

More than Just an Academic Exercise

Conjoining Critical Policy Analysis and Community-Engaged Research as Embodiment of Political Action

ANJALE WELTON AND KATHERINE CUMINGS MANSFIELD

ABSTRACT

Critical policy analysis (CPA) is a means by which to critique policy and promote agency, equity, and justice. However, most CPA scholars examine political discourse from a distance rather than actively participate in political processes. Meanwhile, there is a growing interest in community-engaged research whereby academics partner with community members in their research endeavors. In this article, we consider the value of conjoining the philosophies and processes behind both CPA and community-engaged research to create more powerful and meaningful research endeavors that potentially can lead to political action and policy change. For this article, we present a subset of data from a larger study that asked education policy scholars how critical policy analysis informs their work and what they consider to be key objectives of this approach. We focus on a subsection of participants who demonstrated how and in what ways they consider community-engaged scholarship to be an essential component of CPA. Participants discussed the roles of empowerment and voice, emphasized the importance of moving from theory to action in their research, and provided examples of how they embodied policy making on the ground with participants in their communities.

[Welton, A. & Mansfield, K.C. \(2020\). More than just an academic exercise: Conjoining critical policy analysis and community-engaged research as an embodiment of political action. Educational Studies, 56 \(6\), 619-635.](#)

So what does this mean?

Critical policy analysis is a guiding framework and tool that education policy researchers can use to examine whether and how policies promote equity and justice in education. However, scholars who use this approach often conduct research on communities rather than collaborating with communities to research educational issues that directly impact them and their communities. In this article, we argue that critical approaches to conducting education policy research can and should become more community-engaged because the power of collaborative research lies in its potential to create political action and policy change.

To make our point, we present a subset of data from a larger study that asked education policy scholars how critical policy analysis informs their research and what they consider to be key objectives of this approach. We focus on this subsection of scholars who discuss how overtime, their policy research has become more community-engaged and how that has transformed not only the research process but the fruitfulness of their work. For example, participants discussed the roles of empowerment and voice, emphasized the importance of moving from theory to action in their research, and provided examples of how policy work can happen on the ground with participants in their communities.