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Covid as Crucible: Humanizing Professional Learning within Neoliberal Urban School Contexts

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Abstract
This article juxtaposes neoliberal, high-stakes accountability policy solutions within an urban school with findings about a humanizing professional learning community offered during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of a paradigm shift to ameliorate inequities embedded within P-12 urban schools.

Keywords Professional learning · Humanizing pedagogies · Neoliberalism · High-stakes accountability

Introduction

A crucible withstands extreme heat to melt metal and burn off impurities. Figuratively, a crucible is a severe test, trial, or extreme challenge. In both cases, after the extremity of heat or trial, what remains is a substance stronger and more durable than the original. Ironically, the COVID virus created an opportunity

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to ameliorate what decades of neoliberal policies have struggled to do, addressing "educational debts accrued" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) against Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other historically excluded students of Color who are most often served in urban school contexts.

Neoliberal policies are derived from neoliberal logic—an individualistic, technocratic stance that "reconstitutes the social sphere as primarily economic and the market as the central mechanism for social change" (Sharma, 2022, p. 545). Neoliberal policies, often in the form of high-stakes teacher accountability measures, have been created as market-based solutions to address educational disparities existing between white and historically excluded students (He et al., 2015; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017). For example, teacher retention and performance issues are often addressed through measures like fidelity to scripted curricula, high-stakes testing, teacher evaluations, and technocratic professional development. These solutions paternalistically assume that standardized teacher inputs (e.g. professional development) and outputs (e.g. standardized teaching) will result in favorable student learning and growth defined and measured through standardized assessments (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Warner et al., 2017).

High-stakes accountability policies decenter the desires, experiences, and perspectives of historically marginalized students, and their families and communities. Most recently, neoliberal directives from the U.S. Department of Education have exacerbated this decentering by actively working to erase and eradicate teaching and research that centers Black, Latinx, and Indigenous ways of knowing and being seen in actions such as the "Dear Colleague" letter (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act in Light of Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (PDF)). The self-titled "end DEI [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion]" portal, where students, parents, and teachers are told they can report discriminatory "divisive ideologies and indoctrination" (U.S. Department of Education "End DEI" Portal) serves as a mechanism to enable this erasure.

These actions egregiously undermine humanizing instruction that centers the cultural knowledge, lived experiences, healthy interpersonal relationships, critical consciousness, and liberation of Black, Latinx, Indigenous and other historically ignored youth (Braun & Marion, 2022; Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Hollins, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019; Salazar, 2013). Mitigating educational disparities requires turning away from neoliberal logics, policies, and practices that impede humanization and toward humanizing pedagogies. According to del Carmen Salazar (2013), there are five tenets foundational to humanizing pedagogies:

(1) The full development of the person is essential for humanization
(2) To deny someone else's humanization is also to deny one's own
(3) The journey toward humanization is both an individual and collective endeavor toward critical consciousness
(4) Critical reflection and action can transform structures that impede our own and others' humanness, thus facilitating liberation for all, and
(5) Educators have a responsibility to enact pedagogies and practices that are humanizing (p. 136).

This paper illustrates how, building on these five tenets, we moved toward *humanizing* professional learning (PL) within the neoliberal context of the large urban school district where our PL was conducted during the acute phase of the COVID pandemic (the 2020–2021 school year). By creating PL around humanizing pedagogies, our primary goal was to help educators humanize *themselves and their historically excluded students* during the unprecedented crisis by prioritizing their professional judgement and ways of knowing over neoliberal, high-stakes accountability systems. Praxis, the combination of dialogue, action and reflection, served as an alternative form of accountability that disrupts paternalism, enabling educators to be answerable to communities who have been historically and systematically neglected and dis-serviced (Patel, 2015; Tuck & Fine, 2007). We worked dialogically with teachers to foster *praxical accountability* that made space for meaningful and transformative learning for youth and teachers. The research question that guided our qualitative study was, *In what ways does an intergenerational group of teachers take up humanizing pedagogies while engaging in humanizing PL?*

Neoliberal Logic and High-Stakes Accountability in Urban Schools

Built conceptually on the idea that markets are free and fair enterprises for all, neoliberal logic asserts that "society's inequalities can be tempered by … choice, competition, and accountability" (He et al., 2015, p. 169). Nested within this logic, public education has become a multi-headed "hydra" (Picower & Mayorga, 2015) infiltrating every aspect of teaching and learning, and perpetuating dehumanization in students' and teachers' experiences (Dunn, 2020). Neoliberalism has created a "vast managerial and audit culture rooted in market-based and corporate technical rationalities that seek to optimize institutional efficiency and profit opportunities through measurement-based performance metrics, evaluations, numerical targets, and competitive accountability schemas" (He et al., 2015, p. 288). In this "task-oriented enterprise where students are pressed to learn more in order to earn more, [and] compete with one another" (He et al., 2015, p. 169), inequitable policies driving instruction, curriculum, and assessment have become surveillance mechanisms (Mirra & Rogers, 2020).

In urban schools, a context "structured by social inequality that is unfair at best and untenable at worst" (Mirra & Rogers, 2020, p. 1047), neoliberal logic results in high-stakes policies that "characterize teaching and learning as activities occurring in a vacuum outside of social and political contexts"(Mirra & Rogers, 2020, p. 1047). Mirra and Rogers (2020) for example, describe how high-stakes "'no excuses' policies" characterize students' "academic or behavioral struggles as failures of personal responsibility rather than responses to community stressors" (p. 1047). Furthermore, high-stakes accountability solutions assume that standardized teacher inputs (e.g. professional development, scripted curriculum) and outputs (e.g. standardized teaching) will result in favorable student learning and growth defined and measured through standardized assessments (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Warner et al., 2017). While being held accountable for meeting the same standardized learning goals, teachers in urban schools experience less instructional time and more

challenges than their counterparts in more affluent communities (Mirra & Rogers, 2020, p. 1047). Mirra and Roger's (2020) large-scale study of high-stakes accountability measures in urban schools, for instance, found that teachers experience more than eight extra testing days than those in suburban contexts, while managing higher student stressors and inequitable teaching and learning conditions. Thus high-stakes accountability policies ultimately reduce the actual amount of instructional time available to teachers, "while creating additional demands on that time" (p. 1059).

