The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis

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Abstract:

What counts as critical policy analysis in education? Over the past 30 years, a tightening of national educational policies can be seen in the USA and across the globe. Over this same period of time, a growing number of educational policy scholars, dissatisfied with traditional frameworks, have used critical frameworks in their analyses. Their critical educational policy work has contributed to a unique intellectual landscape within education: critical policy analysis. This article presents a qualitative exploration of the critical policy analysis approach to educational policy studies. Participants included scholars known to utilize critical theoretical frameworks and methods in their research. Through a historical approach that makes use of oral history interviews with educational policy, we developed an understanding of the critical approach to policy studies, its appeal among critical education policy scholars, and the rationales driving its use.

Keywords: critical policy analysis | critical theories | education policy | policy studies | qualitative methods

Article:

Policy studies is often characterized as a theoretically narrow field, relying first and foremost upon functionalist, rational, and scientific models (Brewer, 2008; Marshall, 1997; Scheurich, 1994; Young, 1999). As part of the policy studies field, educational policy research has tended to operate within a traditionalistic (i.e. positivist) paradigm and, over time, has developed a group of taken-for-granted assumptions, norms, and traditions that institutionalize conventional ontological, epistemological, and methodological traditions. The result is a circumscribed set of research findings, garnered through a restricted grouping of theory and method (Young, 1999).

Educational policy studies draws from the broader field of policy studies as well as from the traditions of educational research, political science, and public administration, each of which is strongly influenced by positivism and to a lesser degree post-positivism (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009; Nagel, 1984). The paradigm through which most policy studies operate involves timeworn assumptions, norms, and traditions, institutionalized and accepted by most researchers as the appropriate "value-free" way to undertake educational policy research (Marshall, 1997; Scheurich, 1994; Stanfield, 1993; Young, 1999). According to Levinson et al. (2009), "in this approach there is effectively no social theory of policy" (p. 768). Indeed, the majority of educational policy analysts prefer linear processes that focus on clearly defined problems and measureable facts (Blackmore, 1997; Fischer, 2003; Marshall, 1999; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

A narrow vision was not what the field's founder, Harold Lasswell, had in mind for the policy studies field (Fischer, 2003). Rather, Lasswell envisioned policy analysis as a means for exploring policy problems in all their complexity. His vision included constructing policy analysis as a multidisciplinary approach with an explicitly normative orientation (Fischer, 2003). What some scholars are calling "critical policy analysis" comes closer to Lasswell's 50-year-old ideal of doing policy work while acknowledging context, group values, and the contestable nature of problem definition, research findings, and arguments for solutions (Blackmore, 1997; Fischer, 2003; Marshall, 1999; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994; Young, 1999).

Since the 1980s, a growing number of policy researchers have shifted from traditional approaches and used critical frameworks to interrogate both the beliefs and practices associated with traditional work as well as the policies, insights, and recommendations that result from such work (McDonnell, 2009). For example, Ball (1991, 1993, 1994) and Stone (2002) problematized the rational approach associated with traditional policy research, breaking new ground for critical policy scholars. Similarly, Rist (1994) critiqued the traditional view of policy-making as a deliberate process, undertaken by a known and bounded set of actors, who use research and reason to ensure the best possible policy outcomes. Likewise, deLeon and Vogenback (2007) described the traditional analytic toolkit in policy research as limiting, noting the tendency to rely on the same framework and approaches for all problems under investigation rather than choosing epistemologies and approaches that might be more appropriate for analyzing the problem in question.

Over this same period of time, education has risen to an issue of national importance in many countries. Across the globe, we have seen a tightening of control on students, educators, administrators, and the schooling process in general through national-level educational policies. Although one could argue that these two trends are completely unrelated, it is interesting that as power and control in education became increasingly consolidated, a growing number of educational policy scholars, dissatisfied with traditional frameworks, began using critical frameworks in their analyses.

It is our contention that developments in critical educational policy analysis both are a response to conditions in education and signal an important shift in the field. Yet limited attention has been invested in understanding the nature of this shift and, more importantly, in articulating what counts as critical educational policy analysis and what motivates scholars to engage in critical policy work. The research shared in this article explored the critical policy analysis approach as

practiced within the educational policy field, giving particular attention to understanding the purposes of critical policy analysis, why people are drawn to this kind of work, and what perspectives inform their work.

Comparing frames: traditional and critical

A variety of theoretical perspectives and frameworks are available to educational policy researchers, both traditional and non-traditional. These are drawn from a variety of disciplines, and include but are not limited to cultural perspectives (Kingdon, 1995), critical-race perspectives (Aleman, 2007; Atwood, 2011; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lopez, 2003), critical policy sociology (Gale, 2001), engagement theory (Valenzuela & López, 2011), feminist perspectives (Ferguson, 1984; Marshall, 1997; Marshall & Young, 2006), interest group theory (Peterson, 1970; Wilson, 1980), neo-institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), network theories (Ball & Junemann, 2012; Fenwick, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2001), path dependence (Pierson, 2004), post-structural policy archeology (Scheurich, 1994), policy reconstruction (Forester, 1993), rational choice (Weimer, 1995), and queer theories (Capper, 1999; Lugg, 2003), among others. The theoretical perspective a researcher employs will influence his or her research. It will, for example, influence "the way one identifies and describes policy problems, the way one researches the problem, the policy options one considers, the approach one takes to policy implementation, and the approach taken for policy evaluation" (Young, 1999, p. 275).

