
Policy analysis frameworks: A phenomenological study of education policy researchers' practices*

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Abstract

Aiming to broaden the discourse on methodology in education policy analysis, this phenomenological study explores the real-life experiences of policy researchers and the methodology they follow in their studies. Eleven senior policy researchers holding both liberal and critical political views of education were interviewed about their approaches beginning from defining a policy issue to reporting their findings. The results revealed marked differences in policy researchers' attitudes and experiences. While policy scholars with a liberal outlook were found to be driven mainly by data to determine how policies work, researchers following a critical approach were more likely to base their studies on theory and to focus on meaning and questions regarding how and why. This paper also presents a framework to map out a pattern comprising key concepts and questions based on policy researchers' approaches to policy analysis.

Keywords: education policy analysis, policy analysis framework, policy cycle, policy researcher, political views on education

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Introduction

Policy analysis, essentially a process that supplies policymakers and other stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and information to develop, comprehend, and critically evaluate policies, aims to explore the complex nature of educational issues (Bardach, 2012; Dunn, 2012). With this aim in mind, policy analysis weighs various alternatives by comparing their benefits in relation to one or more objectives and/or values so as to allow policymakers to make informed decisions regarding which policies to implement and how to implement them in order to reach their policy goals (Alexander, 2013). In other words, policy analysis is an exploratory process the goal of which is to provide either *analysis for policy* that produces knowledge or policy recommendations, or *analysis of policy* that critically examines the hows and whys of a policy (Olssen et al., 2004). Policy researchers might therefore follow different frameworks to conceptualize the policy problem and map its context.

By identifying variable classifications and their relationships, a framework enables researchers to form a basis for policy analysis studies (Bardach, 2012). Frameworks serve as a determinant in the conceptualization of the policy problem and its content while simultaneously offering a flexible approach to produce new questions and a contextual map (Bayirbag, 2013; Tatto, 2012). In terms of education policy, the literature contains many analysis frameworks that vary depending on the field of study, the issue addressed, and the focus of the analysis. In addition, policy researchers' interpretations of a policy's rationale, effects, and conceptualization may be influenced by the researcher's approach toward policy analysis. Moreover, researchers following different approaches (e.g., traditional and critical) may operate using distinct questions and methods (Diem et al., 2014; Veselý, 2012; Young & Diem, 2017). Based on the approaches in education politics, researchers draw on different conceptual frameworks to examine education policies (Jones, 2013; Saltman, 2014).

While there are several frameworks in the literature guiding policy researchers in their analyses, the extent that researchers draw on these frameworks in practice is unclear. Further, since factors influencing policies often depend on the lens through which researchers interpret policies' rationale, context, effect, and other elements, identifying the methodology and stages in education policy analysis can be challenging for junior researchers (Scott, 2017). As a result, it is important to comprehend and internalize how policy researchers, especially senior and more experienced ones, interpret and discuss their analysis practices.

This study seeks to explore the process of policy analysis followed by education policy researchers with different political views of education. To this end, eleven senior education policy researchers with liberal, critical, and mixed views of education politics were interviewed to identify the methodological and conceptual foundation underlying their policy analysis practices. Based on participants' statements, we developed a framework comprising a list of questions and concepts outlining the key components to policy analysis to provide a comprehensive roadmap for policy researchers about how to analyze (e.g., where to begin, where to focus, which data to collect, how to interpret data) a policy. Accordingly, we have sought answers to two main research questions:

- (1) What are the steps followed by education policy researchers with different political views of education in their policy analysis practices?
- (2) What would a framework guiding policy analysis research in education look like?

Frameworks for analyzing education policies

Policy analysis methods can be classified into two groups: traditional and interpretive-critical (Diem et al., 2014; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016; Young & Diem, 2017). Traditional methods seek measurable evidence through the scientific application of management skills, program design, and implementation to make objective, value-free assessments using legislation and actions already in practice (Diem et al., 2014; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016; Yanow, 2000). Studies following traditional methods typically view policy factors as independent variables that explore policy outcomes post-implementation, as opposed to the interaction between factors (McDonnell, 2009). Olssen et al. (2004) call this approach *analysis for policy*, which takes two forms, namely, policy advocacy and information for policy. On the other hand, interpretive-critical approaches focus on meanings related to the policy in question, include a broader range of policy actors, and expose the debatable nature of policy regarding problem definition, research results, and arguments for solutions (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016; Yanow, 2000). Similarly, Olssen et al. (2004) dub this approach *analysis of policy*, which takes two forms: analysis of policy determination and effects and analysis of content. Thus, critical perspectives focus on policies' beneficiaries vis-à-vis policy effects, the meaning of policy content, and what actually happens in the policy implementation process. Young and Diem (2017) assert that an increasing number of policy researchers have recently begun to employ critical frameworks in policy analysis.

Table 1 depicts examples of studies regarding the frameworks designed to analyze public and education policies. These frameworks were selected after reviewing the literature using the keywords *framework*, *policy analysis*, and *educational policy*. This limited number of works was used to identify similarities and differences in policy analysis processes in the literature. This literature review also aided the authors in developing the interview form used in the current study.

The frameworks listed above share similar characteristics and stages interested in exploring the formulation and implementation processes of policy cycles. A few studies draw attention to economic concerns, trend themes, and global reconfiguration in education policy formulation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Cheng & Cheung, 1995; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Some frameworks offer a linear set of stages to analyze policies while others present a flexible analysis approach given the complexity of the policy process. For example, Bardach (2012) developed an eight-step policy analysis process whereas both Alexander (2013) and UNESCO (2013) laid out specific procedures to be adopted while analyzing policies. Flexible frameworks, however, take policy as the focal point and attempt to understand it in a way similar to Ball's (1993), Jones's (2013), and Yanow's (2000) frameworks. Moreover, whereas some frameworks prioritize policy formulation, others draw on the nature of policy implementation and the relationships that exist between policy text and action, and even others do both. For instance, Bell and Stevenson (2006) highlight the power-action relationships in policy development for both the formulation and implementation processes. Similarly, Bayirbag's (2013) framework offers a more holistic perspective on policy analysis, taking policy implementation as its central point of focus.

