education policy analysis archives

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

Arizona State University

Volume 29 Number 2 January 11, 2021 ISSN 1068-2341

Critical Policy Scholarship in Education: An Overview

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Citation: Molla, T. (2021). Critical policy scholarship in education: An overview. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 29*(2). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.5655

Abstract: This paper presents an overview of critical policy scholarship (CPS) in education. Historically, policy research has been dominated by what is commonly referred to as the policy science tradition, which is positivist in its philosophical stance and instrumentalist in its purpose—it focuses on producing knowledge relevant for policy decisions. However, with the rise of interpretive social inquiry in the 1970s and against the backdrop of unique political developments in the 1980s, CPS emerged as an alternative policy research perspective. This review discusses the scope and foci of CPS in education under four themes: methodological assumptions, interdisciplinary roots, enduring analytical goals, and emerging empirical contexts. Implications of the prevalence of inequality, Big Data and digital panopticon for educational policymaking and policy research are also briefly discussed. The paper concludes that although its foci of analysis have shifted considerably in the last four decades, analytical interest and tools of CPS remain largely unchanged.
Keywords: educational policy; policy analysis; critical theory; critical policy scholarship; critique; advocacy

Journal website: http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/
Facebook: /EPAAA
Twitter: @epaa_aape

Manuscript received: 6/6/2020
Revisions received: 9/16/2020
Accepted: 9/16/2020

Investigación de políticas críticas en educación: Una visión general
Resumen: Este artículo presenta una descripción general de la investigación de políticas críticas (CPS) en educación. Históricamente, la investigación de políticas ha estado dominada por lo que comúnmente se conoce como la tradición de la ciencia de las políticas, que es positivista en su postura filosófica e instrumentalista en su propósito: se enfoca en producir conocimiento relevante para las decisiones políticas. Sin embargo, con el auge de la investigación social interpretativa en la década de 1970 y en un contexto de desarrollos políticos únicos en la década de 1980, la CPS surgió como una perspectiva alternativa de investigación de políticas. Esta revisión discute el alcance y los focos de CPS en la educación bajo cuatro temas: supuestos metodológicos, raíces interdisciplinarias, metas analíticas perdurables y contextos empíricos emergentes. También se discuten brevemente las implicaciones de la prevalencia de la desigualdad, el Big Data y el panóptico digital para la formulación de políticas educativas y la investigación de políticas. El documento concluye que aunque sus focos de análisis han cambiado considerablemente en las últimas cuatro décadas, el interés analítico y las herramientas de CPS permanecen prácticamente sin cambios.
Palabras-clave: política educativa; análisis de políticas; la teoría crítica; investigación de política crítica; crítica; defensa

Bolsa de estudos sobre política crítica na educação: Uma visão geral
Resumo: Este artigo apresenta uma visão geral dos estudos sobre políticas críticas (CPS) na educação. Historicamente, a pesquisa política tem sido dominada pelo que é comumente referido como tradição da ciência política, que é positivista em sua postura filosófica e instrumentalista em seu propósito - ela se concentra na produção de conhecimento relevante para decisões políticas. No entanto, com o surgimento da investigação social interpretativa na década de 1970 e em um cenário de desenvolvimentos políticos únicos na década de 1980, o CPS emergiu como uma perspectiva de pesquisa política alternativa. Esta revisão discute o escopo e os focos da CPS na educação sob quatro temas: pressupostos metodológicos, raízes interdisciplinares, objetivos analíticos duradouros e contextos empíricos emergentes. As implicações da prevalência da desigualdade, Big Data e pan-óptico digital para a formulação de políticas educacionais e pesquisa de políticas também são brevemente discutidas. O artigo conclui que, embora seus focos de análise tenham mudado consideravelmente nas últimas quatro décadas, o interesse analítico e as ferramentas do CPS permanecem praticamente inalterados.
Palavras-chave: política educacional; análise de políticas; teoria critica; bolsa de estudos de política crítica; crítica; advocacia

Introduction

This paper presents an overview of critical policy scholarship (CPS) in education. In education policy studies literature, it is not uncommon to come across studies that declare to have drawn upon a critical perspective, theory, or approach but with little or no clarification regarding what makes such work 'critical'. In other words, in many instances, what it means to be critical remains opaque to readers. Against the backdrop of this observation, and taking recent socio-economic and technological transformations into account, the paper discusses key features of CPS under four themes: methodological assumptions, interdisciplinary roots, enduring analytical goals, and emerging empirical contexts. If critical education policy researchers are clear about theoretical underpinnings and methodological orientations of their choosing, then they are better placed to frame pertinent research questions and articulate the analytical significance of concepts they invoke.

Historically, policy research was dominated by what is commonly referred to as the policy sciences tradition (Lasswell, 1951, 1970, 2003). Guided by logical positivism, 'policy scientists' assume an empirically 'given' social world exists that can be 'discovered' and explained. In a positivist inquiry, as Horkheimer (1937/2002) stressed, "there are nothing but facts, and the entire conceptual apparatus of science serves to determine and predict them" (p. 154). The policy science tradition produces 'objective' knowledge with a pragmatic aim of improving government practices. However, in the last four decades, the policy sciences tradition has sustained significant criticism, especially from researchers adopting sociological and anthropological approaches to policy research. In the 1970s, in response to criticisms on purposes and methodological assumptions of positivist research, a critical approach to policy analysis emerged as an alternative (see Fay, 2014/1975; Rosenthal, 2018). Critical policy scholarship took deep roots in the 1980s in the context of specific political, cultural, and economic circumstances, understood through particular theoretical and methodological resources. CPS had a history of pushing the envelope. Critical scholars in the sociology of education have reflexively problematized the neoliberal logic of governance as a context of policy and policy knowledge production (Ozga, 1987, 2019; Seddon, 1996).

Empirically, nations and economies became increasingly interconnected and interdependent (i.e. globalization) and market forces infiltrated in every aspect of life (i.e. neoliberalism). As a result of those developments, global policy agents have consolidated their power, education has been economized, and with the prevalence of market rationality in every aspect of life, the role of the state has been redefined. Consequently, increased uncertainty and change as well as networks and interdependence constituted new contexts of policy research. Following the rise of neoliberalism as a primary mode of governance in the early 1980s, policy scholars started using critical analytical lenses to problematize the effects of market forces in education. In terms of theoretical resources, the new developments were expressed in the consolidation of the New Left (neo-Marxist movement), the translation of the works of Bourdieu, Foucault, Freire, etc. into English, and the increasing influence of first- and second-generation scholars of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Habermas) in social sciences, including education. Critical research assumes that what is observed in the social world may not fully capture generative mechanisms underlying events and empirical experiences: 'the visible, that which is immediately given, hides the invisible which determines it' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 126).