Because we are examining an approach to policy analysis that we argue differs from traditional approaches and because we are referring to this alternative approach as critical policy analysis, some guidance in terms of meaning is in order. In the remainder of this section, we sketch out the conceptual terrain of critical policy analysis and introduce some of the key ideas that have come to be associated with this line of research. However, this synthesis of literature of traditional and critical approaches to policy analysis is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is provided to draw attention to the general contours of traditional and critical approaches, as we have come to understand them, as a way of orienting the reader to the focus of our research project.

Finally, while critical policy analysis makes use of many perspectives that fall under the umbrella of critical theory, from social constructionism, and post-structuralism, to post-modernism (Fischer, 2003; Marshall, 1999; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994), our comparison focuses on concerns expressed primarily by critical theorists. This choice is based on our observation that the majority of critical policy work reflects this theoretical domain. Even limiting our comparison in this manner, however, is not straightforward. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) point out, "there are many critical theories not just one, the critical tradition is always changing and evolving, and critical theory attempts to avoid too much specificity since there is room for disagreement among critical theorists" (p. 89). Indeed, the work of most critical researchers blurs rather than embraces strong theoretical lines.

The traditional approach to educational policy studies

Traditional approaches to educational policy studies exhibit a number of common assumptions. We have identified four that we believe reflect the key tenets of mainstream policy analysis. First, traditional policy researchers who are concerned with planning, adoption, implementation, examination, and/or evaluating educational changes or reforms tend to view change or reform as a deliberate process that can be planned and managed (Rist, 1994). Depending on the perspective of the researcher, this process may be viewed on a continuum between straightforward and muddled (Adams, 1991; Moorhead & Griffin, 1992). Thus, planned change or reform may be viewed as more or less sequential, incremental, and/or political, but it is nonetheless planable and manageable (assuming the planners and implementers are skilled and competent). Indeed, policy analysis is typically taught and learned as a process made up of a series of steps, including problem definition, goal setting, policy alternative identification, policy selection, implementation, and evaluation (Weimer & Vining, 2011). Furthermore, traditional research on planned change assumes strategies are unequivocal and can be broadly implemented, paying little attention to how policy arenas are multidimensional and interconnected (Honig, 2006).

A second assumption is that preferences or goals drive action (Becker, 1986; Elster, 1986). In fact, goal-driven behavior is often viewed as the substance of rationality, wherein an individual rationally weighs the costs, benefits, and subsequent outcomes of a strategy. According to Weimer and Vining (2011), the word analysis is derived from a Greek word meaning "to break down into component parts" (p. 343). Based on this premise, it is assumed that one can explain and predict behavior within institutions with a fair amount of confidence (Ostrum, 1999).

A third assumption is that the knowledge necessary for identifying and deciding between policy solutions and planning for implementation and evaluation is obtainable, cumulative, and capable of being expressed to others (Dunn, 1994). This knowledge, which is obtained primarily through data collection, is assumed to adequately reflect reality and to provide useful and valid (again, assuming the researcher is skilled and competent) information upon which one can make decisions regarding policy and practice (Adams, 1991; Dunn, 1994; Nagel, 1984). The data used for policy analysis can be usefully divided into three broad categories: existing data-sets, documents, and fieldwork. Similarly, a fourth assumption is that policies, policy alternatives, and practices can be adequately evaluated and that based on these evaluations, problems can be identified and ameliorated (Adams, 1991; Patton, 1990; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Although we realize this is a significant oversimplification, in sum, the traditional approach to policy studies is typically viewed as a neutral scientific approach, carried out by rational and expert researchers who use theory-supported models that facilitate responsive and effective change.

These four assumptions are identifiable in policy research theories and approaches such as systems theory and analysis, structural analysis, cost-benefit analysis, information technology approaches, decision theory, technicist models, and political models (Adams, 1991; Becker, 1986; deLeon & Vogenback, 2007; Dunn, 1994; Levin, 1988; McDonnell, 2009; Weimer & Vining, 2011). Furthermore, vestiges of these assumptions are embedded in many other approaches to research and analysis (Ball, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Scheurich, 1994). Although the approaches vary in design and application, they tend to support the view that empirical research can access the information needed to understand, design, plan, problem solve, and implement effective educational policies and practices.

The critical approach to educational policy studies

The critical frame has been used in the field of education to study a number of issues. Critical ethnographers, for example, have explored schools as locations of social and cultural reproduction as well as individual and group responses to such reproduction (e.g. resistance and accommodation) (Anderson, 1989). Other researchers have used critical frameworks to study charter schools (Shaker & Heilman, 2008), tracking (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986), social reproduction (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Dumas & Anyon, 2006), character education (Winton, 2010), student resistance to the dominant school culture (Apple, 1982; Willis, 1977), early childhood education (Ackerman, 2006), federal educational policy (Brewer, 2014; Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004), and language education (Hamann, 2003), among other topics.

Within the educational policy realm scholars have studied, critiqued, and offered alternative strategies for examining a variety of educational policy issues (e.g. Brewer, 2014; Lipman, 2004; Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich, & Chapman, 2009; Young, 1999), and they have offered a variety of new perspectives and approaches. A few examples include Marshall (1997) and Taylor's (1997) use of discourse theory to critically examine educational policy and its impact, Ball and Junemann's (2012) examination of new philanthropies and policy networks in educational policy-making, and Brewer's (2008, 2014) examination of federal policy histories and microhistories.