Table 1. Overview of frameworks in the literature for analyzing educational policies

Researcher(s) and year of the study	Title of the study	Approach	Method(s)
Cheng and Cheung (1995)	A Framework for The Analysis of Educational Policies	Traditional PA	Quantitative and Qualitative
Cheng, Ng, and Mok (2002)	Economic Considerations in Education Policy Making: A Simplified Framework	Traditional PA	Quantitative and Qualitative
Bardach (2012)	A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving	Traditional PA	Quantitative and Qualitative
Mingat, Tan, and Sosale (2003)	Tools for Education Policy Analysis	Traditional PA	Quantitative Statistical Analyses
UNESCO (2013)	Handbook on Education Policy Analysis and Programming Volume 1: Education Policy Analysis	Traditional PA	Quantitative and Qualitative
Yanow (2000)	Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis	Interpretive PA	Discourse Analysis
Bell and Stevenson (2006)	Education Policy: Process, Themes, Impacts	Interpretive PA	Discourse Analysis
Ball (1993)	What is Policy? Texts, Trajectories, and Toolboxes	Interpretive-Critical PA	Ethnography
Jones (2013)	Understanding Education Policy: The 'Four Education Orientations' Framework	Interpretive Conceptual	Discourse Analysis
Rizvi and Lingard (2010)	Globalizing Education Policy	Critical PA	Document and Discourse Analysis
Alexander (2013)	Policy Analysis for Educational Leaders: A Step-By-Step Approach	Critical PA	Quantitative and Qualitative
Tatto (2012)	Learning and Doing Policy Analysis in Education: <i>Examining Diverse Approaches to Increasing Educational Access</i>	Exploratory inquiry	Document Analysis
Bayirbag (2013)	A Framework Proposal for Public Policy Analysis	Action Based Public Policy Analysis	Quantitative and Qualitative

Traditional frameworks offer mostly quantitative analysis methods dealing with empirical evidence, such as cost-benefit-effectiveness and impact analyses, and causal relationships (Cheng & Cheung, 1995; Cheng et al., 2002; Mingat et al., 2003). Conversely, the interpretive-critical approach considers the influence of values and power on the policy process and benefits from textual and policy discourse analysis of policy artifacts (Alexander, 2013; Ball, 1993; Ball et al., 2012; Bayirbag, 2013; Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Jones,

2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Tatto, 2012; Yanow, 2000). For instance, some such frameworks include descriptions of the time, space, and context of a policy (Ball, 2015; Bayirbag, 2013; Jones, 2013; Tatto, 2012). Tatto's framework (2012) also draws upon research studies related to the policy issue at hand. Furthermore, a considerable number of the frameworks noted above apply a mixed-methods approach (Bardach, 2012; Bayirbag, 2013; Cheng et al., 2002; Cheng & Cheung, 1995; UNESCO, 2013).

As Bell and Stevenson (2006) point out, the policy presented in the statement of intent, action plan, or set of guidelines often includes much more than what is actually stated. As such, since researchers tend to prefer critical frameworks to explain the role of power and ideology in the policy process (McDonnell, 2009; Young & Diem, 2017), inquiries on what the policy actually means, who benefits from the policy, and the nature of the policy's context all gain importance (Avelar, 2016). Moreover, Burbules and Berk (1999) differentiate between critical thinking and critical pedagogy, considering them to be related to traditional and critical approaches, respectively. They state that critical thinking is to seek reasons and/or justification to do something using empirically demonstrable facts, whereas they describe critical pedagogy as a point of view that emphasizes social injustice resulting from relations of unequal power and that is interested in interpretation via seeking meaning and change through the transformation of inequitable institutions and social relations. Thus, there is need for a wide variety of theoretical perspectives and methods in critical policy scholarship (Diem et al., 2018).

Method

As our main objective was to identify the steps followed by educational policy researchers in their policy analysis practice, this study aims to explore the theoretical/conceptual and methodological perspectives of policy analysts and how they frame their policy studies in practice. Since phenomenology enables researchers to explore individuals' lived experiences and attitudes toward a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), we have employed a phenomenological methodology.

Participants

We used purposeful sampling to identify participants, as it allows researchers to focus on key individuals with the most comprehensive grasp of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). Benefiting from the guidance of the research advisor, an education policy researcher himself, and various networks established through policy conferences, we initially sought out individuals conducting education policy studies. We then used snowball sampling to recruit further individuals until data saturation was reached (Patton, 2001).

Two main criteria were considered while selecting participants. First, we aimed to include researchers holding different political views of education so as to obtain a diversity of education policy perspectives. Policy scholars with liberal and critical outlooks were interviewed to represent traditional and critical policy analysis approaches. These political views embody two of the prevailing orientations in education and can be articulated as: (i) the *liberal outlook*, which relates to the knowledge and skills necessary for individual or market choice and competitive achievement, and (ii) the *critical outlook*, which refers to

alternative values and attempts to restructure social justice issues (Jones, 2013). Whereas policy liberal researchers presuppose the standardization of student achievements, critical researchers seek to make the world a better place for everyone through social and educational change (Saltman, 2014). With regard to the second criterion, since the study was restricted to policy studies in the field of education, we strove to ensure that participants consisted primarily of education policy researchers whose research interests included educational policy and politics.

