

e-Learning Quality during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Ontario's Policy Response to
School Closures and Implications for Critical Democratic Education

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Abstract

According to Naomi Klein's (2007) conceptualization of disaster capitalism, neoliberal policies tend to emerge and take hold during times of crisis and shock. In the months following March 2020, public education policies emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, e-learning, a delivery model that was strongly opposed by teachers, students, and parents prior to the pandemic, was implemented as a solution for Ontario public schools which were closed longer than schools in any other province or territory between 2020-2021. This study examined how Ontario's e-learning policies defined quality and implications of this conceptualization for critical democratic education.

Keywords: e-learning, public education, policy, critical democracy, quality, equity, inclusion, social justice, disaster capitalism

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Introduction

The arrival of COVID-19 to Ontario in 2020 revealed and exacerbated a number of existing equity issues that exist within public education. Reports have confirmed that the coronavirus pandemic has “starkly highlighted the fragility of our education systems” (Deslandes-Martineu, Charland, Arvisais, & Vinuesa, 2020, n.p.) and “magnified deep-rooted racial and social injustices and perpetuated educational inequities” (Gutiérrez et al., 2020, n.p.). At a time when in-person learning was no longer an option, Ontario teachers took on the challenge of transferring their lessons to virtual formats as schools across the province moved to virtual live and pre-recorded lessons (Jeffords, 2020b). In March 2020, e-learning was introduced as a temporary alternative to in-person schooling. Despite the potential of e-learning to benefit some students, Farhadi (2019) has found that even during pre-pandemic times, e-learning tends to exacerbate inequalities for those who already struggle with face-to-face instruction.

The “digital divide” (Lieberman, 2020, n.p.) increased exponentially in 2020 as students from privileged families were better able to seamlessly access alternative learning opportunities while others were restricted by limited internet access, a lack of quiet home learning spaces, and family responsibilities during the pandemic (Schleicher, 2020; Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Prior to the pandemic, in 2005, a report on children’s online experience in the United Kingdom concluded that the digital divide is no longer simply defined as the division between those with internet access and those without; schools and public libraries have improved physical access to devices, but have done so in ways that still limit what a student is able to accomplish (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). The report found that inequalities related to internet speeds,

privacy, and storage (among a widening list of additional divisions) persist in ways that limit personal agency (Livingstone & Bober, 2005).

In addition to its negative impact on students and families worldwide, COVID-19 has also been regarded as an opportunity for corporations to capitalize on the increase in technology use for education (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). Some advocates in Ontario suggest that the political desire to push toward virtual learning (as opposed to funding small classroom sizes and investing in training and hiring more public school teachers) is “part of the province’s broader aim to create a “useful crisis” that puts more learning online, something [Ontario’s] Ford government has been advocating for since before the pandemic began” (Roy, 2020, n.p.). This behaviour is indicative of disaster capitalism as coined by Klein (2007) in *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Disaster capitalism is defined as the stepping-in of private sector actors during the shock of crises such as natural disasters, wars, and economic crashes, and offering “calculated, free market ‘solutions’ to seemingly insurmountable public ‘problems’” (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 4).

Educational technology (EdTech) companies and other private sector actors have been working for decades prior to COVID-19 to enter the e-learning market, and some companies, such as Google, have found great success. As of 2017, Google Chromebooks were the #1 selling educational devices in Canadian public schools, with 20,000 devices in schools across Canada’s largest school district, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (Bout, 2017). Google also offers a number of relevant tools and applications, requiring students (and families of students too young to register) and teachers to create a Gmail account in order to access the tools being provided for free (Kuehn, 2019). To echo Etzrodt and Engesser (2019), as technology becomes

ubiquitous, it becomes invisible and omnipresent. In 2020 when schools faced closures due to COVID-19, Google, through its Chromebooks and Classroom platform, became “a global provider of both the hardware and software platforms” (Williamson, Macgilchrist, & Potter, 2021, p. 121) following years of embedding themselves into public education.

Many public-private policy partnerships and COVID-19 coalitions emerged as a result of the pandemic, promoting EdTech for use by schools, teachers, and parents (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). For example, technology philanthropies such as the Gates Foundation deepened their involvement in the sector by providing financial support and gaining positions of authority for “‘reimagining’ education for the future” (Williamson & Hogan, 2000, p. 2). Another organization which became more involved in education during COVID-19 was Pearson, which stated in their 2017 annual report that there was “a need to capitalize further on the virtual schooling market, given that it only made up 6% of their current sales (£274m)” (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 50). In 2020, Pearson began to offer free subscriptions to their platform Active Learn for public school students, and it is thought that as these resources become more widely used via the subscription model, they may transition into longer term subscriptions and enrollments over time (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). These types of public-private partnerships and EdTech integration significantly increase the likelihood of dependency on private sector services for years to come, even after COVID-19 becomes less of a threat to public health, as they become standardized within education systems (Williamson & Hogan, 2020).

This research study explored the concept of quality e-learning in Ontario during the pandemic through a critical analysis of educational policy. The definition of high quality education within any school environment varies and is influenced by policies which perpetuate

particular values. The knowledge created by this study is important because it is one of the first to provide a critical analysis of e-learning policies enacted during COVID-19 in Ontario. As I explore below, it becomes clear that in analyzing education policy, it is possible to approximate the values, beliefs and related definitions of quality held by the Ontario government and Ministry of Education. This study provided an opportunity to critically analyze the response of the Government of Ontario to the COVID-19 crisis and employed the use of Masoumi and Lindström's (2012) E-quality Framework. This Framework was used to examine e-learning policy documents in Ontario to answer research questions related to the 'quality' of e-learning advocated in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic and implications for critical democracy.

Context of the Study: Disaster Capitalism in Ontario

The Progressive Conservative Ford government made a number of commitments to restructure the education system in Ontario when it came into power in 2018. Its rapid changes and subsequent cuts to public education triggered Ontario-wide student walk-outs, labour disputes, and teacher strikes in 2019 and early 2020 (Blinch, 2019; CBC News, 2020; The Canadian Press, 2020b; LaPierre, 2019). Of the many concerns, a significant number of students, parents, and teachers expressed a lack of support for the Ministry of Education's decision to make four (later changed to two) e-learning credits a graduation requirement, beginning in the 2019-2020 school year (Toronto District School Board, 2020a/b; Gunn, 2020; Blinch, 2019; CBC News, 2020; The Canadian Press, 2020b; LaPierre, 2019). E-learning in Ontario has always existed as an optional service, and since 2010 the optional courses were nearly entirely targeted toward university-bound students (Farhadi, 2019). Desire2Learn, the sole provider of e-learning

software for K-12 schools in Ontario, signed a renewed, multi-year contract in 2018 at an undisclosed cost (Ontario, 2018). Prior to this, private technology companies such as Desire2Learn were prevented from expanding into education by previous provincial governments and unions which sought to represent the interests of workers (Farhadi, 2019).

Though there was much public opposition to mandatory e-learning, the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020 created a necessity for compulsory e-learning and opened the door for increased privatization, as face-to-face instruction was no longer an option for schools (UNICEF, Global Education Cluster, INEE, & Save the Children, 2015). In a similar fashion, the catastrophe left in New Orleans, Louisiana, by Hurricane Katrina “generated the conditions for a new form of educational privatization” (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016, p. 121). As there were major strikes and public opposition to e-learning in Ontario prior to the shock of COVID-19, there were unsuccessful attempts to advance school choice voucher programs in New Orleans two years before the shock of Hurricane Katrina, and again shortly before the hurricane. Despite the expressed public opposition, Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo (2016) write of “legitimation and advancement of policy changes framed as relief, compensation, or reconstruction interventions” (p. 120). In New Orleans for instance, education privatization policies were accompanied by phrases such as “golden opportunity”, “silver lining”, and “bright spot” (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016, p. 120).

Education in the province was on an already rocky foundation prior to the arrival of COVID-19. Many observers refer back to Bill 160 which passed in 1997 under the Progressive Conservative Harris government; the bill changed the funding model of public education from local boards to a more centralized top-down model which turned the responsibility of educational

funding over to the province (Mackenzie, 2015; Roy, 2020). The largest teachers' strike in Canadian history took place that year in response to Bill 160, but the core issue with funding was never truly resolved (CBC Archives, 2020; Roy, 2020). Hugh Mackenzie, leading researcher on education funding in Ontario at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, wrote that Premier Doug Ford's cuts to education in addition to the lasting changes made by the Harris government snowballed into today's system which is now in crisis due to COVID-19 and consists of "[a]ll the weaknesses in the formula, the inadequate funding for technology, the inadequate funding for supports for teachers, [and] the inadequate funding for issues that are raised by students at risk" (Roy, 2020, n.p.).

Due to COVID-19, Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency in Ontario on March 17th, 2020, and although some businesses were allowed to reopen in May, schools remained closed for the remainder of the school year (Nielsen, 2020). As public schools transitioned to online learning, school boards worked to organize drive-through pickups of Chromebooks, iPads, and internet sticks to thousands of students (Teotonio & Rushowy, 2020). Despite having made significant investments into Google Chromebooks as mentioned above, only 43% of Ontario's secondary schools had laptops or computers available for e-learners (People for Education, 2020a). Following a collaboration between the provincial government, Rogers Communications, and Apple, Ontario school boards purchased 21,000 iPads intended to support the newly mandatory e-learning program; each one bundled with free wireless data which lasted until the end of the 2019-2020 school year (Teotonio & Rushowy, 2020). Per Williamson and Hogan (2020)'s definition, I would classify this behavior as a practice of commercialization within the scope of disaster capitalism: the act of offering products and

services for free for a limited time, “likely capitalizing on an avenue of future profitability” (p. 8).

Clarke (2019) writes of a digital government which refers to the use of digital tools to design policy, deliver services, and interact with the public. It is a useful term to describe how education policy was communicated during this time. The Ontario government’s approach to facilitating e-learning in lieu of in-person public education during the early months of COVID-19 included the creation of online learning portals and the provision of educational television scheduling and digital streaming options (The Canadian Press, 2020b). Although these approaches proved effective for some families, usability and accessibility issues were significant deterrents to their use and are a major barrier to the effectiveness of a digital government approach to education (Leist & Smith, 2014).

E-learning following the sudden closure of schools in March 2020 was of two types: synchronous and asynchronous learning (PPM, 2020). Synchronous learning refers to learning that happens in real time and involves the use of text, video, and/or voice communication in a way that allows educators and members of the school board/board-based team to instruct and connect with students in real time (PPM, 2020). Asynchronous learning refers to learning that is not delivered in real time; watching pre-recorded video lessons, completing assigned tasks, or contributing to virtual discussion boards are some examples of how this style of e-learning is implemented (PPM, 2020; Hristova, 2020). In April, over three weeks after the closure of schools in March, school-based synchronous and asynchronous e-learning began (Jeffords, 2020a).

Due to COVID-19, “educators, professors and students alike, [were] forced to be more adaptable, more flexible, and more creative than they have probably ever been expected to be” (Van Nuland et al., 2020). Much was asked of teachers, a majority of whom were given a few weeks to acclimate to new e-learning platforms and convert their lessons to synchronous and asynchronous formats with little guidance (Thompson, 2020). Teachers surely felt the pressure, and although they worked hard to support their students, many young people struggled with feelings tied not only to safety and the pandemic, but also the changes in their school experience related to achievement and the lack of in-person socialization.

A study published in May 2020 reported that the top three emotions felt by students in Ontario immediately following the in-person school closures were: boredom (71%), normalcy (41%), and loneliness (33%) (Angus Reid Institute, 2020). Despite many parents taking on the additional responsibility of supporting their children through e-learning while often themselves transitioning to working from home, over a third of students from age 10-17 felt that “while their parents may be trying their best, it’s not quite the assistance [they] need” (Angus Reid Institute, 2020, n.p.).