Dehumanizing working conditions, expectations, and mandates created by high-stakes accountability ignore urban schools' and districts' unique challenges particularly related to teacher efficacy. For example, urban schools in general have extremely high turnover rates and a disproportionate number of inexperienced teachers who require sustained, relevant, and contextualized professional learning opportunities (Lee et al., 2020). Considering that teacher proficiency typically takes seven years to develop, student growth and development in many urban schools is stymied by an experience vacuum (Carroll & Foster, 2010). Thus, despite the adoption of standardized solutions, urban schools that serve a large number of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students continue to be identified as "failing" (Braun et al., 2006, 2010; de Saxe et al., 2020).

Historic and present reality have revealed that market-based solutions to inequity have resulted in little social change for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people (Fraser, 2018). For example, one neoliberal solution to failing schools involves "school choice," a set of programs and policies that theoretically allow families to use public dollars to access public or private schools of choice outside of their local area. However, Pattillo's (2015) interviews with 67 Black working class families revealed school-choice policies in Chicago to be burdensome, disempowering, and confusing for families. Further, a study of school choice in Charlotte, North Carolina found that white families were more likely than Black families to receive their "first choice," and that school choice policies actually resulted in declining outcomes for Black students (Godwin et al., 2006). Ultimately, within this overarching neoliberal landscape where learning objectives predetermined by the knowledge economy, families, learners, and teachers have become commodities or human capital (He et al., 2015).

Professional Learning

We intentionally use the term *professional learning* instead of *professional development*, and so we will briefly distinguish these terms. Webster-Wright (2009) argues that professional development largely positions professionals as 'in need of training.' Within this neoliberal perspective, professional development is a decontextualized transaction focused on the transmission of knowledge from expert to novice (Kohli et al., 2015). Kohli et al. (2015) caution against the anti-dialogical nature of such professional development, which positions teachers as tabula rasas and urges compliance. Such professional development undermines teachers' humanity, constrains their ability to humanize others, and perpetuates deprofessionalization (Kohli et al., 2015). Paired with the scripted curricula endemic to urban schools (Ingersoll

& Collins, 2017), there is little room for educators in these settings to contextualize instruction within the particular needs of communities or particular learners or for them to sharpen and actualize their professional judgment (Dunn, 2020).

In contrast, *professional learning* (PL) is a situated activity that is mediated by factors such as the sociocultural context, organizational culture, and school-level inequities related to funding, testing, and instructional mandates (Skerrett, 2010). In urban schools, as noted above, contextualized knowledge building is especially important as teachers are constrained by neoliberal policies that disproportionately affect their day-to-day instruction (Navarro, 2020; Skerrett, 2010; Stillman, 2011). Yet, urban districts' PL opportunities predominantly focus on content knowledge (Laguardia et al., 2002). Skerrett's (2010) study of professional learning in urban contexts highlighted barriers such as standardized curricula, irregularity, and mandated assessments. She forwards that teachers in urban contexts need long-term, reciprocal engagement with meaningful cultural tools that facilitate authentic and transformative professional learning. For example, Kohli et al. (2015) engaged one cultural tool, dialogic ac1970tion, applied to what they call "critical professional development," which stands in contrast to the technocratic, training approach to PD. Taking up Freire's () notion of dialogical action, Kohli et al. (2015) found that critical professional development promoted authentic dialogue, distributed leadership, and fostered a sense of community amongst teachers as they worked to contextualize learnings about equity and justice in their urban classrooms.

Humanizing Professional Learning in a High-Stakes Accountability Context

Like critical professional development, humanizing professional learning counters typical professional development offered in urban contexts (Kohli et al., 2015). Humanizing PL is rooted in the concept of humanization. Humanization is the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative beings who participate in and with the world (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). To become more fully human, humans must become conscious of their presence in the world and how they might transform it (Salazar, 2013, p. 126). In contrast, dehumanization denies a person's humanity, divesting people of their cultural, linguistic, and intellectual assets in service of assimilation/standardization and exploitation by neoliberal logics (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Freire, 1970, 2008).

Humanizing Professional Learning: A Conceptual Framework

Humanization confronts the "colonial and dehumanizing consciousness" and fosters "knowledge (and love) of self, solidarity, and self-determination" (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021, p. 2). During the 2020–2021 academic school year, the height of the pandemic, our research team wanted to move our concept rooted in humanization, "humanizing professional learning" into action and study the process. Over the

course of the year-long professional learning, the in-service and pre-service teacher participants helped us understand and articulate a conceptual framework for humanizing professional learning. These four key elements of humanizing professional learning are: (a) cultivating learner-centered teaching, (b) embedding educators' teaching and learning experiences within PL, (c) engaging in dialogic and co-constructed learning toward recursive capacity-building, and (d) positioning educators as *knowers* with something important to contribute. These components are illustrated within the Humanizing Professional Learning Model (Fig. 1).

Grounded in a non-hierarchical approach to teacher learning, this conceptual framework builds theoretically from teaching as an interpretive process (Hollins, 2011) and humanizing pedagogies (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Teaching as an interpretive process requires "teaching with purpose," (Hollins, 2019, p. 19) through a careful analysis of teaching focused on learners' responses to planned learning experiences. This perspective views teaching as a complex and positions "context [as] the gravitational field and the gravitational force for teaching and learning" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 65).