Using their research activities and academic work as the basis for analysis, participants' orientations were identified prior to the interviews. Eleven individuals were interviewed, of whom three had a liberal outlook, two had a mixed critical-liberal outlook, and six had a critical outlook. Participants were categorized based on the positions they expressed during the educational policy analysis (i.e., C: critical, L: liberal, and CL: mixed critical-liberal) and were likewise assigned a number, which resulted in the following designations L1, L2, CL1, and CL2, C1, C2, etc. Of the 11 participants, two were distinguished professors, one was a professor emeritus, five were full professors, and two were assistant professors (see Table 2) all of the participants' departmental affiliations were primarily in educational policy studies. The number of participants was deemed satisfactory once the information obtained from them began to resemble each other (Patton, 2001).

Data collection

Building off the literature on policy analysis frameworks, we developed an interview protocol for use in the semi-structured interviews conducted to gather data for the study (Creswell, 2013). Questions were formed following a review of the related literature, which was mostly found to explain the analysis process as (i) defining the problem, (ii) gathering evidence, (iii) looking for policy alternatives, (iv) evaluating policy outcomes, and (v) reporting results (Alexander, 2013; Bardach, 2012; Dunn, 2012; Fowler, 2014). Additional questions were then asked to reveal participant-specific strategies. Through these questions, the interview protocol focused on researchers' theoretical perspective, their main reason for conducting their analysis, the starting point of their analysis, their main guiding questions, the criteria they used to evaluate policy outcomes, and the methods they used to persuade their audience.

Depending on participants' preference, interviews lasting from 30 to 60 minutes were conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or via Skype. These interviews were voice recorded upon participants' consent and later transcribed. The authors asked interviewees for sample publications and studies which aided the authors to develop a more comprehensive understanding and greater appreciation of interviewees' analysis processes.

Data analysis

The complex, inductive process of discerning patterns and themes began with each interview's transcription (Patton, 2001). Following transcription, data were coded into meaningful parts to convey participants' experiences and insights related to the methodology they apply during policy analysis. Data were organized and analyzed using MAXQDA 11.2 qualitative data analysis software, producing codes that were then transformed into categories, patterns, and themes (Patton, 2001).

Although both the theoretical framework on policy analysis and participants' framework samples provided the main patterns and units for the analysis, we decided to conduct an inductive analysis to reveal fundamental concepts underlying policy researchers' perspectives. Accordingly, we attempted to describe the entire analysis process by defining policy researchers' attitudes and the limitations they encountered at the starting point of their analyses all the way to how they persuaded their audience. Moreover, we made use of an audit trail by compiling feedback from two colleagues during the data analysis process.

Table 2. Study participants

Participant code	Gender	Perspective	Geographical base	Title	Affiliated department	Doctoral background
C1	M	Critical	Canada	Asst. Prof.	Social and Psychological Foundations of Education	Sociology and Social Anthropology
C2	M	Critical	USA	Prof.	Educational Leadership and Policy Studies	Curriculum and Instruction
C3	F	Critical	England	Prof.	Education Policy	Educational Leadership
C4	M	Critical	Australia	Prof.	Global Studies in Education	Philosophy and Education
C5	M	Critical	England	Distinguished Prof.	Sociology of Education	Sociological Studies
C6	F	Critical	USA	Distinguished Prof.	Education Policy, Research and Administration	Education Leadership
CL1	M	Critical - Liberal	USA	Senior Policy Analyst	Education Policy	International Comparative Education
CL2	M	Critical - Liberal	USA	Prof.	Education Policy	Political Science
L1	M	Liberal	USA	Asst. Prof.	Education & Economics	Quantitative Policy Analysis of Education
L2	M	Liberal	USA	Prof.	Public Policy and Governance & Economics	Economics
L3	M	Liberal	USA	Emeritus Prof.	Education Policy	Education Psychology

Credibility and validity

Since establishing validity and credibility is vital in qualitative research, several steps were taken to ensure the study was credible and valid. First, the interview form was

examined by and discussed with two experts for conceptual validity, comprehensibility, and question clarity. Second, interviewees were recruited on a voluntary basis after signing an informed consent form detailing the nature of the research and possible ethical issues. Third, the authors completed an interview evaluation form after each interview, kept notes about the interview, and recorded their initial interpretations. These steps allowed the authors to improve interviews' quality by aiding them in developing and asking more well-rounded questions soliciting more comprehensive answers.

After transcription, the transcribed texts were sent to participants for review, additions, and corrections. The results of the data analysis were further enriched with quotations from the interviews so as to furnish pertinent explanations and accounts directly related to their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Reflexivity is a useful element in establishing the credibility of phenomenological analyses as it identifies biases and assumptions and 'brackets' them out (Patton, 2001). Since the current study focuses on revealing experienced scholars' attitudes toward education policy analysis, we sought to minimize whatever biases toward the topic they might have by focusing on the methodology they follow in their research and analyses.

Findings

The results of the study are presented in two parts. The first illustrates how policy researchers conduct analyses and their experiences are organized into three sections covering nine themes: *pre-analysis* (1) theoretical perspective, (2) main objectives, (3) main questions; during analysis (4) starting point, (5) defining the policy problem, (6) gathering evidence, (7) policy alternatives and *reporting analysis*, (8) criteria to evaluate policy, and (9) persuading the audience. The second part contributes to the greater literature on policy analysis by introducing a framework based on the real-life experiences and perspectives offered by the participating policy researchers.

Pre-analysis

The most remarkable result of this study is that all participants reported not using any specific previously-defined framework in their research and instead used their own framework or drew upon available theories, thinking tools, or questions. For example, C4 described how he approached policy analysis, stating that he would ask several rhetorical questions:

I use a phrase, 'If policy analysis is the answer, then what is the question?' Unless you're clear about the question, I don't know what you're doing an analysis for, or for whom... So, questions matter rather than tools, or framework, or whatever. So, much of what I write is driven by the questions that I have of any given policy.