When employed in educational policy studies, critical approaches tend to focus around five fundamental concerns. First, attention is often given to the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality. Some of this work involves an interrogation of the policy process while other scholarship focuses on rhetorical devices and the symbolic nature of educational policy (Edelman, 1971; Fischer, 2003; Moses & Gair, 2004; Smith et al., 2004; Winton, 2013). Still other researchers are more concerned with the space between policy development and implementation (Ball, 1998; Honig, 2006; Malen, Croninger, Muncey, & Redmond-Jones, 2002). The second concern focuses on the policy, its roots, and its development. Scholars are interested in understanding how it emerged, what problems it was intended to solve, how it changed and developed over time, and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture (Burke, 2004; Chartier, 1988; Green, 1999). Here scholars seek historical and contextual clues that might help them gain a better understanding of policy changes, conditions, and results (Brewer, 2008, 2014). Scholars are also interested in understanding the policy tools and processes that facilitated policy institutionalization and/or internalization. A third concern is with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge (Anyon, 1980; Foucault, 1972; Levinson et al., 2009) and the creation of "winners" and "losers." Here the unit of analysis may be the policy system itself, the site of implementation, or who gets what, when, and how (Dumas & Anyon, 2006; Forester, 1993; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Social stratification, a fourth and related concern, focuses on the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege (Bernal, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Riddell, 2005). Researchers ask questions such as: Does policy X somehow reinforce or reproduce social injustices and inequalities? The work of critical theorists like Bourdieu (1991) holds that schools are institutions that reproduce inequalities. Finally, many critical policy scholars are interested in members of non-dominant groups who resist processes of domination and oppression (Anderson, 1989; Gillborn, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995) and

who engage in activism and use of participatory methods to employ agency within schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Valenzuela & López, 2011). Although the approaches critical policy scholars take vary in design and application, these five concerns are reflected in a great deal of critical policy work.

Critical theories facilitate the exploration of policy roots and processes; how policies presented as reality are often political rhetoric; how knowledge, power, and resources are distributed inequitably; how educational programs and policies, regardless of intent, reproduce stratified social relations; how schools institutionalize those with whom they come into contact; and how individuals react (e.g. resistance or acquiescence) to such social and institutional forces. Although a framework's features may never be reflected on, embraced by, nor even known to a researcher (Young, 1999), and while researchers "may be guided by unpostulated and unlabeled assumptions about what constitutes fact par excellence and how people make sense out of the disparate events of their social world" (Popkewitz, 1984, p. 37), frameworks are crucial in giving meaning to human activity, including that of policy studies.

Two additional similarities mark the work of critical educational policy scholars. First, critical policy researchers tend to pay significant attention to the complex systems and environments in which policy is made and implemented. For example, Levinson et al. (2009) write, "we understand policy as a complex, ongoing social practice of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts" (p. 770). Recognizing that the creation of policy is "an extremely complex, often contradictory process," critical policy researchers have sought to capture the full complexity of policy contexts and the evolution of policy over time (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 153). Second, critical policy researchers are more likely to use qualitative research approaches than quantitative approaches in their work (deLeon & Vogenback, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In particular, discourse analysis has been increasingly used by critical educational policy scholars (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1991; Marshall, 2000; Mosen-Lowe et al., 2009; Taylor, 1997). Other approaches include critical policy ethnography, which examines questions that are often ignored or silenced by traditional strategies and enables the researcher to explore the practices that create, enable, and sustain educational policy (Anderson, 1989), historical approaches (Brewer, 2008; Gale, 2001), and policy archeology, which places and interrogates educational policy within several arenas (Scheurich, 1994).

As the above review of literature reveals, critical approaches to policy research are increasingly used within the education field and there are distinctive patterns of use. Beyond that, however, we know very little about this area of scholarship and the researchers who engage in it. For example, there appears to be little information as to why we have seen increased interest in this kind of work over time, why educational policy scholars pursue this type of scholarship, how it connects to their ideological perspectives, what theories and methods they consider to be appropriate and/or essential to critical policy analyses, particularly when used within the field of education, and how it might be connected to policy developments within the field of education. The research project described in this text was designed with these issues in mind, giving particular attention to understanding the purposes of critical policy analysis, why people are drawn to this kind of work, and what perspectives inform their work.

Methods

Understanding critical policy analysis as it is practiced in the field of education is at the heart of our work. In this exploratory study, we sought to develop a stronger understanding of the purposes of critical policy analysis, why researchers are drawn to this kind of work, what factors and/or experiences influenced their work, and what perspectives inform their work. Gilliland and McKemmish (2004) described efforts like ours as exploring "intellectual landscapes" (p. 175). To be clear, our study is not an example of critical policy analysis; rather, it is an exploration of the work and intentions of critical policy analysts. Given the historical and contextual nature of our research interests, we engaged in a historical, qualitative approach for data collection and employed a naturalistic, post-positivist perspective in our analysis.

In-depth, oral history interviews were conducted with 19 participants identified as critical policy scholars. Participants were purposefully selected based upon a determination that their published work included policy analyses that utilized critical theoretical frameworks. A purposive sample is a sample selected in a deliberative and non-random fashion in order to achieve a certain goal. In this project, our purpose was to better understand critical policy analysis, including how and why it is done (Patton, 1990). As such, our research team reviewed scholarship reflecting our understanding of CPA as described in the above section, The Critical Approach to Educational Policy Studies, and consciously developed a list of individuals who engaged in this kind of work, noting the theoretical frameworks they used in their analyses. We then charted the length and depth of their engagement in critical policy research, assuming that those with more robust engagement would have knowledge and experience that would assist us in answering our research questions.

The final sample of scholars we interviewed included 13 females and 6 males who ranged in experience from just beginning their academic careers to those that have been in the field for over 30 years. The majority of participants were scholars from the USA as we were particularly interested in how the field is emerging within the country. Each scholar had an identifiable line of critical policy scholarship. Additionally, our sample included scholars who used one or more of the following critical frameworks in their analyses: critical theory, critical feminism, critical race theory, critical realism, queer theory, post-structuralism, and feminist post-structuralism. The purposive nature of the sampling in this study as well as the sample size, however, precludes applying the findings to all critical policy scholars. As such, this research is exploratory in nature and future efforts must be undertaken to deepen our understanding of critical approaches to educational policy analysis.