Placing learners at the center of teaching necessitates humanization, "becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons" (del Carmen Salazar, 2013, p. 126). Enaction of this framework necessitated dialogic processes and sociocultural tools. Structured dialogues (Hollins, 2006), a sociocultural tool for facilitating conversation with teachers, facilitated student-centered conversations that made space for educators to discuss problems of practice while building upon their collective knowledge. Rooted in this conceptual framework, we also developed tools that helped educators trouble school policies, practices, curricula, and teaching philosophies to be used in each module. Examples of these tools included a "Mapping My School Culture," exercise adapted from Okun and Jones's White Dominant Culture & Something Different (1999/2021) in which educators examined aspects of neoliberal culture in their contexts. Specifically, educators identified policies and practices reflecting neoliberal culture (e.g., competition, individualism, transactional goals and relationships) and identified counter policies and practices that were humanizing (Allen et al., 2022).

Fig. 1 Humanizing professional learning model

Another tool invited educators to interrogate standardized curricular practices. For example the "SEL Interrogation Tool" ("Appendix B") asked educators to consider the ways in which the SEL framework[1] (and other character education programs) are ahistorical and do not account for the ways systemic oppression disproportionately burdens the social-emotional well-being of Black, Indigenous, and other people of Color or for racism, privilege, access, and the varying degrees to which young people have capacity to make choices for themselves.

Research Methodologies

The mid-Atlantic urban school district where we engaged in professional learning served 80,000 P–12 students at the time of our humanzing PL and study. Fifty-eight percent of those students were low-income, and 76 percent identified as Black, 14 percent as Latinx, 8 percent as white, 1 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1 percent as American Indian. Ten percent of the district's students were multilingual, and 15 percent had identified special needs at study inception. Similar to other urban and/or low-income communities nationally, students in this school district had been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic(s), facing issues of access, income, and experiencing higher-than-average COVID contraction rates, which made teaching and learning even more challenging than usual (Education Trust-New York, 2020). Neoliberal policy reforms predating the pandemic mandated high-stakes teacher evaluations, curriculum fidelity, and rigid assessment timelines within the district (Craig, 2020; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008); these policies remained in place (Allen et al., 2022).

In this context, over the course of one year, we co-facilitated online synchronous and asynchronous professional learning with several preservice teachers and a large group of P-12 educators including an art teacher, a high school librarian, a teacher who worked in a district juvenile detention center, a Physical Education teacher, and many others (N = 73). The majority of practitioners in the learning community were teachers of Color. They had a range of teaching experience (4–15 years) and were initially teaching online in K-12 grade classrooms at the beginning of the study, with many required to move back to face-to-face format prior to widespread vaccine availability. Three preservice teachers participated as they completed their student teaching in the same context. They were enrolled at the university where Allen and Nash worked at the time and included one white man, one Asian man, and one woman of Color.

Within the large community, we created smaller learning pods, each including 5–10 educators. Each small group was co-facilitated by one of the four authors and a teacher co-facilitator. The teacher co-facilitators were invited to be part of the project via purposeful and snowball sampling methods (Creswell & Poth, 2016;

[1] Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) typically focuses on self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (*CASEL Framework*.) The concepts of growth mindset and self-efficacy are also often part of schools' efforts to cultivate SEL.

Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They were teaching in urban schools across the country and had already evidenced commitments to humanizing pedagogies either through the authors' personal observations or through recommendations by colleagues. Teacher co-facilitators included one Black man, one white woman, and nine Black women. The authors of this article are four university researchers who have engaged in teacher education and professional learning collectively over three decades. Three of the authors (Keisha Allen, Sakeena Everett, and Kyla Thomas) are Black women, one (Kindel Nash) is a white woman and all are former P-12 teachers committed to the liberation of Black, Latinx and Indigenous students and their communities.

Cultivating a Humanizing Professional Learning Community

Unlike anti-dialogic (Kohli et al., 2015) professional development that is passive and individualistic, conceptually we anchored four learning modules to epistemic practices of teaching as an interpretive process (Hollins, 2019). Teaching as an interpretive process requires that teachers contextualize teaching based on learner contexts and social and academic needs through the epistemic practices of focused inquiry, directed observation, guided practice, and structured dialogue (Hollins, 2015) (Fig. 2). These epistemic practices facilitate teachers' understanding of the relationship between teaching and learning cycles, instruction, assessment, and socioemotional and academic outcomes (Hollins, 2011). We designed four asynchronous modules aligned with tenets of humanizing pedagogies to support educators' progression from theory to practice. These modules were:

	Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**
	Focused Inquiry	**Directed Observation**	**Guided Practice**	**Structured Dialogue**
Description of Epistemic Practices	Engaging in investigation of phenomena that influences the processes and conditions for learning.	Looking specifically at the ways the phenomena under study are manifested in a specific context, and how learners in that environment respond.	Enacting the phenomena through planning, interpreting, translating, and revising learning experiences.	Dialoguing using a cultural tool that facilitates engaged, student-centered conversations while respecting the knowledge of the learning community.
Examples	Read Camangian et al, 2021 Use the "SEL Interrogation Tool" to understand SEL in your context (Appendix B). Reflect and connect.	Observe "My Multicultural Self" or "Looking at Race and Racial Identity in Children's Books" Respond to reflective questions.	Create and annotate a humanizing SEL lesson.	See protocol (Appendix A)

Fig. 2 Humanizing professional learning structure and module example

Module 1: Understanding systems of oppression
Module 2: Funds of knowledge
Module 3: Criticality
Module 4: Humanization, not social emotional learning (SEL).

Each module centered a guiding text and illustrations of humanizing principles and practices, which those participating in the PL implemented in their online learning/school contexts.

At the mid and culminating point of each module, we met for synchronous "structured dialogues." Structured dialogues are a cultural tool that can facilitate learner-centered conversations while elevating the collective knowledge of the community (Hollins, 2006). A foremost principle of our humanizing PL, which we shared at the beginning of each synchronous structured dialogue session to facilitate humanization and dialogue was, "Everyone is a knower and doer and has something to contribute." These monthly, co-facilitated structured dialogues created space for educators to learn from one another as they discussed successes and challenges in their teaching practice and how they made small adjustments to center their students (Allen et al., 2022).

