UNCONSCIOUS OR UNWANTED? HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM PRIORITIES: LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES

BY

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DISSECRATION
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Abstract

While there has been much attention focused on the “effectiveness” of high schools meeting NCLB standards and their ability to produce students who are “college and career ready” as measured by ACT test scores, less attention has been given to how the curriculum teaches students to think critically about the world around them. Critical consciousness is the thinking necessary to participate in a democratic society and provide our students with knowledge to construct personal meaning and purpose in the world (Freire, 1988; Grundy, 1987; Kincheloe, 2008). District curriculum leadership perspectives about curriculum priorities in light of current accountability measures are important to study as curriculum leaders are charged with the responsibility of leading and facilitating educational outcomes for schools and districts.

This phenomenological study described how district curriculum leaders conceptualize their roles with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and explored to what extent they believe those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. District high school curriculum leaders’ perspectives were gathered through an online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group. Their answers were analyzed utilizing a theoretical framework informed by scholarly literature related to the importance of critical consciousness in creating cultures of democratic community as a focus for education, rather than that of accountability for school improvement. Transformative leadership was found to assist with fostering a culture of democratic community. This study established that the current curricular priorities for high schools are focusing on creating more “college and career” ready students as determined by curriculum and assessment alignment to Common Core standards, higher enrollments in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and increased enrollments in post-secondary institutions, but lack the dimension of critical consciousness as a curriculum outcome to ensure cultures of democratic community. While thinking skills or
“thinking deeply” in the curriculum was valued by the leaders in this study, this aspect of the curriculum was seen to exist only in certain courses or to be associated by individual teachers with elements of Bloom’s taxonomy. This study also established that while some curriculum leaders demonstrated a proclivity toward this vision for democratic schooling, they lacked adequate knowledge of this conceptualization of education to completely address critical consciousness as a curriculum priority.

Linking education and social justice is paramount in creating educational experiences where all students have opportunities to succeed. Recommendations emerging from the findings included the need for districts and schools to create a shared vision and definition of curriculum, beyond the national accountability conversation, which does not consider the social aspects of schooling. Another recommendation made by this study was for colleges and universities to include social justice courses for all teacher and administrators in certification programs.

Curriculum leaders in this study provided perspectives which demonstrate a technical focus on accountability and consistency in the use of standards and assessments as well as a lack of familiarity with the idea of schooling for democratic community. Curriculum leaders must embrace and lead beyond an efficiency and consistency driven idea of schooling that current accountability reforms endorse, and evolve to creating learning environments of freedom and individual growth.
Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Ellen R. Flanigan, and my brother, Edward J. Flanigan; their examples of strength and definition of “life” are a constant motivation in my life.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“To find yourself, think for yourself”—Aristotle

“Beware of a leader that has lots of answers and few questions.”
(Anderson, 2009, p. 21)

“I wish she (the professor) would just tell us what she wants, and then we could just give it to her!” That comment came from one of my peers in a doctoral program in response to a learning activity in which we were to construct our own perspectives of a theater production. We were asked to observe a performance and “deconstruct” the experience to provide our interpretations of the event. Many of my other classmates, many of whom are school and district administrators, shared the same frustration and were clearly uncomfortable with providing their own thoughts as they expressed the fear of “not getting it right.” This discomfort and lack of self-confidence in the learning process caused me to reflect upon the educational experiences afforded to our students in high school classrooms today. Do we empower our students to think critically and construct their own perspectives? Or, have we reduced educational experiences to a Pavlonian “condition and response” experience in that we tell our students not only what to think, but do not afford them the experiences in how to think? What are the implications for our democratic society if this is indeed the truth?

Background and Context

Currently there has been much attention focused on the “effectiveness” of high schools and their ability to produce students who can globally compete. The definition of this “effectiveness” has typically been defined as having enough students pass standardized tests for the school to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to meet NCLB standards, or to prepare
students to be “college and career” ready as determined by ACT scores or higher education enrollment. High school based reforms have ranged from structure-based (i.e., Smaller Learning Communities) to curricular based foci (i.e., Response to Intervention, Common Core Standards) in order to accomplish the goal of preparing students to be successful beyond their high school years. These efforts are attempts to “personalize” the learning environment and respond to the student’s individual needs in order to improve academic achievement and their degree of effectiveness are usually defined by standardized test scores. Many (Apple, 2004; Ayers, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Greene, 1995; hooks, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008; Ravitch, 2010; Rothstein, 2008) argue that these very reforms that aim to improve student learning reduce it to a more mechanical “technical” approach, rather than addressing individual personal development of students, including the ability to think consciously about the world around them. These efforts also support an economic imperative of global economic dominance rather than the idea of democratic schooling to empower all of our students to be active participants in their learning with opportunities to engage in discussion and freedom for expression of ideas. “A democracy protects free expression, the general diffusion of knowledge, the marketplace of ideas, and the open pursuit of truth so that citizens continually educate themselves to participate, learn, and govern in ways beyond the limited ideas of individuals” (Glickman, 1998, p. 21).

To promote such a conception of democracy requires the understanding of social justice and the development of critical consciousness. Linking education and social justice is paramount in creating educational experiences in where all students have opportunities to succeed (Shields & Mohan, 2008). If we do not teach our students and our educational leaders about inequity and empower them to challenge it, we unconsciously can perpetuate and increase disparities among students from different backgrounds. Critical consciousness as a curriculum priority promotes
the intellectual development necessary to create a socially just environment in which all students become critically reflective learners. Critical consciousness is the ability to consider multiple perspectives on a cultural, social, and political level, and engage in critical dialogue to construct personal meaning and purpose in the world (Freire, 1998). This approach to thinking critically should not be confused with “higher level thinking skills” in regards to Bloom’s taxonomy with content knowledge in the high school curriculum. Curriculum that affords students the opportunity to examine and investigate the world from alternative perspectives, ask new questions, and posit new answers that challenge the status quo is essential for the development of individuals who will engage and relate to a larger picture of the world around them (Mustakova-Possardt, 1998). There is a clear distinction between the typical models of “critical thinking” which emphasize cognition and those which actively focus on the problems of current social conditions and examining structures and patterns of domination and privilege. The latter type of thinking empowers students to become less focused on self-interests and limited perspectives and more aware of other realities in the broader context of the world. Critical consciousness development is required to create critical democratic citizenry which considers that social and political structures have the ability to marginalize and perpetuate inequalities within society (Horn Jr., 2004; Zamudio, Bridgeman, Russell, & Rios, 2009). By helping students develop critical consciousness, high school curriculum can develop students’ capacity to think for themselves, and become true partners in authentic learning through inquiry (Mejía, 2004). Critical consciousness allows students not only the awareness of multiple perspectives and the existence of inequalities, but also develops their sense of agency and the capacity to act in light of such conditions.
To overcome the current technical emphasis and focus on critical consciousness requires strong curriculum leadership with a social justice lens. Further, this leadership is necessary to ensure that all students experience a high school education that empowers them to be full and informed participants in our democratic society. Curriculum leadership must consider a broader definition of “teaching and learning” than that of traditional content curriculum objectives and testing measurements. I believe a major area of concern in regard to democratic schooling is the definition of what curriculum actually is in today’s high schools. Curriculum, for most teachers, is defined as a body of information to be checked off a list to be covered and tested. Curriculum leaders, working in environments where standardization and accountability structures are the “norm,” may not feel empowered or compelled to challenge this current reality. Exemplary leadership focuses on the necessity for change and helps make the realities of change happen (Bogotch, 2002). Curriculum and school leaders need to serve as change agents that analyze the aspects of the curriculum that have permitted social inequalities to not only thrive, but also become institutionalized and normalized belief systems (Apple, 1999, 2003; A. F. Ball & Warshauer, 2004; Beyers & Apple, 1998; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Griffiths, 1998; Grogan, 2004; Palmer, 1987; Posner, 1998; Radford, 1985; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Tye, 2000). Dantley (2003) calls for “purpose-driven leadership” in schooling that is not limited to minimum proficiencies and competencies, but rather focuses on academic and intellectual activities and advocates fostering our students’ sense of “destiny, purpose, and commitment to societal change” (p. 273).

Problem

In a time of increased school accountability efforts at the state and federal level, high school curriculum is increasingly becoming narrowed to an “essential skills” mentality,
especially for minority students (Apple, 1999; Hursh, 2008; Ravitch, 2010; Sleeter, 2005). This definition of high school curriculum is defined as “college and career” readiness, and is currently determined by an ACT score. This narrow definition of curriculum thinking could lead to an abandonment of critical consciousness in students, leaving neither space for the social construction of knowledge, nor the capacity for curriculum leaders to foster social justice practices within schools.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

Curriculum leadership at the school district level is important to study as these individuals are charged with the responsibility of prioritizing and facilitating curricular goals. The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of district high school curriculum leaders and to understand the conceptualization of their roles with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability; primarily I wanted to learn to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students.