The Angus Reid Institute (2020) reported that across Canada, children aged 10-17 were mostly keeping up with their schoolwork (75%), but were largely unmotivated (60%). They were no longer able to see many of their friends, and students reported that they engaged in significantly increased screen time – watching TV or videos online (88%), playing video games (74%), and spending time on social media (58%) (Angus Reid Institute, 2020). The Ipsos Public Affairs Annual Mental Health Index survey revealed that since COVID-19, 59% of parents noted “behavioral changes in their child ranging from outbursts or extreme irritability to drastic

changes in mood, behavior or personality and difficulty sleeping/altered sleeping patterns as well as persistent sadness and more” (Children’s Mental Health Ontario, 2020). Many reports also cited parent and student concerns about “learning loss”, although research shows that assigning deficit-based labels to students has predictable, negative outcomes, and it is better instead to respond by addressing the cause of the disruption – COVID-19 – and focusing on the related social and emotional needs of the child first, including their sense of safety, self-worth, and academic confidence (Gorski, 2011; Merrill, 2021).

Despite the challenges experienced by students, families, and teachers with e-learning in the first few months of COVID-19 the Ford government announced that parents would be given the opportunity to choose for their children whether to opt into online learning or full-time in person learning for the 2020-21 school year (Canadian Press, 2020a). The discourse of choice within education is related to marketization, which takes responsibility away from governments for investing in and enforcing standards that would benefit all students –such as decreased class sizes (SickKids, 2020) – and instead holds parents responsible for their children’s success or failure based on their ability to make ‘the right decision’ (Winton & Milani, 2017; Carpenter, Diem, & Young, 2014). The discourse of choice and the ‘free’ marketization of education suggests that “parents would have the best opportunity to achieve positive results for their children if they simply pursued their self-interests and realized themselves as savvy consumers of educational services” (Carpenter, Diem, & Young, 2014, p. 1114). Offering choice between in-person and online learning takes the onus off of the Ministry of Education; they are able to say to families who are concerned about COVID-19 exposure or are interested in e-learning to accommodate personal learning needs that e-learning is available without having to consider or

address its quality. Once the options are available, it falls upon families to make ‘the right decision’.

Two of Canada's largest school boards, both located in Ontario and catering to families in densely populated urban communities, experienced high levels of e-learning enrollment in the Fall of 2020. In October 2020, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) saw an enrollment of over 66,000 elementary students in online learning, and the Peel District School Board (PDSB) saw over 54,000 (Maharaj, 2020). Families may not have chosen e-learning because it was their preferred option; the rate of COVID-19 infection had drastically increased following the opening of schools in September 2020, surpassing levels not seen since March when the state of emergency was first announced in Ontario (Maharaj, 2020; Crawley, 2020). The Ontario government is responsible for class size requirements, but they chose not to reduce class sizes which was recommended by experts at the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids, 2020). Some families erroneously believed that if they kept their children at home, “it might alleviate the burden [of large classes on teachers] and that might mean smaller classroom sizes for those that need to send their kids to face-to-face school” (Canadian Press, 2020a, n.p.). Instead, classrooms where families had withdrawn their children from in-person instruction were simply collapsed and combined with other classes, so as to ensure that all classrooms had the mandatory minimum number of students (Canadian Press, 2020a).

This research examined the Ontario government’s policies related to e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Ontario's e-learning policy during the COVID-19 pandemic define quality?

2. What are the implications of Ontario's e-learning policy during COVID-19 for critical democratic education within and beyond the pandemic?

In this chapter I introduced the rationale and the context of the research. I highlighted concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic, like other crises, created conditions for increased education privatization. In the next chapter, I introduce literature related to e-learning and education quality, noting the relationship between policy, political values, and desired outcomes. I challenge the use of terms such as 'desired outcomes', and even 'quality' itself within the context of critical democracy, while I consider how market-based, neoliberal values have been involved in the development of existing conceptualizations of quality in Ontario.

Chapter 3, “Theoretical Framework: Critical Democracy and Critical Policy Analysis” begins by highlighting the complementary relationship between critical democracy and critical policy analysis. It brings forward the idea of a collective sense of good which is consistently defined and redefined through the democratic process. This chapter ends with a discussion of Young and Diem's (2018) six interests of critical policy analysts, including “the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality” and “the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge and the creation of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’” (p. 82).

In chapter 4, “Methodology”, I discuss how I used critical democratic theory alongside the E-quality Framework to analyze Ontario's e-learning policy documents. I then consider limitations to the study related to the intended purposes of the E-quality Framework, values communicated through Ontario's policy documents, and the values of critical democracy. In the next chapter, Chapter 5, I present the findings of my critical policy analysis of Ontario's e-

learning policy in the first several months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March to August 2020). I discuss themes, patterns, and factors that were evident based on the process of coding used with the E-quality Framework.

Chapter 5, “Findings”, begins by reviewing my findings and more firmly separating the differences between market-based values and critical democratic values. It then explores missed opportunities for e-learning during the pandemic: the proposal of alternative practices for e-learning which are consistent with the principles of critical democracy.

My final chapter, "Discussion", returns to the context of the study and the notions of disaster capitalism. It offers an optimistic view of the future where, despite the crisis caused by COVID-19, we can consider ourselves within a "sweet spot" (Van Nuland et al., 2020, n.p.) where innovation can take hold. In this chapter I suggest that we not rush back to normalcy as Ontario continues to make progress in its COVID-19 response, and that we instead respond to this crisis by adopting more critical democratic values within education policy in order to better serve children and communities.

Literature Review

Canada offers free, compulsory public education to students at the elementary and secondary level, and this is realized by the creation and enforcement of education policy. A common goal of public education policy is to ensure that students are provided with high quality education. However, complications arise when trying to understand what is meant by “quality”, particularly within the context of an unprecedented international health crisis. Throughout this literature review I explain that education quality might be variously defined by, or organized around the goals of, high student achievement, meaningful relationships and collaboration, or critical democracy.

Glasser (1990) writes: “it would be extremely difficult to come up with an exact definition of quality education that would apply to all situations [but] we can almost always recognize it when we see it” (p. 6). Glasser’s (1990) quote suggests that different definitions of quality are related to different outcomes and values, and that high quality is often subjective since the personal pronoun “we” is used. For instance, those who believe that the purpose of education is to produce high quality workers may regard high quality schools as those which prioritize testing and have a record of high academic achievement among students. Similarly, those who believe that the purpose of education is to produce individuals interested in challenging oppressive structures and creating a more equitable world might regard a high quality school as one which boasts critical democratic values and collaborative teaching practices.

In this section, I review literature related to e-learning and education quality, considering that education policy is closely tied to desired outcomes and political values. Terms such as

“desired outcomes” demand us to ask questions of the actors involved in policy creation. Whose desires and whose rationales are being made into policy: whose voices are listened to in the creation of education policy and whose are not? Critical democracy believes in democratic outcomes for education which prioritize a collective sense of good, including social justice, equity, and inclusion (Milani & Winton, 2017). I apply a critical democratic lens to much of the literature that is discussed in this section.

Definitions of Education Quality in Ontario

Dominant definitions of quality in Ontario education policy since the mid 1990s are grounded in neoliberalism and construct education quality as observable, measurable through performance on standardized tests, and that which produces “human capital” (Auld & Morris, 2016, n.d.) competitive in a global market (Herman, 2013; Zhao, 2019; Niyozov & Hughes, 2019; Quirke, 2012). Scholars expand on this further, citing that schools which prioritize market-based, neoliberal values arrange their funding efforts in favour of job preparedness and long-term contributions to the global economy (Lewis-Durham, 2020). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016) writes that “adults with higher proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments tend to have better outcomes in the labour market than their less-proficient peers” (p.26). The OECD (2016) also writes that people with high educational attainment “tend to come from advantaged backgrounds, or have other characteristics that tend to be positively associated with literacy proficiency” (p. 72). It goes on to state that the effect of “other background characteristics” (OECD, 2016, p. 72) is weak, but within the same document the OECD (2016) notes that having at least one parent with

a tertiary degree is associated with a 40 score-point advantage over adults without any parent with an upper-level degree. This finding suggests that students who achieve high academic success are more likely to have parents who themselves have achieved academic success. When contextualized in this way, it is clear that a system which prioritizes academic success is accepting of the fact that certain students will be “successful” – in that they contribute to the competitiveness of society through participation in the labour market – while others will not; mirroring the idea of power distribution and the creation of “winners” and “losers” per Young and Diem (2018).

As with all aspects of the public sector, policy-makers, educators, parents and the public desire a way of knowing that schools are successful; “they want evidence of what is working well and where the education system is falling short” (People for Education, 2013, p. 2). A successful public school in the province of Ontario was defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2004 as “75% of students meeting the provincial target [...] on standardized reading, writing and math assessments administered by Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office [EQAO]” (Winton, 2013, p. 4). The definition was updated in 2012 to include an 85% graduation rate (Winton, 2013; People for Education, 2019a). Defining school success this way demonstrates the Ontario government’s belief that high quality schools *ought to* produce high scoring test-takers who later contribute to the economy by becoming effective workers. Further to this, the EQAO (2019) identifies trends in student learning; the results are often used to measure the effectiveness of schools (Carpenter, Diem, & Young, 2014) and are used in some cases by real estate agents to sell homes in particular areas over others (ETFO, 2020; Zoocasa, 2020; Boisvert, 2017). The Council of Ontario Directors of Education stated in a

2011 advisory that “through review and careful analysis of district results, boards can make general conclusions as to how they are progressing in relation to other districts in the province, and whether they are in line to meet provincial standards” (EQAO, 2013, p. 23). Following the implementation of the EQAO in Ontario there were notable adjustments made within the public education sector within the year (Shah, 2018). Shah (2018) writes that high school graduation rates increased by 14% from 2003-04 to 2010-11, and that EQAO scores in general increased 15% from 2003 to 2012. The prioritization of achievement and investment in standardized testing provides school boards with an opportunity to visualize progress and to enact policies with the goal of improving test scores in future years, but it does not address equity-related issues associated with the tests themselves. It also fails to adequately respond to schools which consistently produce low test scores, nor does it address non-EQAO related content and pedagogies which may benefit from alternative and less standardized assessment practices/models that prioritize participatory models of learning as opposed to the reproduction of facts.

Standardized tests also reveal inequities experienced by children with disabilities, in special education, and in English as a Second Language programs. EQAO (2019) acknowledges that there is a consistent discrepancy in achievement between students with special needs and those without: over 53% of grade 3 students with special needs did not meet the provincial standard for reading in 2018-2019 compared to 26% of students without identified learning needs. A variation this significant calls into question how contemporary conceptualizations of ‘quality’, achievement, and academic success came about, who is part of this ongoing process, and why they are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture over other educational

values (McLaren, 2002). Recalling the notion of “winners” and “losers” of policy, a pattern arises wherein significant groups of people become acceptable losses in order to uphold inequitable systems of power.

Standardized quantitative outcomes may be easier to measure and track than qualitative ones, but Strauss (2014) argues that the prioritization of standardized testing and easily measurable educational objectives dangerously narrows our collective imagination regarding what education is and what it ought to be about. In Ontario, math, science, and literacy receive the highest concentration of government funding (Milani & Winton, 2017), while 50% of elementary schools and 34% of secondary schools report fundraising for the arts, and 62% of elementary and 61% of secondary schools report fundraising for sports (People for Education, 2019a).

In prioritizing the funding of items related to measurable educational objectives, namely STEM, the remaining aspects of public schools are left underfunded and often subsidized by school-board and individual school initiatives. We can infer based on the Ministry of Education's above statements that the government views a high quality public school as one which produces students who perform well on standardized tests. This belief is reflected in the Ontario government's funding priorities which include: the EQAO which designs, administers, and reports on tests for Ontario students each year (ETFO, 2020); the larger amounts of money invested in programs related to subjects that are prioritized on EQAO assessments as mentioned above; and student success initiatives designed to increase graduation rate (Winton, 2013).

Some Ontarians share “the Ontario government’s [prioritization] and use of standardized test scores as indicators of success” (Winton, 2013, p. 4). Others involved with public dialogues about education however, including some educators and parents, define success differently (Winton, 2013). Their alternative definitions include students’ personal happiness, social well-being, communication skills, confidence, and the achievement of individualized academic goals (Winton, 2013).