Critical policy research in education is known by different labels. With a varying degree of precision and scope, it is widely referred to as 'policy sociology in education' (Ball, 1994; Ozga, 1987), 'critical policy sociology' (Gale, 2001), 'critical policy analysis' (Apple, 2019b; Horsford et al., 2019; Prunty, 1985; Taylor, 1997), 'critical education policy studies' (Gunter & Mills, 2017), 'critical approaches to education policy analysis' (Young & Diem, 2017), or 'critical policy scholarship' (Grace, 1998a, 1998b). Grace defined critical policy scholarship (CPS) as a multidisciplinary

analytical approach that unites "the strengths of *critical theory* (with its sharp awareness of structural and ideological oppressions and policy contradictions) with the traditional *disciplines of scholarship* (careful delineation of evidence and argument, balanced and judicious conclusions)" (Grace, 1998a, p. 209, emphasis added). In this paper, I use Grace's framing and expand the notion of CPS by outlining its methodological assumptions, diverse multidisciplinary roots, enduring goals, and emerging empirical contexts.

The last section of the paper charts enduring and emerging contexts of education policy and policy knowledge production. It specifically identifies eight interactive elements that affect education policy in our time and takes three of those as exemplary cases for elaboration. With the intensification of market rationality as a background, dataism is taking hold in education policy, inequality has reached a new level, and 'digital panopticon' is slowly permeating classrooms. We now also live in an age of great technological transformation and environmental crisis. Hyper-automation of white-collar jobs means that education systems are under pressure to equip students with skills for future jobs. The disruptions of populist politics and the global pandemic are likely to affect the disadvantaged (e.g. refugees and the poor) more than any other group in society. We need critical and imaginative scholarship now more than ever. The paper explores how CPS might remain a valuable analytical approach in the face of these and other changes. The discussion in the following sections highlights why CPS is up to the task of supporting policy responses to emerging changes that impact education. CPS can specifically play vital roles in examining who gets what in education systems, whose values are being authoritatively allocated in policy instruments, and whose voices are silenced in policy processes.

The remaining part of the paper is organized into four main sections. The first section briefly discusses two core methodological assumptions of CPS: policy context and researcher positionality. The second section covers the multidisciplinary root of CPS in education. The third section covers the enduring analytical goals of CPS. The fourth section outlines key socio-economic and technological transformations that bear considerable implications for policymaking and critical policy research in education. The paper closes with some concluding remarks.

Methodological Assumptions of CPS

The analytical advantage of CPS is that it puts specific education policy issues within the 'bigger picture' of historical, socio-economic, and political contexts. CPS recognizes the value of *methodological rigor*, the *contextuality of policy* and the *positionality of the policy analyst*. Grace (1998a) stressed, "If critical policy scholarship is to lay claim to integrity in its modes of analysis then its critical intent must be tempered by respect for evidence and evenhandedness in argument" (p. 212). Likewise, Ozga (2019) highlighted reflexivity and dialogical engagement with evidence as key features of critical policy research in education.

In terms of the contextuality of policy, CPS acknowledges that policy reflects the values of specific groups and is formulated and enacted in context. In other words, if politics is "an authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, 1953, p. 3), or if governance is an "authoritative enactment of meaning" (Hajer, 2009, p. 2), policy is a key instrument of values and meaning allocation. That is to say, values—defined as "assumptions or beliefs about what is desirable and about how things are" (Ozga, 2000, p. 47)—inform policy decisions and research. As such, CPS foregrounds human values as central to understanding policy processes and aims at explicating the extent to which policy is a deeply human process, infused with assumptions, aspirations, biases, and political preferences.

In a policy process, agents of opposing views regarding how things are and what is desirable negotiate over priorities and strategies. Policy ideas and knowledge "are mediated by power relations in society; certain groups in society are privileged over others and exert an oppressive force on subordinate groups;" and as such, "what are presented as 'facts' cannot be disentangled from ideology and the self-interest of dominant groups" (Kooiman, 2003, p. 272). A critical approach to policy analysis, therefore, recognizes the value-laden nature of policy, seeks to illuminate who is systematically privileged or excluded, and analyses the hidden structure of power in public discourses. Understanding whose values and meanings are embraced or excluded in a policy process necessitates dialogical and interactive methodological stances. Through problematizing socio-historical and cultural contexts of policy, critical policy analysis aims to "make visible the regulative principles" underpinning policy actions and inactions (Grace, 1995, p. 3). Beyond textual analysis, critical policy sociologists also problematize contexts of policy influence and enactment. They recognize that localized policy enactments "are not univocal, and thought and practice are produced within historical (sedimented) ambiguities, contingencies, indeterminacies, and contradictions" (Webb, 2014, p.3 68). The primary aim of critical analysis is therefore to generate historically and socio-culturally specific causal explanations of policy processes. As Ball (1997) emphasised, "The idea that human sciences like educational studies stand outside or above the political agenda of the management of the population or somehow have a neutral status embodied in a free-floating progressive rationalism are dangerous and debilitating conceits" (p. 264).

When it comes to the reflexive positionality of the researcher, the focus is on one's consciousness about deeply held values and how these influence the research questions as well as theoretical and methodological choices. In a social inquiry, intellectual bias occurs "when researchers are insufficiently critical of the presuppositions inscribed in the act of thinking about the world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39). Critical scholars overcome biases through reflexivity. CPS embraces dialogical inquiry and reflexive critique of the researcher as valid ways of knowing. Here reflexivity is broadly defined as "the inclusion of a theory of intellectual practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society" and entails attending to the "*social and intellectual unconscious* embedded in analytic tools and operations" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 36, emphasis in original). Unlike empiricists, critical policy scholars do not suspend their beliefs and values. Rather, they reflectively engage with valuations that underpin the problem in question. As Myrdal (1969) noted, to be a reflexive social researcher means to "raise the valuations actually determining our theoretical as well as our practical research to full awareness," "scrutinize them from the point of view of relevance, significance, and feasibility in the society under study," and "transform them into specific value premises for research" (p. 5). To put it differently, reflexivity is concerned with the researcher's awareness of their position in society, intellectual roots and assumptions of their theoretical resources, and the articulation of how those factors might influence the research question, method, and process.