In order to better understand the perceptions of district curriculum leaders and their conceptualized roles in creating and leading curricular priorities in the current climate of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness in our high school students, the following research questions provided direction for the study:

- What are the current curriculum priorities in high schools?
- How are curriculum priorities determined in high schools?
- What is the role of curriculum leaders in establishing curriculum priorities?
- What role does critical consciousness play in the development of curriculum?
In what ways do/can district curriculum leaders foster critical consciousness practices within high school curriculum?

**Rationale**

When knowledge of the world becomes reduced to standardized test scores and fragmented content knowledge bearing no relevance to student’s daily lives, education becomes one-dimensional and exclusionary, as it does not consider the individual student. Lack of critical awareness leads to the perpetuation of the dominant culture, which can foster oppression and/or marginalization for various groups of students. While there is considerable literature that focuses on curriculum theory (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008; Slattery, 2006), the principal as “instructional leader” (Dinham, 2005; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Neuman & Pelchat, 2001; Petzko, 2008), the teacher as pedagogical leader (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Kreber, 2010; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008), and the need for teacher education programs that support awareness of social justice practices in the classroom (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Kapustka, Howell, Clayton, & Thomas, 2009; Nieto, 2000; Sosu, Mtika, & Colucci-Gray, 2010), there is very little research or scholarly literature focusing on curriculum leadership that supports “critical consciousness” as a curriculum priority, particularly in high schools. There is also considerable literature on neo-liberal agendas and its impact on schooling (Apple, 1982, 1990, 2005, 2010; S. J. Ball, Goodson, & Maguire, 2007; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Beyers & Apple, 1998), but few studies that consider curriculum leaders’ perspectives and how to overcome current restrictive accountability measures. This study contributed to the research base on the importance of democratic schooling, the impact of standardization, testing, and data-driven accountability models on curriculum
leadership, the importance of critical consciousness, and the role that curriculum leaders assume in creating the learning experiences of our high school students.

**Situated Self**

As a district curriculum leader, this topic is one that interests me a great deal as I am passionate about teaching and learning. Prior to beginning my doctoral studies, my own “consciousness” regarding curriculum and learning experiences was very limited and could be described as one-dimensional and focused on content-centered knowledge. After engaging in social justice dialogue regarding curriculum focus and marginalizing practices, I experienced a new-found awareness and urgency to deconstruct the traditional approaches to curriculum as a district leader. In doing so, I experienced several challenges to my understanding of curriculum by colleagues that were principals and my superintendent. I therefore wanted to research the perspectives of other professionals to determine if there is a critical mass of educators who can promote change in light of the current climate of accountability.

**Overview of Theoretical Framework**

Prioritizing curriculum in light of current educational accountability models to support critical consciousness requires one to think about the nature of empowerment. Literature and perspectives that examine the use of power in accountability models, and the “performance culture” of schools in navigating these processes were used in the creation of my theoretical framework.

Accountability as we know it now is not helping our schools. Its measures are too narrow and imprecise, and its consequences too severe. NCLB assumes that accountability based solely on test scores will reform American education. This is a mistake. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 163)
Foucault believed that the strongest power is not found in domineering rules and regulations, but from common activities and philosophies that follow us in all aspects of our lives and effects our interactions with others (Capper, 1998). The current accountability reforms that are informing the day-to-day interactions in high school classrooms focus around the standardization of curriculum and the performance on annual state testing. This “performance” is an example of top-down power exerted upon the schools and is legitimized through state-sponsored “school improvement” processes that focus on testing data and specific processes and documentation to support accountability reforms. Schools ultimately become their own worst enemies—they begin to self-manage and self-regulate in their ways of thinking and acting, which leads to disempowerment of the organization (Alexander, Anderson, & Gallegos, 2005b).

Overview of the Literature

Extensive writings and research studies have been conducted in the area of curriculum and curriculum leadership, and it was important to focus on specific scholarly literature in order to frame this study (Merriam, 2009). The literature utilized in this study provided evidence that curriculum priorities in light of accountability measures and curriculum leadership perspectives are important to research if we are to provide our students with an authentic education. Scholarly literature and research provided the theoretical framework and conceptual understandings that informed this study as well as the analysis of its results (Figure 1).

Initially, this study examined existing scholarly literature pertaining to curriculum and knowledge theories in schooling, as those theories can contribute to leadership practices utilized in today’s high schools. Conceptual understandings of critical consciousness were defined, and its importance for democratic schooling was addressed (Baldacchino, 2008; Endres, 2002; Freire, 2010; Greene, 1975). Research and scholarship exploring school accountability movements and
performativity processes that impede the development of critical consciousness in the curriculum were presented (Anderson, 2005; Apple, 2005; Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009). Next, literature to support the concept that learning interactions in high school classrooms must involve more than “tested” content to support economic and political agendas were discussed (Grumet, 1992; Grundy, 1987; Kincheloe, 2008; Palmer, 1998). Finally, studies and literature were presented to advocate that leadership with a social justice lens is necessary to provide students with curricular experiences that support authentic education and democratic community (Bogotch, 2002; Brown, 2004; Furman & Shields, 2005; Shields, 2009; Ylimaki, 2011).

**Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative study employed phenomenological methods in order to understand the “essence” and “experiences” of how curriculum priorities in high school districts were developed, and whether these priorities included providing room for leaders to foster critical consciousness efforts in the curriculum (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). This included surveying a large group (65 individuals) of district curriculum leaders from the Chicagoland area for their perceptions on current curricular priorities and leadership roles in light of accountability measures. While surveys are not typically found in qualitative research, I utilized one to promote access to the study and foster interest among participants for further participation in the study, as well to gather anecdotal comments. Individual interviews and a focus group were held to explore more deeply personal perspectives regarding school accountability measures and the impact on curriculum priorities. Individual interviews with semi-structured and open-ended questions provided an opportunity for participants to reveal more personal experiences to be documented if they felt uncomfortable participating in a focus group. Focus group interviews with semi-structured questions provided the participants an
opportunity to hear each other’s responses and make additional comments (Merriam, 2009), as well as allowing me the opportunity to follow up on perceptional data from the individual interviews.

Definition of Terms

Bracketing—first step in phenomenological research in which the researcher sets aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of the participants’ in the study (Moustakas, 1994). While I recognized this as a phenomenological term from Moustakas (1994), I rejected the strict definition of “bracketing” and utilized Duarte’s (2000) interpretation of Freire’s concept of “co-intentionality” as “thinking together” to develop meaning.

Critical consciousness—term most commonly associated with Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, to describe thinking that considers perception and exposure of social and political contradictions within the world. Critical consciousness also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one’s life that are explained by that understanding (Freire, 2010).

District curriculum leader—an individual who holds a district-level curricular position, i.e., Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Director of Curriculum, District Curriculum Coordinator.

Neo-liberal agenda—a market-driven approach to economic and social (educational) policy.

Social justice—idea of a society based on principles of equity for all and the value of human rights.

Performativity—repetitive actions that are socially validated to maximize efficiency by controlling outcomes and creating cultures of accountability (Alexander et al., 2005b).
Limitations

According to Creswell (2007), researchers conduct qualitative research because they seek detailed understanding of an issue from the point of view of the people involved in that issue. Those details can only come from talking directly with people and allowing them to tell their stories, regardless of expectations or what scholarly literature may indicate. In this study, participants’ honesty in answering questions could have been a limitation. Curriculum leaders might have felt vulnerable about speaking openly about accountability as it could promote a risk of censure by their peers or districts, as well as the possibility of career setbacks (McInerney, 2003). Additionally, the level of understanding of “critical consciousness” by the participants was a significant limitation. Curriculum leaders that were not aware of the concept of critical consciousness and its importance for democratic schooling, described their perception of the current climate of accountability as “normative,” as that is their constructed and lived reality.

Significance

Curriculum leaders at the district level are important to study as they are charged with the responsibility of facilitating curricular outcomes for the schools in their district. The reduction of curriculum to a “test-score” mentality is depriving our high school students of the opportunities to develop critical consciousness, which is necessary to fully engage in a democratic society.

The significance of this particular study is that the respondents selected for this research come from a high-profile high school curriculum network in Illinois and are afforded a “voice” in providing input, at both the state and federal level, on political schooling reforms such as the re-authorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the Common Core Standards, and the state’s standardized testing measures. It was important to understand their contextual references
for the outcomes of high school education, as well as their perceived role in determining curriculum priorities for high schools in light of such power.

This study fills a gap in the literature about leadership for democratic schooling and social justice. Currently, there is a lack of research and literature providing a “voice” to curriculum leaders at the district office level in the discussions about a curriculum that fosters critical consciousness. The findings of this study suggested that much of the current accountability measures and policy that impact curriculum in high schools simply do not focus on the educational experiences that our students need and deserve, and that curriculum leadership with a social justice lens must be an addition to the current school leadership narrative.

**Overview of Dissertation**

The following section provides a layout of the dissertation and the organization of the research. Each chapter addressed different components of this study.