I liken the definition of a successful school to that of a high quality school because the implication is that if there is something that schools *ought* to be, it follows that the tools best suited to meet these ends are essential aspects of high quality programs. The challenge here is similar to the challenge of defining quality as mentioned above; defining what is essential and how particular tools should be used is subjective and varies based on one’s values and educational objectives. Indeed, all conceptualizations of education quality are tied to beliefs about the purposes of public education and optimal outcomes for students

Quality in e-Learning

As technology has become ever more integral to the people’s lives, it has also found its way into the classroom through a variety of mediums, be it interactive whiteboards, tablets, or gamified quizzes (People for Education, 2019b). The use of technology in the classroom has the potential to stimulate students' creativity by engaging them in ways that make learning more meaningful (Kelly, 2020). E-learning, the process of delivering educational content via digital technology, has been used as a way of transferring an in-person, institutional, classroom experience to an entirely digital experience.

Advocates highlight many potential benefits to e-learning, including the ability to provide education to students in contexts where face-to-face instruction is no longer safe. Some professionals suggest that e-learning has the ability for teachers to engage learners in unique ways: “instead of reading about a thing, students actually can see the thing they are learning about, they can explore it in detail and with a heightened perspective. It's an enhanced learning experience” (Kelly, 2020, n.p.). Programs such as Live Learning Canada were used by teachers to engage their students during school closures in 2020 by providing museum tours, zoo experiences, cultural experiences, and more from the safety of their homes (Focused Education Resources, 2019).

Similar to definitions of quality within in-person environments, conceptualizations of quality in e-learning vary. Ideally, high quality e-learning programs seek opportunities to help students connect with one another and to avoid a "participation gap" (Jenkins et al., 2009, p.3), which refers to the inequitable access to opportunities, experiences, creative skills, practices, and knowledge necessary to succeed in an increasingly digital world. A participation gap is tied to neoliberal, market-based beliefs in the sense that it is concerned about the ability of students to become fully competent, and perhaps competitive, participants in the modern workplace (Jenkins et al., 2009). Jenkins et al. (2009) argue that our goal should be to focus on the concept of “participatory cultures” (p. 8) and cultural practices of making and sharing as opposed to the technologies themselves. They (2009) suggest that youth should be encouraged to “develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture” (p.8).

Using Khan's (2005) Flexible e-Learning Framework, Vandenhouten, Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly and Ralston-Berg (2014) report that consultation, collaboration, and clear communication between e-learning professionals is important at every stage of the e-learning process. They suggest that it takes a network of e-learning professionals to deliver and protect quality in e-learning programs: “from faculty and instructional designers to graphic designers, information technology staff, and program managers” (Vandenhouten et al., 2014, p.12). Vandenhouten et al. (2014) stress the importance of e-learning professionals being competent in more than just pedagogy in order to deliver a successful high-quality e-learning program.

Jumat et al. (2020) also discuss the importance of various e-learning professionals. They find that a key factor in the success of students’ transition to online learning (prior to the arrival of COVID-19) is the role of the facilitator (Jumat et al., 2020). Given the additional expectations required of students for e-learning, facilitators become responsible for managing the digital education platform itself while attending to the needs of the students in a time-sensitive manner (Jumat et al., 2020). In addition to the facilitators, Jumat et al. (2020) find that a skilled administrative team is typically responsible for ensuring the continuity of the curriculum, as well as maintaining online resources, training students and faculty on using the various platforms, and offering technical support, including solving poor WiFi and other connection issues. It is clear that high quality e-learning solutions must include direct support for instruction, as well as assistance in using the technology itself.

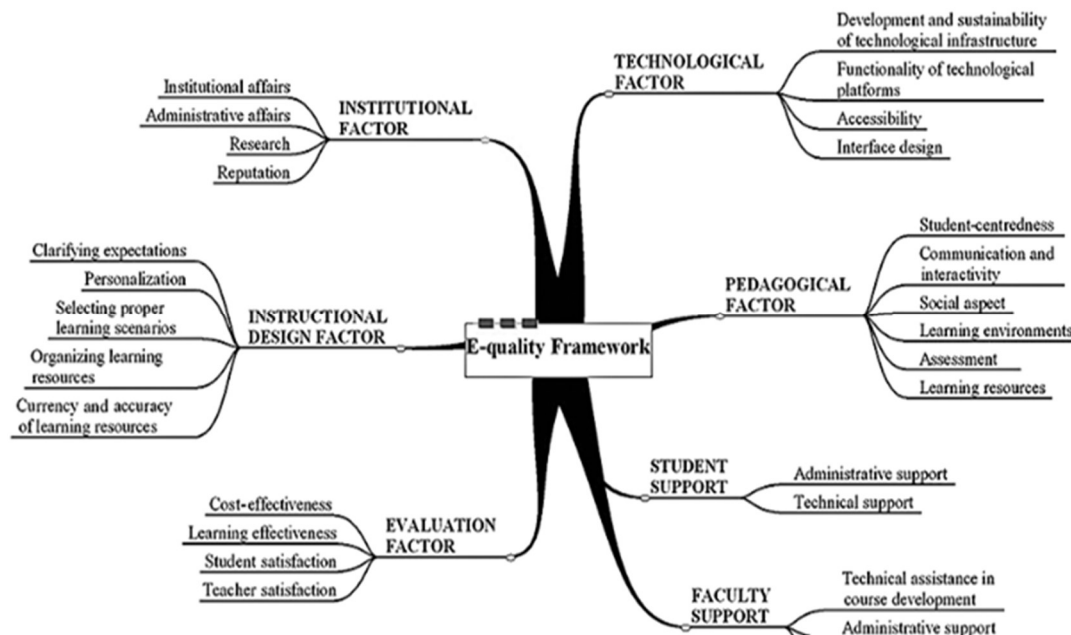
The nature of e-learning calls into question the traditional style of organizing and delivering instruction, as it may allow for deeper levels of inquiry and collaborative student engagement, as well as a transition from solo instruction to team planning. Further to this, there

is limited research that specifically addresses how faculty successfully achieve such a transition (Vandenhouten et al., 2014), although it is likely that there will be much more data to explore as researchers continue to reflect on and analyze e-learning experiences during COVID-19.

The E-quality Framework

Masoumi and Lindström (2012) established a set of benchmarks to be used in the development of “practical quality work with e-learning in virtual institutions” of higher education (p. 27). Similar to Vandenhouten et al. (2014), they acknowledge that focusing on single aspects of quality does not effectively capture the entirety of systemic issues nor their solutions (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). Their E-quality Framework (Figure 1) was developed by reviewing previous e-learning quality models, frameworks, and studies of e-quality in higher education settings (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). Masoumi and Lindström (2012) are sensitive to the issue of e-quality models “mechanistically [approaching] quality in e-learning, in line with massification of education [...] often done with technocratic top-down approaches [...] with roots in industrial mass production” (p. 28).

Figure 1. E-quality framework



Masoumi & Lindström, 2012.

The E-quality Framework is cleverly named, as it seeks to enhance the quality of e-learning environments by prioritizing equality and cultural competency. The Framework is made up of 7 primary factors and an additional 29 sub-factors which were categorized and developed through “a comprehensive review of the practical knowledge (i.e., models, guidelines, benchmarks, etc.) used in practical quality work” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p.28). I briefly review each factor below.

The institutional factor acknowledges that successful e-learning implementation depends on “explicit institutional visions and goals” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 29). In Ontario, such a focus on visions and goals related to education suggests a connection to market values, as assessment tools such as EQAO are typically used to determine whether or not institutional benchmarks are being met. Institutional factors of e-learning quality specific to the Framework

are related to the ability of virtual institutions to pursue their goals, and to what extent they take advantage of their resources: digital, physical, and human resources (Masoumi and Lindström, 2012). Political entities typically have a significant influence on institutional sub-factors which include institutional affairs, administrative affairs, research, and reputation (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012).

The technological factor looks at the technological infrastructure available to support e-learning (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). Within the context of this E-quality Framework, technological infrastructure refers to the “web of equipment, techniques, and applications whose efficiency can be characterized in terms of availability and reliability, the adequate functionalities, usability, and integration into the existing infrastructure” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 30). The sub-factors include the infrastructure itself, as well as commonly shared beliefs of what contributes to high quality e-learning, including accessibility (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012; Leist & Smith, 2014; Verstegen, 2015). Masoumi and Lindström (2012) note that in the context of e-learning, accessibility does not only refer to literal access to virtual programs, but that it is inclusive of any and all physical, technological, and usage limitations, including internet speed and wireless data.

The instructional design factor is “an iterative process that refers to the structuring and arranging of resources and procedures used to promote learning in an institution” (Masoumi and Lindström, 2012, p.31). Sub-factors of instructional design include the clarity of learning objectives and desired outcomes (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). A sub-factor of this stage includes personalization which ties into student-centeredness in that it creates space for programs

to prioritize students' needs, goals, and interests by making use of the customizable nature of digital technology (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012).

The pedagogical factor focuses on the implementation of learning resources and learning environments, as well as student-centeredness, communication and interactivity, socialization, and assessment (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). Explored earlier, the arrival of COVID-19 and Ontario's desire to embrace e-learning provided an opportunity to explore alternative methods of instruction as opposed to traditional, reproduction-based strategies. This factor allows non-traditional scenarios to be assessed by the Framework in a way that they are often overlooked in standardized models of quality assessment.

The Framework defines student support as those things “in addition to typical technical support, announcements, and guidelines, more administrative and social support is required to bring the students into the e-learning environment, especially by eliminating assumptions that learners will know how and what to do” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p.33). Similarly, the faculty support factor refers to the support that educators receive and require, related to: technical support and troubleshooting; administrative support and workload considerations; and, pedagogical support for educators when developing and delivering their courses (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). Often, mentions of support for educators are related to support that benefits students as well.

Instead of evaluating student knowledge or academic progress through standardized testing, the evaluation factor of the Framework examines the effectiveness of the institution by reflecting on “the extent to which it meets the demands at different levels” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 34). This factor centres on examining the effectiveness of the institution and

a course by asking “how and to what extent [are] learning objectives [...] met” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 34), and also considers cost-effectiveness from both institutional and educational perspectives. Gaining the perspectives of students and teachers is another important factor in terms of institutions’ ongoing improvement, and so this Framework regards student and teacher feedback as aspects of e-learning quality that are similarly important to assessments of cost- and learning-effectiveness (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). The desire to obtain reports on satisfaction somewhat positions students as customers. Conflicting research finds that although there is value in wanting to improve the educational experience by collecting feedback, there is a danger in following customer-oriented logic which “[focuses] more on the students’ concerns for advancing their careers than about what they actually learn” (del Cerro Santamaria, 2020, p. 25).

Masoumi and Lindström (2012) note that there are factors which are not included in the Framework which also impact the quality of e-learning, “such as national and regional information and communication technology infrastructures and policies; students and teachers’ information literacy; students’ workload; and different role players’ positive or negative attitude towards e-learning” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, pp. 28-29). This suggests that the Framework can be modified to fit particular contexts and that the version referenced in Figure 1 represents more of a baseline of e-learning quality as opposed to a comprehensive, finalized model.

E-Learning and Equity

In addition to debates about quality e-learning, there are concerns about equity and privacy as well. Prior to COVID-19, some Ontario students engaged in e-learning expressed concern over teachers having access to student analytics, IP addresses, and personal messages

between students (Farhadi, 2019). Farhadi (2019) noted that with this level of surveillance, students “consistently felt that their privacy was compromised” (pp.183-4). Although it is common for teachers to overhear student conversations in the classroom, have knowledge of students’ personal information (like addresses and phone numbers), and become familiar with student behaviours (such as handing in work on time or showing up late), it appears that when the classroom shifts to the online space, the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship shift as well.