The common positivist assumption is that we gather information through our senses and then, after careful evaluation, reason our way to make claims about the world we investigate. But to be objective is not to be neutral; the very choice we make concerning our topics and methods of research reflects our implicit assumptions and values. In social research, a simple description of events entails acts of choice and selection. Even in the so called *pure* sciences, as Lewontin (2010) argues in *Biology as Ideology*, research agendas and findings can be *contaminated* with social and political assumptions. In his critique of what he refers to as *naive empiricism* in social research, sociologist and Nobel Prize-winner economist Gunnar Myrdal (1954/2017) wrote:

> Facts do not organize themselves into concepts and theories just by being looked at; indeed, except within the framework of concepts and theories, there are no scientific

> facts but only chaos. There is an inescapable *a priori* element in all scientific work. Questions must be asked before answers can be given. The questions are an expression of our interest in the world, they are at bottom valuations. Valuations are thus necessarily involved already at the stage when we observe facts and carry on theoretical analysis, and not only at the stage when we draw political inferences from facts and valuations. (p. xli)

Likewise, in rejecting what he saw as positivists' 'cult of facts', renowned historian E. H. Carr cited a useful analogy: "a fact is like a sack—it won't stand up till you've put something in it" (Carr, 1987, p. 11). That 'something' can be theoretical perspectives or value systems of the researcher. In his book, *Objectivity is Not Neutrality*, Thomas Haskell (1998) made a similar point: "facts only take shape under the aegis of paradigms, presuppositions, theories, and the like" (p. 157). In essence, we can only aim for 'positioned objectivity' as one cannot fully grasp the social world without a standpoint—a 'view from nowhere' is impractical. In CPS, for example, a choice of theory is essentially a choice of "a point of vision, a place to see from" (Ball, 1997, p. 270). Concepts and theories we invoke signal our *position* and orient our *intellectual gaze* to specific problems, methods, and goals.

In critical research, social reality is accessed through the interpretation of tacit meanings embedded in discourses, frames, and metaphors through which issues are publicized as public agenda. Over the years, critical education policy scholars have deployed a range of *analytical strategies*, including discourse analysis, interpretive analysis, network analysis, assemblage study, frame analysis, and metaphor analysis (see Emery, 2016; Gale, 1999, 2001; Galey-Horn & Ferrare, 2020; Lester et al., 2016; Mills et al., 2017; Molla & Gale, 2019; Molla & Nolan, 2019).

Multidisciplinary Roots

Critical policy research transcends disciplinary boundaries. It has multidisciplinary roots and orientations. Although primarily grounded in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, critical policy analysis is often presented as a multidisciplinary approach insofar as different theories, concepts, and methods are brought into the analytical frame depending on the research problem in question. As Tamboukou and Ball (2003) argued, the multidisciplinary aspect of policy research represents a form of an "intellectual border crossing" (p. 2) and recognizing "the epistemological and political agendas of different traditions of historical and social research" (p. 10). Critical education policy scholars use *theoretical resources* drawn from critical social theory, cultural theory, poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, etc. In this section, I will focus on three disciplinary/theoretical areas: policy sociology, anthropology of policy, and poststructuralism.

Policy Sociology

One of the earliest attempts to make sociological research relevant to public policy was by C. Wright Mills who emphasized the importance of a 'sociological imagination' in problematizing the interplay of 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' (Mills, 1956/2000). Sociological analysis of education policy is commonly known as policy sociology. Ozga (1987) defined policy sociology as a policy research approach that is "rooted in the social science tradition" and draws on "qualitative and illuminative techniques" (p. 144). In the UK, policy sociology emerged within the context of the consolidation of a neoliberal logic of governance that undercut social services investment and was antithetical to sociological knowledge. Policy sociologists view policy as textual artifacts (a document that authoritatively declares values and allocates resources to achieve stated intents), discourse (who

says what and who remains silent in the policy decision making), or practice (what gets enacted, and who is the key actors, in field of implementation (Ball, 1993).

Critical policy sociologists engage with systemic processes and institutional contexts that set the conditions and possibilities of policymaking and policy enactment (e.g. Ball, 1994; Dale, 1989; Gale, 2001; Ozga, 1987, 2000; Prunty, 1985; Taylor, 1997; Troyna, 1994). Thhhe emphasis is on "the underlying assumptions that shaped how a 'problem' was conceptualized and how 'solutions' were selected (and who did the defining and selection) needed to be subjected to critical scrutiny" (Ozga, 2019, p. 5). In most cases, policy sociologists (e.g. Mills & Gale, 2007; Morrow, 1994; Olssen & Peters, 2015; Torres, 2013; Young & Diem, 2017) use critical social theory to explain why disadvantaged people might 'misrecognize' their conditions of inequality and exploitation; and understand the interplay of 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' and how the latter is translated into policy problems. Others (e.g., Dale, 2005; Molla, 2014, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Robertson & Dale, 2016; Wilkins, 2013) problematize the neoliberal policy logic and the globalization of education policy ideas.

Critical sociological approaches are dominated by an epistemological approach that rejects most (if not all) of the positivist underpinnings of the policy sciences tradition concerning what counts as valid knowledge. In contrast, a dominant argument in sociological research is that any claim that one might access unvarnished facts and knowledge through reason (rationalism) and the evidence of senses (empiricism) is flawed. The alternative view is that research offers a partial image of whatever 'reality' exists beyond human perception and interpretation. For many critical policy sociologists, education policies are not value-neutral objects; and the act of interpreting policies is one that unites facts and values (Regmi, 2019). Research is, therefore, an important yet always imperfect attempt to capture the world beyond human meaning-making processes.

Anthropology of Policy

Critical education policy scholars also employ *cultural theory* and anthropological methodologies to make sense of the politics of policy processes. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz was one of the leading scholars who first applied cultural interpretations of politics. In his essay, *The Politics of Meaning,* Geertz (1973) argued, "a country's politics reflect the design of its culture" (p. 311). He defined culture as "the structures of meaning through which men [and women] give shape to their experience"; he viewed politics as "one of the principal arenas in which such structures publicly unfold" (p. 312). A cultural account of political processes, therefore, focuses on individual and collective meaning systems. For Geertz, the critical challenge in political (or policy) analysis is "how to frame an analysis of meaning—the conceptual structures individuals use to construe experience—which will be at once circumstantial enough to carry conviction and abstract enough to forward theory" (p. 313).