Chapter one presented the background and context and introduced the problem of the narrowing of curriculum to focus only on content-centered/tested curriculum, one that deprives high school students of the opportunity to develop critical consciousness, which is necessary to fully participate in a democratic society. In addition, the purpose of the study—which was to describe the perceptions of district high school curriculum leaders and to understand the conceptualization of their roles with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students were presented. Additionally provided in the chapter were the research questions that guide the study, an overview of the literature and the theoretical framework used in the study, the research methodology, the limitations, and the significance of the study.
Chapter two reviews the literature regarding curriculum theories and studies that examined curriculum from different vantages, and defined critical consciousness and its importance to support the larger goals of schooling in our society. Also included in the chapter are accountability policies and practices that thwart the development of critical consciousness in curriculum priorities and conceptual understandings of teaching and learning interactions in high school classrooms to support more than the current economic and political agendas. Finally, leadership with a social justice lens and its importance for democratic schooling are discussed.

Chapter three explains the methodology employed, the research design, the sample, the data collection, and the analysis procedures. The interview protocols are also presented in this chapter.

Chapter four presents the data collected from the participants and provides answers to the five research questions describing the current curriculum priorities in light of accountability measures and to what extent those priorities included critical consciousness. In addition, the perceived role of the leaders in establishing and fostering critical consciousness practices in the curriculum are presented.

Chapter five analyzes the curriculum leaders’ responses through a theoretical framework informed by the literature to determine if the focus for the high school curriculum is for schooling for accountability, where content-centered/tested curriculum is a priority, or a focus on democratic schooling, where critical consciousness is a priority. In addition, I offer my own experiences and perspectives as a curriculum leader as I co-constructed knowledge with my colleagues.

Chapter six provides discussion of the findings, reflections on the research, and recommendations for district/school leaders and colleges and universities. This thesis contributes
to the knowledge of school leaders in understanding curriculum in a broader context, as well as an awareness of their roles as critical educators and transformative leaders to combat the negative aspects of accountability which prevent educators from providing an authentic education to our students.
Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter discussed the literature and research that informed the perspective that education, and more specifically, the curriculum, must be considered in a larger context. Curriculum experiences for our high school students must cultivate knowledge of the world that transcends individual and group identity interests (Henderson & Gornick, 2007). In order for this to happen, the curriculum must purposefully foster critical consciousness within our high school students.

Despite the importance of developing critical consciousness, “college and career readiness” has become the mantra of the high school experience, and that definition of “readiness” has become reduced to an ACT score (Jacobson, 2004). ACT College Readiness Standards and ACT test preparation classes have become commonplace in most high schools in Illinois, as well as curricula that focus solely on knowledge and skills to “pass the test.” Due to the current political and economic conditions in the United States, high schools are in danger of narrowing their curriculums and learning experiences for their students to meet the demands of the current accountability models put upon them by both the state and federal governments. While I am an advocate for high learning expectations in many academic areas, I believe this definition of “college ready” to be a narrow definition of curriculum or schooling success—one that ignores the conversations of the individual in relation to learning. I assert that the current climate of accountability in high schools inhibits the opportunity to develop “critical consciousness” in our students through the curriculum, and yet it is this very “consciousness” that could give our students the self-knowledge and reflective skills in order to create the society
they need to meet the complex challenges of their future, and provide them the opportunities to fully participate in a democratic society.

The heart of my argument lies in illustrating the much larger picture of curriculum priorities—apart from school reform and curriculum with a “test score” mentality. Posner (1998) suggests that curriculum planning from a linear or “technical production” point of view lacks the conscience necessary to consider what aspects of the curriculum are being assumed, and how those assumptions can lead to “means-end” rationality. That is, are the means (curriculum) leading only to the ends (improved test scores)? “The language of efficiency, standards, competency, assessment, cost effectiveness and so on impoverishes our imagination and limits our educational and political vision” (Beyers & Apple, 1998, p. 92).

This chapter provides theories and research supporting the need for curriculum priorities to be examined in a larger context. Initially, literature regarding curriculum theories and studies that examine curriculum from three different vantages are presented: curriculum as knowledge transmission, curriculum as “political text,” and curriculum as praxis. Next, literature defining critical consciousness and its importance to support the larger goals of schooling in our society are discussed. Then, accountability policies and practices that thwart the development of critical consciousness in curriculum priorities are reviewed. Next, research and literature supporting the belief that critical consciousness is essential to democratic learning are presented. Additionally, literature to support the concept that teaching and learning interactions in high school classrooms must encompass more than the definition of “traditional” content curriculum and knowledge to support current economic and political agendas is highlighted. Finally, literature and studies relating how leadership with a social justice lens is necessary in order to provide our students with curricular experiences that empower them to understand the relationships between
themselves and others in the world is presented. Education should support growth toward authentic learning and democratic community, rather than focus on performance and fabrication events for accountability measures.

Theories That Inform Understanding of Curriculum

“Theory exists to provoke thinking.”—William F. Pinar

Curriculum is an avenue through which a society defines itself and develops the awareness of the next generation. “The school curriculum communicates what we choose to remember about our past, what we believe about our present, and what we hope for in the future” (Pinar, 2004, p. 20). Knowledge itself is entrenched in social power relations, and curriculum leadership is informed by curriculum theory. For this study, it was important to discuss the knowledge theories that fuel understandings of curriculum, particularly when these theories may or may not inform the understandings, practices, and policies of curriculum in our schools today. This section examined the literature regarding curriculum from three viewpoints: curriculum as knowledge to be transmitted, curriculum as “political text,” and curriculum as praxis.

Curriculum as Knowledge to be Transmitted

Curriculum in high schools has been traditionally defined as the textbooks and courses that students take to master content knowledge. Education and knowledge are most often seen as a technical exercise and one “committed to a view of rationality that is ahistorical, consensus-oriented, and politically conservative” (Giroux, 1979, p. 251). Curriculum objectives are set, a plan drawn up, and then applied, and the outcomes (products) measured. This definition of curriculum was popularized by Franklin Bobbitt (1918, 1928) and Ralph W. Tyler (1949). This way of thinking about curriculum theory and practice was heavily influenced by the development
of management thinking and practice. The rise of “scientific management” is associated with the name of its main advocate, F. W. Taylor. Taylor proposed a greater division of labor with jobs being simplified, and an extension of managerial control over all elements of the workplace, with an emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency (Pinar et al., 2008). This theory of curriculum is currently supported by the current accountability measures in schools and provides a focus on providing a workforce to the country (Apple, 2004; Beyer & Apple, 1988).

This view of curriculum can be called a “positivist” stance and one in which considers only one way to teach and only one view of reality in which the individual student is considered in only one dimension. Teachers become “information deliverers,” not empowered cultural workers (Kincheloe, 2008). Transmission teaching is a simple approach to education, one that emphasizes superficial coverage of content that is unmindful of student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This type of curricular focus has also been described as “banking education” by Freire (2004):

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated account. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers” into “receptacles” to be filled by teachers. The more completely she fills the receptacle, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. (p. 100)

Critics of this technical-rational view of curriculum affirm that it dehumanizes learning and promotes “legitimate knowledge” in a very narrow form. Apple (2004) argued that knowledge and curriculum planning in this fashion can bring about a “social and cultural reproduction” that will always produce marginalized groups in society, and that “curricularists” should consider a more “appropriate” analysis of the curriculum:

A more appropriate relationship would require that educational “science” and technical competence be secured firmly within a framework that continually seeks to be self-critical and places both one person’s responsibility to treat another person ethically and
justly and the search for a set of economic and cultural institutions that make such collective responsibility possible at the center of its deliberations. (p. 152)

This examination of the curriculum highlights the importance of reconceptualizing the traditional definition of curriculum in high schools to one that includes social, cultural, and political aspects that will impact our students in the future.

**Curriculum as “Political Text”**

Schools, in general, and particularly the curriculum, play important roles in oppression, and therefore, cannot be viewed as politically “neutral.” Pinar (2008) described this view of the curriculum as “political text” (p. 243). The word “text” utilized in this fashion is not exclusively considered the printed word, but rather the discourses surrounding curriculum theories that look at the political impact that schooling and curriculum have on society (Pinar, 2008).

While traditional curriculum (texts, lessons, units, tests) are considered the “explicit curriculum,” the “hidden curriculum” is important to understand. Jackson (1993) coined this phrase to describe the inadvertent, but tangible outcomes of the schooling process (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989). Social reproduction and ideology, social stratification, and deskilling and diminishing teacher autonomy are just some of the outcomes that the curriculum can yield when examining it with a political lens. It is important to understand curriculum as “political text,” as it requires resistance to curriculum policies or practices that privilege certain sets of knowledge over others (Apple, 1990). An example of this would be the diminished importance of the arts and aesthetics in the curriculum. Maxine Greene (1995) and Elliot Eisner (2002) have both written extensively on the importance of aesthetic knowledge in providing a deeper understanding for our students of the world and of their experiences.

When it comes to schools, the dominant voices are still those of the officials who assume the objective worth of certain kinds of knowledge, who take for granted that the schools’ main mission is to meet national economic and technical needs. (Greene, 1995, p. 9)
Eisner (1998) reminded us that “educational equity is an empty ideal when a substantial portion of our children are excluded from the very areas in which their talents reside” (p. 36).