When asked about their *theoretical perspective*, liberal analysts (L1, L2, L3, CL1) reported that they did not use theory directly in their analyses and instead used statistical data analyses to focus on how a policy works. For example, L3 revealed the following: "This

may shock you, but I do not have one. I'm an empiricist and data lead me. Data must be interpreted." Similarly, L2 stated, "I'm often not trying to do theory development or theory testing. I'm more often trying to do empirical evaluations."

Unsurprisingly, education policy researchers in the critical group were found to ground their work in theory. One such policy analyst (C4) with an *analytical philosophy background* explained his approach: "I'm always mindful of how much time and space matter. By that, we need to know where we are located, under which conditions, under what circumstances, and how we are located and connected to the past and future."

It appears that critical policy researchers draw on social theories and their repercussions to develop a comprehensive understanding about the multifaceted nature of education policies. For example, C1 described his approach using the term *immanent critique*, which has two components. The first component is the importance of *reading policies on their own terms* vis-à-vis different philosophical positions, while also providing insight on how policies prescribe solutions to problems. The other is *historization*, which identifies problems and solutions within broader structures (e.g., political economy, culture, politics) in order to understand the limitations and deeper set of explicit values and meanings of the policy within discourse.

In addition to understanding the policy issue before engaging in analysis research, each policy analyst had a specific objective in mind when conducting analyses. In this study, participants stated that they contributed to educational policy debates by drawing attention to their areas of interest. Policy researchers' *main purposes* in conducting policy analysis research are to promote human development (C1), question power (C1), shake common sense (C1), situate a public problem through interviews (C2, C3), intervene in a public problem (C2), show what is and what ought to be (C4), provide tools to help people make sense of a policy (C5), explore what is happening on the ground (C6, CL1), improve policy and practice (L1, L2, CL2), and engage in the democratic process (L3).

The above objectives illustrate a fundamental difference between critical and liberal analysts. Critical policy researchers emphasize policies' objectives, whereas liberal researchers focus on improving policies' practical aspects. In other words, critical policy analysts examine the hows and whys underpinning policies to discover deeper values, principles, questions, and ethical sensibilities, rather than to produce knowledge or policy recommendations (C1, C3).

Furthermore, participants emphasized that asking questions helped shape their approach and guided them to a starting point and area of focus in their analyses. Participants mentioned the questions displayed in Table 3 while discussing the *main questions* guiding them during their analyses.

Table 3. Main questions guiding policy researchers in their analyses

Political views of education	Questions
Critical outlook	What is the empirical relationship between policy concepts? (C1)
	Why and how do the policy actors value the policy? (C2)
	How do we situate the policy in terms of material and symbolic interests? (C2)
	What positions do people take during the policy process and why? (C3)
	How is the public problem represented by scholars? (C1, C2, C4)
	Who wants the policy? Who produces the policy? (C2, C4)
	What is the (public) problem? (C1, C2, C5)
	Where do policies fit in a global context? (C5)
	Who is served and how? (C6)
	How do people align themselves toward the policy? (C6)
Critical-Liberal outlook	What is happening with people involved on the ground level at this point and why? (C6)
	Who benefits from the policy and who does not? (CL1, C4)
	How do national policies affect local policy actors? (CL1)
Liberal outlook	How does the set of practices influence or change the behaviors of other agencies or educational institutions? (CL2)
	Does the program/policy work? How? (L1, L2)
	What are the people saying about the policy? (L3)

The questions in Table 3 indicate that critical policy researchers ask questions concerning the definition of policy problems and the positioning of policy actors around a policy and their benefits, whereas liberal policy researchers question the efficiency and effectiveness of a policy and its repercussions. Critical-liberal policy researchers, however, ask questions regarding external factors affecting policy formation and policies' beneficiaries. For instance, C2 stated that he dealt with public problems regarding stakeholders' material (i.e., economic) and symbolic (i.e., ideological) interests. He also stated that he would ask how policy actors evaluated the policy with regard to (i) learning and teaching and (ii) the nature of learning and knowledge from both an epistemological and pedagogical perspective. On the other hand, L3 summarized his process as follows: "You look at the problem, you look at the data, and then you look around the world for solutions." Regarding questions for policy beneficiaries, CL1 explained his reason for asking who benefits from a policy:

The main question I always ask in my research is, "Who benefits from this? Who's benefitting from the way things are currently operating?" Then, the follow-up question to that is: "Who isn't benefitting?" These questions generally lead you toward a better understanding of what the motivations might be for a specific policy, forum, or implementation strategy. And then you figure out who's being impacted and why. I mean, you might find legacy institutional practices that aren't helping and people who are just doing things because that's the norm.

Questions pertaining to the stakeholders involved in the policy are mainly asked by policy researchers to gain an understanding of the policy itself. C3, who uses Bourdieu's thinking tools, expressed her approach as follows:

What position people take in a specific field, why they take that position, what their knowledge frames are, how it is regarded by people, who knows about things, and how people give them approval and acclaim for what they're doing. But, how in the end people might—as Bourdieu said—misrecognize what's taking place and what the game in play is.