Following Geertz's (1973) cultural interpretations of politics, policy anthropologists (e.g., Apthorpe, 1996; Gray, 1978; Hoppe, 2006; Miller, 1977; Okongwu & Mencher, 2000; Shore & Wright, 1997, 2011; Wildavsky, 1979/2018; Wright & Shore, 1995) have demonistrated that a culture-sensitive policy analysis not only captures socio-economic contexts of public reasoning but also shows the interaction of policy and cultural change. Policymaking and policymakers are deeply embedded in socio-cultural and historical contexts. Wildavsky (1979/2018), one of the pioneers of anthropological analysis of policy, argued:

> If culture is conceived as values and beliefs that bind social relationships, then policy analysis is intimately involved with culture in two ways: (1) solutions to policy problems reflect and are limited by the moral consistency of historical social

> relationships; (2) solutions to policy problems, by changing the structure of social relationships, alter the values and beliefs that support the social structure. (p. 396)

Although at first, the focus was on a cultural explanation of policy problems and solutions, the second wave of the anthropology of policy has given increasing attention to globalization and neoliberalism in relation to power, governance, and policy processes (see Apthorpe, 1996; Hoppe, 2006; Okongwu & Mencher, 2000; Shore & Wright, 1997, 2011; Wright & Shore, 1995). Following the lead of Geertz, anthropologists problematise the interplay of politics and culture, trace policy mobility, and analyse contextual enactment and outcomes of policies.

Poststructuralism

Many critical policy scholars who draw on *poststructuralism* reject the universality of truth claims and endorse plurality of interpretations (e.g. Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Belsey, 2002; Peters & Burbules, 2004; Wagenaar, 2015). The focus of those deconstructive education policy analysts is on policy problematization, that is, understanding the way policy agendas are framed, produced, mobilized, and mutated. For poststructuralists, policy problems are discursive constructions (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016); as social realities are historical, contingent, and open to challenge and change, policy processes are "unpredictable, chaotic, and contradictory" (Webb, 2014, p. 369). At the core of post-structural inquiry is not "what exists" but "what we can accurately *say* exists" – and as such poststructuralism is concerned with what goes on in language to represent meaning and truth (Belsey, 2002, p. 71). Generally speaking, poststructuralists are apathetic toward totalizing grand narratives but, as Belsey (2002) argued, they "don't (normally) doubt that there is a world: their anxiety concerns what we can claim to know about it with any certainty" (p.71). In the words of Sarup (1993), "While structuralism sees truth as being 'behind' or 'within' a text, poststructuralism stresses the interaction of reader and text as a productivity" (p. 3).

Commonly, critical policy scholars who work under the umbrella of poststructuralism focus on analyzing policy narratives, discourses, networks, and mobilities (see for example, Anderson & Carney, 2009, 2016; Holloway, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Savage, 2018; Webb, 2014; Webb & Gulson, 2015). Poststructuralists use the notion of assemblage to "re-conceive global forms not as a totalizing external force but as an element that works in combination with other heterogeneous elements in local situations and contexts" (Koh, 2011, p. 89). That is, the global policy actors exert pressure on national policy spaces only through mobilizing situated interactions, decisions, and practices that account for the heterogeneity of outcomes of policies albeit similar origins. For instance, Savage (2018) synthesized multidisciplinary concepts and theories to highlight the efficacy of a policy assemblage approach to capture the phenomenon of transnational policy flow and mobilities, and explore "policy in a world marked by complexity, non-linearity, and emergence" (p. 309). Likewise, seen from the actor-network theory (ATN) perspective (Law, 1999), policy takes its form and attributes from its interaction with other entities in the field of practice. An ATN-informed education policy analysis recognizes the relationality of policymaking and policy enactment and traces contextual factors that constitute these processes. The key question is: how does policy create new actors, subjects, and spaces?

Critical policy scholars also increasingly apply concepts and analytical tools drawn from critical race theory (Bell, 1993, 2004), postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1999), and feminism (Butler, 1999; Connell, 2009) respectively to: (a) unmask structures and ideologies that subtly legitimate racial inequality in and through education (e.g. Andreotti, 2011; Cole, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016; Zamudio et al., 2011), (b) problematize colonial legacies in, and assimilative roles of, education (Leonardo & Singh, 2017), and (c) explicate how hegemonic gender

cultures and historical legacies undermine women's experiences and representation in educational policies, systems, and institutions (e.g. Bacchi, 2009; Blackmore, 2017; Marshall, 1999; Marshall et al., 2017). What is a common thread across these diverse theoretical orientations is that policy is not seen as a given but rather as a social construction that needs to be interpreted in context.

It is also imperative to note that those theoretical/disciplinary roots are not mutually exclusive. For example, in problematizing education policy processes, some proponents of policy sociology (e.g., Ball) draw on poststructural thinking tools.

Enduring Analytical Goals

Acts of naming and framing policy issues are necessarily acts of power. The privileged class protects its interest by defining patterns of the distribution of resources and opportunities such as education. In other words, policy is one way of enacting dominant groups' authority. For example, as the elite controls government agendas (Mills, 1956/2000), it would not be a mistake to assume that purposes of education outlined by governments usually reflect the socio-economic interests of the elite. Hence, with the globalization of education policy and the pervasiveness of neoliberal policy regimes as a backdrop, the analytical gaze of policy scholars has increasingly been directed to (a) power relations that determine the flows of policy ideas and practices across borders, and (b) the distributional impacts of marketized education policy agendas. Critical policy analysts are interested in understanding the power relations that produce the policy in question. They problematize the interaction of global policy agents in national policy fields (Dale, 2005; Lingard, 2018; Molla, 2014, 2018, 2019a; Moutsios, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), the role of elites in policymaking (Grek, 2011), and the phenomenon of 'mediatization' of policy (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Rawolle, 2005). Further, critical policy scholars are disposed to social justice (Lester et al., 2016; Ozga, 2000; Prunty, 1985). The 'critical attitude' of a social scientist manifests in his or her "concern for abolition of social injustice" (Horkheimer, 1937/2002, p. 242).

If policies represent "the balance of burdens and benefits among particular categories of people" (Offe, 1984, p. 105), it is critical for policy scholars to constantly question whether or not the balance is fair, especially concerning the most disadvantaged members of society. Unlike the policy science research that is "domesticated to the requirements of the state" (Grace, 1998a, p. 216), CPS aims at problematizing the role of education in reproducing and transforming conditions of disadvantage and unjust inequality in society. In other words, many critical policy scholars are interested in not only understanding how 'private troubles' are translated into 'public issues' (Mills, 1956/2000) but also in envisaging alternative possibilities through reasoned *critique* and evidence-based *advocacy* for change. In this section, I will briefly discuss these two themes.

