

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Critical Policy Analysis in Education:**  
**Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts**

education policy analysis  
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 30 Number 10

February 8, 2022

ISSN 1068-2341

**Critical Policy Analysis in Education:**  
**Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts.**  
**Introduction to the Special Issue**

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**Citation:** Diem, S., & Brooks, J. S. (2022). Critical policy analysis in education: Exploring and interrogating (in)equity across contexts. Introduction to the special issue. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30(10). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7340> This article is part of the special issue: *Critical Policy Analysis in Education: Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts*, guest edited by Sarah Diem and Jeffrey S. Brooks.

**Abstract:** This article is the introduction to a special issue of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* entitled, “Critical Policy Analysis in Education: Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts.” The special issue presents contemporary critical policy analyses from the United States, Canada, and Australia, which collectively represent methodological, contextual, and theoretical diversity. Individually, they offer incisive critiques of policy processes and outcomes

Journal website: <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/>  
Facebook: /EPAAA  
Twitter: @epaa\_aape

Manuscript received: 12/8/2021  
Revisions received: 12/10/2021  
Accepted: 12/10/2021

that shape the way equity, and indeed inequity, are manifest *in situ*. The articles represent a spectrum of approaches to understanding (in)equity in education and point out various ways that educators, scholars, policymakers, and activists can engage with systems to leverage change. In the article, the co-editors identify key themes that distinguish the special issue's contribution and explain the importance of critical policy analysis as a relevant and necessary alternative to policy analyses that ignore issues of equity, social justice, and oppression.

**Keywords:** context; critical policy analysis; educational policy; equity; methodology; theory

### **Análisis crítico de políticas en educación: Explorando e interrogando la (in)equidad en todos los contextos**

**Resumen:** Esta introducción al número especial que explora críticamente la (in)equidad en los contextos de políticas educativas presenta análisis críticos contemporáneos de políticas de los Estados Unidos, Canadá y Australia que colectivamente representan la diversidad metodológica, contextual y teórica. Individualmente, los artículos ofrecen críticas incisivas de los procesos y resultados de las políticas que dan forma a la forma en que la equidad y, de hecho, la inequidad, se manifiestan *in situ*. Representan un espectro de enfoques para comprender la (in)equidad en la educación y señalan varias formas en que los educadores, académicos, legisladores y activistas pueden participar en los sistemas para impulsar el cambio. Aquí, los coeditores identifican temas clave que distinguen la contribución del número especial y explican la importancia del análisis crítico de políticas como una alternativa relevante y necesaria a los análisis de políticas que ignoran los problemas de equidad, justicia social y opresión.

**Palabras-clave:** contexto; análisis crítico de políticas; política educativa; equidad; metodología; teoría

### **Análise crítica de políticas em educação: Explorando e interrogando a (des)equidade em todos os contextos**

**Resumo:** Esta introdução ao dossiê que explora a (in)equidade em contextos de políticas educacionais apresenta análises críticas contemporâneas de políticas dos Estados Unidos, Canadá e Austrália, que representam coletivamente a diversidade metodológica, contextual e teórica. Individualmente, os artigos oferecem críticas incisivas de processos e resultados de políticas que moldam a forma como a equidade e, de fato, a desigualdade se manifestam *in situ*. Eles representam um espectro de abordagens para entender a (des)equidade na educação e apontam várias maneiras pelas quais educadores, acadêmicos, formuladores de políticas e ativistas podem se envolver com sistemas para alavancar mudanças. Aqui, os coeditores identificam temas-chave que distinguem a contribuição do dossiê e explicam a importância da análise crítica de políticas como uma alternativa relevante e necessária para análises de políticas que ignoram questões de equidade, justiça social e opressão.

**Palavras-chave:** contexto; análise crítica de políticas; política educacional; equidade; metodologia; teoria

## **Critical Policy Analysis in Education: Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts**

Scholars who are drawn to critical approaches to education policy analysis emphasize that the issues we face in education systems cannot be divorced from societal issues. Specifically, critical

policy analysis (CPA) compels us to question all aspects of the policymaking process, including whose knowledge is prioritized in the shaping of policy, assumptions guiding policy implementation, and the historical, sociopolitical, and geographic contexts in which policies are created (Fischer et al., 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Apple (2019) adds that CPA in education “is grounded in the belief that it is absolutely crucial to understand the complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society—and the movements that are trying to interrupt these relations” (p. 276). This is particularly important given the neoliberal ethos at the heart of many present-day educational policies and reforms.

