Several studies have identified partisan leanings as playing a primary role in reopening decisions, and this study examines competing justice claims that stakeholders—policymakers, district leaders, families, and educators—evoked during the 2020 COVID-19 New York City school reopening debates. Drawing on thematic analysis of 300 news and opinion articles, we examine stakeholders’ overlapping and contested understandings of justice in public education, including claims related to how school resources are distributed, whom district policies recognize, and who is represented in policy-making. In addition to deepening our understanding of the educational politics of the COVID-19 pandemic—an event with field-changing consequences—our analysis offers researchers and policymakers a more robust basis for advancing equity and conceptualizing just educational policy for multiple stakeholders.

Keywords: equity, educational policy, politics, social justice, urban education, qualitative research, content analysis

On March 16, 2020, governors in 27 U.S. states and territories ordered or recommended that their public schools close their buildings to in-person instruction, affecting more than half of all students in the United States (Education Week Staff, 2020). Just 1 week later, all U.S. public school buildings were closed as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States; nearly all stayed closed through the end of the school year (Education Week Staff, 2020). Initial decisions to close school buildings were relatively rapid and rarely contested (Grossmann et al., 2021). However, subsequent decisions about whether and how to reopen or close classrooms in response to COVID-19 cases have been contentious and persistent (Willyard, 2021). Hanging in the balance of these decisions have been important potential impacts for public health (Rauscher & Burns, 2021); family and caregiver well-being (Asbury et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2021); the work of 3.2 million teachers (Bartlett, 2022); and the education of 50.7 million public school students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Given deep race and class disparities in death, illness, and financial hardship that have been exacerbated under COVID-19, as well as gender disparities in caregiving roles and responsibilities, schooling during the pandemic has raised multiple equity issues (Turner, 2020a). The stakes of a return to school have been deeply unequal (American Public Media Research Lab, 2021; Artiga et al., 2021; Calarco et al., 2021; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Landivar et al., 2022). These decisions have taken on even greater urgency amid the substantial social upheaval of an on-going global pandemic, economic crisis, and racial reckoning in the United States.

Several studies have identified partisan leanings as playing a primary role in reopening decisions,
suggesting that political labels or messages from political elites drive people’s support for reopening or not (DeAngelis & Makridis, 2021; Grossmann et al., 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2022; Marianno et al., 2022; Valant, 2020). However, substantive differences underlying the school reopening debate, including conflicting views of what constitutes the “right” or just policy, remain a central but largely unexamined element of the debates. Partisan stances may reflect principled differences in values and experiences of increasingly polarized groups, rather than blind allegiance to a political label. While some qualitative researchers are beginning to investigate further (e.g., see Cotto & Woulfin, 2021; Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022; Singer et al., 2022), the body of research on school reopenings to date is largely quantitative and offers a limited understanding of the complex reasons for stakeholders’ positions; the import of these decisions for district leaders, families, and educators; and the contested notions of what is fair and right in debates over these policies. We are left with an incomplete picture of the contentious politics of school reopening decisions. Absent a nuanced analysis of the reasoning and values that animate stakeholders’ stances, we lack an element needed to understand this on-going and consequential education policy concern: what stakeholders—especially those most directly affected by these decisions—think should be done and why.

Stakeholders’ views on reopening school buildings during COVID-19 also reflect an issue central to the field of education policy, namely how we conceptually realize justice in relation to educational policymaking. The education policy field has often been consumed with questions of “what works” within existing social, economic, and political conditions. Policy researchers have devoted less attention to questions of what is fair and right in education. When they have done so, they have tended to focus on how to best achieve educational equity within existing systems rather than conceptualizations of justice, or “the transformation of the conditions of oppression” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 20) in public education and in society. Here, we build on a more recent body of work by critical scholars that examine the contested framing of what is just, fair, or right in educational policy (e.g., Bertrand et al., 2015; Dumas, 2009; Freidus & Ewing, 2022; Horsford, 2016; Lewis-Durham, 2020; Nygreen, 2016; Turner, 2015). Drawing on frameworks from Fraser (1997, 2000, 2005) and Abu El-Haj (2006), we examine stakeholders’ justice claims, the “frameworks within which ideas about equity are organized in everyday discourse and practice” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 5). We use the case of the COVID-19 reopening debates to develop a more robust conceptual understanding of these justice claims—including how different claims may overlap or conflict. We focus on justice, a term that interrogates existing values, norms, assumptions, and practices in education to examine the structural roots of inequality. In other words, like Fraser and Abu El-Haj, we believe the concept of justice draws our attention to how things should be rather than how they currently are. This focus can help policymakers and researchers unpack public controversy, advance their understandings of complex policy questions, and guide their consideration of the “right” educational policy decisions.

In this study, we ask what justice claims policymakers, district leaders, educators, and families advanced in relation to reopening public schools in New York City (NYC) during the summer and fall of 2020. Based on print media coverage of debates over reopening NYC public schools between June 1, 2020 and December 15, 2020, we found that community members made multiple, intersecting justice claims related to redistribution, recognition, and representation. These claims reflected overlapping and contested understandings of what justice might entail for various stakeholders in public education, including how educational resources are distributed; whom district policies recognize; and who is represented in policy decision-making. Despite widespread concern about lost instructional time from policymakers and researchers (Bailey et al., 2021; Horowitz, 2021), very few of the claims in our data set focused on “learning loss” (see also Reich & Mehta, 2021). Our discussion offers nuance and insight into research on the politics of school reopening debates, including varied concerns about school reopening, the motivations animating the reopening debates, and the stakes involved in a seemingly technical policy decision. More broadly, our analysis illuminates different ways of understanding justice in educational policy, including the relational nature of educational justice in a society rife with social
injustice. These insights offer policymakers and practitioners a basis for advancing justice and suggest a robust framework for researchers analyzing justice claims in education policymaking.

School Reopening Decisions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A wave of recent research made up primarily of regression studies has examined factors predicting school reopening after Spring 2020. These studies mainly reported that political partisanship and teachers’ union strength, rather than various measures of local COVID-19 severity, were significant predictors of decisions to reopen schools or remain remote (DeAngelis & Makridis, 2021; Grossmann et al., 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2022; Marianno et al., 2022; Valant, 2020). Political leanings also appeared to play a role in families’ decisions to send children to school in person (Camp & Zamarro, 2022). Some preliminary analyses concluded that these decisions were purely based on “politics” rather than “science” or “reason.”

However, political leanings may reflect more than unthinking responses to messaging from political leaders or parties; they may also reflect or coincide with differences in values and experiences of disparate and increasingly polarized groups. What is more, partisan positions have been closely correlated with local demographics and COVID-19 health risks, making it likely that school reopening decisions were more than simple matters of political identification (Harris & Oliver, 2021; Houston & Steinberg, 2022; Singer et al., 2022). Studies of Fall 2020 school reopening decisions found that districts with larger percentages of Black and Hispanic people and people living in poverty had a greater likelihood of remote learning (Harris & Oliver, 2021), while districts with larger enrollments of White students were more likely to reopen in person (Grossmann et al., 2021; Marianno et al., 2022). White families were significantly less likely to consider the risk of COVID-19 infection a serious threat to their safety and well-being, even when factors such as economic precarity and potential exposure to the virus were taken into account (Vargas et al., 2021); Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Latinx, and Black communities, including children, were disproportionately likely to be hospitalized and to die from COVID-19 (American Public Media Research Lab, 2021; Artiga, Hill, & Ndugga, 2021; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). COVID-19 positivity rates were a significant predictor of school district decisions to stay remote in Fall 2020 (Harris & Oliver, 2021) and families’ preferences for virtual instruction were most highly associated with school-level infection rates (Darling-Aduana et al., 2022). In national surveys, trust in information from elites was a greater predictor of stance on reopening schools than contact with COVID-19, while political ideology and race and class identification also appeared to predict respondents’ preferences for reopening (Collins, 2021). Analysis of national representative surveys has also found support for increasing teacher salaries to be a predictor of support for in-person instruction (Houston & Steinberg, 2022).