Critique

A reflexive policy scholar is interested in "not simply telling the truth of this world, as can be uncovered by objectivist methods of observation, but also showing that this world is a site of an ongoing struggle to tell the truth of this world" (Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989, p. 35). Critique is an essence of criticality. Here critiquing is not about mere objecting; it rather means problematizing assumptions and beliefs underpinning the objective appearance of reality and subjective meaning systems associated with the external representation. The aim is to unmask hegemonic discourses (Gramsci, 1971) that keep the disadvantaged in conformity with their conditions—to expose how the dominant class installs its own values as the common sense of society as a whole. For instance, the neoliberal doctrine perpetuates a "'rational' policy – a policy deemed ideologically neutral and ultimately indisputable since it rests on pure considerations of effectiveness and efficiency" (Wacquant, 2009, p. 247). Hence to critique is to problematize framings and assumptions in policy

processes. For Foucault (2000), "A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists of seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based" (p.456). Seen from this perspective, criticality is an 'attitude or ethos' of questioning with purpose and mindfulness (Simons et al., 2009). Critiquing discursive construction of policy agendas, therefore, aims at reassessing the prevailing norms and values. It is a means of unmasking power relations and ideological positions that suppress inconsistencies, mask silences, and marginalize dissent voices in the policy debate (Apple, 2019b; Diem et al., 2019; Gale, 2001; Grace, 1998b). To use Foucault's (2007) formulation, to critique is to claim "the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth" (p. 17). Relatedly, disadvantaged people often tend to internalize a belief that legitimizes their own subordination. In his speech in the Parliament House of Australia (Canberra), French social thinker Jacques Rancière noted:

> […] people are subjugated because they ignore the law of the system, because they are cheated by the images and fallacies that the machinery of domination presents to them in order to hide the reality of its mechanism and prevent them from becoming aware of their real situation. Therefore, the task of the critique was to free subalterns from their ignorance and illusion by unmasking all the tricks and disguises of domination […]. (Rancière, 2007, p. 565)

Critiquing is not therefore limited to accounting for contradictions and omissions. It is also about identifying structures that uphold unjust social relations and playing a role in the transformation of the problem. The goal is to create awareness about the structural causes of injustice and repression in society. For critical scholars, 'cognitive enlightenment' is a precondition for emancipation. Collier (1998) stressed: "When it is *just* a set of false beliefs that enslaves, their replacement by true beliefs *is* liberation" (p. 461, emphasis in original). Through critiquing the discursive construction of policy agendas, the critical policy scholar can debunk hidden structures of power and injustice, and expose false consciousness of the disadvantaged. The aim is to promote self-understanding and highlight who is systematically privileged and excluded, thus illuminating the hidden structures of power and exclusion. In essence, insofar as it exposes structures of unjust inequality, trends of repressive power relations, and forms of knowledge production, critique is a political practice—it constitutes what is referred to as "activist scholarship" (Hale, 2008). To put it differently, CPS is overtly political. Unlike the policy science perspective that seeks to clarify *what it is*, CPS is concerned with *what it should be*. Emery's (2016) analysis of *Social and Emotional Learning* policy in England and Wales (in this journal) is an example of critical policy research as a critique. In critiquing policies, critical scholars acknowledge that although not all problems can be solved, they can be illuminated.

Advocacy

For most critical policy scholars, critique is only the first step in imagining an alternative to the status quo. Critical policy scholars are disposed to entertain the dual concerns of why things are as they are and how they can be made different. Hence, in addition to producing knowledge that can expose exclusive and exploitative effects of policy (critique), many critical policy scholars also advocate specific policy issues. At the core of the activism work of a policy scholar is the ability and willingness to imagine alternative possibilities—an improvement to the present—and to have an agenda for change, for emancipation. Policy advocacy can take a form of pushing the public debate for an alternative framing, especially during events such as elections and moments of crisis or optimism that open 'policy windows' (Kingdon, 2013). The emancipatory argument of critical inquiry is underpinned by the assumption that: (a) a repressive social system that benefits the

dominant groups operates partly because members of the dominated groups embedded beliefs that uphold the interests of the dominant group; (b) members of disadvantaged groups often accept their conditions as normal and incontestable; and (c) it is the responsibility of the social scientist to shed light on conditions of the disadvantage so that they can problematize the beliefs underpinning their worldview, and break this circle of bondage, delusion, and injustice (Geuss, 1981). In other words, the transformative role of CPS is expressed by its ability to produce 'conceptual normative yardsticks' against which we can assess existing arrangements and envision future directions. In a sense, critical policy scholars share what sociologist C. Wright Mills considered master tasks for intellectuals:

> […] to define the reality of the human condition and to make definitions public; […] to release the human imagination, in order to explore all the alternatives now open to the human community, by transcending both the mere exhortation of grand principles and the mere opportunist reaction. (Mills, 2008, p. 222)

Levitas (2013) maintained that non-critical policy research is 'piecemeal' and focuses on 'damage limitation'; as such, it "naturalizes the major contours of present society", including inequality, domination, and climate crisis (p. 218). In contrast, critical policy scholarship with an emancipatory intent is utopian in the sense that it critiques the present and explores alternative possibilities. CPS is informed by critical theory that foregrounds articulating "not the *features* of a just social order, but the *conditions* enabling such an order and the *processes* for attaining it" (Azmanova, 2020, pp. 28-29, emphasis in original). Likewise, sociologist Erik O. Wright identified three basic tasks of what he refers to as an 'emancipatory social science', viz., "elaborating a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists; envisioning viable alternatives; and understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation" (Wright, 2010, p.7). Critical policy scholars address all these three basic tasks—critique represents the frist role and advocacy captures the last two elements of emanucipatory social research. As such, the emancipatory intent of CPS entails understanding conditions of inequality as well as defining strategies to remove sources of injustice in society.

As Levitas (2013, p. xi) further argued, a utopian method not only provides critical tools "for exposing the limitations of current policy discourses" but also "facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures." At the core of critical policy scholarship is therefore a plan for action, a proposal for broadening the horizon of possibilities. To use Freire's categories, critical scholarship is characterised by a *rebellious attitude* that denounces injustice and a *revolutionary position* that announces 'a new utopia'. Freire underscored: "Transformation of the world implies a dialectic between the two actions: denouncing the process of dehumanization and announcing the dream of a new society" (p. 54). To be critical is, therefore, to be able to see alternatives and actively pursue them. Without this emancipatory intent, critical policy scholars run the risk of being labeled as 'cynical theorists' (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020) or 'educated critics' who "find security in their expertise, in their idealism, in their capacity for intellectualized contempt, in educated diversions as frightfully nebulous as they are reassuringly dense" (Allen, 2017, p. 158).