We were also responsive to educators' feelings of fear and shock after the January 6, 2021 insurrection and hosted "drop in" synchronous Friday sessions bi-weekly to help teachers to reflect in-the-moment on how to address students' questions and feelings about their sociopolitical context. Even after the shock of the insurrection died down, we continued to host Friday "drop-ins." Collectively, these efforts toward humanization felt urgent, not just as a result of the pandemic and what was happening politically, but also because of the ways that neoliberal logics furthered policies and practices that did not prioritize the humanity of teachers, students and families.

Methods

Embedding the study of humanizing PL within the modules themselves, this project relied methodologically upon Projects in Humanization (PiH) (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013). PiH are rooted in "dialogic consciousness raising and … relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013, p. 137). We also utilized case study methods to understand how district educators engaged in humanizing PL during COVID-19. Case studies are empirical inquiries that strive for an in-depth understanding of phenomena within a real-world context (Yin, 2014, p. 16). Both PiH and case study created a rich context for understanding how teachers navigated neoliberal practices and policies as they engaged humanizing pedagogies. Working in tandem, these methodological approaches provided tools that allowed us to disrupt systemic inequalities by refusing damage-centered research data collection and analysis methods (Tuck, 2009) that often frame urban teachers as deficient.

Our guiding research question was: *In what ways does an intergenerational group of teachers take up humanizing pedagogies while engaging in humanizing PL?*

Data Collection and Analysis

Consistent with case study methodology, we collected multiple forms of data. This paper includes data from twenty video recordings generated during the structured dialogue for module 4, researcher field notes taken during structured dialogues, three video recorded Friday drop-in sessions, and teacher artifacts (lesson plan reflections, reflections on student work). After engaging in collective sensemaking through dialogic storying (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), all video recorded sessions were thematically coded (Cornish et al., 2014) using the collaborative qualitative analysis software, Dedoose. Aligned with PiH (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), dialogic stories were the primary unit of data analysis. Data analysis discussions centered on dialogic spirals—data conversations involving continuous and collective back-and-forth telling, listening, questioning, and member-checking (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017).

Dialogic Collective Sense-Making

We developed a collective sense-making protocol (Fig. 3) that guided collaborative data analysis discussions (Cornish et al., 2014) rooted in "critical listening" (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017, p. 390S). Directly after each structured dialogue, researchers and co-facilitators (dyads) met to identify initial themes and impressions and uncover patterns from the session; the researcher recorded this dialogic spiral and took additional notes. Then, in an initial research team dialogic spiral, we used field notes and the dyad dialogic spiral transcript/notes to crystalize main themes and record collective interpretations. Later, to work toward interdialogical subjectivity or consensus through dialogue (Saldaña, 2021), the research team interrogated initial interpretations and identified overarching patterns in a secondary dialogic spiral. Finally, we engaged in a dialogic spiral with educator participants to co-construct understandings about themes and patterns and member-check interpretations. We

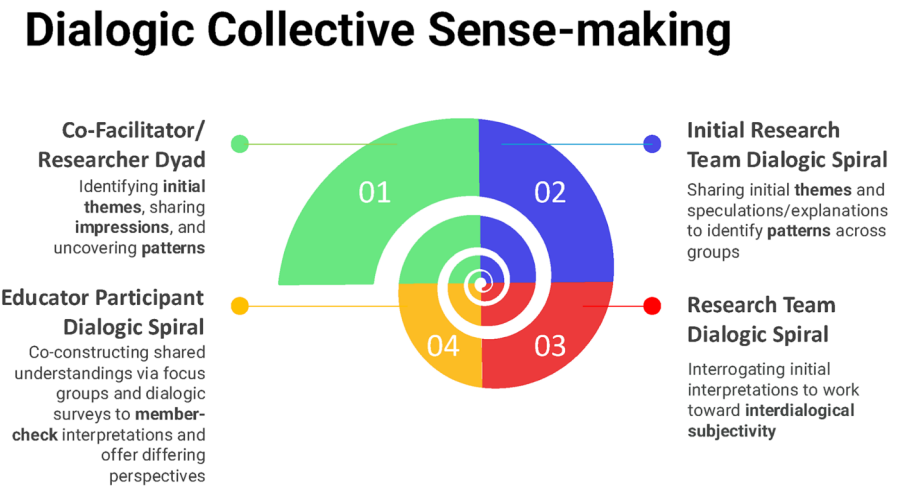

Fig. 3 Dialogic collective sense-making protocol

followed up with a dialogic online survey that provided supplementary space for educators to share any additional and/or differing interpretations (Fig. 3).

Thematic Coding

This process of dialogic collective sense-making was augmented by thematic coding, a qualitative coding approach that embraces subjectivity and collective interpretation in categorizing concepts and mapping relationships between concepts and the theoretical framework (humanization/humanizing pedagogies) (Cornish et al., 2014). After dialogic collective sensemaking, we created a codebook containing the communally constructed themes, which became primary codes. We used these primary codes to thematically code all structured dialogue transcripts again as a whole. Of the 16 overarching primary codes we co-constructed, six are addressed in this paper. These include *accountability, agency, competition/individualism, dehumanization, deprofessionalization, and healing*. Instead of relying solely on our own interpretations, this collaborative process of data analysis facilitated collective sense-making in identifying neoliberal policies and practices and instances when teachers' engaged in student-centered *praxical accountability* that countered neoliberalism.

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

Since this qualitative study is aligned with humanizing axiological and epistemological research paradigms, issues of reliability and validity are of less concern than trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability (Cornish et al., 2014; Guba, 1981). A trustworthy and credible study can help others understand the experiences of study participants, in this case educators teaching through the pandemic within a neoliberal context. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, we made sure our theoretical framework—humanizing pedagogies—permeated every aspect of our inquiry (Guba, 1981). Further enhancing trustworthiness and credibility, we included detailed, thick descriptions in researcher field notes, and utilized common structured dialogue and collective sensemaking protocols throughout data collection and analysis. Taking these steps strengthens the transferability of our results across similar contexts (Guba, 1981).

Next, we focus on findings about humanizing professional learning that fosters praxical accountability and that prioritizes educators' humanity and professional judgement; their humanization for all.