Two recent studies add further insight into the substance of school reopening decisions and stakeholders’ concerns during COVID-19. In their qualitative comparison of liberal and conservative communities in Georgia and Wisconsin, Kretchmar and Brewer (2022) found conservative communities discounted health concerns related to COVID-19; “adopted anti-science and anti-teacher dispositions” (p. 24); and framed the decision to return to in-person schooling as one of individual choice. More liberal communities relied upon decision-making processes aligned with national public health expertise and expressed greater concerns about the health of communities, students, and teachers. In a mixed-methods study of families’ decisions to send their children to in-person schooling in Hartford, Connecticut, in late summer 2020, Cotto and Woulfin (2021) found that families’ decisions to return (or not) to school buildings reflected imperfect compromises between health safety considerations and the need for childcare and access to education among families who had to work in-person. Their findings suggest that such decisions reflected the only “partial equity” of COVID-19 reopening policies.

Overall, this emerging body of research identifies multiple factors underlying reopening decisions and suggests the kinds of considerations that might influence individual positions on these policies. However, few of these studies examine
the meaning that these policy decisions held for stakeholders, leaving a central element of school reopening politics largely unexamined. We therefore have a limited understanding of why these decisions were so contentious and the fundamental questions of justice that reopening policies raise.

Conceptions of Equity in Education Policy

Although “equity” and “justice” are often used interchangeably in education, equity is the more common framework, and thus serves a useful entry into debates over widely espoused educational values. Equity is a frequently articulated goal of education policy. However, there is no single definition of the term. Conceptions of equity have shifted over time and vary across individuals, groups, organizations, and national political contexts (Allbright et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2013; Shah, 2018; Trujillo et al., 2021). For example, grassroots advocates conceptualize equity in markedly different ways than neoliberal policymakers (Nygreen, 2016; Turner & Beneke, 2020), while policy insiders’ education reform preferences (Bulkley, 2013) may also influence how the term is understood. Such value differences and contested terms of debate are inherent to policymaking and consequential for policy decisions (e.g., Stone, 1997; Stout et al., 1994). Perhaps for these reasons, equity is a highly contested notion in education policy (McDermott et al., 2013; Stone, 1997). Contestation may be particularly heated during times—including our present moment—when resources for public institutions are scarce and there are growing demographic disparities, particularly between the population of registered voters and the population of school-aged children and their families (McDermott et al., 2013).

Due to equity’s predominance as a professed policy goal, educational researchers have proposed various frameworks for operationalizing the concept (e.g., Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Jencks, 1988). Some education policy scholars have also examined empirically how equity is framed or conceptualized. Most of this research has focused on policymakers, including “influential actors” (Bulkley, 2013), “policy insiders” (Bertrand et al., 2015), and “district leaders” or “district decision-makers” (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2018; Turner, 2015), or scrutinized policies such as the “Every Student Succeeds Act” (Chu, 2019) and community schools (Lewis-Durham, 2020). In contrast, relatively few scholars examine the perspectives of those most directly impacted by educational policies, including minoritized and economically disadvantaged communities. Thus, our conceptualizations of educational equity tend to reflect the perspectives of relatively privileged policy actors. Marginalized groups’ concerns about an equitable and just education may be broader and deeper than these conceptions (Nygreen, 2016; Shah, 2018).

Definitions of educational inequity frequently involve identifying the root cause of the problem (Stone, 1997). Researchers and practitioners sometimes explain educational inequity as structural, but more often locate the fundamental problem in the perceived deficits of families and communities or in teachers’ unions and teacher seniority (Bertrand et al., 2015). Policy insiders may also disagree about the relative importance of out-of-school factors and the public schools themselves as sources of inequity (Bulkley, 2013). By and large, conceptualizations of educational inequity focus on the “unfair distribution of ‘educational goods’ across the lines of social demarcation” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 199) including money, facilities, teachers, and course content. Alternatively, some researchers and policymakers have focused on equitable outcomes for students (Bulkley, 2013; Coleman, 1968; Guiton & Oakes, 1995). Analyses of “learning loss” and the racial “achievement gap,” as they are typically evoked, are prominent examples of equity conceived in terms of educational outcomes as measured by standardized tests.

Policy actors have also focused on groups identified as having been treated inequitably, such as children in low-income families, multilingual learners, Black and Latinx students, and students identified for special education (Bulkley, 2013); at the same time, they often enthusiastically pursue universal initiatives that address “all students” (e.g., Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2018; Lewis-Durham, 2020; Turner & Spain, 2020). Notably, although teachers have sometimes been understood as a resource to be distributed equitably (see Bulkley, 2013; Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Jencks, 1988) and a cause of inequity (as
described, above), we have not found any education policy literature in which teachers were identified as a group treated inequitably.

Conceptions of both equity and justice have important consequences for how education policies are developed, adopted, and implemented, even in areas of policymaking that appear relatively technical in nature (Allbright et al., 2019; Scott, 2013a, 2013b; Stone, 1997; Turner, 2020b; Turner & Spain, 2020). Stakeholders frequently conceptualize equity as greater resources for students with greater needs or as equal distribution of resources for all students; although researchers have occasionally identified other conceptions of equity in educational policymaking, these opposing views have been particularly prominent among education decision-makers and influential in educational decisions (Allbright et al., 2019; Bulkley, 2013; Hodge, 2021). The equal distribution of resources, a status quo notion of equity that requires little to no justification in the United States, may serve as the default understanding for decision-makers (Jencks, 1988). Such default notions do not challenge the status quo of racism and classism in education and society even among “policy makers who claim to fervently support educational equity” (Lewis-Durham, 2020, p. 4; see also Bertrand et al., 2015; Turner, 2020b). A focus on educational resources or academic outcomes, for example, tends to consider equity within dominant educational norms that marginalize the values of nondominant groups, limiting their full inclusion in schools (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 191, see also Freidus, 2020; Olneck, 1993).

Researchers have argued that common conceptions of equity such as alleviating or ending “achievement gaps” obscure the multifaceted and historical processes, structures, institutional norms, and omissions that are at the root of educational inequity, contending that these conceptualizations are therefore insufficient for guiding policy and research (Carey, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Welner & Carter, 2013). They have offered alternative conceptualizations of educational inequality such as “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) or “opportunity gaps” (Welner & Carter, 2013). These frameworks suggest structural changes and argue for consideration of justice, rather than equity.

However, discourses of both equity and justice may also contribute to the maintenance of systemic inequality in education. Educational policy actors can (strategically or not) mobilize different notions of equity to support and advance their policy goals (Bertrand et al., 2015; Bulkley, 2013; Horsford, 2016; Scott, 2013a). Notions of equity can be harnessed or co-opted to support inequitable and unjust policies; reinforce or advance racist and classist ideas such as deficit-thinking and the denial of systemic racism; divert attention from structural inequity; and allow policymakers to characterize themselves in a positive manner (Bertrand et al., 2015; Freidus, 2022; Lewis-Durham, 2020; Melamed, 2011; Omi & Winant, 2015; Turner, 2020b). For these reasons, how we conceptualize equity and inequity has crucial implications for education research and policy.

Yet, as our discussion above indicates, existing frameworks for understanding educational inequality and injustice are incomplete. They tend to focus on resource distribution or student academic outcomes rather than belonging or systemic social change and they center the voices of privileged policymakers while neglecting those of less privileged stakeholders. A more robust conception of justice such as the one we describe below addresses many of these shortcomings and may better serve to further our collective analysis.

Understanding Justice Claims

To advance our understanding of educational justice and the competing claims that stakeholders make in the course of education policymaking, our research draws on Abu El-Haj’s (2006) conceptualization of contending educational justice claims and Fraser’s (1997, 2005) tripartite conception of justice. Abu El-Haj argues that “justice claims” organize ideas about what is right or fair in everyday educational discourse and practice (p. 5). Justice claims typically reflect or distill broader ideas about educational inequality circulating among legislators, policymakers, educators, and families, rather than the notions of justice debated by political philosophers. While such claims may fall short of a robust conceptualization of justice, it is instructive to examine them to understand how people think about and articulate the “right thing to do.” In this study, we examine different stakeholders’ justice claims to
understand how their ideas about justice relate to their positions in debates over school reopening.

