



Critical Policy Research. What It Is. And What It Is Not.



It's a term that often gets misused, misinterpreted, and—in the process—maligned.

By the general public, it's poorly understood.

It's critical policy research. And it's the topic of the June 2024 issue of the peer-reviewed journal, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. A free [webinar](#) on the issue will be held from 2:00-3:30 pm Eastern on May 23rd.

Under the name "[critical race theory](#)," this approach to understanding the world was not only denigrated but legally banned by politicians in multiple states, many of whom had a limited understanding of even its definition.

So here's what critical policy analysis is—and isn't—according to the introduction to the special issue, written by guest editors [Erica O. Turner](#) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, [Dominique J. Baker](#) of the University of Delaware, and NEPC Fellow [Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California:

1. Approach to existing policies

Traditional policy research: Typically takes policy at face value, presuming it was created for the reasons stated (e.g., "to increase attendance") or for technical reasons (e.g., "the former policy needs to be updated because it was created before the intro-

duction of artificial intelligence”).

Critical policy research: Starts by examining why policies develop, how they are framed, who benefits, and who does not. In doing so, critical researchers explore the extent to which there may be connections between a policy that on the surface appears to apply to one narrow area (e.g., educational testing) and broader societal issues such as culture, economics, or gender. Critical researchers attend closely to rhetoric, which can provide clues to the values underlying the policy. For example, the use of the phrase “achievement gap” implies students themselves are responsible for the historically lower test scores found among some groups, whereas the phrase “opportunity gap” highlights the idea that some students have more and better chances to learn and prepare than others for exams.

2. Policy implementation

Traditional policy analysis: Often equates policy with the rhetoric with which it is surrounded, viewing implementation as dichotomous (either it’s implemented or it’s not implemented).

Critical policy research: Examines the extent to which those charged with implementing policy have the ability to do so and how factors such as environment, power, and ideology play into that equation.

3. Change

Traditional policy research: May assume that certain societal trends (e.g., changes in technology) are inevitable and immutable.

Critical policy analysis: Examines and questions underlying assumptions about social trends, asking for who benefits from them and who does not. Public policy is viewed as a tool with the potential to shift—rather than simply mirror—phenomena that are sometimes described as natural, common sense, or unchangeable.

Even as critical approaches have been villainized by politicians, they are a robust and growing area of academic research on education. The co-editors of the *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* special issue noted that the call generated nearly 400 submissions—“a clear signal of the excitement and interest in conducting critical education policy research and the real need for more outlets that publish critical policy research in education.”

NEPC Resources on Research Issues

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