Emancipatory policy research unites theory and practice, thought and action—intellectual work and political decision. Practice and theory are united in purpose. As Lefebvre (1968) stated, "Both theory and practice are based upon one essential idea, that of 'overcoming,' of 'going beyond'" (p. 4). Whatever you do (activity, task, practice, action), you are doing it to 'go beyond', to improve the existing, to escape from the status quo. Likewise, one applies theory to events, texts, problems, or issues to go beyond what is presented in those entities. The value of policy knowledge

is not limited to showing what the public issues are. Policy decisions are influenced by considerations of priority and feasibility. The role of critical policy scholarship is therefore to convince policymakers that the solutions are feasible and the problem is of great importance. Beyond critiquing the status quo, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) speak of the importance of outlining "strategies for progressive change which might challenge oppressive structures and practices" (p. 51). For example, critical scholarship can be instrumental in building 'collective efficacy' through raising public awareness about structural sources of, and strategies for addressing, personal troubles.

However, it is also equally important to note that not all critical policy scholars commit to emancipatory goals of policy research. For instance, while Marxist-oriented critical social theorists emphasize far-reaching goals of their research, poststructuralists are "deeply sceptical of the emancipatory project" of their analysis (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2017, p.18). Further, whereas some (e.g. Hammersley, 2005) limit the purpose of critical social inquiry to knowledge production, others caution that critical theory "must reject improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order" (Cox, 1980, p. 130). That is, alternative futures of the policy scholar should be realistic. Critical policy scholars who analyze policy with an emancipatory intent are guided by 'pragmatic idealism', expressed in strategic preparedness to "do the most good and cause the right change" (Said, 1994, p. 75). Viewed from this perspective, critical policy scholarship is a form of engagement with the world—it entails reimagining alternative possibilities. The underlying assumption for calling transformative policy actions is that in the social world what once is unthinkable can suddenly become inevitable. This is evident in the drastic impact of COVID-19 on the political, economic, and social spheres of life.

Emerging Empirical Contexts

While analytical goals and foci of critical policy scholarship remain somehow stable, its empirical context has changed considerably. As is noted in the introduction section, the emergence of CPS traces back to the institutionalization of neoliberalism that coincides with the 'critical turn' in the social sciences research. However, factors that gave rise to critical social inquiry are largely historical. In the intellectual sphere, new theoretical resources have become available for educational policy scholars. Castells's (2010) network theory of power, Urry's (2007) sociology of mobility, Honneth's (2012) critical theory of recognition, Zizek's (1989) theory of ideology, and Deleuze and Guattari's (2008) concept of assemblage, all contribute valuable theoretical lenses for critical scholarship.

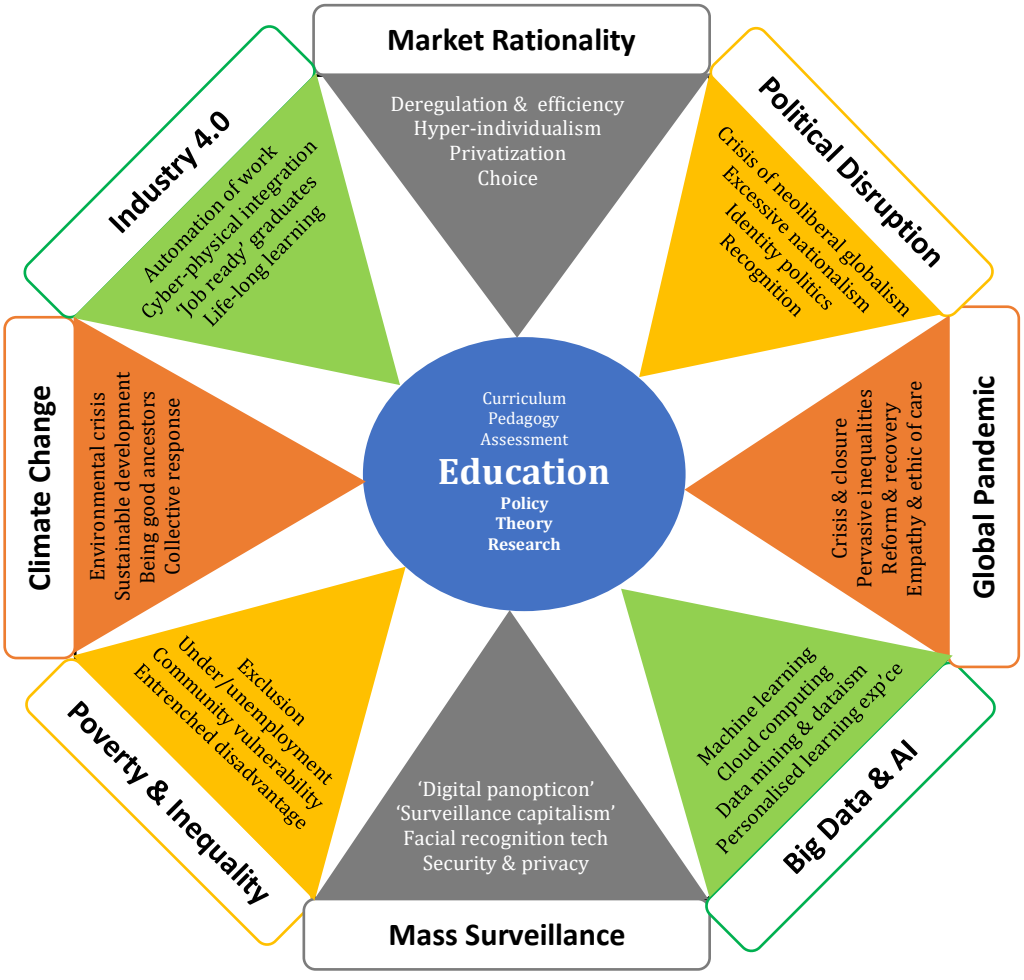
Further, we now live in an age of fast-paced socio-economic and technological transformations. The octagon model below (Figure 1) depicts eight continuing and emerging interactive forces that shape education policy, practice, theory, and research. For example, canonical trust in *market rationality* has eroded public investment in education. Technologies of '*digital panopticon'* and facial recognition are slowly heading to classrooms (Baron, 2019; Dans, 2018; Lovell, 2019), endangering the privacy of students and teachers. In the age of *Industry 4.0* (Molla & Cuthbert, 2019), work is also increasingly automated and the policy pressure on educational institutions is to prepare job-ready graduates. Likewise, Big Data has become a new instrument of governance and a vital source of wealth (mainly for big tech companies). With advances in data mining, learning analytics, and artificial intelligence, the nature and process of knowledge production are changing; as Williamson (2020) observed, "education research is being remade as an experimental data-intensive science" (p. 209). Long-term social justice implications of the *political rupture* caused by populism and racial tensions (Castells, 2018) remain unknown and deserves a critical exploration. With the growing problem of economic, social, and racial *inequality*, education policy has also become a site of political

struggle (Dorling, 2015; Molla, 2020; Reay, 2017). Moreover, *climate change* poses an existential threat. Education is a powerful tool to tackle the problem as educated people are more likely to support efforts toward averting environmental crisis (O'Neill et al., 2020). Finally, *global pandemics* such as COVID-19 have exposed the weakness of the West (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2020) and vulnerabilities of educational systems globally—hasty shifts to remote learning have deepened inequalities in access to quality learning experiences (Sharma, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

In the face of these changes and challenges, how might CPS remain a valuable analytical approach? Looking forward, the relevance of CPS lies in its ability to creatively respond to current and emerging socio-economic and cultural issues that have direct implications for education policy. This section reflects on the changing realities of education policy and the implication of those for critical policy research. For the sake of space, here I will elaborate only three of these eight elements that influence contexts and contents of education policy and research: inequality, Big Data, and digital panopticon.