While stakeholders in our study did not draw from political philosophy to make sense of justice and equity in school reopening debate, we turn to Fraser’s (1997, 2000, 2005) normative theorizing to help conceptualize and understand the different dimensions of justice advanced by contending groups. Fraser identifies three, interrelated dimensions of claims-making about justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation.

Claims for redistributional justice are concerned with the distribution of material and economic resources and how maldistribution of these resources may prevent some people’s full participation as equals in society. Examples of maldistribution include exploitation of a group’s labor, economic marginalization, and denial of adequate resources for schooling (Dumas, 2009). As previously noted, redistributinal claims about school funding and resource allocation are widespread in analyses of educational inequity.

Claims for recognitional justice are concerned with “institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value” in society which “constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible—in other words, as less than full partners in social interaction” (Fraser, 2000, p. 113). The problem of recognition can include cultural domination; nonrecognition (e.g., being rendered invisible); and disrespect (being maligned or disparaged in public representations). Efforts to ensure that curriculum and pedagogy reflect the “knowledge, values, assumptions, and participatory modes” of diverse groups are recognitional justice claims (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 144).

Claims for representational justice are concerned with politics. These justice claims ask whether “decision rules accord equal voice in public deliberations and fair representation in public decision-making to all members” by examining the criteria for “inclusion in, or exclusion from, the community of those entitled to make justice claims on one another” (Fraser, 2005, p. 75). Problems of representational injustice include denial of opportunities to participate fully, as peers, in political arenas. Struggles over voice and power at school board meetings and within Parent Teacher Associations (Freidus, 2019, 2020; Turner, 2020b; Turner & Beneke, 2020; Sampson & Bertrand, 2022) are examples of contested representational justice claims.

Fraser’s work offers a robust conceptualization of the ways that different dimensions of justice may be invoked in policy debates, challenging us to examine these dimensions of justice as interlinked and overlapping. Redistribution and recognition go hand-in-hand as material resources are often necessary for recognition and vice versa. In addition, redistribution requires consideration of which educational goods should be fairly distributed, rather than taking existing norms, resources, and practices for granted (as is typical in discussions of educational equity). Furthermore, examining justice claims requires attending to various forms of knowledge, cultures, and values as well as various needs of particular groups (Abu El-Haj, 2006). There can also be tensions between emphasizing difference in recognition and ameliorating difference in redistribution (Dumas, 2009). Because political representation is necessary for remedying both maldistribution and misrecognition, it can be viewed as an overarching concern of those seeking justice (Fraser, 2005). While educational research and policymaking have tended to focus on equity by addressing redistribution, Fraser and Abu El-Haj’s work, among others, points to the inadequacy of an exclusive focus on equity for achieving justice. We therefore consider how the other dimensions Fraser analyzes are evoked in stakeholders’ justice claims.

Our analysis of school reopening decisions combines Fraser’s dimensions of justice with Abu El-Haj’s (2006) approach to justice claims as situated and relational: these claims are expressions of political relationships enacted through policy debate and institutional practice (p. 198). By situated, we mean that people make justice claims from their experiences and contexts and in response to and relation to claims made by others. By relational, we mean that justice claims, and indeed justice more broadly, reflect social, political, and economic power relationships, among others. The relative ease with which some stakeholders can advance justice claims in mainstream media, for example, reflects their social status. Furthermore, by framing justice relationally, we recognize that inequality is produced in the power relationships between groups. As Abu El-Haj (2006) notes, practices (and policies) that advantage some children often simultaneously disadvantage others. Attending to these power relations allows us to understand competing justice claims.
advanced by stakeholders as claims that are often, though not always made, in relation to others and examine competing justice claims advanced by stakeholders alongside each other.

**Data and Method**

In this critical study of educational policy and politics (Diem et al., 2019), we analyzed media coverage of NYC COVID-19 school reopening policies that took place between June and December 2020. Many observers described New York City Department of Education’s (NYCDOE) school reopening as chaotic (Amin & Veiga, 2020; Goldberg, 2020; MacEwan, 2020). Schools opened, closed, and reopened on both a system-wide and case-by-case basis in response to positive COVID-19 test results (see Appendix A for more details). These hotly debated policy decisions were covered in great detail by local and national news media, generating a significant volume of text. We used inductive and deductive analytic methods to examine a sample of the extensive local media coverage, focusing on the justice claims advanced by various stakeholders in response to unfolding events.

**Site Selection**

As an extreme case (Maxwell, 2013), NYC is an important and useful site from which to examine justice claims invoked during school reopening debates. The city was both the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis in the spring of 2020 (Thompson et al., 2020) and the first large city in the United States to reopen school buildings during the pandemic (Shapiro & Zaveri, 2020). During the 2019–2020 school year, NYCDOE schools served over a million students, the large majority of whom are identified as economically disadvantaged and as students of color (New York City Department of Education, 2021). NYC students are thus likely to be from communities that have disproportionately experienced death, hospitalization, food and housing insecurity, and/or financial hardship impacts of COVID-19 (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

Education debate in NYC can be particularly visible and heated. As the largest school system in the nation, NYCDOE decisions are consequential both for the number of children they directly affect and for the national attention they generate, which may influence policy discussions beyond city borders. Multiple news outlets covering local education ensure that multiple perspectives are commonly promulgated in the city; one of these outlets, The New York Times, has a national audience. In addition, the city’s school system is under mayoral control, with a teachers’ union representing nearly 200,000 members, and a principals’ union representing more than 6,300 members.

New York is one of many U.S. cities with relatively homogeneous political affiliation in which contentious debate about reopening school buildings occurred. During a period in which the city’s COVID-19 positivity rates hovered around 1%, the Mayor’s office, NYCDOE offices, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA) contributed to consequential decisions regarding the conditions under which school buildings were reopened. The first day of the school year was delayed as schools scrambled to prepare and offer two options from which families could choose: exclusively remote instruction or “blended learning” in which remote instruction was combined with in-person instruction. Due to limited classroom capacity under social distancing guidelines, many students who enrolled in the blended learning option attended school in-person for 1 to 2 days each week. Middle and high school buildings were closed between November 2020 and March 2021.

**Data Collection**

We used Lexus-Nexus and Factiva databases, together with the website of Chalkbeat New York, to identify relevant news articles, editorials, letters to the editor, and other opinion pieces published between June 1, 2020, and December 15, 2020, from four major NYC education news sources: Chalkbeat New York, New York Daily News, New York Post, and New York Times (see Table 1). The original data set of 446 unique items was then narrowed to news and opinion pieces that were (a) focused on the terms and impacts of school reopenings and (b) included substantial opinions on this topic (defined by
having at least three quotations or being an opinion piece). In total, we identified 300 articles that met these criteria.

We selected these periodicals because they reflected a range of political stances while providing detailed, ongoing reporting on NYC news for local audiences. We included The New York Times, The New York Post, and The New York Daily News based on their high circulation, their accessibility via databases, and their substantial coverage of local education news. Although The New York Post and The New York Daily News are tabloids, we included them in our sample because, due to their large readership, they heavily influence public discourse about NYC news. They are therefore an important and relevant source of claims about school reopening. We decided to include Chalkbeat New York in the data set because of the sheer volume and detail of its coverage of NYC schools.

There are limitations to this data. These newspaper accounts may not have fully or proportionately captured constituents’ views; journalists may also have been selective in the topics reported and the sources quoted. As a result, we are not claiming that these news reports are uniformly credible, nor that they make accurate claims about the policies. Neither do we argue that they are representative of all elements of NYC reopening debates or that they capture the entirety of positions on justice in school reopening. Rather, we approach these data as reflecting a diverse set of justice claims advanced by stakeholders.

A second limitation of this data set is the lack of contextual detail related to individuals quoted. In some occasions, we have made community-level inferences based on information included in the articles, as well as publicly available data regarding the demographics of individual schools and neighborhoods. Thus, while our claims about the relative advantage of certain parents are based on verifiable data about their communities, we can rarely confirm specific details related to individuals’ race, class, or immigration status.