Curriculum leaders must consider the idea that education is inherently political, ethical, and more importantly, a human act. To ignore the political aspects of the curriculum is to deliberately side-step the responsibility of moral leadership. It is important to understand curriculum as “political text” so that our students will have understanding of and act against structures of dominance and inequalities.

Curriculum as Praxis

Curriculum as praxis is a development of the interactions that take place between the teacher, students, and knowledge—the enactment of the physical curriculum. The praxis model of curriculum theory and practice brings to the center the communal well-being of all involved in the learning interaction and makes an unequivocal commitment to equity (Cherryholmes, 1999; Grundy, 1987; Lather 1991; Sirotnik, 1991). Thus action is not simply informed, it is also committed.

Critical pedagogy goes beyond situating the learning experience within the experience of the learner: it is a process which takes the experiences of both the learner and the teacher and, through dialogue and negotiation, recognizes them both as problematic. . . [It] allows, indeed encourages, students and teachers together to confront the real problems of their existence and relationships. . . . When students confront the real problems of their existence they will soon also be faced with their own oppression. (Grundy, 1987, p. 105)

In this approach, the curriculum itself develops through the dynamic interaction of action and reflection. “That is, the curriculum is not simply a set of plans to be implemented, but rather is constituted through an active process in which planning, acting and evaluating are all reciprocally related and integrated into the process” (Grundy, 1987, p. 115). Examples of praxis would be how educators embed conversations about culture, identity, race, and global
perspectives in the curriculum (Subedi & Daza, 2008). Teachers are stimulated to remove the distance between intangible knowledge and theory and rational, factual presentation between themselves and their students and instead, place them directly in the middle. “Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching—and in the process, from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life” (Palmer, 1998, p. 11).

Educators committed to praxis explore their practice with their peers (Ryken, 2004). They would be able to say how their actions, with respect to particular interventions, reflected their ideas about what makes for the “greater good” and to say what theories were involved. Curriculum leaders who encourage educators to provide this dimension of the curriculum would understand the importance of engaging in critical consciousness to free our students from an inadequate understanding of the world, history and injustice (Renner & Brown, 2006).

**Definition and Benefits of Critical Consciousness**

Critical consciousness is an examination into the definition of given knowledge and thinking critically about it. This term is not to be confused with “critical thinking” skills of Bloom’s taxonomy in content subject areas as illustrated in most high school curriculum documentation. The difference between the two exists in the knowledge they employ—Bloom’s taxonomy is primarily concerned with cognitive sophistication in thought regarding the content being learned (analysis, synthesis). Critical consciousness is focused on developing an awareness of multiple perspectives and the ability to be critically reflective. This approach was popularized by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who termed it as “conscientization.” Freire (1998) developed a vision of education that conceptualizes real freedom as the ability to engage in critical reflection of the world around us and ways of knowing which leads to empowerment and
true participation in democracy. Critical consciousness refers to thinking defined by Freire (1998):

To think correctly implies the existence of subjects whose thinking is mediated by objects that provoke and modify the thinking subject. Thinking correctly is, in other words, not an isolated act or something to draw near in isolation but an act of communication. For this reason, there is no right thinking without understanding, and this understanding, from a correct thinking point of view, is not something transferred but something that belongs essentially to the process of coparticipation. (p. 42)

Freire maintained that the struggle to be free and create meaning and action (both historically and culturally) from a given situation is an essential component of being fully human (Glass, 2001). Critical consciousness is necessary because conditions exist that can exclude individuals from democratic participation which can dehumanize individuals and make them naive objects of history or culture (Freire, 1998). It is only through this participatory exercise of critical awareness and examination that action can take place to transform individual understanding of the world around them and therefore, change their reality.

We began with the conviction that the role of man was not only to be in the world, but to engage in relations in the world—that through acts of creation and re-creation, man makes cultural reality and thereby adds to the natural world, which he did not make. (Freire, 2010, p. 39)

Schools and education must be considered as part of a larger civic, political and critical democratic culture (Apple, 2004; Apple & Beane, 2007; Kanpol, 1993; Palmer, 1987; Sewell, 2005). Critical consciousness is necessary when striving for an emancipatory curriculum which considers all students and their opportunities to actively participate in the democratic experience as adults. Curriculum priorities that focus on knowledge transmission, rather than that of critical thought, denies our students the learning opportunities to make sense of and change their world. Additionally, the breakdown of civic benefit in society has fostered a competitive and individualistic vision of education, rather than one that embraces community and a deeper vision for our educational agenda (Palmer, 1987).
Critical consciousness can be used to provide high school students opportunities to explore their own identities. Gatimu (2008) emphasizes that a critical consciousness framework is necessary when looking at personal identity, particularly for minority students. Individuals who have critical consciousness have the ability to question their own position, grow intellectually and emotionally, and to transform their social reality. This is a fundamental learning which can battle oppression and foster true community within our schools. “Such a person is not afraid to nurture and develop his project for the good of the community. A community built and sustained by people who have critical consciousness constructs a solid future for its children” (Gatimu, 2008, p. 60). Students are engaged in how the larger society in which they live positions them as individuals and their cultural groups. They learn how to use their lived experiences as tools for knowledge transformation and change. They construct critical commentaries of oppressive actions and attitudes around them, and critical commentaries give students resources in which to enact opposition and resistance to oppressive conditions.

Horn (2004) describes the realities of our current democratic society as one fraught with navigation of information technologies (Internet, radio, television, and movies) that attempt to mediate and inform our individual understanding of reality and a “masking of complexity.” Our students are bombarded on a daily basis with messages and information wrapped in “sound bites” that shape their perception of reality and their definition of “norms.” Critical consciousness provides them the intellectual capacity to think critically of the messages that they are receiving. This consciousness provides them with the understanding that life is complex, and there are many perspectives and realities to consider. Horn (2004) elaborates that there is an insidious reason for this information bombardment on our society. “Collapsing complex issues into simple binaries masks the inherent contextual complexity of an issue. However, influencing
individuals to think simplistically and to deny contextual complexity is a powerful and effective political tool of control” (p. 171). In the educational context, complexity of the curriculum has been reduced to binary bits of fragmented knowledge that has been quantified, packaged, and tested. In the pursuit of accountability, rather than true democratic schooling, curriculum has become a casualty.

**Accountability Measures that Limit the Curriculum**

Accountability measures have had a diminishing effect on the curriculum for high school students. Our current climate of accountability is a direct result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act which was enacted by Congress in 2002. This legislation was an answer to the 1983 document “A Nation at Risk” report which contributed to the ever-growing (and still present) sense that American schools were “failing,” and it created a wave of local, state, and federal reform efforts. The definition of “failing” was the lack of individuals to meet the national need for a competitive workforce, and squarely diverted the role of education as a social and moral imperative, to one that supported political and economic agendas for dominance in a global market. This urgency to support an economic imperative is an underlying tenant of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a name given to a group of economic and social policies that are embedded in the everyday workings of schools. Neoliberalism originally was promoted as the mechanism for global trade and investment supposedly for all nations to prosper and develop fairly and equitably. These policies encompass tenants that focus on deregulation of the government such as the rule of the market, cutting public expenditures for social services, privatization to foster competition, and eliminating the concept of the “public good” or “community” (Apple, 2006; Bartlett, Frederick, & Gulbrandsen, 2002). Neoliberalism transforms
the role of society and education from providing for the welfare of individuals to promoting the quest of profit. After NCLB was passed, neoliberal agendas in the educational arena were common place as school choice, charters, and voucher programs became more popular and were encouraged by political and corporate groups who came to gain from them. Market principles and efficiency models have been applied to the school environment, along with rewards and sanctions. “Accountability is a marketplace ideal as it provides a mechanism for guaranteeing the input (the state or district’s financial investment) is being used wisely to increase output (students ready to contribute to the workforce)” (Ullucci & Spencer, 2008, p. 163).

Berliner and Biddle (1995) have presented data to scientifically prove that common information and beliefs regarding the educational system of the United States are not the primary source of blame for all that is wrong in our society. Although this research is 16 years old, it is still relevant to the discussion regarding education today, as it concerns itself with focusing on the real issues in education, which is examining the inequities in schooling and the role it plays in creating a globally dominant workforce. Despite publications such as “A Nation at Risk” (1983), these two researchers provide sufficient evidence that the U.S. school system has many successful aspects and results with its students. They assert that this “manufactured crisis” in education ignores the real problems with educational reform in this country which is examining poverty, class and racial issues within our classrooms and schools. These very issues are ones that could become more visible to our students and teachers and addressed if schools and the curriculum had opportunities to develop critical consciousness within our students. Unfortunately, as a result of NCLB, accountability measures like high-stakes testing and technical-rational school improvement efforts that create an “audit culture” (Apple, 2005) define
the climate into today’s high schools and prevent the development of critical consciousness practices within the classroom.