Beyhan Farhadi (2019) finds that “e-learning operates as a virtual reproduction of the face-to-face operation of schooling structures where Black identity is subsumed into a “neutral” colour-blind (i.e., white) interface” (p. 123). Colour-blind racism neutralizes individualized experiences of identity, and its effects are that “oppression becomes rationalized as naturally occurring and a product of market dynamics, particularly online, where embodiment is optional” (Farhadi, 2019, p. 37). Like in-person schooling prior to the pandemic, including the reliance on standardized testing, ‘normalcy’ has allowed certain groups of students to progress through school and experience success in the workforce at the expense of other groups who face barriers at the systemic level which impacts their ability to fully participate. The arrival of COVID-19 and its drastic impact on education should prompt us to seek out a better method of delivering education as opposed to returning to ‘normal’.

Much of Farhadi’s (2019) e-learning research is based on asynchronous spaces, such as discussion forums. Since students have the option of remaining abstractly ‘pictureless’ in these types of e-learning spaces, the societal pressure to assume that neutrality = whiteness creates a sense of isolation for students seeking a sense of community (Farhadi, 2019), including those

with disabilities or who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Farhadi (2019) writes of the irony of online learning for marginalized students: they may seek out e-learning as a way of escaping negative experiences tied to their identities in schools, but that to do this they enter a digital space which often recreates the “static, culturally embedded “hidden” curriculum” of in-person learning (Farhadi, 2019, p. 146). Farhadi (2019) communicates the importance of recognizing “the exceptional nature of their access and the ways in which this access is bound up in the workings of institutional racism” (p. 123). Put another way, although marginalized students may achieve success in e-learning environments, the e-learning space itself actively displaces individual identities in its desire to reproduce the universality of face-to-face instruction (Farhadi, 2019).

In synchronous e-learning spaces, some students enjoy the freedom that accompanies being able to attend classes from a distance and being able to turn their cameras off. Some teachers have reported however that some students turn their cameras off because they are uncomfortable with the idea of classmates seeing the inside of their home (Paglinawan, 2020). Data security and privacy expert Rebecca Herold shared that features of synchronous e-learning platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet have a high potential for exposing private information related not only to students, but their families as well (Paglinawan, 2020). Williamson and Hogan (2020) note that the rapid transition from in-person to online education exposed students to risks of institutional and corporate “monitoring, profiling, data mining, marketing, [and] manipulation for commercial exploitation” (p. 61). The term “coronawashing” (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 61) is used in reference to the waiving of data privacy laws in the United States with the goal of quickly getting schools onto e-learning platforms during 2020.

Cornell professors Frank Castelli and Mark Sarvary sought to establish a balance between student safety and student engagement (Terada, 2021). Castelli and Sarvary (2021) recognized that among college students, “anxiety and depression have already been increased by the COVID-19 pandemic and a mandate for camera use may add to that trauma” (p. 3566). Among college students experiencing COVID-19 related stress and anxiety, racialized students - specifically Black, Hispanic, Latine, and American Indian or Alaska Native - were less likely than their peers to engage in e-learning by turning on their camera because of: concern about personal appearance; concern of others in the home being seen on camera; weak internet connection; feeling self-conscious; and, concern of others seeing their physical location (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

Castelli and Sarvary (2021) acknowledged these concerns, but were conflicted because of the cited benefits of full participatory e-learning sessions. They found that learning sessions where cameras stay on help to build teacher-student and student-student relationships, as well as overall student trust and engagement (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). By taking an equitable, student-centered approach, Castelli and Sarvary (2021) concluded that instead of requiring one over the other, it is best to establish a set of expectations at the start which encourages camera use but allows for alternatives to be used by those who choose not to do so. Castelli and Sarvary (2021) also add that active learning techniques can be used to keep students engaged while promoting equity. Active learning is “an approach to instruction that requires students to thoughtfully engage with the course material, and often with one another” (Western University, 2021, n.p.), which includes polling and “think-pair-share” (Sarvary & Gifford, 2017; Tanner, 2013).

It is important to highlight the fact that research has shown that it is better to respond to the concerns of students who do not fully engage in e-learning by offering strategies to teachers rather than pushing the students past their level of comfort. Indeed, teachers were asked to take on a lot of additional responsibility in 2020 to ensure a smooth transition toward effective e-learning, and they contributed highly to the perception of overall e-learning quality during COVID-19. In the discussion of my findings, I examine the relationship between teachers, policy, and quality e-learning.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Democracy and Critical Policy Analysis

This project is grounded in critical democracy and critical policy analysis (CPA). Perry (2009), citing John Dewey (1944), says that democratic outcomes of education must include a collective sense of good, as ongoingly co-defined by actors, and must promote a personal interest in social relationships and control over ongoing aims and purposes. Perry (2009) continues by referring to theories of education policy which examine the conflicts that arise in the context of democratic frameworks that embody “a plurality of viewpoints” (p. 8). Educational policy theorists Howe (1992), Levin (2002), and Paris (1995) have explored these tensions, noting conflicts between cultural diversity and equal opportunity, as well as choice, equity, and cohesion. The term conflict in this context refers to conflicting voices and opinions, viewpoints which engage in meaningful discussion that is necessary for the ongoing development of an ideal, democratic system. Paris (1995) remarks that a plurality of viewpoints inevitably leads to conflict and debate among competing interests. Ontario’s prioritization of privatization in its educational policies, as explored earlier in this thesis, is an example of policy creation in the absence of meaningful debate which might otherwise result in democratic outcomes. CPA perfectly complements theories of critical democracy, as it brings tensions and absences in policy into focus.

Young and Diem (2018) found that a key distinguishing feature of CPA is the relationship between theory and method, where theory, often informed by critical theory and post-structural frameworks, leads to the method. Where critical democracy seeks inclusivity through a participatory model (Pinto, 2012; Paris, 1995), CPA questions the practice of policy

creation and subsequent normative discourses which, in practice, tend to privilege particular values over others (Perry, 2009; Young & Diem, 2018).

In the following sections, I discuss both critical democracy and CPA, making note of how each framework may be applied to the context specific to this study: e-learning and e-quality.

Critical Democracy

Critical democracy stands in contrast to neoliberalism, as it is not limited by economic ideals or values and instead prioritizes the welfare of others, social justice, and equity (Milani & Winton, 2017). It is crucial that social justice is not simply reduced to a singular strategy or behaviour, and that instead it is regarded “as an ethic and responsibility that presupposes the promise of public education” (Farhadi, 2019, p. 177). Drawing from the works of Kincheloe (1999), Portelli and Solomon (2001), and several other researchers, Pinto (2012) articulates the tenets of critical democracy by distinguishing it from other understandings of democracy. Pinto (2012) writes that critical democracy extends beyond liberal democracy’s ideas of individualism and “narrow concern with equality” (Pinto, 2012, p. 266). Critical democracy instead “embraces equity as a goal, through genuine and inclusive participation” (Pinto, 2012, p. 266) which acknowledges the importance of “equity, diversity and social justice” (Portelli & Solomon, 2001, p.15).

Pinto (2012) suggests that critical democracy is a way of life “that includes concern for meaningful engagement among citizens in all aspects of [life] in which individuals become agents of social change” (p. 266). Kincheloe (1999) writes that the goal of education in a critical democracy is to promote an individual's self-reflection that in turn changes their perspective of

themselves and the world around them. Using this approach, “schools could become institutions where forms of knowledge, values, and social relations were taught for the purpose of educating young people for critical empowerment rather than subjugation” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 71).

Critical democracy proposes that the optimal outcomes of a critical democratic education are individuals who understand “how and why [their] political opinions, worker role, religious beliefs, gender role, and racial self-image are shaped by dominant perspectives” (Kincheloe, 1999, pp. 71-72).

Unlike traditional perspectives of education, critical democratic education does not require an analysis of quantifiable outcomes in order to confirm that it is successful. Instead, the democratic outcomes of high quality e-learning must include a collective sense of good, as stated above, where the concept of ‘good-ness’ is ongoingly co-defined. This concept would include not only macro-level indicators; it would prioritize the actual ‘goings-on’ of e-learning, including the pedagogy used in teaching, the classroom experience of students, and the level of collaboration between and across all levels of education.

Sant (2019) writes that within critical democracy, “participation and education are intrinsically connected” (p. 673). Jenkins et al. (2009) wrote of the effectiveness of collective online experiences, such as with the game *I love Bees*; known as “history’s most challenging scavenger hunt” (p. 40), as many as 3 million players with expertise across a variety of domains and geographic locations gathered clues by completing a combination of real-world and online tasks which all players could then deconstruct and analyze. “As players learn to work and play in such knowledge cultures, they come to think of problem-solving as an exercise in teamwork” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 40).

Critical Policy Analysis

CPA is a field of critical policy scholarship which addresses a number of practices. Young and Diem (2018) note that scholars engaged in CPA take few things at face value. Similar to critical democracy, it is critique that is foundational for much CPA work (Young & Diem, 2018). CPA is attractive to scholars interested in social justice - a key feature and purpose of critical democratic education and similar ideological values (Young & Diem, 2018; Fernández and López, 2017; Welton et al., 2017; Milani & Winton, 2017). CPA goes hand in hand with critical democracy, as it aims to uncover of structures of oppression and inequality (Young & Diem, 2018).

Young and Diem (2018) highlight critical practices commonly addressed by researchers conducting CPA:

1. CPA interrogates the roots and development of educational policy.
2. CPA probes the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality.
3. CPA examines the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge and the creation of “winners” and “losers.”
4. CPA scrutinizes the complex systems and environments in which policy is made and implemented.
5. CPA explores social stratification and the impact of policy on relationships of privilege and inequality.
6. CPA is interested in the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of historically underrepresented groups (p. 82).

As Young and Diem (2018) suggest, I am interested in exploring a number of the above concerns, primarily the distribution of power and resources and the production of “winners and losers” (Young & Diem, 2018, p.82).

Critical policy analysis (CPA) researchers have long acknowledged that educational systems are complicit in oppression (Dell’Angelo, Seaton, & Smith, 2014). It is important that we reflect on the significance of policy to systems as a whole, as well as the historical and cultural contexts themselves to which they apply (Young & Diem, 2018; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992). Doing so allows us to expose the impact and violence of oppressive systems and to support students and their families by challenging these systems. The alternative assumes the issues experienced by marginalized people are individualized or merited, as is the belief within traditional market liberalism and ‘unregulated’ neoliberal systems (Perry, 2009) where it is presumed that all people have equal opportunities and are equipped with adequate resources needed to ‘succeed’.

Kincheloe (1999) lists 10 principles for educators to “make sense of the tacit ways [that] power operates to shape education” (p. 81), including the practice of “[exposing] educational processes that privilege the privileged” (p. 81). Like other critical policy researchers, I am interested in the contradictions which lie in between what is said and unsaid in policy.

Researchers such as Young and Diem (2018) and Kincheloe (1999) show that education has yet to successfully adopt alternative critical methodologies and practices, and as a result continues to perpetuate neoliberal priorities that advantage some at the expense of others.

Through my data analysis and discussion, it will become clear that there are aspects of e-learning quality that Ontario is willing to invest in above others, and it is my hope that readers

will begin to critically question why and ask who or what benefits from an education system which invests heavily in technical factors as opposed to democratic, micro-level ones. As stated by Young and Diem (2018), it is through the process of contextualizing policy that we can begin to realize how policy is reflective and constitutive of society. It is possible to draw conclusions about the underlying beliefs and values of the government of Ontario regarding the purpose of education, and I will use CPA and a critical democratic framework to engage in that analysis.

Methodology

A critical democratic educational system prioritizes social justice, equity, and inclusion (Milani & Winton, 2017), and CPA can help achieve such a system by questioning the nature of education policy, that is, “how it is created, and its impact” (Young & Diem, 2018, p.81). This study operated under the belief that digital technology has the potential to serve an important role in education. It presumes that by using the lens of critical democracy and CPA, it is possible to understand how Ontario's e-learning policy during COVID-19 defined quality e-learning and success and identify opportunities for improvement. This research specifically aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How does Ontario's e-learning policy during COVID-19 define quality?
2. What are the implications of Ontario's e-learning policy during COVID-19 for critical democratic education within and beyond the pandemic?

