, while also revealing how educators exercised constrained agency through humanizing pedagogical decisions that resisted dehumanizing, output-driven expectations during distance learning.

Theme 5 —**Interpreting Student Silence and Participation as a Pedagogical Decision****Vignette: Teacher A**

When I asked open-ended questions to spark dialogue, students often stayed silent. Some waited until I called on them; others seemed disconnected. In one discussion, I posed a question meant to invite reflection, and students froze, either because they were conditioned to wait for the right answer or because they did not feel safe speaking on Zoom. I changed my approach and invited low-risk participation, responding privately in chat or writing a short response, because I did not want silence to be misread as inability.

Vignette: Teacher B

I noticed students were regulated through remote learning, Zoom etiquette, cameras, and muting, so participation became about compliance. I had to decide how to interpret disengagement. During a lesson, a student kept the camera off and did not respond; rather than framing it as defiance, I considered access barriers, home responsibilities, and the discomfort of being surveilled online. I shifted my expectations by offering multiple participation options and avoided penalizing students for not performing visibility, because the conditions were not equitable.

Analytic Commentary

These vignettes show that teacher agency includes interpretive decision making: how educators understand student behavior and how those interpretations shape pedagogy. Neoliberal distance learning reduces engagement to visible compliance (camera use, response frequency, task completion). By reframing silence and disengagement as possible responses to alienation, surveillance, and inequity, educators resist deficit interpretations and shift pedagogical decisions toward humanizing responses (Ball, 2003; Williamson, 2016).

Teacher Reflections

- Teacher A reflected that shifting from deficit to structural interpretations altered pedagogical decisions about participation, assessment, and classroom norms, supporting more equitable engagement pathways.
- Teacher B reflected that refusing to equate visibility with learning became an ethical stance against compliance logic, enabling participation norms that accounted for surveillance discomfort and unequal home conditions.

RQ Tie-Back

This theme shows that neoliberal definitions of engagement as visible compliance shaped teacher agency by pressuring educators to interpret participation through performative metrics; however, teachers enacted agency through interpretive decision making that reframed student silence as structurally produced and adjusted pedagogy toward more equitable participation pathways. Across themes, neoliberal policies shaped teacher agency by narrowing what counted as legitimate pedagogy in online spaces (visibility, standardization, compliance), while teachers' constrained resistance appeared in humanizing adaptations and decision-making that centered equity and student dignity.

Discussion

This critical narrative indicates that neoliberal policies shaped teachers' agency during distance learning by restructuring the conditions of pedagogical decision-making. Platform governance increased surveillance and incentivized instruction that was visible and auditable, narrowing professional autonomy and discouraging dialogic pedagogy. Standardization through scripted curricula and pacing expectations constrained teachers' capacity to adapt learning to students' lived realities and pandemic circumstances. Austerity and digital inequities forced educators into triage pedagogy, requiring redefinition of participation and assessment in response to unequal access. Despite these constraints, teacher agency persisted as contested practice through humanizing decisions that prioritized relational care, community building, and interpretive reframing of student participation. In this framework, agency is not freedom from constraint; it is ethical and political action within structures that seek to standardize, monitor, and marketize schooling (Allen et al., 2025; Ball, 2003, 2016; Stelitano et al., 2020; Williamson, 2016, 2019).

Implications for Educators

Educators working within digital learning environments must recognize that the platforms they use are not neutral tools but systems that actively shape what teaching and learning can become. Distance learning technologies introduce their own rules, metrics, and mechanisms of visibility, often making teachers feel personally responsible for constraints that are actually built into the platform's design. Understanding these systems as forms of governance, not individual shortcomings, allows educators to reframe their efforts and navigate these limitations more intentionally.

Within this landscape, it becomes essential to protect humanizing pedagogy as the heart of instructional practice. Relationship-building, dialogue, and cultural affirmation are not "extras" but vital counterbalances to the dehumanizing pressures that accompany output-driven, efficiency-focused digital environments. Centering these practices helps preserve students' dignity and supports deeper, more meaningful learning.

At the same time, educators must plan proactively for inequities that distance learning can exacerbate. Students may face unstable internet connections, limited devices, or complex home responsibilities. Designing flexible pathways for participation and offering varied forms of evidence for learning ensures that all students can engage meaningfully, regardless of circumstance.

Given these pressures, collective teacher agency becomes a powerful force. Professional communities, formal or informal, provide space for shared reflection, mutual support, and coordinated resistance to purely performative accountability demands that tend to intensify in virtual spaces. These communities help teachers hold onto what matters most in their practice.

Finally, democratic decision-making must be central to how educational technologies and policies are chosen and implemented. Teachers need an institutionalized voice in decisions about platform adoption, curriculum pacing, and accountability expectations. Without this, market-driven priorities risk narrowing pedagogy and undermining the very purposes of public education. Ensuring meaningful participation in these decisions helps safeguard a more just, humane, and educationally sound learning environment.

Conclusion

Distance learning during COVID19 intensified the reach of neoliberal governance in urban schools serving marginalized communities, making visible how platform-based privatization, standardization, and accountability systems reorganized the conditions under which teachers worked and made decisions. The findings from this critical narrative inquiry demonstrate that these policy mechanisms did not merely shape instructional logistics; they fundamentally redefined what counted as legitimate teaching and constrained the forms of agency available to educators. Neoliberal policies exerted pressure through digital surveillance tools, scripted curricula, and performance-oriented metrics that privileged visibility, efficiency, and standardization over relational, dialogic, and culturally grounded pedagogies.

Yet the narratives also reveal that teacher agency persisted, not as unbounded autonomy, but as constrained resistance, an adaptive, ethical, and relational practice enacted within and against structural limits. Teachers modified curriculum, reframed participation to account for inequities, prioritized relational care, and resisted deficit interpretations of student engagement. These actions were not peripheral or informal; they were central acts of professional judgment demonstrating how educators navigated the tension between institutional compliance and their commitments to student dignity, equity, and community well-being.

In urban schools disproportionately impacted by racialized inequities and digital divides, teachers' pedagogical decisions were shaped by intersecting forces: policy expectations, technological constraints, and students' lived realities during crisis conditions. Understanding these

decision points illuminates the ethical and political nature of teacher agency during distance learning. It shows that teachers continually negotiated the boundaries of what was possible, working to sustain humane and culturally responsive learning even when policy structures prioritized measurable outputs over meaningful engagement.

Ultimately, this study underscores that neoliberal distance learning environments do not eliminate teacher agency; they reshape it. Agency becomes an act of interpretation, negotiation, relational care, and resistance. Recognizing this complexity is essential for policy-makers, school leaders, and researchers alike. Efforts to reimagine postpandemic schooling must center teacher voice, democratize decision-making, and invest in equitable digital infrastructure. Without such structural shifts, schools risk reproducing the very inequities that distance learning made more visible.

By analyzing the lived experiences of teachers who navigated these constraints, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how neoliberal policies operate through digital platforms and accountability systems, and how educators persist in enacting dignity-affirming, community-responsive pedagogy despite these pressures. Teacher agency, as illuminated here, is not merely an individual trait but a collective and ethical struggle to humanize education within systems designed to standardize it.

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