**Standards and High-Stakes Testing**

Supporters of NCLB assert that uniform standards and high-stakes test-based education reforms will enable educators and policymakers to track test-based achievement gaps by allowing them to identify problems in curriculum and instruction and take steps to correct them to ensure that inequalities in achievement among students are eradicated, however, research has shown that not to be true (Duffy, Giordano, Farrell, Paneque, & Crump, 2008; Hursh, 2008).

Standards and high stakes testing support a neoliberal agenda. Based on the premise that improving the measurement of what people know will enhance a country’s competitive economic edge, standardized assessments are viewed as preparation for the business world (Spring, 1998). Standardization, easily quantifiable results, and the willingness to redesign all fundamental processes to obtain them, describe the pathway to success in both the tests and in business. Student success is measured through standardized testing based on multiple reasons benefiting market principles such as the assessment of policies and innovations which develop a more productive workforce, the supporting of better management, the promotion of a more efficient allocation of resources, the selection of students according to ability, and the evaluation of the productivity of teachers (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000).

Several major corporations promote standards-based education and the accompanying high stakes standardized examinations with the stated goal of promoting global competitiveness. Critics (Mathison, Ross, & Vinson, 2001) charge that this is an attempt at social control through the establishment of a routine, standardized schooling process that will socialize most workers to expect low level, routine work experiences that mirror the low skill level jobs that have
prospered with globalization and increased technology, and control through the well-established sorting mechanism provided by standardized testing.

Diane Ravitch, in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010), describes how she was a staunch supporter of NCLB and the neoliberal agenda of privatization in education. She believed that market strategies like choice and competition would support a better education for all students with higher standards and more equitable opportunities for learning. She thought that this market approach would bring innovation and efficiency to schools. Today, Ravitch (2010) admits to feeling disillusioned by current reform efforts:

Eventually I realized that the new reforms had everything to do with structural changes and accountability, and nothing at all to do with the substance of learning. Accountability makes no sense when it undermines the larger goals of education. (p. 16)

The focus on standards and high-stakes testing in today’s high schools in pursuit of achieving AYP targets is having an impact on our teachers and the education that our students receive in schools. Standards and tests drive curriculum and instruction in ways that cause harm to students and teachers. On the basis of test scores, students may be denied access to learning opportunities through tracking, retention in a grade, and may be denied a diploma, regardless of what they know or can do in authentic life situations (Ravitch, 2010).

The standards movement was the first step in the accountability framework. The assumption is that by applying one fixed set of standards (and a test to measure them) to all students, educational equity can be addressed. However, this is a very flawed and simplistic approach to a very complex issue, which ignores the issues of class, race, and social justice. Standardized testing and standards reform alone will not reform education. “It is hard to resist the notion that what is important is whatever we and our peers happen to know. But if we buy that simplistic idea, the clones we create will be poorly prepared to cope with changing reality”
Proponents for national standards (DeCoker, 2002) assert that national standards could improve U.S. education by providing better articulation at grade levels K-12, less disruption for students who are mobile, and textbooks that are more focused and coherent. McPartland and Schneider (1996) contend that the implementation of a common core curriculum is not really the issue, but that the school reform efforts need to be analyzed and ensure that factors such as enhanced resources, flexible scheduling and professional development for teachers needs to be considered. The focus on developing national standards, such as the Common Core Standards (recently adopted by 48 states), pose potential threats to an exclusionary curriculum, particularly for our diverse student population. Zhao (2010) criticizes national standards as they lead to the distortion of the purpose of schooling, stifle creativity, and reduce diversity. Standards are primarily used as outcomes to be tested, and the idea that implementing national standards to gain international superiority on test scores has not been proven, as other countries that have national standards perform worse than the U.S. (Zhao, 2010).

Standardized testing limits the curriculum and has serious negative effects on our high school students. Curriculums have been reduced to focusing only on content that is tested. Au (2007) investigated 49 studies on the impact of high stakes testing on the curriculum and exposed that “tests have the predominate effect of narrowing the curriculum content to those subjects included on the tests, resulting in the increased fragmentation of knowledge forms into bits and pieces” (p. 264). High-stakes tests isolate students from their lived experiences and deny students the opportunities to direct their own learning since they are no longer encouraged to explore the concepts and subjects that interest them. Specific harmful effects on students include increased anxiety, damaged self-concepts, a categorization and labeling of students, and the
creation of self-fulfilling prophecies (Linn & Gronlund, 2000). Amrein and Berliner (2003) record other harmful effects of testing as expressed in decreased student motivation, higher retention and student dropout rates, and limited engagement with critical thinking. Along with these effects, many students also resort to dishonesty and cheating (Daniel & Dyson, 2009).

Standardized tests demand a more standardized view of the curriculum, and standards and tests are designed to promote a particular, singular view of truth, knowledge, and learning (Apple, 1999). Research by Viruru (2006), asserts that reading content on standardized tests expose children to “racist and colonialist ideas in legitimate forms” (p. 51). In her examination of 94 reading passages from 11 state tests, Europeans and people of color were often placed in “positions of difference like functioning without clothes or performing traditional dance” and “more likely to appear in stories in which they were rescued or behaved passively” (p. 62). Leonardo (2007) states that while much of the literature and research have critiqued testing and NCLB accountability measures for their impact on minority students, less attention has been paid to the way it creates a “legitimate” nation of “whiteness” and ignores the larger issue of race. “A nation that supports an undeclared apartheid through color-blind policies produces foreseeable results. It is difficult to be surprised when such policies do not make a dent in narrowing the achievement gap” (p. 269). The subgroup reporting aspect of standardized testing under NCLB has shown that the achievement gap is greatest across segregated schools rather than that of their integrated counterparts (Stiefel, Schwartz, & Chellman, 2007).

The assumption that test scores will motivate all students and teachers is inconsistent with research (Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). The concept that threats of punishment such as withholding a diploma will create a positive learning environment and radically transform long-suffering educational institutions has been discredited by several researchers (Cunningham &
Sanzo, 2002; Daniel & Dyson, 2009; Supovitz, 2009; Ullucci & Spencer, 2009). High-stakes tests discourage and demoralize at least as many students and teachers as they motivate to work harder. Thus dropout rates rise, particularly for the most vulnerable students, and damage the very students who are supposed to benefit most from them (McSpadden McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008).

The damaging effects these tests have on teachers include the fact that they are often distracted from consideration of students and unable to appreciate their students’ individual experiences and how they could contribute to their construction of knowledge. When a teacher’s primary focus is on tests and test-taking strategies, attention to individual potential is hard to sustain (Donlevy, 2000). Additionally, many quality educators are leaving the field of education because of the intense pressures placed upon them due to standardized testing and the lack of teacher autonomy and sense of professionalism (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Because of these pressures, an increasing number of teachers experience ethical lapses and rely on cheating to ensure the results from the classes are not substandard (Popham, 1999). This is expressed through a variety of methods such as giving hints or direct answers to students when asked for help on the test, and allowing more time than was allotted for the students to complete the examination. There have also been cases where teachers review the finished tests and “revise” the incorrect answers (Popham, 1999). Cheating is an obvious outcome of pressure to have high test scores, but Ravitch (2010), illustrates “gaming the system” as only one of the less visible results of assessment utilized for accountability, rather than that for informing instruction. “Gaming” takes place at the school, district, and state level. Practices such as “hiding” low performing students by shifting them to another AYP subgroup, encouraging low
performing students to not attend on testing days, and identifying “bubble” students and providing them with isolating test preparation are just some of the less frequently talked about practices at the school level. Districts employ continuous enrollment criteria to eliminate low performing students from testing and states have lowered their cut scores or made the content less challenging on the tests (Ravitch, 2010).

The “Performance” of School Improvement

The current accountability reforms that are informing the day-to-day interactions in high school classrooms focus around the standardization of curriculum and the performance on annual state testing. This “performance” is an example of top-down power exerted upon the schools and is legitimized through “school improvement” processes that focus on testing data and specific processes and documentation to support accountability reforms. Schools ultimately become their own worst enemies—they begin to self-manage and self-regulate in their ways of thinking and acting, which leads to disempowerment of the organization (Anderson, 2005). The top-down accountability system promoted by NCLB is supported at the governmental level by a series of disciplinary practices that create new forms of power at the state and local level. Power is essential to study in the context of examining school improvement efforts as power is exercised through institutional regulations that discipline our ways of thinking and acting through self-regulation (Alexander, Anderson, & Gallegos, 2005a).

This regulation is a result of what Foucault, as cited in Anderson (2005), calls “Panoptic control,” or a type of constant surveillance to manage behaviors. Studies of educational reform in the United Kingdom by Perryman (2005, 2009) illustrate this phenomenon of power:

Normalisation, which can be defined as the modification of behaviour to come within socially acceptable standards, is a powerful mechanism of power which is achieved through the hegemonic internalization of discourses of control. (Perryman, 2009, p. 614)
Perryman (2009) documented the effects of Special Measures, a system of intensive inspection measures applied to British schools deemed “failing.” She describes how research on “effective schools” becomes the “rigid recipe” for how an effective school should be run:

Discourses endow those who have specialist knowledge with power and in terms of inspection, this knowledge is provided by the school effectiveness discourse, and the inspectors have the power to enforce adherence to its doctrines. Phrases such as “experts say . . . ,” “studies show . . . ,” and “research has concluded . . .” give power to those who hold the knowledge and decide how it should be acted upon. (p. 614)

Her studies contend that accountability measures that reinforce a performance culture can lead to schools to manufacture a performance as illustrated in her findings by the manipulation of school documents, rehearsed meetings, and temporary displacement of pupils. She asserts that the constant threat of unannounced inspections and self-evaluation processes created the state of panoptic control in British schools. Her work is important to consider when looking at the current accountability efforts in the United States and its focus on a performance culture.