The oral history interview approach focuses on "the meanings that events hold for those that lived through them" (McMahan & Rogers, 1994 in Chase, 2008, p. 59). As a team, we designed an oral history interview protocol that explored scholars' personal, educational and career development, intellectual education, motivations behind conducting critical policy analysis, descriptions of how they "do" this kind of work, and rationales for why it is important. Our focus on experiential knowledge is key because we also hoped to understand whether critical policy scholars have always thought of their work as critical policy analysis, what led them to this approach, whether there were certain "events" that our participants lived through that encouraged them to develop a critical stance, and how and why (or if) their scholarship changed over time.

The interview protocol also helped us ensure that members of the research team collected the same key information from each of the participants.

Oral histories differ from other forms of qualitative interviews. They tend to be more in-depth than most interviews, and the content is grounded in participant reflections on past events, although they may also address issues concerning contemporary contexts (OHA, 2009). Although research team members are cognizant of the role and impact of subjectivity in this project, efforts were made to support transparency and trustworthiness. For example, informal member checking was built into the interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview transcripts were analyzed by members of the research team using the constant comparative method, meaning analysis was ongoing, open-ended, and inductive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Taped interviews were transcribed as soon after the interview as possible. After unitizing the transcripts (i.e. identifying units of information in the interview transcript), team members identified working categories in which we located specific data units. These categories were subsequently modified as we worked through each of the interview transcripts, seeking what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as a "saturation of categories" and an "emergence of regularities" (p. 350). Comparative pattern analysis, which involved searching for categories exhibiting "internal homogeneity" and "external heterogeneity," was used to illuminate recurring patterns in the data (Patton, 1990, p. 403). To increase the trustworthiness of the coding, transcripts were exchanged among team members and several excerpts were recoded.

Findings

Our data analysis revealed a number of continuities and discontinuities in the way people gave meaning to and employed critical policy analysis, some of which were expected and some less so. For example, while participants focused their work on a wide array of educational policy issues, the concerns that drew them to engage in critical policy analysis reflected broader themes, such as growing disparities among different educational subpopulations, the increased centralization of power and influence, and global educational policy trends. However, in addressing such issues, participants became frustrated with traditional approaches. This, coupled with their desire to contribute differently or more robustly to the knowledge base in education, led many to adopt a more critical approach. We assumed this would be the case. Most interesting were findings concerning factors that influenced the participants' work in this area. Below, our findings are organized into two major sections focused on the purpose of critical policy analysis and the evolving nature of this kind of research.

Expanding the purpose of critical policy analysis

In our interviews, we asked scholars to describe in their own words the rationale for using critical lenses to inform their educational policy work. Their responses reflected a number of interconnected themes. The most common rationale for engaging in critical policy analysis was to interrogate the policy process and the epistemological roots of policy work. Part of interrogating the policy process involves examining the players involved in the process as well as policy constructions. Based on the literature, we anticipated responses focused on the role of power and the social construction of knowledge. Less anticipated were the responses focused on

activism and bridging research to practice. We provide further clarification on each of these themes in the following subsections.

Interrogating policy processes and roots

The scholars interviewed for this project found critical policy analysis an indispensable tool for questioning the roots of much policy work. Contrasting their work to traditional policy analyses, several scholars pointed out how critical policy analysis enabled a deeper critique of the contextual nuances and complexities of the policy process. One scholar explained how critical policy analysis was "focused on the questions of epistemology," and, unlike traditional approaches to policy analysis, critical policy analysis recognizes the complexities of policy contexts and how these complexities impact what we know to be real and true.

The scholars we interviewed found it important to carefully examine policies and interrogate the policy process because, as they pointed out, policies are "subjective," "value laden," "complex," and "messy." Through critical policy analyses researchers can decipher multiple arguments or viewpoints, question and discover how nebulous concepts become reality, and explore how ideas become normalized. In the words of one participant, critical policy analysis enables both discovery and exploration of "how categories work, and how do they become fixed, and how do we need to constantly challenge the categories?" In this sense, critical policy analysis is a tool for questioning structures and systems within the policy field.

Data revealed that participants placed particular importance on using critical policy analysis to explore and question the policy process. One researcher said:

> We should be constantly asking questions: is this the way it has to be; what's the value of doing it this way; how are people hurt by this; what are the alternatives? And then: How do you collect information that informs decisions? What would present a compelling case for changing the policy that may be having negative impacts?

According to a second scholar, critical policy analysis reveals critical imperfections in the way traditional scholars think about the policy process:

> You are more or less guided by the tenets of traditional policy analysis, meaning that it's a realist, structuralist epistemology. There's a real world out there, and it's flawed. It's deeply flawed, and it's flawed in a very predictable way. Doing work in that area means that you would deal with inequity, you would anticipate people being both effective and ineffective, you are a strong component of "there's got to be practice" and "there's got to be change," and "you can't get in this conversation just to do the critique; you also have to take part."

Within the policy field, this scholar explained, deeply held beliefs about reality and agency are palpable.

Power and voice in policy

The same deeply held beliefs that govern the behavior and assumptions of many policy scholars also impact the role of power and voice in policy processes. Scholars ascertained that critical policy analysis enabled them to explore, "what is the role of power in making knowledge … which is always shaped by power relationships" as well as, "to investigate the kinds of questions that fundamentally have to do with power and access to the policy process … about what and who has informed this definition over time." It was noted that deep investigations of individual policies enabled a better understanding of the way power and voice operated within the policy process.