**Data Analysis**

We organized the data set chronologically and read through each article carefully to familiarize ourselves with the data and develop initial analyses. In the tradition of critical policy analysis, these initial reviews of the data focused on the roles of power, resources, advocacy, and voice in policy construction (Diem et al., 2014). Individually and collaboratively, we wrote analytic memos that identified themes and patterns in the data and put data into conversation with theory (Deterding & Waters, 2021). In particular, we noted different stakeholders’ claims about feeling ignored or disregarded in the debate and about having a lack of voice in the decisions, which eventually brought us to thinking about Fraser’s scholarship on justice.

We then coded our data using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Our coding scheme included descriptive labels (such as stakeholder

| Publication          | Circulation (2020)                                      | Political orientation | Total articles in data set |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Chalkbeat New York   | 69,994 newsletter subscriptions                       | Leans center or center left | 69                          |
| New York Daily News  | 1.4 million page views/month                           | Leans left              | 47                          |
| New York Times       | 2 million weekly print readers                         | Leans right             | 127                        |
| New York Post        | 28 million unique online visitors/month                | Leans center left       | 57                          |
| New York Daily News  | 840,000 print subscriptions                            |                        |                             |
| Times                | 77.7 million unique online visitors/month              |                        |                             |
|                      | 6.1 million print subscriptions                        |                        |                             |
|                      | 164.2 million unique online visitors/month             |                        |                             |

*Articles in the New York Post were typically about half the length of those in the other outlets we examined, which may partially explain why they were more numerous.
New York City’s COVID-19 School Reopening Debates

Positionality

As we worked through the data, we regularly reflected on how our different social positions affected our interpretations. While we are both mothers and former K–12 educators, we differ in how we identify racially, where we live, how we understand our children’s needs, and whether our children attended school in person during the Fall and Spring of 2020. In particular, Alex is White, lives in NYC, and sent her children in person to NYC public schools during the time period discussed in this article; Erica identifies as Black and Asian American, lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and her children’s school district operated almost entirely virtually up until April of 2021. Ultimately, we believe that our discussions and understandings across our different social positions enabled a more thorough and nuanced analysis than we would have achieved otherwise.

Findings

Through our examination of stances on reopening NYCDOE school buildings, we found broad consensus that remote learning in the Spring of 2020 was subpar and widespread concern that remote learning was inherently inferior to face-to-face instruction. Yet, we also found considerably different views among groups of stakeholders regarding how NYC schools should move forward. Our findings below highlight conflicting arguments that reflected distinct yet interwoven claims about redistribution, recognition, and representation in NYC school reopening debates. We have organized our narrative discussion of the findings by stakeholder role, but we summarize the claims we have identified within and across groups of stakeholders in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Stakeholders’ Justice Claims

| Stakeholders         | Redistributive claims                                                                 | Representational claims                                                                 | Recognitional claims                                                                 |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Politicians and advocates | In-person schooling provides access to educational, social, and material resources.                  | NYC had an obligation to listen to parents who are clamoring for schools to reopen.    | NYC’s decision to reopen school buildings was based on a fundamental disregard for educators’ safety and well-being. |
| Educators            | The NYC school communities most impacted by COVID-19 lacked resources they needed to open safely. | NYC school reopening decisions ignored educators’ professional knowledge of school policy and practice. | In-person schooling is essential for the well-being of NYC children and working parents (primarily advantaged families). |
| Families             | NYC must offer high-quality remote instruction to address the dangers of COVID-19 infection and racism in school buildings (primarily disadvantaged families). |                                                                                       |                                                                                      |
Our findings identify claims which extend beyond those typically emphasized in educational policy and research (e.g., achievement gaps or school funding) and which consider stakeholders other than students (e.g., teachers and caregivers). We also examine tensions between stakeholders’ various claims. Taken together, these findings demonstrate a wider range of considerations than research on equity in educational policy typically captures; they also foreground important and notable divergence in the meaning of justice for different stakeholders in public education.

“I’m With the Parents”: Politicians’ and Advocates’ Redistributive and Representational Claims

Mayor Bill de Blasio, the leader of New York’s mayoral-control school system, emphasized claims of redistribution and representation when making the case for reopening school buildings. By emphasizing parents’ voices as he announced policy decisions, the mayor framed reopening as a matter of representational justice. By focusing on the resources that schools provide to in-person instruction and essential services to the city’s majority low-income students of color, the mayor made a case for redistributive justice for the city’s neediest families. These claims were challenged by politicians and advocates who advanced alternative theories of redistribution for poor students and students of color.

The belief that in-person education constitutes a valuable resource that could never be matched by remote or virtual instruction was fundamental to de Blasio’s justice claims. De Blasio argued that face-to-face teaching was necessary to ensure equitable access to educational resources, as well as that schools provide children with much more than academic benefits. Identifying NYC public schools as places where many low-income families access food and health care, in July 2020 the mayor asserted that families wanted schools to reopen because their children needed schools “to help them learn again, and for their social development, because they know it’s a safe place, and there’s food available, and health support available” (Veiga, 2020a). The claim that schools provided important resources beyond academics connected de Blasio’s emphasis on providing material resources to low-income families with the claims made by some advantaged families (which we detail later in this article) about the importance of schools for children’s social or emotional well-being. De Blasio’s focus on safety and service provision therefore bridged competing arguments about how to best serve the city’s students during the pandemic.

The mayor linked his redistributive claims regarding the provision of material resources provided through in-person schooling with representational claims regarding the preferences of his constituents. When urged by some elected officials to begin the year with exclusively remote instruction, de Blasio retorted, “Honestly, I respect my fellow elected officials. . . . But if all of them say one thing, but the majority of parents say another thing, I’m with the parents. It’s their children. . . . Those are the voices who matter” (Marsh, Algar, & Musumeci, 2020). The New York Times reported that a week later, the mayor reiterated his commitment to representational justice: “I have heard the voices of thousands and thousands of parents over the years’, Mr. de Blasio said in a recent interview. ‘They need this’, he said of in-person instruction, ‘and it’s our obligation to give it to them’” (Shapiro, 2020a). By emphasizing the voices of “the majority of parents” and the resources that schools provide to the predominantly low-income families of color that NYC public schools serve, the mayor framed reopening as a matter of representational and redistributive justice for the city’s families, particularly its neediest families.

During the summer of 2020, de Blasio and NYCDOE focused on “Plan A”: returning the greatest possible number of students to in-person learning (Veiga, 2020a). Getting all children back in buildings was central to the city’s hybrid learning plan, which attempted to reduce COVID-19 transmission by enforcing social distancing and creating small, stable instructional “pods” of students, thereby decreasing the number of possible exposures to infection. These measures would necessitate the hiring of thousands of additional school staff. Safety decisions were based on NYC’s low COVID-19 rates at the

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De Blasio’s Plan A prioritized offering each child the opportunity for some in-person school time. However, the emphasis on returning all students to classrooms overlooked the expressed desires of some families to keep their children at home. Moreover, this approach diverted resources away from students whose families or caregivers chose to continue remote learning in the 2020–2021 school year, a group disproportionately likely to be low-income students of color. By December 2020, the New York Times reported that the mayor found himself presiding over a starkly unequal school system. . . Nearly 12,000 more white children [were] returning to public school buildings than Black students . . . in part because of the exceedingly harsh impact the virus has had on their communities. (Shapiro, 2020b)

Observers pointed out that the mayor’s plan did not entirely take into account deep and preexisting social inequalities in the city and the school system, including raced and classed differences in neighborhood COVID-19 transmission rates, school budgets, and facility maintenance. Nor did it account for related variation in families’ beliefs that returning to physical school would be safe and desirable.