Data Sources and Collection

The word “policy” in the context of this study goes beyond a single decision or document; it includes policy announcements, funding decisions, and news releases. Data for the study came from a range of government documents. The documents were accessed online through the Ontario.ca website, as well as through the dedicated Ontario Ministry of Education Newsroom website (news.ontario.ca) which reports on advisories, bulletins, media, and news releases directly from the Office of the Premier and through contacts of the Ministry of Education.

The process of selecting relevant policy documents was multi-stepped. It began with a general search of each online source and identifying documents published between March and August 2020, containing the keywords: “e-learning”, “online learning”, “COVID-19 education”, “remote learning”, and/or “distance learning”. This initial search yielded 74 documents. Next, these documents were reviewed to ensure they addressed the study’s focus. Many were excluded for repeating similar information, or for simply not being relevant, such as those documents which were ‘announcements of announcements’. Through the review it became clear that two forms of e-learning were being discussed at once in the policy documents: temporary e-learning in response to COVID-19 and mandatory online learning for high school students, first introduced in the 2019-2020 school year. Documents focused on mandatory e-learning for high school students, particularly in relation to the teacher-led strikes that took place in early 2020 in response to this announcement prior to the pandemic, were not included in the study. Fifteen documents were ultimately deemed relevant and served as data.

Data Analysis

The analysis involved “concentrated looking” (Young & Diem, 2018, p. 87): a practice of contextualizing information within policy texts and deriving meaning from both what is said and what is not. First, each document was read closely to provide an overall sense of its contents. Documents were then coded using both *a priori* and open coding approaches. Masoumi and Lindström's (2012) E-quality Framework (Figure 1) provided the initial (*a priori*) codes, while open coding, a method helpful in identifying emerging themes (Creswell, 2014; Saldana, 2009), was used to generate additional codes based on patterns that revealed themselves during analysis.

Masoumi and Lindström (2012) write that the primary function of their E-quality Framework is twofold: quality enhancement and quality assurance. This makes it a useful starting point from which to analyze Ontario's educational policy and answer the research questions exploring quality and critical democratic education. It is important to note that the E-quality Framework was developed to analyze e-learning quality in post-secondary contexts, most notably, contexts that did not take place during emergency-level health crises. As a result, I included some additional a priori codes I anticipated would be relevant.

Additional Codes

The first additions were related to the student support factor. In my initial review of Ontario's e-learning policy documents, I noticed that many of the supports that were developed to aid students were in fact directed toward parents, guardians, and families, such as increased accessibility to e-learning devices and platforms through government partnerships and specialized funding. It was also for this reason as well that I did not include the sub-factor of administrative support as a code under the student support umbrella.

Initially, it was difficult to decide whether “family support” should be added as a separate code or if policies related to children and families should be coded together. Ultimately, I decided that policies directed to financial support for families would be coded separately under family support; and, policies with tangible, immediate supports for students would be coded under student support.

The second code I added was again related to student support: safety. Referring to the literature review, data security and privacy experts note the importance of balancing cyber

security and synchronous e-learning expectations (Paglinawan, 2020; Terada, 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Reports from UNICEF (2020) and others based in the United Kingdom (Tapper, 2021) found that children are vulnerable to online harm, and I felt it was important to identify themes relevant to safety since e-learning in response to COVID-19 demanded unprecedented amounts of screen time from children as young as 5.

The third code I added was also related to student support. Due to the state of e-learning in 2020 and the trauma experienced by all in response to the global pandemic, the code ‘mental health supports’ was added.

The final code that was included prior to the start of the coding process was related to reputation, a sub-factor under the institutional factor’s umbrella. I interpreted Masoumi and Lindström’s (2012) conceptualization of “reputation” in the context of this study as referring to the literal reputation of policymakers in relation to their implementation of e-learning policy. I added the code “strike related” in anticipation of e-learning policies that I believed may be created in order to acknowledge the 2019-2020 strikes and to embrace a collaborative relationship with teaching unions and educator consultants regarding the development of e-learning policy.

Following the above coding changes, I proceeded with coding the policy documents and engaging in data analysis. It was during this process that additional themes emerged. One theme stood out and demanded the addition of a separate code: “Corporate Partnerships”. The institutional affairs and administrative affairs sub-factors contained under the institutional factor umbrella both refer broadly to the issues related to institutional and organizational goings-on, including the “efficient and effective use of the institution’s diverse resources to ensure that right

decisions are made and implemented competently” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). I wanted to highlight corporate partnerships separately from the codes related to the institutional factor, because I wanted a set of themes distinctly focused on the behaviours of organizations and government in the context of “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2007, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*), as explored in my introduction.

These coding additions were made in direct relation to the effects of COVID-19 on public education in Ontario, which was the primary context of this study. They were used alongside the factors outlined by the E-quality Framework to analyze the province’s e-learning policies in an attempt to respond to my research questions. In order to develop a strong sense of the data and adequately respond to my second research question, the final step in my research process was to review my data and consider the implications of the findings for the critical democratic values of social justice, equity, and inclusion. It is my hope that this study can offer a critical democratic analysis of e-learning policy in Ontario during COVID-19 and offer recommendations for improvement by highlighting missed opportunities for e-learning.

Findings

The answers to my research questions will be discussed in two parts: Phase 1, which explores the policy announcements released in immediate response to COVID-19 between March and June 2020, and Phase 2, which explores the policy announcements released following the end of the 2019-2020 school year between July and August 2020. Within each phase, the key components of the government's e-learning policy, the E-quality factors they address, and other patterns and trends discovered through the coding process will be discussed. Table 1 outlines which factors were present during each phase. Although the Table shows that across the two phases, each factor has been addressed, it will soon become clear that the degree to which each factor is addressed in e-learning policy varied.

Table 1. Findings

	Phase 1	Phase 2
Institutional Factor*	✓	✓
Technological Factor*	✓	✓
Instructional Design Factor*	✓	✓
Pedagogical Factor*		✓
Student Support Factor*	✓	✓
Faculty Support Factor*		✓

Evaluation Factor*	✓	✓
Family Support**	✓	
Corporate Partnerships**	✓	✓

*Factors based on the E-quality Framework created by Masoumi and Lindström (2012)

**Additional codes created and used by the researcher to complete the study

Phase 1: March - June 2020

I noticed specific themes for each phase of the pandemic. Phase 1 began with a sense of urgency and prioritization of the institutional and accessibility factors. The institutional factor provides guidance toward the operation and delivery of e-learning programs. Throughout Phase 1, the government consistently expressed to parents that it was doing everything it could “[d]uring this extraordinary time [...] to support parents to keep everyone safe and ensure our children continue to learn and stay mentally active” (Office of the Premier, April 2020, *Ontario Government Supports Families in Response to COVID-19*). The government of Ontario initiated a call for proposals on their Ontario Together website between March 31, 2020, and April 21, 2020, and they received a significant amount of feedback. Primarily, “[a]ccess to digital learning resources, supports for special education needs and mental health, as well as internet connectivity and access to devices [were] identified by school boards and other stakeholders as urgent needs during the current school closure period” (May 2020, Office of the Premier, *Health and Safety Top Priority as Schools Remain Closed*). The practice of examining the effectiveness of e-learning and its ability to produce a desired result falls under the evaluation factor. It also

falls under the assessment subfactor, as the feedback provided by stakeholders was the result of an intentional call for consultation. It is reassuring to note that the government of Ontario was willing to consult school boards and stakeholders this way, although it remained to be seen how the feedback would be put into practice for the following year. It is also important to question from a critical democratic perspective why more changes and investments were not made if these things were deemed “urgent needs”, and the policy document was released with more than a month left before the end of the school year.

In March, one of the very first things to occur in response to COVID-19 in Ontario, aside from the closure of schools, was the closure of all non-essential businesses and at-risk workplaces (Office of the Premier, March 2020, *Ontario Closing At-Risk Workplaces to Protect Health and Safety*). This began the positioning of some Ontario workers and businesses as “local heroes” and “front line workers” (Office of the Premier, March 2020, *Ontario Closing At-Risk Workplaces to Protect Health and Safety*). Lohmeyer and Taylor (2020) explain that the portrayal of individual workers as exceptional individuals positions them as examples of “what it is to be a good neoliberal subject in pandemic times – willing to sacrifice personal health (and more) to ensure others can work for the good of the economy” (p. 630). Jones (2020) adds to this idea in emphasizing that as we thank and applaud our “undervalued heroes”, we must note who it is we are disproportionately addressing: “women, minorities and the low-paid, all of whom always suffer the most in every crisis”. This rhetoric calls to mind the idea of the “strong black woman” (Stewart, 2017, p.34), where mythical “strength” used as justification for the abuses acted upon them, and a form of dehumanization that “[aids] in erasing her emotions and the

mental health that is intricately tied to her humanity” (p. 34). A critical, social justice perspective argues that rather than deify our “heroes” (Lohmeyer & Taylor, 2020, p.632), we need to actively demand substantive supports for them in the form of fair wages, safe working conditions, and lives that they genuinely deserve (Jones, 2020).

Teachers in Canada were similarly praised by the public for their adaptability (Lang, 2020; McKeen, 2020), but over the course of Phase 1 teachers began to express feelings of stress and professional burnout (Sokal, Trudel, & Babb, 2020). Findings from the University of Winnipeg suggest that teachers were concerned about the increase in demands that was not accompanied by an equivalent increase in resources (Sokal et al., 2020; Goldfinger, 2019). Masoumi and Lindström (2012) note that political forces typically influence institutional issues, and this can be seen in the events of Phase 1. While much of what was required of teachers was stated explicitly by school boards and the Ministry of Education, many demands were communicated indirectly as well. An example of this can be seen in the following March statement by the Office of the Premier regarding end-of-year expectations for students: “All students who were on track to graduate from secondary school before the initial closure order was made in March will be able to graduate, and all students will receive report cards” (Office of the Premier, May 2020, [Health and safety top priority as schools remain closed]). The statement is an example of the government clarifying expectations, “marshalling community support” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 30) for reputation, and conducting administrative affairs. The statement is also an example of an indirect demand for additional labour from teachers, some of whom felt that the radical shift in learning due to COVID-19 would “make true assessment

difficult for even the most well-meaning instructor” (McQuigge, 2020, n.p.). To recall, the start of the 2019-2020 school year was already challenging for students prior to COVID-19; many high school students experienced months of fragmented online learning and only six weeks of in-person instruction due to the large-scale teacher strikes that took place across the province (McQuigge, 2020).

Specific to the factor of reputation, a sub-factor of the institutional factor, this study revealed that each policy document was titled in a way that would portray the respective governing body in a positive light. Some examples from Phase 1 of the pandemic include: *Ontario government supports families in response to COVID-19* (Office of the Premier, April 2020), *Ontario helping students learn from the safety of their own home* (Office of the Premier, March 2020), and *Ontario establishes key partnerships to make home learning more accessible* (Ministry of Education, April 2020). The first title is written in a matter-of-fact way, such as to suggest that “of course Ontario supports families”, likely in an effort to produce a strong and confident narrative during the early months of the pandemic. Other notable vocabularies from the titles include keywords and the use of active language such as: “supports families”, “helping students”, and “establishes key partnerships”. These phrases convey a sense of importance and communicate to the public that the government is prioritizing market values and will work to remain competitive in the field of education (Carpenter, Diem, & Young, 2014). This is something that persisted into Phase 2 and will be explored further below.

Acknowledging that COVID-19 forced the world to adapt, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said:

We will invest more in student computers, technology, and internet

than any government in Ontario history because we want our youth to retain a competitive advantage. By delivering this funding, we are sending a signal to the country: Ontario is investing in our kids, closing the digital divide, and taking action to ensure all students have the best opportunity to learn when returning to school in the fall.