In some cases, analysis involved exploring the power imbalances among discourse within communities, interest groups, or policy-makers vis-à-vis those impacted by policy. In their work, several scholars used questions such as, "Who is sitting around the decision-making table, and more importantly, who's not sitting around the decision-making table?" to identify who has a voice in the policy process. Researchers also described the examination of inequities in power as exploring questions of "Who's winning and who's not winning?" or "Who's benefiting and who's not benefiting?"

Through the process of raising critical questions, several scholars focused specifically on identifying and exposing inequities and social injustices, such as "loss of opportunity or lack of opportunity," "who is not represented and why," and "what are going to be the repercussions and for whom?" Such explorations unmask how one community's accumulation of power may result in another community's loss of power. To illustrate, one scholar found critical policy analysis allowed him to, "ask really important questions about the role of race and racism, of inequity, of issues of social justice and oppression."

Scholars also stressed the importance of exploring silences by looking at, "what policy says and doesn't say, looking at how problems and solutions are defined and not defined, what voices are included and not included, and looking for voices on the margin." One participant referred to such silences as "white spaces." White spaces reveal:

> What's missing; what needs to be there that's not there; what are the silences that are there, and why aren't they being addressed; and what can you do to help make sure that they are addressed? So looking at inequities, looking at loss of opportunity or lack of opportunity, looking at silences, looking at who's not represented and why …

This idea of distinguishing not only what is centered in policy and policy conversations but also what is marginalized or absent was a common concern among the scholars we interviewed. One scholar explained:

> We don't just look at how the problems and solutions are defined …. [We also examine] how they're not defined. We don't just look at whose voices were included, but try to figure out what the silenced voices would say if they did have a chance to voice their concerns.

In other words, using a critical framework when analyzing policy enables the exploration of the voices of those typically not heard in traditional policy contexts and processes.

Policy constructions

Conducting comprehensive examinations of specific policies involving detailed analyses of each policy-making and implementation stage, for some scholars, was the crux of critical policy work. Several scholars described their analytical work as "unpacking the assumptions," exploring the foundational ideas "underpinning the policy," or "unpacking the sense making" of policy discourse. One researcher defined critical policy analysis as a method for critiquing/questioning various stages of policy enactment:

> I want to know who is behind the policy, whose voice is being privileged …. And then I want to see how that rolls out to every student, and how it affects particular students …. So analyzing policy in a critical way to see how it is enacted, who it affects, who's putting it forth, what it means, how it actually does or does not do what the intent is.

This scholar explained that exploring how policy is enacted allows the researcher to consider the contextual intricacies of the policy process:

> You're going in very well aware that there are societal structures that oppress. And policy is then the vehicle through which these things are cemented or not. And so that's a very different perspective than going in with that kind of an ahistorical, non-historical view.

For some researchers, an examination of this nature was not an end in itself, however. Rather, just over half of the researchers engaged in this project considered analyses an essential precursor to engaged and activist research. In the words of one scholar, "critical policy analysis opens up a space for activism."

Engaged and activist research

Although the complexity offered through the application of most critical perspectives to policy analysis might make it hard to accept that influencing policy could even be an option for critical policy scholars, our participants identified informing the work of policy-makers as a key purpose for conducting critical policy analysis. Expressing dissatisfaction with the way the policy process has traditionally worked, they have sought ways to bring different perspectives to bear on policy. According to one participant, "most critical perspectives enable not only critique, but also indications of what might work in the best interest of certain populations. … We need to learn to speak the language of those who draft and approve policy."

Thinking about the development of this particular area of scholarship, one scholar expressed the expectation that critical policy work is more than an intellectual exercise – that it influences practice and policy. Another scholar remarked that critical policy analysis is focused not only on theoretical change but on real change as well:

> A lot of times we do research and we propose … what we think may be some practices that are worthy of consideration at the policy level. Some real pieces that we've done for

legislators have actually become part of the state directives. We feel pretty good about that.

One participant explained that critical policy analysis fosters a:

perspective and the methodological approaches to be able to be more of an activist … it allows me to center the stories and the perspective of students and of families and of communities that have for very much [of the time] been silenced in this.

Respondents linked their purpose for conducting critical policy analysis to bridging the gap between policy and practice, grounding this bridging activity in the field. Participants shared that their use of critical perspectives that emphasized context and collaboration enabled them to communicate authentically with and be useful to a variety of stakeholders, including teachers, principals, and regional or district leadership personnel. However, making research findings and policy analyses accessible to local educators and educational leaders appeared to be of utmost importance to this group. For example, one researcher stated:

The thing you're trying to do with the practitioners is to try to show how they can use the policy – any policy. It's a leverage; some agency for them. You know, how can you subvert it, how can you move it, how can you use the discourses to mobilize them in ways that actually make it a value meaningful to them as practitioners?

Another participant provided a perspective on how to build bridges between policy and educators' practice: build educators' capacity and then assist them in advocating for or making needed changes. This researcher explained that part of understanding how to leverage state or federal policy within local schools to support typically underserved student populations involves challenging wrong-headed beliefs about such students with data, introducing alternate ways of thinking and practicing, and then setting up systems to support them as they change their practice.

Indeed, another researcher told us that given the current direction of federal and national education policy, critical policy analysis:

is wonderful because we have an obligation, those of us in universities, to ask what structural priorities aren't being addressed when we direct federal funding streams in certain directions. And I think that it becomes harder to have that kind of dissent, if you will, when there is such a powerful sort of torrential flood and momentum in one direction. I think it's essential for the field of policy to nurture independence in scholars. I think we want to continue to bring in people from many different disciplines to ask these questions.

This researcher went on to say that it is important to "be experimental" and not "be afraid to pose questions that are right at the heart of central issues about power," particularly when it comes to what this researcher described as the "new federal role" in education.