As the head of a school system under mayoral control, de Blasio may have been particularly focused on the return to in-person schooling as a mechanism of justice. However, other local politicians raised competing redistributive justice claims. Unlike the mayor’s focus on providing existing resources through in-person schooling, these advocates emphasized justice claims related to the long-standing inequitable allocation of resources to NYC public schools, which primarily serve low-income communities of color. For example, the City Council Education Committee, Women’s Caucus, and Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus pointed to a long history of delayed funding and poor school facilities maintenance, arguing it was crucial to “know how much funding is needed to reopen safely and that we work together on a plan that allows us to comply with that figure” (Veiga, 2020b). This argument foregrounded differences in how stakeholders viewed the existing school system. While de Blasio appeared to proceed with the view that the schools already had the capacity to reopen safely and meet families’ perceived needs, the council members viewed the existing school system as already unjust. Rather than returning to prepandemic patterns and practices, these council members suggested that justice required dramatic correction of existing resource injustices before school buildings could safely reopen.

Relatdely, educational advocates frequently advanced distributional justice claims that emphasized the need to treat different student groups according to their need (i.e., equitably), rather than treating them the same (i.e., equally). In October 2020, the NYCDOE reported that more than 25% of schools attended by majority Black and Latinx students reported low remote attendance during the initial school closing, compared with just 3% of other city schools. Council Member Mark Treyger, the chair of the Education Committee, charged that the city’s data “further paints a picture of a city perpetuating the divide between well-resourced and under-resourced communities” (Elsen-Rooney, 2020b). In August 2020, advocates for homeless youth argued for a reopening policy that prioritized “the needs of the students who had the most difficulty with remote learning, including students who are homeless, to help address the learning loss and trauma they experienced during the closure of schools and help them catch up” (Elsen-Rooney, 2020c). These redistributive claims argued that resources must be reallocated to students with the greatest needs.

However, NYCDOE officials generally rejected proposals to give greater in-seat time to “at risk” students as unfeasible given the city’s demographics: about 75,000 students in NYC public schools are poor and 114,000 are homeless (Shapiro, 2020b; Shapiro et al., 2020). Initially, the only groups for which the NYCDOE prioritized in-seat time were elementary students and students with disabilities. This distinction may have been a response to the relative power of families of students with disabilities (or a subset of them) or related to the district’s legal obligations under special education law. Regardless of the cause, the implications for relational justice are notable. In an overcrowded school system operating under social distancing requirements, additional in-seat time for some students meant less time for their peers. Unlike other proposed priority groups, students with disabilities and
young children were not disproportionately likely to be from low-income communities or communities of color. This went largely unaddressed, other than encouragement by the NYCDOE central offices to prioritize in-seat instruction for students living in temporary housing (but not to any other groups) when principals reprogrammed hybrid learning schedules in November (Zimmerman, 2020).

“Broken Promises”: Educators’ Recognitional, Representational, and Redistributive Claims

Unlike de Blasio, leaders of the UFT and the CSA argued for a delayed return to in-person schooling, declaring the mayor’s plan to reopen schools at the beginning of the school year unworkable, unsafe, and therefore unjust in multiple, intertwined ways for both students and staff. The city’s school reopening policy attempted to reduce the effects of inequality for some stakeholders, including students who might be best served by in-person instruction. However, these policies were understood by others as exacerbating inequality for adults in schools who were believed to be at greater risk for deadly infection. These educators claimed that the city’s policies reflected a fundamental misrecognition and lack of concern for educators’ lives and well-being. Advocates argued that by ignoring educators’ rights to a safe work environment, policymakers were not only endangering people who worked in school buildings, but also refusing to recognize their equal status. Educators further called for greater representation of educators in school district reopening decisions, arguing that their voices and experiences were essential to safe and sound educational decisions.

As the summer drew to a close, both the teachers’ and the principals’ unions charged the mayor and NYCDOE with an “alarming lack of direction,” conflicting messaging, and inadequate planning for the upcoming school year (Marsh, Algar, & Hogan, 2020). In August, the CSA argued that schools were being given “frighteningly little time” to prepare safety measures and plan for instructional needs in the midst of the pandemic (Amin & Zimmer, 2020). By early September, the teachers’ union was threatening to strike over the need for ongoing COVID-19 testing in schools. UFT President Michael Mulgrew warned that

we’ll know shortly over the next couple of days if we’re going to have a major war—even a bigger war—with the city of New York, or if we can actually get to the hard work of preparing each one of our schools to open in a way that is safe. (Algar, 2020)

However, once the city had met the union’s demands, Mulgrew declared with confidence: “the New York City public schools system has the most aggressive policies and safeguards of any school system in America” (Shapiro et al., 2020). Both unions grounded their public criticism of the NYCDOE in concerns for the safety of both educators and students.

Interwoven with these calls for public safety were claims for representational justice. When de Blasio visited a popular radio show to talk about school reopening, a Queens teacher called in to tell the mayor that the rapidly shifting plans were “really impeding our ability to be ready. . . If you had listened to us, if you had listened to what schools really needed, we could be doing a better job to serve our students” (Hicks & Musumeci, 2020). Indeed, the CSA asked New York State to intervene after the city had twice delayed the start of the school year arguing that “During this health crisis, school leaders have lost trust and faith in Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza to support them in their immense efforts and provide them with the guidance and staffing they need” (Guse & Shahrigan, 2020). These very public arguments emphasized not only the need to listen to educators regarding the safety of their working conditions, but also the need for policies that respect educators’ professional knowledge.

Educators also called for recognition of teachers’ lives and safety in the midst of a pandemic. Many believed that justice claims and the reopening plans that centered on students or families, such as those advanced by the mayor, prioritized the well-being of students and families over that of teachers in what Fraser (2000) calls “an institutionalized relation of social subordination” (p. 113). These perceptions were heightened by NYCDOE’s mandated in-person staff meetings for 3 days after school buildings were closed in March 2020; one teacher explained in July 2020,
We were told to support one another while we were asked to attend workshops regarding the social emotional impact on students and families. It was almost as if the lives of teachers and their stresses did not matter. No one thought to ask. (Swope, 2020)

Educators believed they had been rendered invisible and fundamentally misrecognized.

Disregard for educators’ safety and well-being continued to concern teachers even after schools were reopened. During the first week of school, the UFT released a video featuring dead rodents, overflowing trash cans and a voiceover warning: “The NYC DOE and City Hall promised safe and clean schools. However, staff have returned to unsanitary conditions and broken promises” (Algar et al., 2020). In December 2020, a teacher described a principal’s order to use a school lunchroom to serve students hot lunches as “a total disregard for our safety and New York State protocols” (Elsen-Rooney, 2020a). Many educators argued that the planning and implementation process for reopening school buildings reflected lack of concern for their lives and “disregard” for their well-being. Educators’ claims for recognitional justice foreground the extent to which policies which attempt to reduce the effects of inequality for some stakeholders may be understood as exacerbating it for others. The resulting tensions highlight the relational nature of justice, which was particularly notable in reopening debates because examinations of equity or justice in education policy rarely consider teachers’ priorities, experiences, or rights.

Importantly, some educators framed their justice claims in terms of the needs of “school communities,” that included school-based staff, students, and students’ families. They protested the mayor’s proposal that teachers “rise to the occasion and answer the call” (Marsh & Algar, 2020) as dangerous for all members of the school community, challenging claims that positioned teachers’ rights, concerns, and demands for a safe return to in-person schooling as at odds with the needs of other stakeholders. A progressive caucus of the UFT called the Movement Of Rank and file Educators (MORE) projected images outside the NYCDOE headquarters in September; one image featured a child seated at a desk with the caption “My school was never safe” (emphasis in the original), while others included pictures of the Grim Reaper and the words “We won’t die for the DOE” (Edelman, 2020). At a Manhattan high school, families joined teachers in a march to draw attention to their safety concerns. The principal, who pointed out that 90% of the schools’ families had opted for remote-only instruction that fall, explained, “It’s unfortunate that it takes events like parents and teachers picketing to draw attention to something that we’ve been talking about for the last few weeks. . . We all want to be in school. And there’s a way to do that safely. But I’m worried that this way is not safe” (Veiga & Zimmerman, 2020). Indeed, many educators urged families to support protests and letter-writing campaigns arguing that those most impacted by reopening policies—educators and their family members who, due to their age, were at greater risk for illness or death related to the pandemic and families in the communities most impacted by the pandemic—did not have a fair say in NYCDOE and mayoral decision-making. These arguments evoked both recognitional and representational justice claims on behalf of those communities and implied a need for more dramatic change to the mayor’s reopening plan and how schools operated more broadly.