During analysis

The next question asked to participants related to their *starting point* when conducting analyses. Their answers revealed that they tended to focus on several points: conversations around the policy issue (CL1, CL2, L2, L3), conceptualizing the problem (C2, C3, C5), policy discourse (C1), texts (C4), question(s) (L2, C5), and data (L1). Here, C2 stated that his *starting point* was to question not only how advocacy of a given policy justifies itself, but also what and why policy stakeholders are doing with regard to the policy in question. CL1 reported that he began his analyses by exploring the policy's timeline in policy documents and by determining who the actors are and how they benefit from the policy. Commenting on the starting point for his analyses, L2 expressed the following:

For me, the starting point is a question that I want to know the answer to. So, I don't start with the literature. I don't read the literature and say, 'What's the hole in the literature?' Rather, I start with a question, like, 'Is this a good policy?' And I start with that question and I say, 'Okay, how am I going to answer that question?' Well, then I have sub-questions like...

It may be deduced from the above statement that policy research following a liberal approach starts with questions focusing on evidence for policy efficiency. On the other hand, C4 reported his starting point to be *texts* related to the policy, a finding that supports the hypothesis that critical policy researchers prefer to gain a comprehensive understanding of policies:

My starting point is always the text, what is written down. Then I ask questions about what has gone into what the text says. I start off with a document – any document – and then ask people questions about that document in order to frame and figure out just what the politics around that document are that led to the document's production in order to see how, based on that document, people develop their positions into a new document. So, I always start off with a document, its history, and its politics.

The last two statements by liberal and critical participants reveal that critical analysts are primarily interested in describing a policy issue using policy texts and discourse, whereas liberal analysts start with evidence for policy outcomes.

With certain objectives and questions in mind before conducting analyses, policy scholars moved on to *defining the policy problem*. Participants' statements reveal attitudes pertaining to defining problems. For instance, L2, L3, and CL1 reported that the policy problem had already been defined and publicly discussed. Moreover, L2 expressed that policies themselves generate the questions asked and solutions pursued, stating the following: "It's like, 'Here's a policy problem, here's a possible solution that somebody's going to try to implement,' and I look at that like, 'Oh, that's interesting, I wonder if it works.'" In addition, CL2 stated that he relied on literature related to the policy issue under study and sought to interpret different attitudes while defining the problem. CL1, however, explained that since the problem's definition is contested and that since people frame the issue differently, it is important to draw out multiple perspectives to perform a satisfactory analysis, adding the following:

[I ask,] "Does that play out empirically?" Then, [I ask,] "Does the way that any constituency envisions the solution actually work? And again, for whom?" Because things often work for some people and not for others, so you want to be clear about how it functions.

In contrast to liberal policy analysts' tendency to provide multifaceted definitions of policy issues, some of the critical analysts (C2, C3) mentioned that policy issues were not a problem whatsoever. For example, C3 expressed that policy practitioners had been told what the problem is, arguing that although public education does not have any major problems, some teachers and politicians do not perform their professional duties adequately. She strongly emphasized the question, "What have we been told the problem is?" Furthermore, C2 preferred to define policy issues as public problems, emphasizing that public problems differ from social and policy problems because the former represent the interests of many people. He exemplified his idea as follows:

There will be an individual problem that is the product of social forces and everyone is encouraged to see it simply as one's own individual problem, and it's very oppressive for people to learn that problems they didn't create are theirs to solve. Sure, someone might be unhealthy, but what makes people unhealthy? There are lots of factors that make people unhealthy, like environmental pollution, depending on where you live and whether you have access to healthy food and what not. So, there are a lot of social factors going into what makes people healthy. But, people are told their health is their own individual responsibility. If you're unhealthy, it's not that you should get a gym membership and go exercise there. No, that's a consumerist solution. In short, this is an example of translating public problems into individual problems as opposed to translating individual problems into public problems, like our social problems. And they get other people to do something to address or organize people.

The findings detailed up to this point elucidate the beginning of policy analyses. Gathering evidence represents the data collection process in policy analysis research. When participants were asked how they *gathered evidence* in their analyses, they indicated that it depended on the questions they asked. Although they reported using methods and types of data that best suited the research question(s), their methods and techniques varied depending on whether they held a liberal or critical outlook. Participants used a variety of methods, including causal impact analyses, regression analyses, cost-benefit analyses, discourse analyses, post-structuralism, Bourdieu's set of tools, immanent critiques, the new sociology of education, political economies, and policy genealogy. In addition, several scholars were influenced by the ideas and theories of other researchers, especially in terms of which methodology they followed while performing policy studies.

Seeking the meaning of policies and inquiring into the *how* and *why*, critical policy researchers seem to prefer conceptual works based on discourse analysis. As a result, their work might be considered more interpretive and subjective in nature. On the contrary, liberal policy researchers were found mainly to perform data-based analyses using quantitative methods like causal impact and regression analyses. However, liberal researchers also reported that research questions determined which tools they used to collect and analyze data, indicating that they also employ qualitative methods.

Adopting ethnography in his analyses, C5 clarified that "the way in which structures, discourses, and policies work on and through the lives of ordinary people set them within a broader perspective and bigger picture." In addition, L3 cited the algorithms used in long-term studies in the literature, stating that they were helpful in providing an historical approach. Finally, C4, who followed an eclectic approach, commented on the evidence-gathering process, underlining that evidence is never neutral since it is influenced by policy analysts' own values and interests, in addition to which topics they choose to address.

Participants reported that they employed quantitative, qualitative, and eclectic approaches to tackle their research question(s). Several mentioned using multiple qualitative methods in their research, including interviews, academic meetings, fieldwork, ethnography, and discourse analysis (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, CL1). Although liberal analysts did not explicitly cite qualitative methods when responding to this interview question, they did state that they sometimes referred to qualitative data in their research (L1, L3). Moreover, several analysts falling mostly in the liberal group, stated using surveys, regression analyses, and causal impact analyses. Again, some participants affirmed using both paradigms in an eclectic or mixed-methods approach (L3, C4).