(Ministry of Education, June 2020, *Ontario Makes Major Investment in Mental Health and Technology to Support Students*)

This statement uses vocabulary that strongly communicates that Ontario desires to produce graduates of public education who are digitally literate and competitive on a global market. What was unique about this document was that it directly states the relationship between its contents and its intended purpose: directed funding communicates values, and the overall goal is to “retain a competitive advantage” (Ministry of Education, June 2020, *Ontario Makes Major Investment in Mental Health and Technology to Support Students*) over other nations. Looking further still into the vocabulary used in this final phrase, the use of the word “retain” over “gain” suggests that Ontario is already at the top, establishing a narrative that likely supports and aligns with the policies that were enacted throughout the pandemic. The notion of competition is further evidence of market-based values, and it was surprising to me that it was stated so directly. Immediate questions that arise from such a statement include, “who are we in competition with?”, “how do we know when we are ‘winning’?”, and “what happens if we ‘lose’?”. From a critical democratic perspective, the answer to the first question is that students are ultimately in competition with each other for roles and significance in the global marketplace. And within neoliberalism, schools and districts are also placed in competition with each other.

Further to the sub-factor of reputation, the Ministry of Education was also sure to emphasize when partnerships and educational services were ‘made-in-Ontario’. In the following statement within the document *Ontario Develops Additional Learning Materials for Students and Teachers*, the Ministry of Education announced new partnerships and contributions to e-learning during Phase 1 of the pandemic:

The Ontario government, in partnership with Science North and the Ontario Science Centre, is creating additional educational content for students and teachers during the school closures resulting from COVID-19. The province is providing up to \$1.5 million to create made-in-Ontario videos and resources to support Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) learning.

(Ministry of Education, June 2020, *Ontario Develops Additional Learning Materials for Students and Teachers*)

Like Lohmeyer and Taylor’s (2020) recognition of war vocabularies used to describe the work of front-line workers and other essential staffers as heroes, we can examine the use of vocabularies like “Ontario Together”, and even those that take care to emphasize that resources are “made-in-Ontario”. It is evident in the above quote that the government’s intention is to convey a sense of pride and confidence in the material by virtue of it being produced in Ontario as opposed to the research or other aspects of the development of e-learning resources that may have contributed to its high quality. The use of discourse related to unity and leadership may also act as mobilizing metaphors of innovation and the investment and development of STEM and digital learning

resources despite (or because of) the pandemic may be intended to signal the province's competitiveness and progress.

The Ontario government and Ministry of Education exhibited a number of behaviors during Phase 1 consistent with the indicators of the institutional factor, including communicating their goals and organizing resources (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012). The act of communicating goals is also tied to the technological factor, and in the early months of Phase 1, many of the goals were related to the sub-factor of accessibility as is seen in *Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home* (Office of the Premier, March 2020) with the government's expressed desire to "[develop] a one-stop spot for at-home learning [that] doesn't replace school, but offers a great alternative as we approach the end of March Break", citing parent concerns of children "[falling] behind while schools are closed". It makes sense that policies related to accessibility were important as they helped provide students with access to the devices needed to participate in synchronous and asynchronous learning.

E-learning standards weren't clearly defined until Phase 2 with the release of the Policy/Program Memorandum No.164 (PPM), but a number of partnerships were established which have the potential to permanently shift the landscape of e-learning for the future due to the context under which the partnerships were created. Klein's (2007) idea of disaster capitalism primes us to expect significant changes to e-learning in the form of corporate partnerships in the context of COVID-19. The following quotation is an example of how e-learning policy announced the intention of corporate partnerships to improve accessibility for students in Ontario:

Working with Apple and Rogers, Ontario school boards now have

access to affordable solutions with the iPad device, which is the most secure device for education that's also easy to use, and to manage and deploy – so that no student is left behind while schools are closed due to the ongoing COVID-19 situation [...] iPad devices will be purchased and distributed by Ontario school boards, pre-equipped with Rogers LTE wireless data. Rogers is providing this plan at no cost for the balance of the school year (until June 30, 2020). Students and families do not need to contact Rogers to set the devices up. (Ministry of Education, April 2020, *Ontario Establishes Key Partnerships to Make Home Learning More Accessible*)

The Government of Ontario announced that its partnerships were an attempt to improve the accessibility of e-learning. The policy addressed accessibility both in terms of access to physical devices, as evident in the quote above, and in terms of access to digital learning platforms such as TVOLearn. In addition to for-profit partnerships, the Ontario government also partnered with existing public, government-funded organizations such as TVO, Science North, and the Ontario Science Centre to “support [government] development of virtual education resources to support our students and teachers” (Ministry of Education, June 2020, *Ontario Develops Additional Learning Materials for Students and Teachers*). These resources were available in both national languages, English and French, and included: “professional development videos for educators, virtual and at-home hands-on STEM activities for students, [and] activities and student worksheets which can be printed and distributed through school

boards” (Ministry of Education, June 2020, *Ontario Develops Additional Learning Materials for Students and Teachers*).

The e-learning program that relied heavily on partnerships and other administrative connections during Phase 1, and referenced often in e-learning policy documents was the asynchronous, home-based learning platform called Learn at Home. Learn at Home consisted of the partnership between “34 organizations and private businesses, along with school boards, to address key needs among educators, students and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak” (Office of the Premier, May 2020, *Health and Safety Top Priority as Schools Remain Closed*). The government expressed a desire to “identify and make available low-cost, high-impact solutions that can significantly improve the Learn at Home experience now and into the future” (Office of the Premier, May 2020, *Health and Safety Top Priority as Schools Remain Closed*). This last statement is an example of the government’s neoliberal values and conveys a desire “to restrict monies with an expectation that schools will pursue the efficient improvement of educational outcomes” (p. 1113). It also reveals that, although by May 2020 school-based e-learning programs were operational, the government was focused on maintaining and prioritizing the improvement of their own e-learning platform, Learn at Home.

Trained educators who were registered with the Ontario College of Teachers were involved to some degree in the creation of Learn at Home content:

The at-home activities offered by Learn at Home provide quick and easy access to some of Ontario's best online kindergarten to grade 12 learning resources produced by Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) Educators. As part of the government's

commitment to planning for every scenario, the province is working closely with education stakeholders to develop a plan for scaling and building additional online learning programs. (Office of the Premier, March 2020, *Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home*)

In addition to the involvement of teachers, the statement above also refers to the involvement of education stakeholders, which can refer to a number of actors, including the Ministry of Education itself, the EQAO, Trustees, Directors of Education, Superintendents, and others (People for Education, 2021).

Williamson and Hogan (2020) write that technology partners generally have the capacity to scale up in order to address inequities related to accessibility, however they also noted that “the short-term emergency response also needs to be understood in terms of the longer-term aims of increasing ‘investment’ in online learning technologies in order to build ‘education systems for the future’” (p. 19). Ontario’s Premier appears interested in scaling and building additional online learning programs (as suggested by the above quote from *Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home*), and it will be important for researchers to critically examine with the changes over a long period of time in order to truly understand their effects.

As months passed, the sense of urgency that defined the early months of Phase 1 developed into a narrative related to learning loss and summer learning opportunities to make up for the challenges of the previous school year. A number of policy documents referenced Ontario's adapted summer learning site and the Learn at Home resource which included supports for students to upgrade their marks and prepare for high school “through core programming; as

well as virtual volunteering opportunities” (Office of the Premier, May 2020, *Government Supports Online Learning During COVID-19 Outbreak*). The document *Health and Safety Top Priority as Schools Remain Closed* (Office of the Premier, May 2020), speaks to the government’s desire to make up for lost learning by investing in summer e-learning programs: “Summer learning programs are being expanded to reach the most students in Ontario history, to ensure they remain on track to start the 2020-21 school year with the confidence and knowledge required to succeed.” It continues, saying “the government is leveraging all tools, resources, technologies and services to assist school boards deliver equitable and effective learning through access to technology and Internet connectivity” (May 2020, Office of the Premier, *Health and Safety Top Priority as Schools Remain Closed*).

Similarly, the Office of the Premier (March 2020) said of families: “Our government is providing families with the support they need so that they can continue to contribute to our shared goal of protecting the health and wellbeing of all Ontarians, including our young students.” (*Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home*). The support of students is one of the “influential factors in the success of e-learning” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 32), and it is reasonable to suggest that in the elementary school context, this support extends to parents and families as well. An example of a family support policy is the Support for Families initiative which offered one-time payments per child to help parents access tools while young students studied remotely from home (Office of the Premier, April 2020, *Ontario Government Supports Families in Response to COVID-19*). Many people questioned the practice of offering direct payments to families while reducing funds directed toward education to levels similar to before the pandemic (Miller, 2021). The Support for Families initiative offered

families “a one-time payment of \$200 per child 0 to 12 years of age, and \$250 for those 0 to 21 years of age with special needs” (Office of the Premier, April 2020, *Ontario Government Supports Families in Response to COVID-19*), and the expressed purpose was to “allow parents to access additional tools for our kids to use while at home and studying remotely” (Office of the Premier, April 2020, *Ontario Government Supports Families in Response to COVID-19*).

Notably, there were few mentions of mental health supports that went beyond the government’s acknowledgement of their importance. The Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, made an announcement regarding the investment in mental health supports that involved the funding of additional classroom devices as well as mental health workers:

\$15 million to purchase thousands of classroom computers, and \$10 million to hire additional mental health workers. These new resources will help ensure students can return to school with the confidence and the tools they need to succeed. Through consultations with Public Health Ontario, the Hospital for Sick Children, and front-line workers, the government heard about the need for enhanced mental health supports to respond to COVID-19. This new \$10 million investment will provide students with unprecedented direct access to regulated mental health professionals and significantly reduce wait times.

(Ministry of Education, June 2020, *Ontario Makes Major Investment in Mental Health and Technology to Support Students*)

This announcement informs readers that through consultation with public citizens and organizations the government learned there was a notable and urgent demand for mental health

support for public school students. Terms from the above announcement like “enhanced”, “unprecedented”, and “regulated” suggest that the government values general welfare as evidenced by its willingness to provide additional resources and supports.

Young and Diem (2018) write that there is value in questioning the gaps, or blank spots within policy. An example of a gap in Ontario’s e-learning policy was pedagogy. Pedagogy is the “what” and the “how” of education, but policy related to e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic tended to focus solely on the “how”.

The Ontario Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, shared that the province would “provide interactive teacher-led math supports to keep students learning and empower all students to learn key skills with an emphasis on STEM education, while also arming parents with resources to support them as their kids learn at home” (Office of the Premier, March 2020, *Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of their Own Home*). The emphasis on STEM education is notable; during the pandemic, especially during the early weeks of national shutdowns in March 2020, the Government of Ontario was likely hoping to take a strong stance on education, communicating to the public that they would be focused on supporting students through hardship. The prioritization of STEM, however, suggests their attachment to neoliberal values: even during an unprecedented global crisis where the inclusion of arts and other varieties of subjects may be increasingly meaningful, education must focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – subjects seen as essential for the modern workplace. Deslandes-Martineau et al. (2020) have observed that some curricular priorities are proposed with a focus on the maintenance of academic skills and knowledge that students *ought* to have in subjects like language, math, science, and history. Echoing Strauss (2014), it is clear that when STEM is

prioritized above all else, “the rest of the curriculum – the arts for example – [is] discounted as non-essential” (Deslandes-Martineau et al., 2020, n.p.).

In addition, Lecce’s above statement references the discourse around heroes during this phase of the pandemic. Scholars suggest that it is in fact the “nationalist rhetoric of combat” (Wright, 2020, n.p.) – “arming” parents with resources as opposed to “equipping” them – that “provides a stage on which our heroes can enact their personal sacrifice” (Lohmeyer & Taylor, 2020, p. 632). Lohmeyer and Taylor (2020) remind us that a war cannot be won against an invisible and intangible enemy that is COVID-19, and that perhaps the invoking of the pandemic as a battle is intentional. “Perpetual war reinforces the transformation of social life into an ongoing conflict between individuals” (Lohmeyer & Taylor, 2020, p. 634) and “provides the political cover for the unfettered rule of total market rationales” (p. 634). These transformative possibilities were introduced at the start of this paper as thesis of “disaster capitalism”, and prompts us to consider if, despite all of the challenges faced by families during this time, COVID-19 has truly been configured into an otherwise “useful crisis” (Roy, 2020, n.p.) for certain political actors and corporations within the province of Ontario.