Figure 1

Enduring and emerging contexts shaping education policy, practice, theory, and research (Author's construction)



Inequality

Inequality within and between societies has become out of control (Atkinson, 2015; Goodhart, 2018; Piketty, 2014, 2020; Pistor, 2019; Scanlon, 2018). Wealth has concentrated in the hands of the few. According to Oxfam (2019), in 2018, the top 26 billionaires have the same amount of wealth as the bottom half of the world population. Advances in technologies of production and distribution (including artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, automation, and Big Data) are transforming job profiles and skills requirements in the workplace. As a result, now (more than ever before) economic participation largely depends on one's level of knowledge and skills. Without a proper policy action to widen access to higher education, the new economic reality may lead to increased inequality that undermines social cohesion and social mobility. Over two decades ago, in his seminal book, *The End of Work*, Rifkin (1995) cautioned:

> If the dramatic productivity gains of the high-tech revolution are not shared, but rather used primarily to enhance corporate profit, to the exclusive benefit of stockholders, top corporate managers, and the emerging elite of high-tech knowledge workers, chances are that the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots will lead to social and political upheaval on a global scale. (p. 13)

Educational disadvantage—as assessed in terms of who gets access to what kind of education and with what experiences and outcomes—is a significant factor of social inequality. If rising inequality is linked with unequal access to valued knowledge and skills (Dorling, 2015; Piketty, 2014; The Economist, 2015), the policy response needs to include widening access to quality and relevant higher education. A critical policy scholar recognizes that growing and unjust inequalities are destined to create discontent in institutions, systems, and societies. With the consolidation of the knowledge-intensive economic system, the analytical interest of CPS is in how education might ameliorate the *rise of inequality* within and between societies.

Increased inequality has precipitated the crisis of neoliberal globalism. Starting from the early 1980s neoliberal globalization has intensified. The unfettered market has been espoused as a prevailing ideology (albeit recent signs of fracture). The prevalence of market rationality eroded democracy and legitimized inequality, resulting in such unintended consequences as excessive nationalism and indifference to truth (Brown, 2019; Vormann & Lammert, 2019). The heightened economic interdependence of nations has created losers and winners. In the global North, whereas gains of globalization mainly flow to corporate and technological elites, millions of jobs have disappeared and the welfare state has shrunk. Further, the hyper-automation of jobs and the refugee crisis the world witnessed in the mid-2010s have triggered political rupture, economic insecurity, and cultural tensions in liberal democracies (Castells, 2018). Against the backdrop of these crises, a critical policy scholar needs to ask: beyond the distributive accounts of educational disadvantage, what should be the informational bases of assessing inequality? How can one discern structural factors of disadvantage underpinning unjust inequalities in educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes? Or to paraphrase Apple (2019a), how does society use education to make inequality legitimate?

Big Data

On a daily basis, in our professional as well as personal lives, we produce multifaceted data at an unprecedented rate and volume. The concept of Big Data refers to the combination of big, complex, and fast-moving data, and innovative analytic "techniques and technologies to capture, store, distribute, manage and analyze" this multifaceted body of data (Daniel, 2015, p. 907). At the core of Big Data is the capacity to turn complex and unstructured data into actionable, profitable

information. In essence, Big Data results from what sociologist Manuel Castells (2018) referred to as "a *transparent society* in which we have all been turned into data" (p. 1, emphasis added).

Two recently published provocative books, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (Zuboff, 2019) and *The Cost of Connection* (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), show that Big Data is exploitative—it is a means of profit extraction. The authors argue that external agents (e.g. big tech companies) collect and store information about private and shared human experiences. Then using advanced computational tools (e.g. artificial intelligence), the agents translate the information into 'behavioral data' and 'prediction products' that can be sold to business customers who would use the product to cater goods and services to consumers. The outcome is 'surveillance capitalism', "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 8). Big Data is not only exploitative but also oppressive. In creating data sets that feed into AI, the act of choice that we draw on in data classification is an expression of unequal power relations in society. Data classification presents hierarchies and asymmetries in the world around us—Bartoletti (2020) describes this subtle and uncontested way of silencing people as 'data violence'.

As a form of ideology, dataism or datafication (a) insists that every aspect of human life should be collected and processed for instrumental uses, (b) sees Big Data as a higher form of knowledge and knowing, and (c) is skeptical toward interpretive knowledge (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Han, 2017b). For the proponents of Big Data, everything worth knowing must be measurable and countable. Growing skepticism toward critical social research is captured in the words of Chris Anderson, former Editor-in-Chief of *Wired* magazine and a renowned science writer: "Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the *numbers speak for themselves*" (Anderson, 2008, para. 7, emphasis added). This is in clear contrast to the aim of critical social research, which is "to *discover the intentions* which actors have in doing whatever it is they are doing" (Fay, 1975/2014, p. 73, emphasis added). Critical education policy scholars take Fay's position. For instance, technology inherits the values of its creators (Feenberg, 2010), making 'racist robots' a real possibility (Benjamin, 2019b). As such, a critical analysis of automation in education needs to articulate and critique values embedded in the technologies in question. Without problematization, technology can simply be an instrument that acculturates us "into a culture of compliance built on the willing adherence to prescription" (Franklin, 1990/2004, p. 70).

The positivist onto-epistemological assumption underpinning Big Data is that "the world is knowable via calculation and measurement and can be represented as the aggregation of discrete, independent, empirically observable units" (Lake, 2017, p. 3). It is with this assumption that policy actors at global, national, and local levels use large-scale international comparative survey data (e.g., the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA) as "a governing device" (Ozga, 2016, p. 70). Increased use of artificial intelligence (AI) and large-scale data in policy work and governance has given rise to what Gulson and Webb (2017) referred to as 'computational education policy'. Drawing on a wide range of theoretical resources, many scholars have examined the role of comparative performance data in policy and governance (e.g., see Gorur, 2014, 2016; Grek, 2009; Lingard, 2011; Ozga, 2009; Sellar, 2015; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Williamson, 2018). One should also wonder if the prevalence of Big Data leads to quantitative testing of policy propositions and outcomes. In other words, the key question that needs to be addressed is: What does the rise of Big Data imply for policy knowledge and policymaking in education? And how should critical policy scholars respond to the omnipresence of Big Data in education policy spaces?