Participants stated that they used several *data sources* in their research, including policy documents (e.g., reports or data from international policy institutions like OECD, the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum), academic and journal databases, online libraries (e.g., ERIC, JSTOR), the Internet (e.g., Google, Google Scholar), library databases, governmental databases and data sets, bookstore databases (e.g., Amazon), and networks. CL1, for example, discussed the role of policy documents in his studies as follows:

Examining policy documents is a critical step because the language used in legislation is what drives the process. When I think about a policy, I think about the concepts of policies and all the different ingredients that go into a policy as a process that the policy undergoes, as well as the timeline for drafting a policy. I mean it's

not like a policy pops up overnight. There's a three to five-year negotiation process during which different constituencies present different options, asymmetries in power and governance, and non-governmental organizations.

After collecting and analyzing data, policy analysts derive conclusions about the policy issue from the resulting evidence. Considering *policy alternatives* is one of way to illustrate how a policy works. Analysts differed as to whether policy alternatives were applicable in their studies. L1 and L2 mentioned that they created simulations based on what if questions. L1, for example, stated, "Though not always, I sometimes perform simulations of an alternative policy to examine what would happen if another alternative had been implemented." C3, on the contrary, stated that in order to examine a policy, she considers the bigger picture instead of trying to understand the realities of policy implementation: "When I'm working on alternatives, it's not about what the outcome is or what the alternative is; it's about what type of education system we want for society." One of the critical-liberal analysts (CL2), however, focused on policy makers and their decision-making process when discussing what's next in policy studies, explaining that policy researchers should do a better job translating their findings into practice for policymakers:

We need to interpret our findings from the perspective of policymakers and translate them in a relevant, meaningful way so that policymakers will be able to use them and ask what differences the results make from a policy perspective.

Critical policy analysts (C1, C2), however, underlined that they benefited from good examples, and attempted to move beyond the dominant discourse.

Reporting analysis

Before reporting how they proceeded, participants were first asked what *criteria* they used to critique and evaluate policy outcomes. The majority did not give concrete answers about their criteria, discussing instead the complexity of policy evaluation. Most of their comments revolved around evidence-based evaluations and interpreting conflicts between theory and data (L1, L2, CL1, C1, C4). One participant (CL2) noted that policy researchers needed to contextualize results instead of leaving them as statistical findings so that policy makers can understand and make use of them. One critical policy analyst (C5) emphasized the importance of raising questions that propel researchers and other stakeholders to devise alternative ways of implementing and improving policies. In addition, L3 specified that his commitment to democracy was an important factor while critiquing and evaluating policies.

Speaking on this issue, C4 gave an example of his critical approach to policy analysis, stating that while the proposal to add an extra two hours of instruction to help improve children's grades might appear positive in terms of outcomes, its effects on younger children may be detrimental, considering society's moral obligations toward children and the rights they possess. This policy researcher emphasized the difficulty in describing a policy in simple black-and-white terms. A liberal analyst (L2) also mentioned that he focused on the policies' results over the size of their effect and avoided making

recommendations calling for policies to be extended or rejected.

Since it is important to report and disseminate research results after conducting policy research, participants were asked how they *persuaded their audience*. Their answers reveal that depending on the seniority of the researcher and the scope of his/her studies and projects, one's audience varies between academics, teachers, and policymakers. C1, for example, stated that "finding a very clear thematic focus and then working through a series of arguments based on that thematic focus is the best way of persuading people." CL1 and L2 considered the strength of their work to be the provision of up-to-date and verified information, whereas C1 stated that craft and evidence quality were important. In addition, C4, C6, CL1, and L1 pointed out that the language used varies depending on one's audience. Those participants who had reached the level of full professorship (C2, L3) mentioned that since they were able to write popular works on policy issues, they had the ability to use clear, direct language that made it easier to attract public attention. All participants specified that they use diverse media to disseminate their research results, including social media, television, radio, and teaching, in addition to journal articles, books, conference papers, and workshops.

Policy analysis is a complex process and our interviews reveal that while there are specific steps followed in policy analysis, the questions that drive analyses vary by policy and analyst, in a way representing not only the characteristics of the policy but also the analyst's norms and area of focus. Thus, while there is no one way to conduct policy analyses, it is possible to map out a pattern comprising key concepts and questions to aid analysis of education policies. The following section builds off the literature and ideas expressed during interviews to form a framework for novice policy analysts.

Framework proposal

Figure 1 presents a framework developed based on policy analysts' experiences with and attitudes toward policy analysis. The critical concepts addressed, the distinct actions taken, and the questions asked by policy analysts are organized into similar themes related to policy analysis. The proposed framework seeks to provide an holistic perspective for analyzing policy problems in diverse educational settings.

The resulting framework is composed of four main parts: (i) positioning the policy, (ii) defining policy actors, (iii) practical experiences, and (iv) evaluation and improvement. The initial step in analyzing a policy is to position it in its proper time, place, and context, which requires reading and understanding the policy on its own terms and by historicizing it. The second step is to define policy actors, and this involves determining which groups have a vested interest in the policy in order to understand the relationships between power and policy development, as well as who benefits from the policy. Since practice plays a critical and active role in policy enactment, the next step is to investigate the real-life experiences of policy actors and institutions, as this will provide valuable insight into whether and how the policy actually works. Moreover, by examining policies' texts and surrounding discourse while keeping in mind that every policy contains its own set of values and understandings, researchers can develop a better understanding of policy implementation. Raising questions during analyses enables researchers and other stakeholders to contemplate and even demonstrate alternative methods not only to improve policies but also to implement them more effectively.