Phase 2: July – August 2020

Where the avoidance of “learning loss” was a primary concern during Phase 1, the safe return to in-person learning with an emphasis on personal protective equipment (PPE) was a primary focus of e-learning policy during Phase 2, citing the importance of balancing “the risk of direct infection and transmission of COVID-19 in children with the impact of school closures on their physical and mental health” (Government of Ontario, 2020, n.p.). Due to this prioritization,

there were far fewer documents relevant to the study analyzed during this Phase, although Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 164 proved to be important.

Unlike the e-learning policy documents of Phase 1, the language of this PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) and other e-learning policy documents from Phase 2 was much more specific about how e-learning should be implemented and what standards should be in place during the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. Released in August 2020, the PPM addressed the instructional design factor, as it contained directives and expectations of the Ontario Ministry of Education, and it was intended to support district school boards and authorities. Other factors that the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) addressed include the evaluation factor, technological factor, faculty support, and student support.

Reflecting the instructional design factor (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012), the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) clearly defined learning objectives, such as giving minimum requirements for synchronous and asynchronous learning:

During remote learning, students and parents must be provided with a daily schedule or timetable that includes 300 minutes of learning opportunities, with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Programming must be based on the full Ontario curriculum and include opportunities for guided instruction, large- and small-group learning, synchronous check-ins, and asynchronous independent work (PPM, 2020)

The PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) also offered a definition of what a synchronous platform would look like for e-learning during the 2020-2021 school year, stating that it “should

include live video, audio, and chat features and be fully accessible”. This type of e-learning policy addresses the sub-factor of interface design under the technological factor umbrella. In terms of accessibility, which also falls under the technological factor, baseline instructions were provided while specifics were left to the discretion of school boards: “School boards are expected to provide remote learning devices and internet connectivity to students who do not otherwise have access to them, and to develop policies on how these resources will be allocated on an equitable basis” (PPM, 2020).

As discussed above, Ontario’s Ministry of Education is responsible for setting provincial curriculum, allocating funding, and setting policies and guidelines to school boards who in turn develop local education policy and allocate government funds (People for Education, 2021). Setting policies and guidelines is exactly what the government did in its e-learning policy documents using terminology like “should” and “are expected” as opposed to “must” and “are required”.

The evaluation factor differs from assessment in that it uses assessment data to “stress the ability of an institution to produce the desired result” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 34). In the case of e-learning, this means that programs are assessed based on their cost- and learning-effectiveness, and teachers and students are asked to provide feedback on the quality, effectiveness, and overall satisfaction with their e-learning experiences (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 34).

During Phase 1, assessment related to the evaluation factor was limited to an invitation to school boards and other stakeholders, and they raised concerns about urgent needs for increased

accessibility to digital learning resources, special education supports, and mental health (Office of the Premier, May 2020, *Health and Safety Top Priority as Schools Remain Closed*). In Phase 2, the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) addressed different forms of assessment that included opportunities for student and teacher feedback. Firstly, regarding students, the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) stated that “[t]eachers should provide daily opportunities for each student to receive meaningful feedback” (n.p.). This directive provided a foundational guideline by saying that teachers *should* as opposed to *must*, and leaves room for added context by school boards and the personalization of teachers to determine what is meant by ‘meaningful feedback’.

Similar to Phase 1, the analysis revealed that during Phase 2 policy documents addressed the sub-factor reputation, acting as a form of communication of the government’s values and actions. Examples of e-learning policy documents from Phase 2 of the pandemic include: *Additional Funds Enhance Ontario’s Robust Back-to-School Plan* (Ministry of Education, August 2020), and *Actions Taken to Keep Schools Safe During Reopening* (Office of the Premier, July 2020). Their titles are stated in a matter-of-fact way and use the term “robust” as if to say that “*what we have done has made a significant impact*”. This wording is likely part of an effort to produce a strong and confident narrative with the goal of gaining public trust, a crucial force for maintaining social cohesion, especially for “planning and implementing an inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 emergency” (OECD, n.d.).

As it became clear that COVID-19 would not be temporary – in fact it continues to impact students and families worldwide a year into the writing of this thesis – Ontario’s Ministry of Education and provincial government adopted a more intentional approach to discussing and

enacting e-learning policy. Many e-learning policy documents during Phase 2 addressed the instructional design factor, which refers to the delivery of e-learning by way of “constructive alignment of pedagogy, technology, and learning resources” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 31).

Policies that addressed the student support factor in Phase 2 were related to direct supports for students as opposed to indirect financial supports targeted toward parents and families. Examples of direct support for students include the Learn at Home and accompanying Apprendre à la maison platforms from Phase 1, as well as the adapted summer learning site which was developed with the expressed goal of providing resources for students to “refresh their learning in preparation for 2020-21 courses” (PPM, 2020). According to the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020), student support would be carried out by providing students with access to “a school community, a support network, and authentic educational experiences in order to continue to progress in their learning”. Referring again to the terminology used, the use of open-ended language enabled education professionals to apply their expertise to their unique contexts. Further, what is meant by “authentic” could be co-determined directly by those involved, leaving space to possibly incorporate democratic practices.

Often, supports for students were stated in e-learning policy alongside supports for faculty. When the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) addressed technical support, it offered guidance for both staff and students: “Technical support should be responsive to immediate needs [...] In the context of remote learning, technical support should span the full spectrum of users' technological needs, including devices, connectivity, security, and digital learning tools and applications” (n.p.). In the PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020), faculty

supports included the provision of technical support and standardized platforms for remote learning, educator training, and the establishing of roles and responsibilities. It is possible that these specific supports were intended to address the concerns raised by teachers and stakeholders related to burnout regarding the demands of synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid teaching during the pandemic.

Final Thoughts

As evident in Table 1, it is clear that between Phase 1 and 2, all factors of e-learning quality identified by Masoumi and Lindström (2012), as well as additional concerns were addressed by the government of Ontario, although some areas were prioritized over others. Given Canada's decentralized system of governance, much of the detail surrounding pedagogy, faculty and student support, and assessment are left to individual school boards and third parties. This system may have contributed to the feelings of some teachers who reported feeling lost and lacking guidance about expectations throughout the pandemic (Thompson, 2020).

Quality e-learning within a critical democratic perspective begins in the classroom and requires well supported teachers to foster the curiosity of students, prioritizing social justice, equity, and inclusion. The Government of Ontario has taken steps to establish an e-learning system during a pandemic which was delivered to thousands of students. It has made use of publicly funded, pre-existing partnerships, as well as private corporations in order to support students and their families in accessing and using the system during Phases 1 and 2. In the next chapter I discuss additional steps that can be taken to support students and critical democracy within and beyond the pandemic.

Discussion

The arrival of COVID-19 challenged understandings of what is essential to learning. The transition from in-person to e-learning not only exacerbated the inequities in public education, but also laid bare the values of educational policy-makers. These values became apparent following the critical examination of Ontario's e-learning policy documents through a critical democratic lens.

Pedagogy, technology, and distribution of learning resources such as laptops and e-learning platforms were prioritized in Phase 1 when there was still a great deal of uncertainty regarding the state of public education and the future of e-learning. With Phase 2 came more certainty and the experiences of Phase 1 which provided a sense of what worked, what did not, and what was needed to improve the quality of e-learning for the following school year.

During Phase 1 there was a clear desire to focus funding toward the development of STEM, English, and French resources – all based on subjects which are most easily measured by standardized testing. As explored above, “[s]tudents and teachers miss out on meaningful analyses and joyful engagements with [texts] under testing regimes” (Shelton & Brooks, 2019, p.13). The arts and other methods of creative expression are chronically overlooked in education when results and other market-based values are prioritized over democratic ones (Strauss, 2014). Previous research demonstrates that the government of Ontario prioritizes student achievement and invests in initiatives designed for traditional, face-to-face environments, with the goal of increasing graduation rate (Winton, 2013). It has become clear that there is a desire to replicate this focus on market-based values in e-learning as well.

Missed Opportunities in E-learning Policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Neoliberalism was ever present in the government response to COVID-19 in Ontario education. It could be seen in behaviours related to “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2007), including the Ontario government’s new partnerships and expressed desire to work with “education stakeholders to develop a plan for scaling and building additional online learning programs” (Office of the Premier, March 2020, *Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home*). Neoliberalism was also evident in the general public discourse which labelled essential workers as heroes willing to put their lives on the line for the economy. Neoliberalism was present in the government’s continued prioritization of standardized tests as its Fall announcement stated that “EQAO will be field-testing online and adaptive assessments for Grade 9 math” (Ministry of Education, September 2020, *Ontario Moving to Standardized Online Testing for Students*).

Absent in e-learning policy documents were critical democratic ideals, including accessibility, equity, pedagogy, and collaboration. In the following section I consider the priorities of Ontario for e-learning during COVID-19 and propose alternative practices for e-learning consistent with the principles of critical democracy.

Technology

Ontario’s e-learning policy was not specific about the particulars of e-learning such as pedagogy or design; these considerations were reserved for EdTech companies and affiliated partners such as Apple, Google, and TVO. Technology is referred to by Masoumi and Lindström (2012) as the “backbone of an e-learning entity” (p. 30), and I agree that this perspective is

essential to maintain in a high quality e-learning environment. Indeed pedagogy, accessibility, and highly trained educators are required to make e-learning successful, and no e-learning is possible without effective technology to connect students, educators, and administrators. The E-quality Framework notes platform usability, troubleshooting, and accessibility key to e-learning, among other factors, and I will highlight these in particular below.

Technical support and troubleshooting from the lens of E-quality means addressing poor WiFi and other connection issues and having trained facilitators available to provide the support (Jumat et al., 2020). The inclusion of trained facilitators may also benefit teachers by reducing some of the expectations that contributed to the feeling of burnout during COVID-19 in 2020. The PPM (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) adds to the E-quality definition of technical support for e-learning in Ontario by including “the full spectrum of users' technological needs, including devices, connectivity, security, and digital learning tools and applications” (n.p.).

Pedagogy

The direct use of e-learning technology is related to the idea of “can”; are students able to meaningfully access and engage with the e-learning platform? According to Masoumi & Lindström (2012), usability refers to the creation of “learning objects or modules that can be reused and restructured [ensuring] future reusability” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 30). The indirect aspect of e-learning platform usability according to the E-quality Framework is related to the idea of “should”; if the platform is user friendly and accessible to children, should it be? This question addresses the pedagogical content of e-learning which was often left out of Ontario’s e-learning policy documents; they tended to focus more heavily on institutional factors

and funding. Pedagogy and course-related content was left to the discretion of school boards and educators themselves, but I believe that it is important for large governmental bodies to acknowledge the value of pedagogy and collaboration in high quality e-learning. It is crucial that e-learning environments view pedagogy and curriculum “not simply [...] as a set of knowledge and skills that needs to be transmitted to the students, but where different curricular areas are explored and utilized for the particular opportunities they provide for students to bring their own unique beginnings into the world” (Biesta, 2007, p. 753).

COVID-19 has raised a number of questions related to what is essential to learning and education quality. UNESCO and the Université à Montréal’s, Deslandes-Martineau et al. (2020), noted that apart from traditional economically-based factors such as student assessments and academics, “the paramount need that has emerged [during COVID-19] is to preserve students’ motivation, engagement and interest as well as their connection with school” (n.p.). They explain that achieving this will require “varied, flexible and authentic learning activities” (Deslandes-Martineau et al., 2020, n.p.). Technology and pedagogy are inextricably tied together in e-learning, as high quality pedagogy involves educators’ ability to make the most of digital tools to enhance teaching and learning. Collaboration and action-centered pedagogy, discussed below, are also important.