It is also important to understand the concepts of “performance” and “performativity” when looking at school improvement practices. “Performativity “ refers to performance as maximizing efficiency, rather than that of enacting a role (Anderson, 2005). “Performativity has to do with the efficiency of a social system in which the goal of knowledge is no longer truth, justice, or any other narrative, but rather system efficiency” (Anderson, 2005, p. 214). The current climate of accountability has changed to a performance culture that increases visibility and requires that we align our performances to external criteria. This brings about what Ball (2001) calls “fabrication,” the need to perform for others. This fabrication occurs between dominant groups and subordinate groups in education, and is visible in school improvement efforts in Illinois at the state, district and local levels.
At the state level, NCLB encourages each state to regulate itself by creating its own accountability system in order to receive monies for schools. The federal government does not sanction or reward schools for this system, it simply convinces states to publicly display their test scores and that further rewards or sanctions are given based on the performance of the school (Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009). Other examples of performativity at the state level include creating a longitudinal data system which tracks achievement on each student, and the creation of a new teacher evaluation system based on achievement data.

At the district level in Illinois, performativity practices include posting yearly “report cards” with many different types of data (demographic, financial, student achievement) on its web site, and the creation of district and school improvement plans with quantitative goals and strategies tied to “research based” practices to increase performance on reading and math assessments and increase graduation rates. These plans are uploaded to a state web site and monitored by state officials. If the schools are in “Corrective Action” or “Restructuring” status, meaning if they have not reached their AYP targets and accept federal monies (Title I), they must be monitored by the district’s Regional Office of Education (ROE) on a weekly basis. These weekly meetings can be site-based observational visits, or examination of “research based” indicators that could improve the district’s or schools improvement plan as submitted to the state. As previously mentioned by Perryman (2009), “research based” has come to be defined by NCLB as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs” (United States Congress, 2002, p. 540). This thinking reduces all learning to a scientific management mentality that ignores the obvious implication of “valid” knowledge (who determines validity?), as well as denying the role of the teacher in professional observation and
judgment. Regulating “performances” at the district level become reduced to the simplistic belief that all learning can and should be quantified, and the daily work of schools becomes justifying practices that support that vision of learning.

Schools performativity practices can vary depending upon district and principal leadership. Common practices in high school districts include scheduling double blocks of reading or math based courses (therefore limiting student participation in elective courses), utilizing Institute Days and early dismissal days to examine student achievement and behavior data and creating site-based plans for improvement, and mandated staff development workshops driven by data deficiencies. Monthly reports may be given by building principals to the Board of Education as to programs instituted that increased students achievement levels. Student and parent workshops are held to stress the importance of the ACT test, and which curricular courses are necessary to take in order to be prepared to take these tests. These practices illustrate what Ball (2001) calls a “new mode” of regulation and power:

It is the database, the appraisal meeting, the annual review, report writing and promotion applications, inspections, peer reviews that are to the fore. There is not so much, or not only, a structure of surveillance, as a flow of performativities both continuous and eventful—that is spectacular. Instead it is the uncertainty and instability of being judged in different ways, by different means, through different agents; the bringing-off of performances—the flow of changing demands, expectations and indicators that make us continually accountable and constantly recorded. (pp. 211-212)

These performativity practices, at the state, district and local level, promote a self-regulation among schools and districts and normalize the “work” done in schools every day. Yet, these practices are not about education of the “self”—they support and mimic the business approach to the neoliberal idea of transparent accountability; an accountability structure that supports the idea of competition and the ability to choose by simplifying and quantify results. As these practices become more the “norm,” high schools become less and less likely to engage our
students in the development of critical consciousness which is necessary to engage in a true democracy.

**Role of Critical Consciousness in Democratic Schooling**

This discussion begins with the essential question, “What is the purpose of public education?” Fuhrman and Lazerson (2005) describe public schools as the vehicle to “bring together children of varied backgrounds; teaching them literacy, moral values, and patriotism necessary for informed citizenship” (p. xxiii). Schools have been the foundation for perpetuating the democratic ideals of our country and provide a public sphere for learning to take place for individuals. Democratic education is learning which gives “individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of the mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder” (Dewey, 1902). Democratic schools teach students how to learn as individuals, but with an understanding of a “common humanity,” and offer opportunities for learning environments that are “equal, respectful, and mutually beneficial” so that students can then replicate that understanding in society (Shields, 2009, p. 11).

There has been extensive literature emphasizing the importance of education and schools in fostering democratic ideals (Apple & Beane, 2007; Baldacchino, 2008; Gale & Densmore, 2003; Glickman, 1998; Goodlad, 2001; Hirsch, 2009; Horn, Jr., 2004; Shields, 2009; West, 2004). In “Democratic Education” (1987), Gutmann asserts that that being a citizen in a democracy means ruling, which makes it necessary for individuals to be capable of doing so through participation by moral deliberation and mutual respect with others of the society. In order for this moral deliberation to happen, Gutmann (2005) states that education plays a pivotal role:
Whether consciously or not, democracies rely on educational systems to shape the way in which diverse individuals learn from one another—or fail to do so—both within and across generations. That is what education—for better or for worse—is about. (p. 347)

Traditional definitions of democracy in schooling tend to focus on the narrow idea of an isolated high school course on civics or conversations that take place only in social studies classes when studying governance structures. Education in a democratic society must encompass a deeper understanding in that schools should not only teach “about” democracy but provide experiences in the curriculum to “practice” it (Shields, 2009).

My contention is that education in and for democracy requires more than simply learning about systems of government or economic development. Indeed, I argue that to successfully prepare students to participate fully as citizens and leaders of a democratic society, our systems of education must take a much more comprehensive and holistic approach to the conceptualization and realization of democratic practice. (Shields, 2009, p. 5)

Education leaders need to foster true democratic practices by providing equitable educational experiences for all students. This can be addressed in schools by recognizing that issues of social justice exist in the classroom every day. Schools are bureaucratic institutions that engage in, consciously or unconsciously, policies and structures of power and inequity that can lead to the marginalization of some students. “Unless all children experience a sense of belonging in our schools, they are being educated in institutions that exclude and marginalize them, that perpetuate inequity and inequality rather than democracy and social justice” (Shields, 2004, p. 122). Central to this discussion for democratic schooling is the need for schools to retool their teaching and courses to address issues of power and privilege—to embed social justice into the foundation of curriculum, pedagogy, programs, and policies of schools (Brown, 2004).

How does school curriculum invite all students to participate in, and benefit from, the educational process? As a curriculum leader for a K-12 district, I would have a very difficult time answering that question in an adequate fashion. I believe a major area of concern in regard
to democratic schooling is the definition of what curriculum actually is in today’s schools. Due
to the accountability models imposed on schools and teachers, curriculum definitions have
become very narrow and mechanistic. Unfortunately, curriculum has come to mean state
standards, textbook content, or standardized testing preparation. I maintain that issues of social
justice can and should be addressed through the formal curriculum by understanding the role that
critical consciousness plays in providing students a “space” in which larger meanings of the
world can be created, and the role of “transformative” curriculum leaders who foster critical
pedagogy and dialogue in curriculum development.

Curriculum Knowledge and Pedagogy for Critical Consciousness

Research has highlighted the regulatory facets that high-stakes testing and accountability
measures have over pedagogy and the curriculum in three different areas (Au, 2007). Assessed
content is defined as what counts as legitimate knowledge, meaning, if a knowledge domain is
on the test, then it is declared legitimate. Control over the form that content knowledge is also
impacted as teachers “teach to the test.” Tests and accountability measures also impact teacher
pedagogy, as more teachers are turning away from learner centered activities such as field trips
and independent exploration, to teacher-led, scripted learning. I assert that if critical
consciousness were a priority of the curriculum, and critical pedagogy was encouraged as a
normalized practice of educators, high school students could contribute to building a more
inclusive society, one that questions knowledge and power, and “is self-directed to participate
fully in the production of ideas” (hooks, 2010, p. 43).
A curriculum that supports critical consciousness would be one that organizes its content around “big ideas.” An example would be found in the framework of “backwards design” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) which starts with reflection on the essential and enduring understandings teachers want their students to learn. This organization would allow high school teachers to engage their students in meaningful ways—allowing students the ability to bring their knowledge and lived experiences into the classroom. In order to connect and allow deeper meaning into content areas, Wiggins and McTighe (1998) emphasized, “Only by framing our teaching around valued questions and worthy performances can we overcome activity-based and coverage-oriented instruction and the resulting rote learning that produces formulaic answers and surface-level knowledge” (p. 27). While I believe that his form of planning curriculum to be a positive beginning, it does have a perilous aspect to it. The judgment of “valued questions” and “enduring understandings” falls to the developer of the curriculum. This is where the concepts of the “subject-centered classroom” (Palmer, 1998) and “transformative intellectual knowledge” (Sleeter, 2005) are essential when looking at fostering critical consciousness in the curriculum. Both Palmer and Sleeter illustrate the need that curriculum planners must examine the “big ideas” stressed by UbD and that its power to transform learning relies in the identification of “what” and “whose” ideas are of most worth.