Toward Praxical Accountability: Findings

We have previously published findings focused on how humanizing professional learning supports teacher agency and helps teachers develop urgent pedagogical tools (Allen et al., 2022). Here, we focus on findings that illustrate how an intergenerational group of teachers took up humanizing pedagogies in ways that nurtured praxical accountability, even within their neoliberal context. Praxical accountability

is marked by humanizing actions and commitments that center the desires, experiences, and perspectives of historically marginalized communities. It is transformative resistance that requires answerability to the realities of marginalized communities. Praxical accountability engages two humanizing pedagogic principles, (1) "critical reflection and action can transform structures that impede our own and others' humanness, thus facilitating liberation for all" and (2) that "to deny someone else's humanization is also to deny one's own" (del Carmen Salazar, 2013, p. 136). In other words, to enact praxical accountability, teachers must critically reflect and ground their actions in humanization. However, in order to do so, teachers need to be humanized themselves, and be able to trust that their professional judgement is worthy.

In contrast, neoliberal, high-stakes accountability in educational contexts prioritizes standardized actions and policies that devalue and dehumanize the experiences of teachers and of historically marginalized students, their families, and their communities. For example, during our professional learning, students were subject to remote standardized testing during the peak of the COVID health crisis, among countless other unprecedented challenges. To illuminate this point, one teacher discussed how the district required her to administer the *Woodcock Johnson* (Schrank and Wendling, 2018) remotely to preschoolers; an English as a Second language teacher similarly talked about how she was mandated to administer the WIDA (2020) assessment remotely, taking away "important class time with my students." Teachers described such mandates as "demoralizing" and "dehumanizing for kids and teachers." Another simply commented: "I wrote a poem called, 'My principal thinks I'm a robot.'"

Praxical Accountability Through Critical Reflection and Action

Despite the high-stakes accountability context of the school district, our humanizing PL countered anti-dialogic (Kohli et al., 2015) practices common within professional development, creating conditions for praxical accountability through critical reflection and action. Our fourth Module, *Humanization, not SEL*, the culminating module of the collective PL, focused on humanization instead of the popular social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. The module was linked to Camangian and Cariaga (2021)'s anchor text, *Social and emotional learning is hegemonic miseducation: Students deserve humanization instead*, which suggests that teaching centered on dialectic interrogation of colonizing and life-affirming practices would be a more humanizing way to foster students' social and emotional health and well being. Building upon the notion of pedagogical dialectics (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021), educators interrogated and discussed the extent to which their SEL curricula and pedagogy upheld neoliberal, white supremacist logics (Diamond & Gomez, 2023) or affirmed the lives of Black and Latinx learners in their classrooms. After engaging with this text and the SEL Interrogation tool ("Appendix B"), during a structured dialogue for this module, one third grade teacher foregrounded what she came to identify as the dehumanizing limitations of her school's SEL curricula,

> Criticism that I have of the curriculum that we're using now is that it takes these sort of intuitive skills that kids do all the time and it tries to break it down into these regimented steps that are just unnatural for kids to use. When in reality they're using these skills all the time and it turns it into this thing that they have to like relearn when in reality they already know how to do this.

Others expressed similar critiques about what they perceived as a disingenuous focus on SEL. One seventh grade English Language Arts teacher called it a "buzzword;" "So if you drop SEL, if you drop restorative practice, if you drop trauma-informed care, if you drop this, that, and the other, then the buzz words, you're perceived as doing something." A fifth grade teacher remarked, "SEL, with [the] curriculum, it seems to be less about the actual kids and more about like, … you look good on paper." An elementary school curriculum specialist noted, " it's a transactional relationship… rather than like we're a community, we're cultivating something that is nurturing, you know, it's like a transactional type of deal."

The teachers' critique of the existing SEL curriculum illustrates the importance of teachers utilizing their professional judgment and contextualized knowledge of students to mediate curricula choices that are often denied teachers in urban schools (Mirra & Rogers, 2020). It also reveals an understanding of an underlying assumption that valid knowledge exists solely within the school walls, implied within conversations about learning loss during COVID. These teachers' critiques challenge paternalistic, deficit perspectives of urban communities embedded within market-based reforms like packaged SEL curricula that reject students' lived experiences and prior knowledge (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021) and deny their community, linguistic, and intellectual resources (Engzell el al., 2021). Yet, praxical accountability goes beyond critique. Teachers' critical reflections led them to adapt SEL curricula in ways that were accountable to communities, not "buzzwords." One teacher adjusted the existing anticipatory exercises at the beginning of a new SEL unit to "include real world connections for students to anchor skills that they would be learning to their existing funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). A preschool teacher declared, "SEL means much more than just a check-in to me," noting, that while,

> The SEL curriculum has questions like 'Would you rather eat ice cream for dinner?' which doesn't really deal with the meaty things kids are dealing with right now. So instead, I try to create a space where students can just share something they love. It often ends up lasting thirty minutes in the morning, but it seems to help the kids.

These adjustments are examples of praxical accountability, as teachers refused paternalistic curricular choices that undermined what they knew to be necessary for their students. In these examples, teachers chose to engage in humanizing instruction that centered their students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences. They prioritized healthy interpersonal relationships and critical consciousness rather than viewing SEL as merely a check-in or a set of prescriptive questions (Braun & Marion, 2022; Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Hollins, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Salazar, 2013).

Teachers engaged in praxical accountability to make adjustments to other aspects of their curriculum throughout the humanizing PL. A high school Health teacher critically reflected on such actions; "we have to find a way to … help the kids understand that you have to think bigger than the system." One fourth grade teacher, reflecting the humanizing principle of critical reflection and action, discussed how she made changes to her daily schedule and curriculum over the course of the humanizing PL:

> I changed my schedule, and I teach sometimes differently than the order of my curriculum. Some things I saw in the beginning I knew just would not work to benefit them. I took it to my principal, and she was ok with everything I switched it to!