Digital Panopticon

For many critical scholars, Big Data is not just another form of asset for big tech companies. With the full enactment of tracking technology and face recognition software, data has increasingly become "an instrument of surveillance and control" (Pistor, 2020, para. 2). According to Foucault (1998), for a long time, liberalism and industrial capitalism relied on biopolitics that combined discipline (through economic, pedagogic, punitive, medical, and military institutions that control and order individual bodies), and knowledge about biological processes of the population as instruments of governance (biopower). The state does biopolitics when it collects population census to map trends of reproduction and mortality in the population and to create and sustain social stratifications (Kelly, 2013). However, as German cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han noted, we now live in an age of 'psychopolitics' whereby neoliberalism and financial capitalism heavily depend on control of thought rather than control of the body (Han, 2017a). He sees the rise of Big Data as a technology of control or a "digital panopticon" (Han, 2017b, p. 37). For Han, digital surveillance (i.e. 'psychopower') is more efficient than biopower insofar as it operates in a subtle form—it "watches over, controls, and influences human beings not from outside but *from inside*," and has direct access to "the collective unconscious" (p. 80, emphasis in original). Psychopower enables governments and corporations to predict our choices and manipulate our desires.

Thanks to surveillance technologies, the phenomenon of 'networked authoritarianism' (Mackinnon, 2013) or 'data authoritarianism' (Pistor, 2020) has come into existence. The case of China's new so-called Social Credit System is illustrative here. It has been reported that the Chinese Government uses a network of surveillance cameras to control how citizens act in the public sphere. The surveillance apparatus combines facial recognition cameras and artificial intelligence technologies to gather personal information in real-time. The result of such an undertaking has been astonishing. By the end of 2018, the Chinese Government banned over 23 million people from buying train or plane tickets as a punishment for 'untrustworthy conduct', ranging from not paying personal taxes to spreading false information and to walking a dog on a leash (Kuo, 2019). The problem of digital surveillance does not end at control and commercialization. Big Data tools are also discriminatory. A major report from the U.S. Department of Commerce shows that facial recognition technologies are racially biased (Grother et al., 2019), giving rise to what has come to be known as 'algorithmic injustice' in criminal sentencing (Benjamin, 2019a; Mbadiwe, 2018), or 'black software' more broadly (McIlwain, 2020). In the US, the first case of the wrongful arrest of a Black man due to a flawed facial recognition algorithm was reported by the *New York Times* in June 2020 (Hill, 2020).

What is still more worrisome is that the digital surveillance system has infiltrated the school. A high school in Hangzhou (China) is reported to have installed facial recognition cameras in the classroom to monitor the attentiveness and academic engagement of students. The cameras "scan students' faces every 30 seconds to try to detect their mood, classifying it as surprise, sadness, antipathy, anger, happiness, fear, or neutral—recording it and averaging it during each class" (Dans, 2018, para. 6). Even so, the rise of psychopower has not been critically examined in relation to educational policies and practices. In CPS, questions worth asking include: What does the rise of the *digital surveillance* mean for pedagogic work and education policy research? What does the intrusion of digital surveillance in schools imply for protecting students' digital lives?

Conclusion

This paper set out to highlight the main features of critical policy scholarship (CPS) in education. The guiding assumption is that if researchers are clearer about theoretical underpinnings and methodological orientations of their choosing, then they are better placed to frame pertinent research questions and articulate the analytical significance of concepts they invoke. With this assumption, the paper showed that CPS recognizes the value-laden nature of policy, seeks to illuminate who is systematically privileged or excluded, analyses the hidden structure of power in public discourses, and aims at transforming undesirable conditions of the disadvantaged in society through evidence-based advocacy. Critical policy scholars consider the 'big picture' of the policy process: they examine the interaction of state and non-state actors and unmask power relations and ideological positions of interest groups. Also, whereas ontological individualism views society as a mere collection of individuals (Robeyns, 2007), for critical policy scholars, social phenomena cannot be fully explained in terms of facts about dispositions, beliefs, and resources of individuals. There is a need to capture both subjective meaning systems and objective structures that mediate policy content, production, mobility, and enactment.

The paper also argued that, at the present, critical policy scholars are expected to work in the context of considerable socio-economic and technological transformation, ranging from rising unjust inequality to digital surveillance and Big Data. The challenges of our time are many. We live in a time of economic anxiety and identity politics that underpin the disruptive force of populist movements. If the recent global Coronavirus outbreak and catastrophe tell us anything it is the fact that our technological achievement and economic prosperity have not fully freed us from risk and uncertainty. In addition to the fast-paced changes in the world of work, we face technological disruption, climate change, and a persisting risk of a global pandemic. Innovative responses to those issues should include new thinking in education policy and learning. And critical policy scholars have a key role to play in the process. We need critical and imaginative scholarship now more than ever. Brazilian philosopher and politician Roberto Unger noted that imagination foresees crisis and enables us to "put the *actual* under the light of the *possible*"; he emphasized:

> Our capacity to do so, however, is conditioned by our power to see and think *more than* our institutional and discursive systems can allow. By giving voice, through the imagination, to the inexhaustibility of the mind, we are able to recognize the inexhaustibility of the real around us: seeing it as irreducible to what is now manifest. (Unger, 2011, p.lii, emphasis added)

The changes call for a new way of thinking about socio-economic goals of education, and about what roles the state and market forces play in the system. There is a need for critical policy scholars to problematize the interplay of macro and micro forces that bear direct influence on education policies and practices. Looking forward, it is my view that CPS will remain relevant to the extent it creatively engages with these and other emerging transformations in the cultural, political, economic, technological, and educational lives of society. In analyzing the interplay of technology and education, critical inquiry needs to expose surveillance motives, investigate whether and how technocracy perpetuates elite power and unjust inequality, and highlight alternative possibilities.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the five anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and constructive criticism on the earlier version of the manuscript. The paper has also benefited a great deal from discussions with Professor Trevor Gale (University of Glasgow), Associate Professor Glenn Savage (the University of Western Australia), and Dr. Jessica Gerrard (the University of Melbourne). All possible shortcomings of course remain mine.

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Volume 29 Number 2 January 11, 2021 ISSN 1068-2341