The subject-centered classroom places the subject being learned at the center of the classroom, but not in an isolated existence from both teacher and student. This subject knowledge can rise above the tension of choosing either the teacher-centered or student-centered classroom, and can bring about real learning. Parker Palmer (1998), in his work, *The Courage to Teach*, calls this “a great thing” or “third thing” (p. 116), when looking at the curriculum. It is
knowledge of a subject that can transform the isolated entities of teacher and student into a
“community of truth.” As Palmer (1998) describes:

The subject-centered classroom is characterized by the fact that the third thing has a
presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and student alike accountable
for what they say and do. In such a classroom, there are no inert facts. The great thing is
so alive that teacher can turn into student or student to teacher, and either can make a
claim on the other in the name of that great thing. Here, teacher and students have a
power beyond themselves to contend with—the power of a subject that transcends our
self-absorption and refuses to be reduced to our claims about it. (p. 117)

When a student is invited to check and challenge knowledge that is brought to the center of the
classroom, it provides them direct access to that knowledge and allows them to become more
personally engaged in the learning process. “A subject-centered classroom also honors one of our
most vital needs as teachers: to invigorate those connections between our subjects, our students,
and our souls that help make us whole again and again” (Palmer, 1998, p. 120).

Transformative intellectual knowledge, as described by Sleeter (2005), goes beyond
“personal opinion or experience” to “draw attention to understandings that challenge many
mainstream assumptions and that reenvision the world in ways that would benefit historically
oppressed communities and support justice” (p. 83). The counternarrative is also important to
consider in curriculum as it not only provides “facts and important people who are marginalized
in traditional academic knowledge, but also historical accounts and interpretations of facts that
run counter to those of the mainstream” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 89). If this aspect of curriculum was
considered when examining knowledge in mainstream academic disciplines, traditional school
knowledge would not be used as a normalized explanation of social order, but rather questioned
to bring about a new understanding of traditional knowledge and a new social order. This
questioning is how we would foster critical consciousness within our high school students.

Unless school curriculums start to challenge our students to think critically about the knowledge
that they are exposed to, the social order will be replicated. Issues of power and domination will continue to exist for our students in the future because education will not have given them the opportunity to develop the tools for action to change their society. Curriculums that foster critical consciousness would provide our students the awareness and sophistication that they need to become the problem solvers for their generation.

**Pedagogy for Critical Consciousness**

Typically, pedagogy is not thought of in terms of a curriculum priority in high school curricula. It is usually defined as the teaching act—the enactment of curriculum. This act is usually left up to the discretion of the individual teacher, and not necessarily a formal part of curriculum priorities in education. Critical pedagogy, born out of critical theory, is more than learning a few teaching strategies and knowledge required by standards or textbooks. Critical pedagogy, as described by Giroux (1997), is an “educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (p. 259). The literature on critical pedagogy is extensive (Endres, 2002; Freire, 2010; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008; Martin, 2008; Shor, 1992; Young, 1988) and has many different definitions and interpretations that describe it. To consider definitions of critical pedagogy, one must reflect on definitions of what curriculum actually is. Pinar and Grumet (1976) refer to the idea of “currere” the actual Latin base for the word curriculum—meaning “the race.” They assert that the definition of curriculum was shifted from the actual process of looking inward to create meaning (the process), to the “racetrack” (the product). In other words, students have been separated from the actual curriculum. Grumet (1992) asserts that teachers cannot separate their students’ experiences in the world—that learning is a phenomenological experience. “We cannot
talk about education without talking about a dialectic between person and world, a dialectic that holds all the mysteries and ironies of paradox” (p. 31). She further asserts that learning cannot be an isolated experience that separates the emotional from the intellectual:

Further depersonalization and fragmentation of human experience distort it and estrange us not only from each other but from ourselves as well. When we refuse to reduce the educational process to training, the assembly-line production of skills and socialized psyches standardized to society’s measure, we must forsake the static and consult the educational experience of one person. Thus, my first request of a reconceptualized curriculum is the safe return of my own voice. (p. 31)

Critical pedagogy allows teachers to study their students in order to better understand them, but it also allows students to understand themselves and others more deeply. Kincheloe’s (2008) definition captures what schools could and should be:

Critical pedagogy wants to connect education to that feeling, to embolden teachers and students to act in ways that make a difference and to push humans to new levels of social and cognitive achievement previously deemed impossible. Critical pedagogy is an ambitious entity that seeks nothing less than a form of educational adventurism that takes us where nobody’s gone before. (p. 2)

I believe that critical pedagogy is a necessary facet in the development of critical consciousness in high school students. I suggest, like Endres (2002), that “critical pedagogy and liberal learning are not only compatible, but mutually dependent, and that together they offer an alternative to education defined by preparation for occupational roles or cultural transmission” (p. 59). More importantly, critical pedagogy allows the curriculum to consider the students that are in our high school classrooms and foster deeper relationships with them. How does critical pedagogy accomplish this connection? Engaging students in purposeful, meaningful dialogue that questions existing knowledge and social realities provides teachers with the necessary information to understand their perceptions of themselves, their relationships with others, and their social reality (Kincheloe, 2008).
Dialogue

Dialogue as a pedagogical tool has a vast literature base as well, and is primarily associated with the idea of critical pedagogy (Applebee, 1996; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Fisher, 2007; Greene, 1975; hooks, 2010; Jackson, 2008; Shields, 2004; Skidmore, 2006; Young, 1988). I suggest, as Applebee (1996) states, “the problem of curriculum planning, then, is the problem of establishing a conversational domain and fostering relevant conversations within it” (p. 44). Dialogue is different from discussion. In a discussion, different viewpoints are presented and defended, usually with the result being a “correct answer.” Dialogue seeks to explore complex issues from many points of view, foster reflection, not agreement, and develop a broader understanding of the issue. Speaking is vital to thinking and talk is essential to literacy and to our ability to form relationships with others (Lipman, 1993). When students collaborate in thoughtful dialogue, it promotes the vision of community in the classroom and supports the belief that there are many voices to be heard, and multiple viewpoints to be considered (Fisher, 2007). This approach to inquiry and knowledge fosters respect, trust, and the ability to collaborate with others. Community in the classroom is developed by helping students see connections within themselves and others and allows space for mutual understanding to take place. The curriculum must consider a broader definition of thinking, and allow our students to practice and develop what Fisher (2007) calls, “emotional intelligence—the capacity to be self-aware and caring towards others” (p. 619). Curriculum that reduces thinking in the classroom to binary bits of content knowledge that is “tested” destroys the opportunity to foster more inclusive classrooms and ignores the importance of “community” in the educational context.
Curriculum that encourages teachers and students to engage in critical dialogue allows for the deeper development of their respective identities. Students can learn to express their views with confidence, raise doubts and questions, and challenge thinking of others in respectful ways. Literature has described how dialogue can offer students an opportunity to rehearse social criticism (Giroux, 1988), how cultural and identity issues can be treated during dialogic processes (Endres, 2002; Nieto, 2004) and how issues related to gender and sexual orientation can be critically engaged when dialogue is student-centered (Yep, 1998). Students benefit when they are offered opportunities to engage in critical dialogue with their peers, as they are “heard” in the learning process.

Teachers are provided the opportunity to develop their identity as “a concerned other” (Skidmore, 2006) and are empowered to be a guide and coach of students as a member of a community of learners. Teachers are social agents, and must be empowered to embrace that identity, as “culture, race, class, and gender forces have shaped all aspects of the pedagogical act” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 2). Dialogue provides teachers a “voice” in the classroom and the school—one that has been ignored in the current climate of accountability:

Teachers need to be able and willing to separate the politics from the mandates. Without thinking teachers, we do not have thinking schools. Without thinking schools, we do not have thinking students or future citizens who can think. Teachers who timidly follow and obey mandates without considering the pros and cons and political agendas attached to the mandates are dangerous. Thinking and questioning teachers will not only tweak and improve our school systems, but will work to improve our democracy and model the responsibilities of all citizens. (Page, 2004, p. 219)

By incorporating critical pedagogy as an expectation of the curriculum, high schools will deepen students’ ability to think critically and provide them with the necessary consciousness to navigate the world around them. Critical pedagogy understands the importance of recognizing the complexity of learning, and is essential in providing our students with a rigorous and
transformative education. Curriculum leaders need to understand the importance of critical pedagogy and foster ways that it is purposefully prioritized within the curriculum for high school students.