One scholar explained that the key value of critical policy analysis was how it enabled a "revolutionary stance … looking at: What does this policy do within this grid that privileges some and marginalizes and oppresses others? It is a different view." Along similar lines, a different scholar stated:

> The problem is there and there's a sense of urgency to do something about the problem. … We have to be engaged. We have to care about something so much that it's going to move us to act, that it's going to move us to do something, not just necessarily write about it.

Not surprisingly, given the common association of critical policy analysis with taking a stand, one participant stated that conducting critical policy analysis entailed personal risk:

> I think that you can't separate whom you write about and what you're passionate about from what you do in the real world. … There's an affective component that … motivates me to want to do something about that. … So, I really feel – I think I do the work because I'm coming from a different epistemological space, a space of deep, profound caring; a space of wanting to be changed.

The evolving nature of critical policy analysis

As we sought to understand how scholars conducting critical policy analyses gave meaning to their scholarship, we worked to identify the scholars who influenced their research, critical incidents that influenced their thinking, the methods and theories they used, as well as how their work changed over the course of their careers. While we were interested in determining whether there were any consistent themes in their responses, which might enable us to develop a more succinct definition of critical policy analysis and to track its roots, we also felt that careful consideration should be paid to how the area is evolving over time and in different scholarly communities.

Not surprisingly, how participants situated critical policy analysis into their own research and where they saw themselves fitting into the field were related to which scholars and scholarship they identified as informing and guiding their work. Our findings suggest that the critical policy researchers included in this study have been influenced by a range of scholars representing multiple disciplines. However, findings also suggest that they identify foremost with theoretical frameworks drawn from sociology.

Although participants identified most strongly with sociological theories, the breadth of theories utilized makes it difficult to determine a core group of influential scholars or pieces of scholarship. Those participants who had similar research and theoretical interests tended to have more overlap among the individuals they considered to be influential than across the group as a whole. For example, critical feminist policy analysts listed both early and contemporary feminist theorists as well as early critical theorists as influential in their research. One scholar shared, "the tradition of existentialism feeds into this to some degree. Various social democratic and neo-Marxist schools feed into it. But the school of critical theory is also very broad." That we were

unable to identify a set of seminal pieces anchoring the work of these scholars appears to point to a field in motion. Critical policy analysis is and has been evolving for over a decade.

The notion of an evolving field fits well with the scholars' descriptions of their work. For example, our participants described how their way of thinking continued to evolve over time:

> I think a lot of things influence you … it builds up over time … the story of me as a researcher, it's constantly evolving … I think the thing that doesn't change is this desire to make a difference.

A number of factors were attributed to such change, including new research and theory, re-reading theory with new experiences and ideas, gaining confidence as a researcher, and being influenced by the thinking of other critical scholars with whom they have worked. Several participants shared how going back to research they read in the past provided new meaning in today's context. One stated:

> I revisited a lot of stuff that I had read … in grad school. But reading them again meant something different to me. I reread several … pieces about White racism and the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. It was all new to me. Yes, I had read it before but it all meant something totally different to me when I started being out in the field and thinking about these issues in my work.

Several scholars explained that they entered the field with the expectation that thinking would continue to evolve. They explained how their graduate work pulled from a variety of critical perspectives and that their graduate programs' faculty encouraged them to read widely and seek out research and theory that were using ideas in new ways. One participant shared:

> [Professors] encouraged us to read really widely across disciplines because those [experiences] become really fertile means for developing research questions. And I think in my case that really worked, that encouragement to read so widely … I've been lucky that I've never really had to be defined by just one discipline.

Similarly, another participant described an "open/interdisciplinary system" in his critical policy work:

> You've got an open system, and you've got a system that lends itself to different traditions that you can ensure the future of the field by not having to be stagnant and relying on the same series of time immemorial. You've got to be able to still grow, and I think that that's some of the work that's exciting, and that's one of the things that teaches us in doing this work. I think all of us … doing work with queer theory; or whether it's others doing work with critical race theory or with feminism … we're bringing in different kinds of theoretical traditions and, in the process, redefining and reshaping the field.

Interestingly, one scholar asserted that the current notion of an "open system" may not be open enough. This scholar acknowledged the importance of drawing on work from classic critical

scholars but wondered if critical policy researchers were relying too much on a narrow group of scholarship, due to an implicit agreement about their importance. He expressed concern that over-reliance on one tradition may limit the field from discovering other ideas, perspectives that could be just as significant:

> Lots of people draw on Bourdieu and Foucault when they do critical policy analysis. But there's a lot more than Foucault out there. There's a lot more than Bourdieu. … I don't know how many times I see Freire cited in something now.

To clarify, his concern was not that Bourdieu, Foucault, or Freire were being used, but that scholars were creating new norms by using a circumscribed group of scholars and scholarship. "People just cite it because they think they're supposed to cite it. And I just wonder how much we're actually mining the different fields to get ideas that should influence what we think about …" The consensus from scholars we interviewed was that in order for a field like critical policy analysis to survive, scholarship and theory must continue to grow and evolve.

Just as bringing different perspectives into the field was viewed as a necessity, the same held true for methodology. Our analysis revealed that the critical policy scholars we interviewed primarily made use of qualitative inquiry, which included a wide variety of approaches including but not limited to case studies, oral history interviews, narrative approaches, and discourse analysis. Those who made use of quantitative data and methodology did so in conjunction with qualitative approaches. One researcher told us how using even basic statistical methods and analyses can enhance qualitative inquiries:

> And what I find is, quantitative data in any form, even if it's the most basic form, leads me to ask different kinds of questions of my qualitative data. And the qualitative data allows me to go back and look differently at the quantitative data. And so, even when I constructed that survey that we did with [higher education institutions], using a discrepancy model to me was a unique way to get at something that was more qualitative in nature. So it's not, do you do this; what value does it have. And to me that going back and forth – and then we had open-ended questions so I had qualitative responses there that I actually could use to go back and look at what did I have numerically that gave me some different insights. So, I have found that to be a really rich way to look at things.