Critical analytical and methodological approaches that are used to better understand, reveal, and act against extant (in)equities in society are becoming more commonplace in educational research (Diem & Young, 2015). Critical inquiry is not a new way of framing research—scholars have been using this approach to challenge and expose power and oppression for quite some time (Cannella, 2015; Cannella & Lincoln, 2015). Yet, a growing number of scholars in the fields of educational policy and leadership are resisting traditional and dominant approaches to research by adopting critical perspectives (Welton & Diem, 2021). Many of these scholars are using CPA to interrogate policy processes—including analyzing the roots, foundations, and assumptions of policies; examining how policies develop; illustrating differences between policy rhetoric/discourse and reality; examining the distribution of power and resources; ensuring the perspectives of racially minoritized and underrepresented individuals and groups are front and center; and exploring the effect policy has on (in)equity and (in)equality (Diem et al., 2014, Horsford et al., 2019). Critical policy scholars also work to ensure their research connects to practice and activism, and seek to facilitate empowerment and emancipation across communities (Diem et al., 2014).

Building a liberatory education system that is based on equity and racial justice is of critical importance, particularly in a time of growing inequality and political polarization that threaten democracy (Horsford et al., 2019). Understanding educational policy through a critical frame not only aids in exposing the problematic nature of dominant ways of knowing and doing, but also provides space to offer alternative strategies that can result in more inclusive and equitable policies and practices. The articles in this special issue provide insights into aspects of educational policy (e.g., actors, interests, discourse) that if left unquestioned can further perpetuate existing inequities (Young & Diem, 2017).

## Overview of Special Issue

The purpose of this special issue is to present contemporary critical policy analyses across different countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia, and ultimately enhance our understanding of the importance of CPA in democratizing educational policy inquiry (Fischer et al., 2015; Horsford et al., 2019). Each of the six articles in the special issue employs CPA as an analytic approach to investigate equity policy in various contexts. The articles represent methodological, contextual, and theoretical diversity. Individually, they offer incisive critiques of local, state, and national policy processes and outcomes that shape the way equity, and indeed inequity, are manifest *in situ* (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Taken as a whole, they represent a spectrum of approaches to understanding (in)equity in education and point out various ways that educators, scholars, policymakers, and activists can engage with systems to leverage change.

In U.S. public education, to say the issue of governance is complex is an understatement. As there is no national education system, each state and territory create their own education governance systems (Brooks & Normore, 2017). One powerful governing body in U.S. public education can be found at the state level in the form of state boards of education (SBOE). In the first article of the

special issue, “Who Governs? Blank Spots and Blind Spots in State Board of Education in the United States,” VanGronigen, Young, and Rodriguez note that these SBOEs, present in all but three U.S. states, determine curriculum standards, adoption of state tests, and design of state accountability systems. As such, it is important to better understand the role of a SBOE, who serves in these roles, and who is (un)represented and (dis)advantaged as a result of SBOE membership. Drawing on the concepts of blank spots and blind spots (Wagner, 1993), critical feminist theory (Marshall & Young, 2013), and diffractive methods of policy analysis (Barad, 2006; Dixon-Román, 2016; Ulmer, 2016), VanGronigen and colleagues, show varying degrees in how SBOE members are selected, which raise important questions around equity and representation, as well as members’ professional experience in education.

Two of the articles in the special issue bring together CPA with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to highlight the importance of language and text in communicating and exerting power, and the role sociopolitical context plays in the sensemaking of discourses. In “Language and Power Dynamics: A Critical Policy Analysis of Racial and Choice Discourses in School Integration Policies,” Diem, Good, Smotherson, Walters, and Bonney pay particular attention to racial and school choice discourses in their analysis of three school districts’ integration policies. They frame their CPA with CDA and interest divergence, a key component of critical race theory that points to how white powerholders further exclude Black individuals and groups in society when they feel that will accumulate more advantage for themselves (Gillborn, 2013). Their findings highlight complexities of each district’s approach to school integration, including competing power dynamics and the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality (Diem et al., 2014). Castro, Parry, and Siegel-Hawley’s article, “All Schools are Not Created Equal: An Analysis of Public Comments on School Rezoning,” focuses on written public comments that were provided by stakeholders across two school districts engaged in school rezoning processes. In their pairing of CPA and CDA, Castro et al. explore the values of these stakeholders and how they were used to rationalize their support or opposition to school rezoning, how the values play a role in challenges, limits, and benefits to school rezoning, and finally, what these values tell us about racial and economic politics associated with school rezoning. While the public comments the authors analyzed are themselves a form of participation and public engagement in policy making, whether they are taken up by policymakers in ways that limit dominant discourses and create more equitable and democratic engagement is unclear.

Children who have access to and participate in high-quality early childhood education (ECE) are more likely to experience positive social and academic outcomes (Gray-Lobe et al., 2021; Meloy et al., 2019). Yet, as Hollett and Frankenberg illustrate in their article, “A Critical Analysis of Racial Disparities in ECE Subsidy Funding,” significant racial disparities exist both in access to quality ECE and in funding and educational resources. Through a CPA framework that integrates tenets of quantitative critical race theory (QuantCrit), they descriptively explore disparities by children’s race and community racial composition in access to tiered ECE subsidy funding in the state of Pennsylvania. Their findings illustrate that tiered reimbursement funding policies are not beneficial if the goal is to achieve racial equity, and are particularly harmful for Black and Latinx children and communities.