By centering “school communities,” these claims countered the seeming disregard for educators’ lives and aligned justice for educators with justice for students and families. Justice claims on behalf of “school communities” often included redistributive arguments centered around the lack of resources to provide adequate safety measures for both students and staff. Moreover, they foregrounded the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on particular NYC neighborhoods. Coalitions of principals in Community School District 6, 13, and 15 asserted that although NYCDOE used citywide data to reopen schools, these decisions should account for ZIP codes with higher infection rates. Guidelines for safe in-person schooling, they argued, must be driven by families and “center the specific needs of populations who will be disproportionately harmed by COVID spread” (Amin & Zimmer, 2020b), an argument that implied a need for more dramatic change to how schools operate. Principals in Community School District 6, which serves primarily Latinx and immigrant students, argued that underfunded mandates would exacerbate inequalities: “Asking an undervalued and under-resourced system to do three times the work with
even fewer resources is unrealistic and unattainable” (Amin, 2020). These redistributive claims were made on behalf of multiple groups of stakeholders; they evoked recognition of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on particular students, families, and school staff. The claim of misrecognition by some educators reveals how addressing one group’s claims may contribute to claims of injustice for others. What is more, educators’ advocacy suggested that diverse stakeholder groups might pursue justice in alliance, rather than opposition.

“Isn’t Collective Trauma”: Families’ Recognitional and Redistributive Claims

NYCDOE families’ stances on the return to in-person school varied widely, not only on the question of whether buildings should reopen but also on the justice claims in which they based their responses. In this section, we first examine the claims of predominantly White and middle-class or professional families who wield considerable influence and privilege within the NYC school system; we call these families “advantaged” to indicate the social and political capital that NYC school policies collectively afford them (Freidus, 2019, 2020; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). The possibility that schools might not reopen in-person made some of these families feel unheard and their struggles unrecognized.

They positioned decisions to close school buildings as harmful to children’s social-emotional health, claiming that these benefits were essential aspects of schooling. We then examine the claims of low-income families and families of color. Although the majority of NYC students come from these families, their responses to the reopening debates as captured by the four news sources we examined were less unified. Some claimed that remote schooling would better serve their children and protect them from the dual risks of COVID-19 infection and racism at school, while others focused on equitable access to the resource of in-person instruction for children and childcare for working adults.

In general, advantaged families argued the city should recognize that school is essential to children’s social and emotional well-being and take any and all necessary measures to ensure that children could return to school. One mother protesting the closure of middle school and high school buildings in December explained that “having the interaction with the teachers, the social opportunities—it’s such a critical age in terms of development” (Green & Sheehy, 2020). Her daughter, who attended a school near their home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, agreed that “human contact is so important at my age.” Thus, some families celebrated hybrid learning as “one step back towards normal—even though this is so not normal” (Roberts et al., 2020). In contrast to de Blasio’s wide-ranging view of the resources offered by schools, these families emphasized in-person schooling as a resource for students’ and caregivers’ social and emotional well-being, rather than meeting a need for academic instruction, childcare, food, or health services.

In fact, some advantaged families explicitly minimized the role that schools played in childcare, arguing that this function was secondary to the role that schools play in children’s mental health. One mother argued, “It’s not a matter of ‘I’m busy with work and don’t want my kids home’. . . It’s collective trauma thousands of kids are going through right now” (Gartland et al., 2020). Other families described their children’s reaction to the fall school closure as “gut-wrenching” (Elsen-Rooney & Sommerfeldt, 2020). The mother of a child with a disability explained that “remote learning does not work for my son”: “He runs away. He cries. He screams. It just ends with both of us crying at the end of the day” (Fenton & Algar, 2020). By situating access to schools as crucial for families’ emotional well-being, these parents suggested an expanded notion of school as a “safety net” extending beyond the structural supports offered by the state. What is more, they positioned decisions to close schools as misrecognition of families’ needs and harmful to their own and their children’s social-emotional health.

Families who advocated for reopening often made their case in general terms; they spoke for “all kids,” not just their own, a claim that can rearticulate equity language to draw attention to the concerns of advantaged families (Turner & Spain, 2020). However, the disproportionately low numbers of Black and Asian American students who opted for hybrid schooling (Shapiro, 2020b) and actual statements by low-income
families suggested greater ambivalence about in-person schooling. When school buildings reopened at the end of September, a Brooklyn cab driver explained that “It’s not safe, but we have to try. . . As soon as I hear a cough or hear of any contamination, I am taking my daughter out right away” (Roberts et al., 2020). This father, like others who deliberated over whether or not to send their children back to school, was torn between fears for his children’s safety and anxiety that he had no other choices, given his need for childcare. He did not describe a return to schools as an issue of justice, but as a necessity. Similarly, the mother of a child with special needs explained that for her family, remote schooling was “impossible”: “You have parents having to choose between their work and their kids. We have bills to pay” (Mongelli et al., 2020). In contrast, a South Bronx mother who works as an auditor chose to keep her daughter home, in part due to transportation challenges. Her ambivalence about that decision was evident: She saw remote learning as offering predictability and allowing her to more easily communicate with her child’s teacher, but she also declared, “I would change my decision in a minute if I knew that in-school learning was the more stable option” (Kim, 2020).

For these caregivers, justice was a question of which childcare arrangements were immediately workable for their families; the structural supports that more advantaged parents may have considered relatively unimportant were central to how less advantaged families conceptualized the redistributive justice of reopening schools. Similar to Cotto and Woulfin’s (2021) findings, these statements suggest that there were no good choices available to families during this phase of reopening policy.

Across lines of race and class, many parents’ or caregivers’ claims—like those of the mayor—appeared to be predicated on a mostly unstated set of assumptions that in-person schooling was the only vehicle through which redistributive justice could be achieved; that the status quo was equitable (i.e., schools were basically good as they had been prior to the pandemic); and that the state would provide no form of assistance to families other than public schools and a limited set of supervised childcare facilities. According to this logic, the responsibility for rectifying inequities lay with the NYCDOE decision-makers and the unions who held sway over decisions about school reopening. However, a few parents pointed to a broader set of systemic injustices in the situation. One mother who described herself as “privileged” wrote, “we are being rolled over by the wheels of an economy that has bafflingly declared working parents inessential” (Perlman, 2020). Noting that some families could draw on deep financial resources or extended family to address the challenges that working parents encountered during the pandemic, she asked why no policy to had been proposed support the many families that did not have these personal resources. She claimed misrecognition of working parents, observing that “allowing workplaces to reopen while schools, camps and daycares remain closed tells a generation of working parents that it’s fine if they lose their jobs, insurance and livelihoods in the process” (Perlman, 2020). This parent, like several others, argued that such maldistribution and misrecognition were unjust, highlighting that decisions to close schools while keeping workplaces open took a disproportionate toll on working parents.

Although these claims pointed to the broader systemic injustices outside the school system, other parents’ voices indicted systemic injustices within it. In fact, some families of color saw remote schooling as an opportunity to offer their children safety from the dangers of both the coronavirus and school-based racism. While reopening advocates argued that children were suffering due to lack of “normalcy,” these families pointed to the effects of racism—manifested not only in the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on their communities and heightened racial violence, but also in everyday interactions in schools—on their children’s emotional well-being. In a New York Times op-ed about Black families who preferred remote instruction, journalist Anderson (2020) described the “subtle bigotry” that many Black students encounter in school, quoting a mother who explained that when her daughter is in remote learning, “Although the violence is still there, she has the ability to maneuver in a way that she didn’t have when she was in school.” Several Black families thus inverted arguments
made by more advantaged families and the NYCDOE that students’ social and emotional needs would be best served by returning to in-person schooling. They claimed justice would be better served and their children would be better protected from racism by remote schooling at home than they were in school. Rather than devoting resources to reopening, buildings, they argued, the city should focus on improving the quality of remote instruction. Evoking misrecognition, a Black mother from Brooklyn who decided, like many Black caregivers, to keep her children in remote schooling for the year declared, “I feel like the city treats remote like an afterthought” (Shapiro, 2020b). To ignore their concerns by dedicating so many resources to reopening school buildings and so few to their children’s needs these parents argued, was misrecognition and maldistribution.