In our exploration of the relationship between participants' theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, we used Lather's (2006) paradigm typology to categorize approaches to critical policy analysis. This typology delineated the way researchers respond to ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions to research aims, values, voice, representation, and integrity according to four paradigms (i.e. positivism/post-positivism, interpretivism, critical approaches, and deconstruction). Categorizing our participants' work in this way provided a means for understanding how their philosophical stance informed their use of theory in the research process.

None of our participants' responses fell within the first paradigm, positivist/post-positivist, which suggests an objective or naïve realist perception of reality; however, approximately half of their perspectives reflected the critical paradigm. Within the critical paradigm, knowledge is seen

as socially constructed, and facts, it is argued, should be explored within historical, political, and social contexts. These researchers described challenging status quo beliefs and understandings, and focusing on issues of power and inequality to capture the complexities of oppression impacting marginalized people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, researchers working out of this paradigm (e.g. critical theorists and feminists) shared how they challenged the inequities embedded in the social life of the researched and focused on status inequalities like race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation (Anyon, 1980; Capper, 1999; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lather, 2006; Lopez, 2003; Lugg, 2003; Marshall, 1997; Young, 2003). Each of the scholars whose work reflected this category raised questions like: "Who is behind the policy?" and "Who is the voice that's being privileged in this situation, and whose voice is being marginalized?"

The other half of the informants positioned their work within the deconstructivist paradigm. Participants who considered themselves deconstructivists described using post-modern/post-structural lenses to examine issues of power and oppression, to challenge notions of knowledge, meaning and universal truths, to interrogate inequality embedded in social life, and to pose questions regarding the construction of reality, such as "Is there a there?"

Interestingly, only one participant self-identified as an interpretivist, explaining that reality is constructed based upon human meaning making. Further, this scholar explained that the theoretical framework used in her research depended upon its fit with the topic of the research:

> My [current] work is critical White theory, which would then fall under interpretivism. But I vary the theoretical frames I use, because I see that as different because there would be a different theoretical frame for each particular study I do, for the most part.

The use of different, and in some cases multiple, theoretical and methodological approaches was typical of many of the critical policy scholars we interviewed.

Regardless of their particular theoretical framework, collection tools, or presentation style, critical policy analysis scholars unanimously rejected traditional approaches to analysis that relied solely on linearity of thought, used a narrow range of data-gathering tools, and privileged data as fact. Participants instead emphasized the importance of providing a contextualized understanding of their research findings, reflecting the complexity of the policies, people, schools, and communities they impact. We heard time and again from our participants that the methodological approaches utilized in any study should be based on, "the question that I want to have to answer, and then what would be the best method for answering that question, and what data would provide me with the ideas and the information that I would need." Furthermore, participants who described themselves as operating out of the critical frame explained that they used collaborative ethnographic and narrative approaches in an attempt to provide a fuller story (or the story behind the story) and/or deeper accounts that provide texture and complexity. Scholars who reflected the deconstructivist frame described their work as either ethnographic, as incorporating multiple lenses, or as involving critical discourse analysis. Utilizing a form of bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), wherein scholars apply the tools that best fit the job, our research participants seemed to use methods that enhanced their capacity to collect relevant data and support their analytical and interpretative work.

Discussion

The profound shifts taking place in contemporary social life warrant a shift in our research traditions (Young, 1999), and the shifts taking place within the field of education and educational policy specifically, warrant a shift in educational policy analysis. This investigation sought to develop an understanding of the critical policy analysis approach to policy studies, and to discover and describe how and why scholars are working to question and redefine work within the policy studies field. Accordingly, our findings highlighted how the critical policy scholars who participated in our research gave meaning to critical policy analysis, how they have shifted away from, and attempted to expand upon, more traditional policy research and analytical approaches in education as well as what scholarship influenced their work.

We found that, for the most part, participants' articulation of critical policy analysis reflected the five underlying concerns of critical approaches to research and policy studies presented earlier in this article. Specifically, they asserted that critical approaches to policy analysis: (1) involve an interrogation of the policy process, the use of policy symbols and rhetorical devices as well as the delineation of the difference between policy rhetoric and policy reality (Ball, 1998; Edelman, 1971; Fischer, 2003; Malen et al., 2002; Moses & Gair, 2004; Smith et al., 2004; Winton, 2013); (2) examine the roots and development of policy, including how policies emerge, what problems they are intended to solve, and how they reinforce dominant culture (Brewer, 2014; Gale, 2001; Scheurich, 1994); (3) uncover elements of social stratification, the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge in policy creation and implementation, and the creation of winners and losers (Anyon, 1980; Ball, 1998; Dumas & Anyon, 2006; Forester, 1993; Foucault, 1972; Honig, 2006; Malen et al., 2002); (4) explore the broader and deeper effects of policy work, such as the institutionalization and the internalization of dominant culture (Anderson, 1989; Bourdieu, 1991; Gillborn, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995); and (5) promote agency, resistance, advocacy, and praxis (Anderson, 1989; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright et al., 2006; Valenzuela & López, 2011). Importantly, our participants' notions of critical policy analysis also expounded beyond the aforementioned fundamentals, elucidating additional concerns, theories, methods, and processes for critical policy analysis.