Much like the Hollett and Frankenberg article, the last two articles of the special issue also focus on school funding, albeit in different countries—Canada and Australia. Using a theory of discourse analysis, in the article “Shifting Meanings: The Struggle Over Public Funding of Private Schools in Alberta, Canada,” Winton and Staples explore the debate of using public dollars to fund private schools in one Canadian province. Specifically, they combine concepts of argumentative discourse theory (Hajer, 1993, 1997, 2006) with CPA to illuminate the struggles that take place over

how policy meanings are constructed through discourse. The argumentative processes that ensue among policy actors are then used to mobilize story lines to ultimately persuade other actors to go along with a particular policy issue. While Winton and Staples found that the arguments surrounding public funding to private schools have not drastically changed, the meanings of the arguments have changed as neoliberalism has taken more of a foothold in education not just in Canada but across the world.

In the last article of the issue, “School Funding in Australia: A Critical Policy Analysis of Inequitable Processes of Policy Production,” Sinclair and Brooks adapt Bowe, Ball, and Gold’s (1992) policy cycle framework with Fraser’s (2008, 2009) social justice theory to critically analyze school funding policy in Australia. Specifically, they deploy CPA to examine the *Review of Funding for Schooling* report (Australian Government, 2011) and how the appointed panel’s text production processes shaped the final published report and reflected broader inequities within the Australian education system. In doing so, they demonstrate that the Review panel’s makeup and subsequent consultation processes with education stakeholders were inequitable because they strongly favored the already powerful non-government school sectors in Australia.

The special issue concludes with a commentary by Camille Wilson, in which she reflects on the aforementioned articles and discusses their insights and implications as well as connections to each other. Specifically, Wilson illustrates how collectively, the articles in the special issue demonstrate that only when we have healthy democracies can we have more equitable and racially just school systems. Wilson also reminds us that despite the mounting challenges we face every day by those trying to dismantle public education, we can still organize and mobilize to demand that educational policies are designed and implemented in ways that advance social justice and equity.

## Conclusion

Critical policy analysis has gained traction in academic and education spaces over the past 30 years (Young & Diem, 2017). Though economic analyses, “value free” input-output approaches, and a focus on student “achievement” scores remain the dominant policy making discourse, scholars who identify institutional racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and a host of other inequities are slowly becoming part of the discourse (Bell, 2016). While this trend toward acknowledgement is encouraging, it is also insufficient. Policies that ignore issues of power, oppression, and marginalization are, at best, ineffective in effecting change that improves people, communities, and institutions and, at worst, violent toward them (Brooks et al., 2007). How much longer should children, families, and educators wait before legislators and administrators craft, implement, and enforce policies that provide equal opportunity for a quality school experience? The answer we would like to give is, “not a single day,” but we are compelled to instead reply with, “large education systems are designed to perpetuate inequity, but we are fighting hard to expose this and offer an alternative grounded in justice.”

The scholars in this special issue have approached CPA from a variety of perspectives and employed a wide range of methodologies to interrogate schools and school systems. They have also suggested improved ways of examining, conceptualizing, and enacting education policy, grounded in an ethos of social justice. We applaud their efforts and the lessons they teach through their work, but also acknowledge that these systems are slow to change—if indeed they change at all—and that the change agenda is seldom about creating more equitable processes and outcomes, even though system leaders routinely espouse this aim. We are buoyed and inspired by the work of the scholars in this special issue and heed their call to continue working toward equity and equality in education policy. We will not arrive there today, but the articles in this special issue have moved us one step

closer, and as we look ahead in our own research agendas and work across the field of inquiry, we are committed to take another step toward equity tomorrow, and one more the day after.

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the editors of *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, particularly Audrey Amrein-Beardsley and Stephanie McBride-Schreiner, for giving us the opportunity to support and disseminate this important research. We are deeply grateful to our colleagues who took the time to provide critical and thoughtful feedback on all of the articles included in this special issue. Their insights helped to strengthen the analyses offered across all of the articles: Erin Atwood, Jennifer Ayscue, Ken Brien, Curtis Brewer, Melanie Brooks, Alexandra Freidus, Erica Greenberg, Erin Hardy, Jessica Holloway, DeMarcus Jenkins, Julia Mendez, Carrie Sampson, Glenn Savage, Brittany Smotherson, and Jasmine Ulmer.

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education policy analysis archives

Volume 30 Number 10

February 8, 2022

ISSN 1068-2341



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