The teacher discussed how important it was that her administrator supported her decision-making. She also acknowledged that others within our humanizing PL community did not have the same luxury of administrative support, noting, "I wish that everyone was able to speak up like me, but because of their timelines and testing, others cannot make changes like I have."

A high school Computer Science teacher reflected on his decision to not just present content to students, but to connect it to students' experiences; "it is dehumanizing for me to just present content for an hour to students and just talk *at them*. That is demoralizing." In a similar way, a high school English teacher discussed ways he was now critically questioning aspects of the mandated curriculum as he planned lessons; "I'm evaluating– Does it fit? Is it oppressive? Does it dehumanize a student? Is this the best way to get that information?" He shared that before the humanizing PL, "These are questions I never would have asked." This indicates that our community helped teachers to try new practices they learned in our humanizing PL, and their willingness to share their experiences within the courageous space of our community.

Further illustrating praxical accountability, a middle school ELA teacher shared, "a small thing" that she did to adjust a module within the ELA curriculum that she was required to "implement with fidelity," Wit & Wisdom, which has received significant critique for promoting ideological bias (Rigell et al., 2022):

> For the Wit and Wisdom module about immigration, one of the texts that you know that we're supposed to teach, sort of presents immigration as like a voluntary choice… like Africans… immigrated here, and it doesn't mention slavery… I'm really proud that I advocated to not teach that book. Instead, we found other books about immigration that were relevant and that presented different stories... we read this book called, *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad, 2019). The students really responded well to that and… other texts that we read throughout the module. And a lot of them do have background knowledge on this because they themselves are immigrants or their families are immigrants… I think making that choice to replace a text really benefited our students… our kids were able to have really deep conversations about what it means to be an immigrant and [address] questions like, 'Why do people immigrate? Why do people choose to leave their home countries?' They could

talk about their feelings of loving your home country, but also loving the new country that you moved to. I think that they learned a lot in the end, and we really enjoyed teaching that module.

Neoliberalism leads to high-stakes accountability measures that reflect a "proliferation of measurement and outcomes-based practices such as standardized curriculum, scripted lessons, high-stakes testing" (He et al., 2015, p. 289), without thoughtful consideration about the real lives of humans behind the measurements. In our context, these measures felt woefully disconnected from context and ignorant of the unprecedented times. In contrast, within the humanizing PL, teachers found ways to engage in praxical accountability and make instructional adjustments that fostered humanization for their students. They built on the lived experiences of their immigrant students, forgoing a scripted curriculum that taught inaccurate information. These kinds of adjustments not only acknowledged the reality that we were all living through a global pandemic, but also responded to students' needs, interests, cultural knowledge, and experiences.

While professional learning in harsh policy contexts often reflects activities tightly connected to teacher compliance with state mandates instead of teachers' professional growth and students' academic growth outside of test scores (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2015; Rinke & Valli, 2010), the examples highlighted illustrate ways that our humanizing PL fostered praxical accountability. Praxical accountability was cultivated through high-quality professional learning situated within teachers' contexts, focused on student learning, and embedded within professional learning communities, thus contributing to sustainable mindsets and actions (Whitcomb et al., 2009).

Praxical Accountability Through Humanization for All

Humanizing pedagogies attend to the principle that to deny someone else's humanization is also to deny one's own, advocating instead for *humanization for all.* Approaching professional learning as an ongoing and reciprocal process of humanization within an environment of "mutually anti-oppressive... self and collective care" (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021, p. 6) required us to be responsive to educators' particular capacity and needs during the pandemic(s) and polarized sociopolitical and neoliberal context. Humanization, not high-stakes accountability that holds educators responsible for systemic inequities, seemed to help begin to burn away the harm caused by decades of under-educating and neglecting historically excluded students. In this excerpt of dialogue from a monthly synchronous drop-in session, two teachers discussed the critical value of humanization within our PL:

Kia: Because I no longer have real control, I've allowed [students] to take some of it back. And, and it's, I don't know, [learning about humanization] is just allowing me to reflect in a different way of how I teach myself. That's all I wanted to offer

Carrie: I know that the district, the top level, have not really looked at this situation with truth and with knowledge of actually what's happen-

> ing. Like there's no way we should be testing as much as we are testing because we can't! By the time we finish testing, we're getting ready to prepare for another test cycle. And so I just, I really feel like everybody should be required to take this [professional learning]. Everybody, a lot of levels should be required to come in and take this … specifically for the humanizing part … the humanizing part is the first step for them.

Humanization is always important, but it mattered particularly because of the context of quadruple pandemics (Ladson-Billings, 2021) that we were in. One high school librarian discussed the value of our professional learning community as therapeutic because it prioritized humanization and dialogic problem-posing:

> I liked that this is a space where, I think of it like therapy And, you know, you get calm and you get to lay out all your comfortable and uncomfortable feelings, but then you also get an opportunity to kind of like engage with people that are dealing with the types of things that you're dealing with. So you don't feel [like you're in] such a vacuum. Not only that, but you can walk away with some real strategies and solutions to try. So it's not just a place to come and complain. It's not just a place to come and lay out your burdens. It's a place where you can engage and really get some insight, get some real help, you know, with something that you're dealing with. So you end up walking away, refreshed and ready to handle [it].

The participants seemed to need a humanizing space. Many teachers felt isolated in their respective homes as they taught online during the acute phases of the pandemics. They didn't have the hallway conversations where they could run ideas by colleagues. Further, nearly all of the teachers in our study discussed the value of the humanization they felt in our PL in the context of the dehumanizing impact of the district's continued focus on standards, testing/data, and curriculum fidelity, even during the most acute phase of the pandemic. A third grade teacher exclaimed, "the standards for learning have not changed to accommodate for [online learning]! My 3rd grade students are still required to write 5 paragraph essays despite their typing difficulties." A special education teacher likewise noted, "There is a lot of pressure on data and curriculum—which then makes teachers feel pressure to focus on that rather than focusing on a student-first approach." A high school teacher reflected, "one of the big takeaways I got from the school, from this discussion and this top-down thing, we could do it [humanization] for our students, but it was not being done for us." Teachers wanted to provide attentive and humanizing classroom spaces for their students, even though many of them expressed working under conditions that felt dehumanizing to them.