Discussion and Conclusion
Consistent with Fraser’s (1997, 2000, 2005) scholarship and Abu El-Haj’s (2006) work, we have identified multiple justice claims related to reopening NYCDOE schools in Fall 2020, including how and what school resources are distributed; whom district policies recognize; and who is represented in policy decision-making. By doing so, this article contributes to our understanding of the specific politics of school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic and more broadly to the ways we conceptualize justice in relation to education policy. Taken together, our findings contribute to the research about COVID-19 school reopening and paint a complex portrait of the substance of these debates. They also point to the expansive and intertwined ways that stakeholders understand (in)justice in school policy and policy debate, as some educators’ arguments for additional resources and consideration for the safety of teachers and communities of color were intertwined and punctuated with demands for a seat at the decision-making table. These findings underscore the importance of both education policy researchers and education policymakers more fully conceptualizing educational justice, a term which is increasingly common, but at times only vaguely explicated.

Our analysis draws attention to questions of justice for multiple stakeholders in public education. While previous studies have emphasized the conceptualizations of privileged actors, particularly education policymakers, we have highlighted the tensions between their justice claims and the claims of key stakeholders, including the mayor, educators, union leaders, and various families. What is more, these debates surfaced conflicting justice claims within stakeholder groups that are at times treated as monolithic, as illustrated by the conflicting claims advanced by various families. Importantly, in contrast to the lack of previous attention to teachers as a group that is subject to inequities, this study raises justice for educators as an important concern. Indeed, much public attention has been focused on how reopening debates surfaced competing justice claims between families and educators. Justice claims advanced by some families and teachers appeared incompatible, as when teachers expressed a need to stay home to stay safe while families of children with disabilities expressed the need for in-person instruction and support services. However, we also found a set of justice claims linking justice for teachers and justice for students of color, given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Latinx communities. This is notable, given how frequently the interests of teachers and students of color have been conceptualized as opposing (for a frequently cited example from NYC, see Perrillo, 2012).

We further find that stakeholders’ specific justice claims were often about the distribution of material resources schools offer, including the childcare families required as they worked amid a pandemic, and the social relationships that contributed to mental health for some (but certainly not all) students who attend them. These findings draw attention to resources beyond those that are expected to directly improve educational outcomes, such as funding, facilities, teachers, and course content. Our data highlight the social welfare role that schools play in ensuring families’ access to food, health services, and social-emotional well-being, in the absence of a broader social safety net, and situate such claims as relevant to conceptualizations of fair and just schools. Consistent with previous research on justice
claims, some stakeholders’ redistributive claims also drew attention to the systemic maldistribution of resources across schools and communities, arguing that unjust systems of schooling in the context of COVID-19 may further harm students, families, and educators in underresourced schools and communities.

Relatedly, the distribution of academic support was not widely articulated in our data except in relation to demands for more robust support for remote instruction. This is notable in light of the common belief that in-person school was superior to remote school and growing concerns about “learning loss” in research literature and public debate (Bailey et al., 2021; Horowitz, 2021; for others’ rejections of this claim, see Reich & Mehta, 2021). What is more, it stands in marked contrast with widespread conceptualizations of educational equity as delivery of instruction and resources. After 20 years of a nationwide embrace of high-stakes testing and a relatively narrow academic focus in the era of No Child Left Behind, one key implication of these findings is that we need a more expansive understanding of the just distribution of school resources than is commonly acknowledged. Our data further highlight the extent to which redistributive claims are intertwined with claims of recognition (having an equal sociocultural status, including feeling your knowledge, culture, and circumstances are recognized and cared for) and representation (having an equal political status, including having a say in matters that affect you), suggesting that these are also key elements of educational justice that policymakers and researchers should not overlook. This is especially true given the coronavirus’s disproportionate impact on many communities of color and significant racial differences among families’ choices to return children to in-person school.

Justice claims grounded in recognition and representation raise questions about the purposes and roles that schools play in different students’, families’, and educators’ lives, including not only academic achievement, but also childcare and social-emotional well-being. They suggest additional components of a just education, ones that are not widely integrated into education policymakers’ and researchers’ prevailing conceptions of educational equity. Crucially, debates over what resources should be redistributed are also questions of justice. Where de Blasio focused on access to food and in-person instruction, advantaged families focused on distribution of social-emotional well-being as an educational good. Neither of these claims recognized the needs of teachers nor represented the views of many low-income families and families of color. This calls into question the extent to which the arguments these stakeholders advanced were truly ones that would achieve justice. Likewise, the current call to address “learning loss” as an urgent matter of injustice assumes the desirability of pre-COVID-19 curriculum and pedagogy and the prioritization of academic outcomes. Our data suggest that position does not fully recognize many NYC families’ concerns. What “goods” or resources schools should distribute as an element of a just education is a question policymakers need to think through more carefully in relation to questions of recognition and representation.

Our findings make clear the extent to which stakeholders’ claims about COVID-19 school reopening are not only redistributive, representational, or recognitional, but also situated and relational. Fraser (2000) clarifies that claims of injustice, particularly claims of misrecognition, should be linked to institutional patterns that prevent particular groups from being full and equal partners in social interaction. Thus, our understanding of the tensions among competing justice claims must take into account the power arrangements at hand. For example, teachers’ claims of misrecognition are situated in the institutional contexts of (declining) union power, mayoral control of schools, and related neoliberal educational reform policies. These structural factors both overlap with and are distinct from those shaping the experiences of low-income families of color, many of whom urgently needed childcare yet grappled with previous experience with racist school policies and practices. A further structural consideration is the extreme segregation of NYC schools and neighborhoods. Advantaged families may have been isolated from those who preferred remote instruction, who often lived in communities that bore the brunt of the pandemic and racism within schools. Rather than asking which of these claims are “more valid,” analysts might overlay Fraser’s
Freidus and Turner (2005) heuristic with Abu El-Haj’s (2006) conceptualization of relational justice to examine the role that unequal power relations play in producing each claim, as well as the tensions among them.

However, our research also suggests that not every justice claim is equally legitimate. We should expect some justice claims will serve as window dressing for injustice. The language of equity and social justice is frequently co-opted into racist projects (Melamed, 2011; see also Omi & Winant, 2015), and can undermine education policies that are equity-minded (Lewis-Durham, 2020; Turner, 2015, 2020b). For example, our findings echo previous research critiquing blanket claims about “all kids” as politically expedient notions of equal distribution of resources where needs-based distribution might be more appropriate. Using Fraser’s framework, we argue that de Blasio’s claim that families need childcare and access to other resources that schools provide lacks the specificity required for true recognition, including consideration of families’ diverging concerns and the diverse neighborhood and community contexts in which they were situated. Moreover, de Blasio’s plan for school reopening appeared to overlook key relational justice concerns. In light of the racialized disparities among the students who actually returned to in-person schooling, the mayor’s stance that he was merely responding to families’ desires seems either misguided or misleading. Although his claim was advanced in the name of justice, it ignored parallel, racialized disparities among the city’s most marginalized families’ opportunities to be heard.

Furthermore, an individual’s or group’s feeling of being wronged is not necessarily evidence that an injustice has occurred. For example, while both the UFT and the CSA made extensive claims about their lack of representation in reopening decisions, the teachers’ union played a significant role in shaping the details of NYCDOE reopening policy, whereas the principals’ union did not. Similarly, although advantaged families claimed that the mayor ignored their needs, de Blasio cited the thousands of calls he had received from parents when he announced his decision to reopen school buildings. While our dataset did not allow us to identify the veracity of these or other claims, nor can we establish their relationship to broader institutional patterns, we see it as imperative that future studies undertake this work. The need to discern between legitimate justice claims and claims that are unlinked to institutional patterns of injustice underscores the complexity of assessing justice in educational policy and decision-making. Claims grounded in patterns of inequity make implicit or explicit demands that unjust systems be transformed into just ones. Remediing distributional, recognitional, and representational injustices may require significant reworking or even, transformation, of the cultural and political status quo embedded in our institutions. Yet without institutional change, injustice remains.