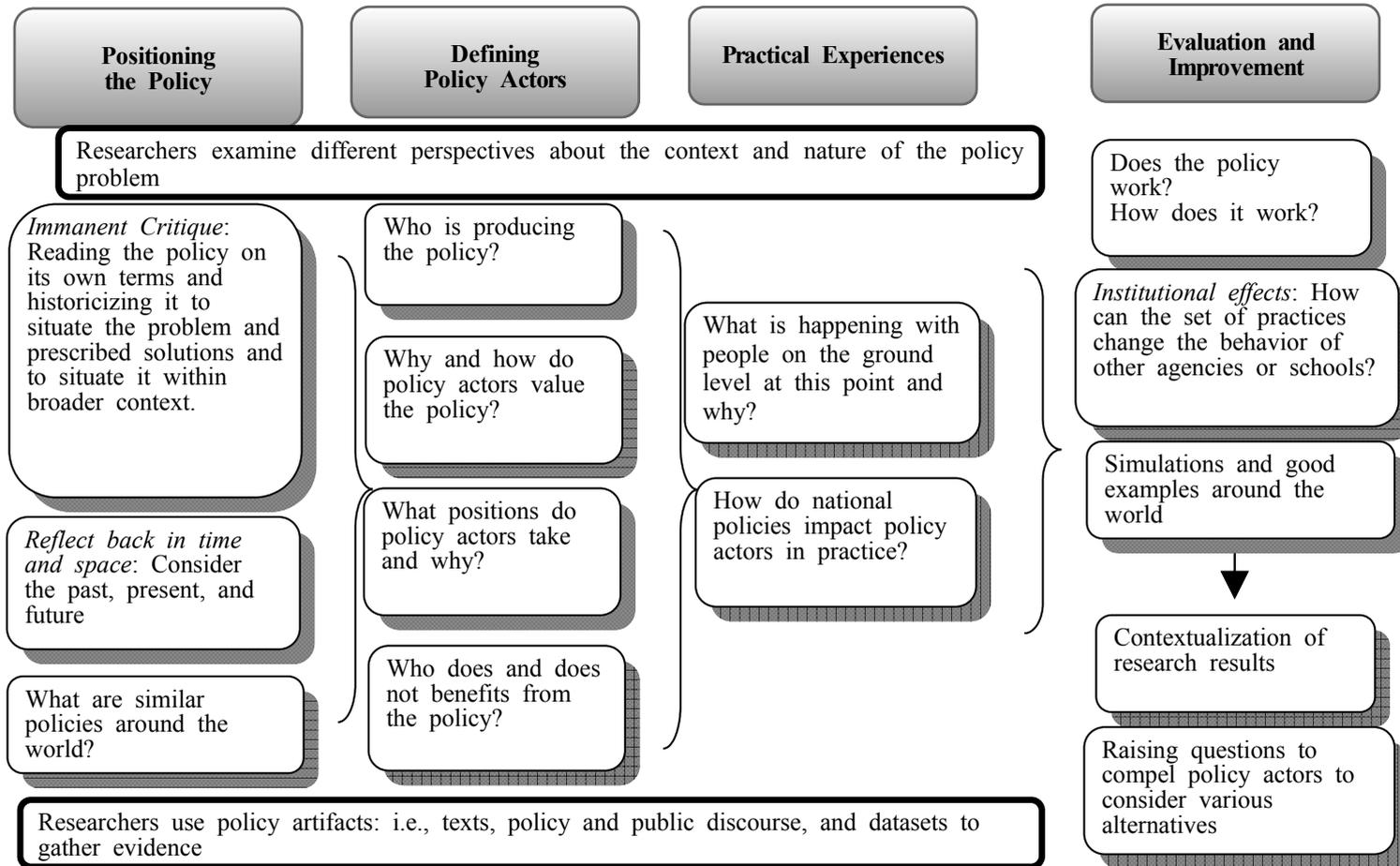


Figure 1. Framework for analysis of education policies based on policy researchers' practices

Education policies during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can be taken as an example of how this framework can be applied to an actual policy case. During this pandemic, policies in many cases establish online education as a primary instruction method. However, considering the first step of the developed framework, these policies need to be *positioned based on their own terms*—the conditions of a pandemic instead of traditional educational philosophies. In addition, it is likely that the COVID-19 pandemic will influence many education policy issues in the upcoming years, such as the physical infrastructure of schools and alternative models in delivering instruction. While positioning education policies during the pandemic, policy makers and analysts should be careful when historicizing and contextualizing the policies so that they offer clear explanations and interpretations. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced national and international institutions and government bodies to renew or review their established educational policies by stopping face-to-face education early on, or by waiting to see how the virus will diffuse. In developing such policies, countries have developed their policies considering not only the students' education but also the needs of families and both economic and manufacturing factors, something related to the second step of the framework, that is, *defining the policy actors*. This, in turn, will inevitably affect beneficiaries in different ways. Thus, policy researchers must also consider the narratives of beneficiaries in the analysis process *as practical experiences* to explore how the policy actually works in practice. Lastly, during the *evaluation and improvement* stage, policy researchers need to analyze comprehensively these contextual factors and practical experiences to provide a better understanding of the educational policy during the pandemic, and develop alternative ways of thinking in order to improve policy implementation.

An applied example of how the proposed framework is employed in an actual policy problem is the analysis of the education incentive policy for private education institutions in the case study of Turkey (Ozturk-Calikoglu, 2018). In this example, to explore an holistic description of the incentive policy applied in Turkish private education institutions, the policy was examined based on the research questions developed through the main steps of the framework given above. Here, the framework directed the research by going beyond an analysis of national strategy documents and statistical data and facilitated exploration of the practical experiences by adding the perspectives of central and local governmental actors, school administrators, and parents as beneficiaries. Hence, a more comprehensive evaluation and more useful recommendations were reached through the steps delineated in the framework. Accordingly, researchers can draw on this framework considering their research design, policy issue, and to what extent researchers want to examine a policy. Furthermore, while the framework is developed based on the steps followed by the educational policy scholars and thus it is primarily education-oriented, it can also be used for other fields of public or social research where the steps and questions are applicable.