High school art teacher Kia discussed the importance of continuing to reflect on the principle of humanization in a structured dialogue where each teacher committed to prioritizing students in the midst of dehumanizing conditions:

> Last night I found a student on Facebook who had yet to show up in my class this semester. I messaged him. At 11 o'clock at night, he was return-

> ing from his job at Taco Bell. He works every day, no choice. His computer doesn't work. And he is tired in the morning. I gave him an assignment to do. Texted him my phone number. He turned it in at 2 in morning. Tonight at 11:00 pm, I will message him again. As I told him, we will get through this together.

Having relationships with students beyond school contexts allowed some teachers to find students who did not make it to class. During a time when many people were losing their jobs, some students had to pick up additional jobs or worked essential jobs to help make ends meet in their households.

One preservice teacher discussed how he prioritized humanization for all by finding ways to adapt how he assessed student learning:

> It seems like with a lot of assignments, maybe my kids would feel like [the learning management system] is a lot, especially if they're playing catch up—it might be overwhelming. And so, without having a face-to-face discussion with just being able to have this open space, it makes me think about, okay, how else can I grade them? If they're feeling overwhelmed with the learning management system, how else can I grade them? If they feel more comfortable talking in the session or putting their responses in the chat, like how can I find some other ways that wouldn't be as overwhelming.

Humanizing the educators we worked with, acknowledging their context, and honoring their professional judgment, disrupted what Jacobs et al. (2015) found to be the predominant type of decontextualized professional development offered in urban schools. This is probably why teachers were so grateful for a space that humanized them. It's also important to note that our humanzing PL was a voluntary space that teachers opted into during the acute phases of the pandemic. In a final structured dialogue, teachers across all of the ten groups discussed our PL community as, "an affirming space where we all work together," a space where "we're all the knowers and doers," and "a healing space" that they experienced as "refreshing … because we don't get that during the week." These are the sentiments that helped all of us to persist during a challenging time—the teachers and our research team were all managing households outside of our humanizing PL; it was important for us to share a space with like-minded educators who were committed to engaging in humanizing practices during unprecedented times.

Humanization nurtures praxical accountability that leads to actions that best serve students and communities. For example, participants talked about the value of contextualized decision-making and dialogic problem-posing that prioritized their professional judgement through structured dialogues. Discussing the value of structured dialogue, a preschool teacher commented, "I think what empowers me most is hearing the conversations students have when we implement humanizing practices. I love hearing the tiny lightbulbs when we start with what kids know/have experienced." Similarly, a high school librarian mentioned the value of the non-hierarchical structure of the PL: "I love being able to pose a problem and then having a community of support to help me think through it. I love being able to take on the same role as others." By affirming educators' professional agency (Scales et al., 2018)

structured dialogue opened up opportunities for engaging in context-specific praxis to address oppressive policies, practices and curricula that undermined their and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students' humanity and funds of knowledge (Navarro, 2020). Teachers declared, "it's a healing space for me, but it's also a place where we come and solve problems of practice. We really work through some stuff in here." These remarks demonstrate that praxical accountability is not achieved alone, it requires a humanizing community. An elementary grades special education teacher further commented on the value of being in a space where teachers could share their expertise across a range of grade levels:

> And just to hear the experience and the expertise from other colleagues who are in other grades, but are able to still give me something I can walk away with, like, you know, even, even the pre-K teachers come out with some suggestions and I'm like, Oh, I'm going to try that. You know what, let me put that down. So we all have different levels. We all have something we can contribute. And that's what I really like about this space.

This special education teacher highlights the professional respect we cultivated for one another across grades levels and content area expertise. Neoliberal, high-stakes accountability conditions that were present within our urban school district professional learning context, such as hyper-surveillance, punitive behavior, and deprofessionalization are antithetical to humanizing pedagogies and approaches to professional learning, educational equity, and transformative justice (Brown, 2017; Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2018). High-stakes accountability undermines what educational researchers know to be necessary to achieve educational equity for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. Fostering humanization within the sociopolitical context of urban school districts created an important professional dialectic to high-stakes accountability—praxical accountability. Unlike high-stakes accountability, praxical accountability's primary educational equity goal for historically excluded students is, and has always been, freedom (Love, 2019).

Implications: The Power of Dialogic Professional Learning

The examples above illustrate how our community provided educators with language and a community to talk through pedagogical decisions that worked toward humanization and praxical accountability (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). The teachers discussed in particular the value of our synchronous structured dialogues and drop-in sessions. This confirms research on the importance of creating humanizing, dialogic spaces within professional learning (Kohli, 2019; Kohli et al., 2015).

During our PL, structured dialogues and other dialogic spaces were an opportunity to reach consensus on a problem of practice related to humanizing pedagogies and collectively strategize solutions grounded in student learning (Hollins, 2006). In each dialogue, teachers collectively identified and clarified a contextualized issue related to humanization in order to work toward an approach for resolving it through problem-posing dialogue. The problem-posing process relied upon the knowledge and expertise of the collective and not the expertise of the teacher and research

co-facilitators (see Structured Dialogue Protocol example, "Appendix A"). The dialogic spaces also forefronted the importance of teachers' professional judgement; we viewed them as capable decision makers who knew what was best for their students. Professional learning focused on humanization also fostered critical reflective practices rooted in a deep care and concern for the communities, or praxical accountability.

Research has found that the most direct way to disrupt neoliberal logics in urban schools is to implement "policies that address social and economic inequality" (Mirra & Rogers, 2020, p. 1070). Our research also contributes to this argument; particularly the argument that policy makers and school administrators should deeply consider the context within which professional learning is embedded and the type of professional learning (e.g. not solely focused on content). In other words, policies regarding teacher development should take into account disparities in important factors such as school professional capital (Sanders et al., 2021) and school culture (Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2018). Ultimately, no amount of standardized learning, testing, and rigorous curriculum pacing within school districts serving Black and other marginalized students, such as the one where our work with educators was contextualized, will disrupt neoliberal logics that mark children and their families' ways of knowing and being as deficient (Diamond & Gomez, 2023).