Collaboration and 21st Century Literacy. Jenkins et al. (2009) refer to 21st century literacy as the shift in focus from “individual expression to community involvement” (p. 4). This shift suggests that in addition to the traditional curriculum which focuses on reading and writing, modern conceptualizations of literacy must also include digital and collaborative competencies

where learners make and design cultural artefacts that have value to them and their communities. High quality e-learning settings encourage students to discover what it is like to contribute their own perspectives to a sometimes long-distance, collaborative learning and making community (Jenkins et al., 2009). The digital tools which necessarily accompany e-learning (including digital access to knowledge centres, the ability to research diverse topics, and visual tools for communicating learned knowledge and for creating/sharing cultural artefacts) have the potential to make this an even more accessible option.

Action-centered pedagogy. Action-centered pedagogies are based on the belief that participation and education are intrinsically linked (Sant, 2019). Action-centered pedagogies are linked to positive outcomes for students, including open participation and having their views taken into account (Sant, 2019). Settings where action-centered pedagogies are present tend to prioritize opportunities to participate in collaborative activities such as youth councils, student unions, and curriculum co-development, among others (Sant, 2019).

Educators

A lot of responsibility is placed on teachers to communicate and embody critical democratic values; scholars such as Carpenter, Diem, and Young (2014) argue that educators should expose students to a common set of democratic values and practices. Students in classrooms where educational objectives align less with employability and more with critical democracy and inquiry-based learning are better equipped to transform themselves from “passive objects to active political subjects, not because [teachers] told them to do so, but because

[students'] new knowledge spurred a hunger for solutions to the social and economic problems they [face]" (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 25). While Noonan and Coral's (2015) work was based in an adult high school classroom, the benefits of critical democracy likely extend to elementary and secondary school e-learning contexts. Jenkins et al. (2009) write in favour of teaching media literacy and engaging children and youth in critical dialogues, explaining that "we do not need to protect them so much as engage them in critical dialogues that help them to articulate more fully their intuitive understandings of these experiences" (p. 12).

Critical democratic outcomes should be central goals of e-learning, however it is unrealistic to expect such a change when educators have consistently shared that they felt a lack of clarity and support within the current model of e-learning (Thompson, 2020). Teacher interest alone isn't enough to "deliver and protect quality" (Vandenhouten et al., 2014, p. 12) in e-learning programs; in addition to desire, teachers need ongoing professional development in e-learning, as well as opportunities for consultation and collaboration with other e-learning professionals (Vandenhouten et al., 2014).

There is an opportunity during crises such as COVID-19 to inspire and meaningfully support educators, as their role as leaders is even more crucial in a world where everything is constantly changing. An opportunity in the future to welcome a new wave of educators and uplift existing ones is to respond to their "heroism" (Lohmeyer & Taylor, 2020, p. 632) by adequately addressing their concerns, such as those raised in 2019 prior to and during the provincial teacher-wide strike: greater investment in public education; reduced teacher-student ratios; optional e-learning instead of mandatory courses for high school; wages that increase with the cost of living; and special funding for students with accessibility needs (Miller, 2019).

Family Support

During the COVID-19 pandemic, family support through funding was a crucial aspect of e-learning policy. Funds were allocated toward the improvement of internet speed and access for families across the province, especially those in rural areas, 59.2% of whom do not have access to high-speed internet, and those in Indigenous communities, 68.7% of whom do not have access to high-speed internet (Flanagan, 2020; Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2020).

Reframing these actions within a critical democratic framework, we must examine what was done beyond providing physical access to e-learning platforms. COVID-19 continues to devastate families across the province, and especially during Phase 1 and 2, families experienced difficulties far beyond digital access to e-learning that would have impacted their child's ability to fully participate. Researcher Beyhan Farhadi says of this type of framing, "[i]t doesn't matter if you've got a computer and a laptop if you don't have food security and housing security" (Roy, 2020). Similarly, while mental health supports are crucial to the success of students in any form of education, they are especially so with e-learning during a pandemic that has directly affected the health of 44,594 school aged children (4-17 years) between August 30, 2020, and April 24, 2021 (Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion, 2021).

It is important to reflect on the significance of policy to systems as a whole, as well as the historical and cultural contexts to which they apply (Young & Diem, 2018; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992). Doing so allows us to expose the ugliness of oppressive systems and support students and their families by challenging them, as opposed to pretending the issues experienced by marginalized people are individualized or merited as is the belief within neoliberal systems

(Perry, 2009). Ontario missed an opportunity to address housing and food insecurity, among other social justice and equity issues which have impacted Canadians since before COVID-19, setting the stage for a more critically democratic future.

Institutional

Masoumi and Lindström (2012) write that the institutional factor in their E-quality Framework is concerned with “how well [...] virtual institutions pursue their mission and goals” (p. 29). Teacher support must be included because educators require financial compensation for the “volunteer time” (Goldfinger, 2019, n.p.) expected of them, and funding is related to institutional decision-making. Masoumi and Lindström (2012) describe research as the centering of “how and to what extent the institutions’ research strategies and efforts are in line with an institution’s broader goals and objectives” (p. 30). If we are to imagine an e-learning system in Ontario that is consistent with critical democratic values, namely social justice, equity, and inclusion (Milani & Winton, 2017), we must be imagine an Ontario willing to rethink many aspects of education.

Teacher support

As discussed above, it takes a network of e-learning professionals to deliver and protect quality in e-learning programs (Vandenhouten et al, 2014). High quality programs require a lot of their teaching teams and communities, so it is crucial to have support in place for all members in the form of training and professional development, mental health support, and more.

Sokal et al. (2020) have written about teacher burnout, and they note that “it may be the most effective to provide the resources that are negatively correlated with the teachers’ current stage of exhaustion in addition to providing resources that significantly mitigate against loss of accomplishment” (p. 73). A possible solution to teacher burnout, a significant issue during a crisis, may be to provide support to teachers that addresses their ability to perform their immediate duties, while also addressing underlying concerns that contribute to the ability to achieve long-term professional goals. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Canadian teachers have expressed the need for: administrative support (Sokal et al., 2020); resources, including “parent support, professional learning on methods, physical self-care such as exercise, healthy eating, and emotional self-care such as meditation, prayer, journaling, and mindfulness” (Sokal et al., 2020, p. 72); recognition of and financial compensation for the additional work done by teachers for their students, including the common practice of paying out of pocket to compensate for gaps in government funding (Goldfinger, 2019); and, continuous training in the use of technology for teaching and to encourage the effective use of digital tools, including audio, video, live sessions, and interactive games, for the purpose of support student engagement and learning (Deslandes-Martineau et al., 2020).

Learning resources and decision-making

When Ontario schools adopted the hybrid learning model in 2020, teachers reported an increased need to collaborate with colleagues and share resources (Wong, 2020). Issues of quality related to e-learning resources are often tied to the “selection and sequencing of resources” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 31), which means that in addition to determining

which resources should be used, teacher face challenges deciding exactly how they should be used. Further, to support learners, Masoumi and Lindström (2012) emphasize the importance of organizing and regularly reviewing resources, ensuring that they are current and that their contents are accurate.

Masoumi and Lindström (2012) also share that decision-making should be explicitly defined and tackled along with appropriate guidelines and recommendations. One Toronto teacher expressed their frustration with the decision-making from decentralized government entities, saying that “[t]he board makes its plans, and lets us know the plans, and then the ministry changes the plans” (Thompson, 2020). They explained that all of the changes left little time to actually prepare; there was “little guidance but many expectations” (Thompson, 2020). Masoumi and Lindström (2012) note the importance of clearly defined learning objectives and outcomes, suggesting that there should be unity between “learning activities describing learning content, the actions to be taken or performed, and how these will be assessed” (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 31). Many of Ontario’s e-learning policy documents communicated actions to be taken and methods of assessment, but this study’s findings show very few documents mentioned learning content, leaving it to the discretion of individual school boards and educators. While it is important to give individual boards the freedom to make decisions specific to their communities, it is also important that all those who wish to participate and those who will be affected should be able to contribute their voice, in critical democratic fashion.

Critical democracy differs from other conceptualizations of democracy in that it requires participation in civic life (Pinto, 2012). Pinto (2012) acknowledges that citizen participation in policy production is not a perspective valued by all, despite playing a significant part in

achieving “the critical-democratic ideal” (p. 276). E-learning policy development processes that pursue this ideal include community involvement, are transparent, display willingness to make changes, and remain open to consultation.

New methods of assessing progress

A classic study by Ruth Butler found that students who receive narrative reports rather than a typical mark-focused report card with brief comments perform better and are more interested in their learning tasks (Butler, 1988). Incorporating teacher narratives and student perspectives into assessment, decision-making, and research may contribute to critical democratic e-learning. However, teacher biases and personal feelings influence how they mark (Anti-Black Racism Steering Committee, 2021) and any efforts toward achieving social justice must address these issues in order for the education system to be successful and high quality.

Anti-racism in training and practice

Teachers play an invaluable role in delivering high quality, critically democratic e-learning, and in order to adequately support students, educators must become “culturally responsive and adequately trained to teach in culturally diverse settings” (Perry, 2009, p. 22). Racism affects all aspects of life for racialized students, and e-learning is no different. Any critical democratic model of education must include practices which actively work to reduce outcome gaps in the hiring and training of staff, creation of school policies, and development of curriculum (DasGupta, Shandal, & Shadd, 2020). High quality e-learning programs address

teacher bias and outcome gaps in the hiring and training of staff (DasGupta et al., 2020; Barber & Jones, 2019).

Masoumi & Lindström (2012) are clear in their Framework that accessibility goes well beyond computers and connections. From the perspective of critical democracy, once children have access to physical technological devices with consistent, reliable access to high speed internet, they must feel welcome in the e-learning environments created for them. Accessibility includes how the experience of education impacts dimensions of identity and barriers to entry for marginalized students, including language, gender, ethnicity, spiritual beliefs, and socio-economic status among others (Farhadi, 2019). High quality e-learning settings fundamentally cannot exist unless all students are able to participate and be wholly themselves.

Finally, the term “diversity” has become attached to corporate strategies “designed to make it appear as if something is being done when in reality a fig-leaf is plastered over the real issues” (Csengeri, 2016, p. 20). Anti-racism turns the notion of equality from a passive idea to an action that must be supported by constant learning and self-reflection (Nichols, 2020). E-learning spaces must embrace students entirely as they are as opposed to acting as spaces which reproduce “neutral” or “colour-blind” (Farhadi, 2019, p. 123) environments.

Conclusion

In March 2020, the Ontario government provided mandatory e-learning to its students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The early response to the transition from in-person to e-learning may be separated into two distinct periods: Phase 1 (March-June), and Phase 2 (July-August). There were lessons learned from Phase 1 that were taken into consideration during

Phase 2 as the government planned for the 2020-2021 school year, but there were areas that could have been improved further.

This thesis discussed how disasters and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic serve as entry points for disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007; Williamson & Hogan, 2020). The study's findings show that Ontario's government prioritized instructional design and technological issues in its e-learning policy and continued its pursuit of neoliberal values during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we may be living on the "edge of chaos" (Van Nuland et al., 2020, n.p.), ironically placed in the "sweet spot for creativity and innovation" (Van Nuland et al., 2020, n.p.). Critical democratic e-learning systems consist of student-centered pedagogy that prioritizes collaboration and participation-based learning models (Jenkins et al., 2009; Vandenhouten et al., 2014), flexibility, and a receptiveness to change, "not only for the sake of doing things differently, but [...] to [improve] the current organization" (Sparkes et al., 1999, p.288).

As nations around the world continue to work toward the eradication of COVID-19 and schools permanently reopen, e-learning may not disappear in Ontario given the government's expressed desire to scale up existing digital learning platforms in 2020 (Office of the Premier, March 2020, *Ontario Helping Students Learn from the Safety of Their Own Home*). I hope the recommendations offered above might contribute to more critically democratic e-learning during crises and in ordinary times. It is worth imagining and building toward a future where the tools and systems available are applied in ways that better serve our children and communities. Collaboration is vital, and as I continue to grow in my curiosity around education policy, I commit to fostering critical democratic ideals in my own classroom so as to contribute to change one small space at a time.

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