Discussion

The findings for liberal and critical policy researchers portray the arguments underpinning traditional and critical approaches to policy analysis. Liberal researchers were found to focus on how policies work (i.e., efficacy) and relied on data-based investigation. Similar to the traditional approach, liberal policy analysts tended to disregard the nature of policy problems and arguments regarding solutions and instead follow a linear analysis process (Diem et al., 2014). Critical researchers, however, were found to be more interested in texts, discourse, practice, and questions related to *why* in addition to the meaning and benefits of policies, their beneficiaries, and their temporal and spatial contexts in texts, discourse, practice, and questions related to *why*. This, coupled with the fact that critical policy researchers employ different tools to comprehend the nature of policy issues (Diem et al., 2018; Fischer, 2003), indicates that they base their research on a specific theory/theoretical frame or have a specific objective in their mind prior to beginning (Diem et al., 2014; Fischer, 2003). In other words, critical researchers might be said to use critical pedagogy since they concentrate more on raising questions about policy issues seeking to empower oppressed stakeholders in pursuing emancipation (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

The results demonstrate that, regardless of objective, the research question largely drives the policy analysis process, and particularly the methods used to gather evidence and deal with questions. In this study, critical policy analysts were found to employ fewer traditional policy analysis techniques than liberal ones. Diem et al. (2014) highlight that three data collection tools are generally used in policy analysis: existing datasets, documents, and fieldwork. Policy researchers have recently begun employing different methods than those found in traditional policy analysis approaches and have focused on exploring policy complexity while making use of various theoretical lenses (McDonnell, 2009; Young & Diem, 2017). Furthermore, critical analysts have been found to make more frequent use of qualitative research methods in accordance with their research objectives (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016).

Doctoral background and disciplinary orientation may provide a clue as to why the participant policy scholars adopted either liberal or critical perspectives. For instance, liberal analysts in this study have backgrounds in psychology, economics, and quantitative policy analysis disciplines, which can easily lead them to rely more on statistical data and to focus more on macro-level policy evaluation. On the other hand, a background in sociology, anthropology, and education philosophy that the critical analysts in the study have may lead to inquiries more linked to perspectives of different beneficiaries. Thus, they may have also benefit from their individual experiences while evaluating and recommending policies. This finding illustrates the importance of disciplinary background and orientation in approaching a scientific problem, in this case a policy problem. Indeed, Becher and Trowler (2001) indicate that researchers are deeply committed to and tend to maintain disciplinary traditions in addressing and shaping the problems, selecting and analyzing data sources, and interpreting findings within the framework of particular theories.

Although policy analysts, and critical analysts in particular, admitted to having difficulties deeming a policy as being good or bad in black-and-white terms, Bardach (2012) argues that a set of evaluative criteria must be decided upon prior to conducting an analysis used to make judgments about a policy's projected outcomes as opposed to policy alternatives. This might correspond to a more traditional approach based on the decision

as to whether a policy works. In addition, both traditional and critical approaches take into account policies' unintended consequences, as policy formulation and implementation might differ as a result of practitioners' regenerative role in the implementation process (Ball et al., 2012; Bardach, 2012).

In addition to the research examined in this study, several other studies on policy analysis adopt a rational or critical outlook. With the growing number of multi-disciplinary studies in policy analysis theory and with practice varying to the extent it does on different policy issues based on time and place, a great number of frameworks, models, tools, and techniques have emerged (Diem et al., 2014; Scott, 2017). Further, since each field of study brings its own assumptions related to the policy issue in question (Jones, 2013; Tatto, 2012), researchers need to employ a specific/unique conceptual framework or perspective. Here, our framework provides a pattern for educational policy analysis based on the lived experiences of scholars working on educational policy and politics, economics of education, privatization initiatives in education, school choice, voucher-charter schools, and a number of other issues.

The proposed framework integrates insight from two distinct policy approaches (i.e., traditional and interpretative/critical approaches), and differs from available frameworks in that it is both practice-based and composed of questions and concepts covering the entirety of the analysis process. Further, the framework begins by positioning the policy and ends with evaluation and improvement; however, it is neither a one-way analysis nor a step-by-step approach to policy analysis. Adams (2016) also emphasizes the positioning theory in policy research, and asserts that texts and discourse are used in attempts to explain and frame a policy, which then produce what he terms *position calls*. These position calls, in turn, result in discursive acts that form policy. Accordingly, the framework has the potential to serve as a question-based roadmap for complicated mechanisms used in policy analysis models/methods. In addition, policy analysts could use it to design their studies with appropriate questions given in the presented framework, depending on the scope and feasibility of the policy issue in question.

Conclusion

Based on the real-life experiences of policy researchers, this study illustrates how education policy scholars with different perspectives on policy analysis conduct their research. While policy scholars with a liberal outlook were found to be driven mainly by data to determine how policies work, researchers following a critical approach were more likely to base their studies on theory and focus on meaning and questions regarding how and why. This paper also presents a framework to map out a pattern comprising key concepts and questions, based on policy researchers' approaches to policy analysis. Thus, the framework presented simplifies the complicated process of policy analysis in education. It may also play a role in offering a more concrete image of the analysis process that addresses a variety of actors, such as policy makers, interest groups, and practitioners. However, the results are limited to the experiences of the education policy researchers included in the study and to only two approaches on educational policy (i.e., liberal and critical). The range and depth of the practices adopted by policy analysts might be further elaborated upon by including a wider range of perspectives, specifically conservative and neo-liberal ones.

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