COVID as Crucible

Educational equity is possible, as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities have long fought for literacy and liberation, resisting dehumanizing policies designed to keep them disenfranchised (Love, 2019) but it cannot be realized through technocratic professional learning. This holds even more truth within the current educational landscape, which is characterized by a new wave of neoliberal educational dehumanization that seeks to dismantle initiatives focused on historically excluded people, enact wide-sweeping bans of books, and privatize public education, but the fight for educational justice continues. One of the challenges to achieving educational equity in schools is envisioning and bringing about a system that does not yet exist. Neoliberal, market-based solutions that decontextualize learning and perpetuate paternalistic relationships toward educators and historically excluded learners will always be marginally successful because they limit the possibilities for what is possible within neoliberal and white supremacist logics (He et al., 2015). Strength-based, humanizing approaches to professional learning (Fig. 1) support collaborative problem-solving and teacher autonomy that ultimately promotes teacher retention and development (Kohli, 2019; Kohli et al., 2015). This is what we worked toward in our humanizing PL.

If we lean into the metaphor of COVID as crucible, we must first be honest about the contaminants within our current educational system. Educational equity requires solutions that are grounded in praxis. Humanizing approaches to professional learning, being an example of one such approach, challenges the dehumanizing nature of high-stakes accountability by centering the co-construction of knowledge across roles and teaching experience, contextualizing

professional learning and forefronting life-affirming practices and policies that counter colonizing and racist ones. Our study demonstrates the power of praxical accountability, particularly for the ways that educational systems harm historically excluded children. The teachers in this project helped us to see humanizing approaches to professional learning as a way forward for professional learning that supports and humanizes educators as they center *humans first*.

Appendix A: Structured Dialogue Protocol

Purpose and norms	Process
Purpose Structured dialogues are an opportunity to reach consensus on a problem of practice and collectively strategize solutions EVERYONE is a knower within this space We will ground discussions in student learning *Norms* Everyone is a knower, doer, and has something to contribute Intentionally think about using the knowledges and resources within this space You don't have to share	*Collective Problem Identification and Clarification* *Goal Identify* and *clarify* an issue in order to work toward an approach for resolving it *Guiding Questions* Thinking about the SEL Interrogation tool, what colonizing practices were at play? What life-affirming practices were at play? How does this dilemma affect students? Student learning? How does this dilemma affect your ability to foster social and emotional learning? How is the dilemma connected to prior learnings about humanizing pedagogy? *Collective Problem-posing Dialogue* *Goal*: *Contextualize* the issue. Discuss what has already been done and what could be done *Guiding Questions:* What steps have been taken in your context to address the dilemma? What can we learn from the readings/slides that might help address these challenges? What successes have we already had in addressing these challenges? How can we build from our successes? What could be done to address the problems we have identified? *Group Decision Making & Next Steps* *Goal*: *Identify* patterns in the successes and challenges presented. *Restate* them. Then, *identify* next steps towards achieving a desired outcome. This is a consensus decision *Guiding Questions:* What approaches will we collectively each use to address these challenges? What are the desired outcomes we hope to achieve in our own context? What professional development do we need in order to move toward resolving this issue?

Appendix B: SEL Interrogation Tool Interrogating Social and Emotional Learning

Directions In this module, we are prompting you to consider the ways in which the SEL framework[2] (and other character education programs) are ahistorical. In other words, character education programs do not account for the ways systemic oppression disproportionately burdens the social-emotional well-being of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. SEL frameworks also do not account for racism, privilege, access, and the differing degrees to which young people have capacity to make choices for themselves.

Camangian and Cariaga (2021) suggest that teaching that focuses on dialectic interrogation of colonizing and life-affirming practices would be a more humanizing way to foster social and emotional health and well being. Use the following tool to interrogate the colonizing practices at your school providing examples for how they play out in your school community. We'd also like you to identify possible life-affirming practices/policies. You might extend or restate parts of the SEL teaching dilemma you have previously identified as you use this tool.

Colonizing	Practices/policies (include the message students receive)	Life-affirming	Practices/policies	Possibilities (if you don't have an example from your context)
Self-hate: Eurocentric curricula that erases the histories and contributions of BIPoC and teaches students to see themselves through the eyes of dominant society Framing students' language, communities and cultural practices as deficient	*Ex.* Wit and Wisdom curriculum does not represent funds of knowledge of my students	*Self-knowledge:* Curricula that supports students' knowledge of their own personal and cultural identity, history and place in society Equipping students with the ability to analyze negative cultural messages and appreciate their cultural strengths, traditions, legacies of one's ancestors, etc	*Ex.* Fostering criticality through asking critical questions instead of light-hearted ice breakers	

[2] Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) typically focuses on self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (*CASEL Framework*.) The concepts of growth mindset and self-efficacy are also often part of schools' efforts to cultivate SEL.

Colonizing	Practices/policies (include the message students receive)	Life-affirming	Practices/policies	Possibilities (if you don't have an example from your context)
Divide and Conquer: Emphasizing competition; perpetuating the myth of meritocracy	*Ex.* Tracking, testing-based school admission	*Solidarity:* Building community with and between students with a shared goal of collective achievement and solidarity Supporting students in understanding the interconnections of different oppressions and where they are located within that	*Ex.* Critically examining red-lining in Baltimore	
Sub-oppression: Creating rules that require Black students' assimilation to dominant ways of knowing and being for success Using dominant developmental and psychological theories to interpret Black students' behavior	*Ex. Use of uniforms, metal detectors, and pat downs during entry to the school*	*Self-determination:* Teaching that honors the community cultural wealth of students Problem-posing and inquiry-based learning	*Ex. use of suspension and expulsions from school as punishment*	

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