We believe educational policy researchers, like researchers of educational practice, would benefit from examining justice claims “in terms of the relationships they produce between groups—relationships that create or limit possibilities for building more equitable schools” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 200). While students have been the focus of most prior research on conceptions of equity and on justice claims (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2006; Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020; Dumas, 2009), our research foregrounds the need for a broader notion of equity or justice. The notion of “school communities” offered by some educators might be one avenue toward conceptualizing a more expansive notion of educational justice that is necessary in this moment. Our conceptualizations of educational justice must include children, families, and educators and speak to the varied dimensions of injustice—distributive, recognitional, and representational—that they may experience. It is clear that the issues raised here are not restricted to school reopening during one truly unprecedented year in U.S. schooling. They are rooted in deeper, enduring questions about justice and educational policy that offer critical lessons for future educational researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders.
APPENDIX A
NYCDOE COVID 2020 Response Timeline

| Date                     | Event                                                                                          |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| March 12, 2020 to March 14, 2020 | Individual NYCDOE schools closed based on positive COVID case reports.                          |
| March 15, 2020           | Mayor Bill de Blasio closes all NYCDOE schools.                                                  |
| April 6, 2020            | Governor Andrew Cuomo declares all schools in NY State will remain closed for the coming weeks.     |
| April 11, 2020           | De Blasio announces rest of school year will be remote for NYC public schools.                    |
| May 1, 2020              | Cuomo announces rest of school year will be remote for all schools in NY State.                   |
| July 8, 2020             | NYCDOE announces intention to offer blended and remote instruction.                               |
| July 27, 2020            | NYCDOE opens enrollment preferences survey for families.                                          |
| July 31, 2020            | De Blasio announces that schools will not open/remain open if citywide weekly average of positive tests exceeds 3%. |
| September 16, 2020       | First day of school: remote instruction begins for all NYCDOE students.                          |
| September 21, 2020       | NYCDOE 3k, PreK, and District 75 (for students with complex disabilities) buildings open for blended learning. |
| September 28, 2020       | NYCDOE K–5 school buildings open for blended learning.                                            |
| October 1, 2020          | NYCDOE middle and high schools open for blended learning.                                         |
| October 5, 2020          | NY State closes 100 NYC schools in nine “Orange Zone” zip codes for 2 weeks.                     |
| October 26, 2020         | NYCDOE announces that students will not receive failing grades for the 2020 and 2021 school year. |
| November 2, 2020         | NYCDOE tells families they must register for in-person learning by November 15 or their children will remain in exclusively remote instruction for the rest of the school year. |
| November 19, 2020        | NYC citywide positivity rate exceeds 3%. All NYCDOE school buildings are closed.                 |
| December 7, 2020         | K–5 schools reopen for blended learning.                                                          |
| December 10, 2020        | District 75 schools reopen for blended learning.                                                   |

Note. This timeline does not include many NY State policy decisions. NYCDOE = New York City Department of Education.

APPENDIX B
Coding Scheme Utilized for This Analysis

| Category       | Code                  | Definition                                                                 | Example                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Representation | [General/other than below] | Justice as politics: ensuring equal participation and voice                | Includes cases that describe union input/requests. Also includes reference to nonunion status, IF that status is implied/presumed to have an impact on teacher’s voice, job, and so on. |
| Protest        |                       | Organized political action                                                  | Teachers at a handful of New York City schools on Monday refused to enter their classrooms and instead worked on their back- to-school plans outside in a show of protest. Others picketed in the morning, waving signs at honking cars and chanting, “Not until it’s safe!” (Chalkbeat, September 14, 2020) |
### Category Code Definition Example

| Category            | Code                        | Definition                                                                 | Example                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Redistribution      | [General/other than below]  | Justice as structure: equal material resources                              | A friend who works in chronically underfunded city high schools pointed out that privileged parents like me are getting a taste of something that other urban parents have always gone through. (<i>NY Times</i>, August 25, 2020) |
| Family resources    |                             | References to individual families’ resources                                |                                                                                                                                       |
| School resources    |                             | references to education budgets, current or future, as well as other material resources | The city is also facing a budget squeeze from the state, which is temporarily withholding 20% of regular payments to districts across New York but announced Wednesday that it won’t withhold any money at the end of this month. If Governor Andrew Cuomo decides to make these temporary cuts permanent, that could result in $2.3 billion of cuts for city schools, and the city could see 9,000 teachers laid off, according to Chancellor Richard Carranza. (<i>Chalkbeat</i>, September 16, 2020) |
| Recognition         | [General/other than below]  | Justice as culture: ensuring recognition of groups’ humanity and equal status | “If you think about the history of people of color used as guinea pigs and knowing that history, I don’t feel safe,” said Mejia, member of District 1’s Community Education Council, who acknowledged that city schools have so far not been shown to be major coronavirus spreaders. (<i>Chalkbeat</i>, October 28, 2020) |
| Race/ethnicity      |                             | Institutionalized patterns of cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect. Includes stating or implying that considerations of race and/or racism should or should not be a part of Department of Education policy |
| Teachers’ rights    |                             | References or claims related to valuing teachers’ safety and rights; inverse: statements questioning teachers’ motives or argument for wanting to stay remote | “We had to decide: Are we martyrs or are we heroes? We chose heroes, and applied for accommodations,” she said. (<i>Chalkbeat</i>, August 31, 2020) |
| Risks/safety concerns | Learning loss | Concerns about students being unable to learn remotely (due to technology, remote instruction, etc.) | While much of the reopening logistics focused on personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, and ventilation, comparatively little energy has been spent adapting curriculum to suit the remote learning environment. And |
| Category                | Code             | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Example                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mental health          | Concerns about   | without the education department providing a wide array of materials and templates for strong remote teaching, schools are largely coming up with their own strategies. That will likely produce uneven results, experts say. (Chalkbeat, September 16, 2020) |
|                        | students’ social |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Now Ms. Berroa is worried her daughter will fall further behind in reading. And she sees all her children turning inward, and becoming more antisocial, even on the playground. (NY Times September 14, 2020) |
|                        | isolation or     |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | “If you think about the history of people of color used as guinea pigs and knowing that history, I don’t feel safe,” said Mejia, member of District 1’s Community Education Council. (Chalkbeat, October 28, 2020) |
|                        | emotional health |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | “It’s about life or death to me,” Mejia said, citing coronavirus concerns. “It’s not even an option—I’m not opting in.” (Chalkbeat, October 28, 2020)                                                                 |
| Protection             | Belief that      |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | “Why isn’t the government, particularly here in New York City, helping the schools, funding the schools properly, so that the schools can be a safe place where their kids can go?” asks Alderman. Though parents are blaming themselves for not being able to make their lives work, she said, “Someone failed them.” (NY Times, August 25, 2020) |
|                        | students will    |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | For those wealthy enough to have second homes, one obvious-seeming option is to take their children out of the city, and transfer them to schools in the country or near the beach, where classes tend to be smaller and the air is, in theory, cleaner. (NY Times, August 1, 2020) |
|                        | be better       |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | “Does the mayor think we’re all stay-at-home moms?” asked Martinez, who lives in Harlem. “I ran out of family leave.” (NY Times, November 20, 2020)                                                                 |
|                        | protected        |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | from risks of   |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | racism, bad      |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | teaching, and    |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | other dangers    |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | at home         |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Transmission           | Concerns about   |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | COVID-19         |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | transmission     |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | (between students, staff, families) |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Safety net             | [General/other than below] |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Support for public     | References to   |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| education              | impact of       |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | reopening       |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | policies on     |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | support for     |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | system, including votes, public opinion, and pulling students from the public school system |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Childcare              | References to   |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | families’ need  |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | for childcare,  |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | including       |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | references to   |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | parents’ need   |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | to return to    |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                        | work            |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

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