Participants in this study defined critical policy analysis as a means to discover and/or question the complexity, subjectivity, and equity of policy as well as to illuminate intended and unintended consequences of the policy implementation process (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001), supporting Lasswell's original vision for policy analysis (Fischer, 2003). In order to fulfill such purposes, the critical policy analysts we interviewed utilized less traditional approaches in their scholarship and a variety of theoretical frameworks, either alone or in combination. The scholars noted that critical policy analysis allowed them to work outside of what they viewed as constraints within traditional policy analysis methods and theoretical frameworks.

Common among all participants' contributions was a desire to use their role and efforts as researchers to make a difference in the lives of students and communities, particularly those that have been historically marginalized by the educational system, through their policy research, to facilitate empowerment, to critique traditional approaches to policy analysis, and, ultimately, to

connect their research to practice. Levinson et al. (2009) put it well when they noted that scholars who use, "critical approaches to policy research have as the imagined horizon of their analysis a picture of the possible" (p. 769). Such desires reflect those published by scholars many identify as critical, both within and outside of the policy studies community (Anderson, 1989; Gillborn, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995).

Furthermore, the work they conducted did not end with journal publications, research reports, or policy briefs. Rather, participants conducted research to influence and take a stand against education policies they viewed as working to advantage some groups and disadvantage many others, to explore the imbalance of power (absences and silences) of policy-making, and to expose power and rhetoric – what many consider "commonsense" or taken-for-granted beliefs (Bernal, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Riddell, 2005). As such, their work took them into the field, town halls, and the offices of legislators. Scholars indicated that by focusing on issues of equity and exploring the context of policy issues, they became more engaged with communities as they were able to see at a grassroots level how policy impacted people's everyday lives.

The researchers we interviewed have had long careers as educational policy analysts, spanning between 20 and 35 years. In our effort to learn more about these policy scholars and what shaped their work, we found their sources of influence to be vast. Not only did scholars draw from a variety of fields, including education, sociology, anthropology, and political science, but their work was also informed by a variety of epistemological perspectives. As they grew as scholars their theoretical viewfinders and understanding of critical policy analysis evolved, sometimes slowly and at other times in sudden jolts. Though such growth is not uncommon in academic life, the scholars in our study emphasized the significance of critical scholarship in their development as well as in their openness to, and in some cases, their search for, new frameworks that might provide deeper meaning for and understanding of their policy questions.

Just as scholars described their own perspectives as evolving, they pointed to changes in the field of education as well, noting that as conditions within the field became increasingly complex they sought different methods and perspectives with which to examine those conditions. Given the centrality of questioning to how scholars defined critical policy analysis, one would expect this to some extent. The scholars interviewed not only questioned the policy process – the subjectivity, equity, power imbalances, silences, and constructions and consequences – but they also questioned their own previous theoretical leanings or ways of seeing.

Given the theoretical and methodological eclecticism which characterized the work of our participants and that of critical scholars in the field, we did not expect to find, nor did we find, a singular or concrete definition of critical policy analysis during our inquiry. Rather, researchers described critical policy analysis in a variety of ways and used a range of theories, approaches, and tools to thoroughly examine educational policy issues. A strict definition of critical policy analysis may have no place within critical policy analysis as that would imply a "one best way" to conduct education policy research. Indeed, this would run counter to the epistemological variety out of which critical policy analyses are derived.

Still, there were important commonalities, one could even describe them as features, which held this group of scholars together as a community. The distinctive features of critical policy analysis

include theory, method, and purpose. With regard to theory, we found that critical policy researchers are making use of a broader range of theoretical lenses in their work. Increasingly, critical educational policy researchers are pulling more from sociological work than from theoretical work in policy and politics. In some cases, scholars are blending theoretical perspectives, engaging in a "theoretical eclecticism" (Ball, 1997; Mosen-Lowe et al., 2009; Taylor, 1997). Without question, critical policy scholars are providing novel perspectives for research problems in education literature.

When conducting research, there is a preference for rich description, connection to context and voice, authenticity, and collaboration. Perhaps what reveals policy work as critical policy analysis best, however, is the purpose(s) associated with it. For the scholars who participated in this study, these included making a difference in the lives of students and communities that have been historically marginalized by the educational system, positively influencing education and social policies, critiquing traditional approaches to policy analysis, exposing power and rhetoric, facilitating empowerment and emancipation, and connecting their research to practice and activism.

Concluding thoughts

According to Gilliland and McKemmish (2004), there is a new interest in "research discerning the evolution of intellectual landscapes" (p. 175). Tracing the origins and major ideas that have shaped the identity of a field is a type of "reflexivity" which is a "hallmark of maturity" (Gilliland & McKemmish, 2004) of a field of study.

In this article, we have sought to understand "what counts as critical policy analysis." Two features, in particular, set the work of critical policy analysis apart: the theoretical frames from which critical policy researchers draw and the purposes for which critical policy analysts put their scholarship to work. Scholars reasoned that multi-theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches to policy analysis enable deeper and broader understanding of educational issues, and allow the researcher to investigate and question the complexities of educational issues, such as why certain changes are occurring within the field of education, why certain options tend to be chosen as policy options and solutions, and how such pathways have impacted or are likely to impact children and their communities. The resulting analyses of educational policies, they argue, have more depth and breadth than traditional methods and theoretical frameworks allow. Interestingly, even those scholars who considered themselves to be a certain type of critical policy scholar (e.g. a critical feminist) reported using different frameworks in their body of work.

Our findings provide a glimpse into the hearts and minds of the critical policy community, share concrete examples of the questions with which these scholars struggle, and delineate the methods and theories they have applied in their work. As such, this investigation into the intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis provides an instructive look into a vibrant policy research community and breaks ground for deeper investigations of the relationship between the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of critical policy researchers.

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