**Leadership Needed to Foster Critical Consciousness**

The importance of leadership within our schools in order to transform them has been discussed heavily in scholarly literature (Bates, 1983; De Cremer, 2007; Dinham, 2005; Krüger, Witziers, & Sleegers, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Louis, 2008; McCarthy, 1999; Neuman & Pelchat, 2001; Petzko, 2008; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Wise, 2008). Most of these research studies focus on the dimensions of leadership and study leadership characteristics that will bring about increased student academic achievement or outcomes, but are usually defined as greater achievement on test scores, positive school climate, or reforms made to the structure of the school day.

Curriculum leadership with a social justice lens is needed to foster critical consciousness. Linking education and social justice is paramount in creating educational experiences in where all students have opportunities to succeed (Shields & Mohan, 2008). It is not enough to be knowledgeable of models of curriculum structures or delivery models. It takes what Shields (2008) calls a “clear sense of our own sexual, racial, cultural and class identities.” It involves a deep knowledge of self and what directs us and what our position is on issues of social justice. Starratt (2005), as cited by Shields (2009), stated that a place to begin for educational leaders is to have “absolute regard” for one another involved in education—not just other educators, but students, parents and community members. This regard has to be present before meaningful interactions among individuals who come from different backgrounds and perspectives can take place.
It is also helpful to utilize the leadership framework supplied by Furman and Shields (2005) describing the dimensions of leadership necessary for supporting social justice and democratic community. While the authors focus on five different leadership dimensions, the “pedagogical dimension” and the key issues and questions surrounding it provide a starting place for leaders to examine curriculum in a different way. The key question asked by the authors in this dimension is, “How can school leaders influence the conceptions of curriculum and pedagogy to promote dialogue about and understanding of social justice and deep democracy?” (Furman & Shields, 2005) This can be accomplished by questioning current curricular and assessment practices which marginalize or alienate some students, and placing a value on conversations that deepen curriculum understandings for teachers and students. However, it is more important to be, what Dantley (2003) calls, “purpose-driven” in leadership practices. “Purposive leaders understand the cacophony of voices that commingle to speak a variety of legitimate perspectives in the learning community and in fact endorse the use of the cultural richness that grounds these voices as fodder for curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 289). More specifically, it is not just enough to discuss or bring forth curricular policies or practices that may exclude students from real learning, curriculum leaders must be seen as transformative leaders to bring about action that will change the “status quo” and invigorate learning for students.

**Transformative Leadership**

Transformative leadership, as described by Shields (2008), is “the need for social betterment, for enhancing equity, and for a thorough reshaping of knowledge and belief structures.” (p. 6). This is not to say that transformative curriculum leaders are not interested in promoting academic excellence through the curriculum, but seeks to include a deeper education
and leadership that prepares students for participation in democratic community. This leadership calls for the courage to act as an activist in reinventing the learning environments in our schools.

Transformative leadership with a curricular focus seeks to broaden the definition of learning and make it meaningful for students. Students must learn to connect and establish relationships not only with others around them, but to the very subjects they are learning (Shields, 2009). To transfer theory into practice, transformative curriculum leadership would not only consider the “what” that is taught in curriculum, but carefully considers the “how” as well. Henderson and Gornick (2007) suggest a framework that engages leaders to foster five phases of transformative curriculum leadership: (a) enacting constructivist activities in the classroom as well as other educational settings, (b) practicing critical reflection on these activities, (c) promoting design, development, and evaluation activities that support critical constructivist activities, (d) creating supportive learning communities to sustain these constructivist activities, and (e) practicing action inquiry and formal inquiry to support the reflective practices of the first four stages. These authors encourage these five phases to be implemented with collaboration and deliberation, practical inquiry, imaginative planning and critical review (Henderson & Gornick, 2007). I believe that these phases can be integrated with the concepts discussed below that Shields (2009) states as being hallmarks for teaching and leadership practices that foster “inclusive and deeply democratic education” (p. 152). “Curriculum as conversation” (Grumet, 1995) means that students are working with the teacher to make sense of things being studied with the goal of not determining a correct response, but instead a deeper understanding through interaction and dialogue. “Attending to students’ lived experiences” and “a subject-centered curriculum” are concepts where we as curriculum leaders and teachers help students deconstruct the content-centered curriculum and reconstructing it through a relationship with it by allowing
students to bring their lived experiences into learning. “Curriculum as dialogue” and “pedagogy as relationship” are concepts that view educator’s beliefs and attitudes toward their student’s ability to learn as well as providing the sphere for both the teacher and student to interact through meaningful and unique dialogue. Both approaches, Henderson and Gornick (2007) and Shields (2009), provide curriculum leaders with conceptual frameworks in working with curriculum that provide learning opportunities and that are more meaningful and inclusive for our students.

Transformational leadership presents challenges and takes courage, particularly in our current climate of accountability. Leadership studies (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Burch, 2007; McGhee & Nelson, 2005; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008) have documented the detrimental effects of accountability measures (standardized testing) on superintendents, district curriculum leaders, and principals. A culture of fear has taken over as perceived leadership effectiveness has been reduced to test scores and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Curriculum leaders may fear losing their positions, losing school or district resources, or fear alienation from their professional peers. However, as Shields (2009) reminds us, “Whenever we see inequitable or discriminatory treatment, it is our duty as educational leaders to respond. We cannot simply take the safe course, remain silent, or even just follow the rules. We must take a stand for justice” (p. 187).

Discomfort regarding the expression of conflict can be a challenge for a curriculum leader, even when the conflict is considered “healthy” for the organization to learn and grow (Shields, 2009).

The ongoing presence of dichotomous language and labels such as pass or fail, win or lose, slow or smart, gifted or special education is a strong reminder of the ways in which we continue to think about education in competitive and dichotomous ways. (Shields, 2009, p. 140)

Other challenges include administrators who are unprepared to address inequalities due to lack of awareness, a mismatch of the demographics of the profession and the communities that
they serve, and a lack of social justice focus in district and school policy direction (Marshall, 2004).

**Summary**

This chapter provided theories and research supporting the idea that curriculum priorities in high schools must be examined and transformed to support a larger context of learning for our high school students. Initially, literature regarding curriculum theories that examine curriculum from three different vantages (curriculum as knowledge transmission, curriculum as “political text,” and curriculum as praxis) was presented in order to understand definitions of curriculum that exist for curriculum leaders. Next, literature defining critical consciousness and its importance to support the larger goals of schooling in our society was discussed. Accountability policies and practices that thwart the development of critical consciousness in curriculum priorities were reviewed, and then literature supporting the belief that critical consciousness is essential to democratic learning was presented. Additionally, writings to support the view that teaching and learning interactions in high school classrooms must encompass more than the definition of “traditional” content curriculum and knowledge to support current economic and political agendas was emphasized. Finally, literature and studies relating how leadership with a social justice lens is necessary in order to provide our students with curricular experiences that empower them to understand the relationships between themselves and others in the world was presented. Schools, and more importantly, students, need educational environments that broaden the horizon of possibility and liberate them from the confines of their own realities to construct a future of engagement in the larger society.

The literature and research discussed in this chapter of the study provide a context as to what curriculum could and should be for our high school students in order to prepare them for
participation in a democratic society. This literature and research was utilized to create a theoretical framework (Figure 1) for analysis for the study. This framework outlines the key concepts of examining schooling for accountability (left) and the direct outcomes of leadership and curriculum promoting a one-directional static result of winners and losers versus the priority of democratic schooling (right) with critical consciousness as a focus and critical pedagogy fostering two-directional dynamic dialogue, relationships, an awareness of “other” and self, and a deeper understanding of the content knowledge studied. The analysis of curriculum leadership responses in this study provided a representation of the current nature of curriculum priorities in high schools, and offered insight into conceptual understandings of leadership in light of accountability. This process is what Henderson and Gornick (2007) call “curriculum wisdom problem solving” (p. iv). It was my hope that this literature, in conjunction with the analysis of responses from participants, provided an accurate rendering of today’s high school curriculum priorities and direction for the future. This research attempted to understand the current reality and develop a consciousness that is needed to fully understand “curriculum wisdom.”

Curriculum wisdom problem solving cannot be forced; it is an invitational paradigm that must be advanced one person at a time by dedicated educators who appreciate the many benefits of teaching for real understanding. (Henderson & Gornick, 2007, p. iv)

This research provided potential direction for pre-service programs, policy, curriculum, and leadership arenas if the belief that education is vital to our society’s democratic well-being.
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework.
Chapter 3

Methodology

“Qualitative researchers are intrigued with the complexity of social interactions as expressed in daily life and with the meanings the participants themselves attribute to these interactions” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 2)

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the perceptions of district high school curriculum leaders and to understand how they conceptualize their roles with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. Critical consciousness, for the purposes of this study, is critical thinking that involves engaging students in “the continuous improvement and transformation of self and reality” (Kincheleoe, 2008, p. 72). It requires teachers and students to look critically at knowledge about the world, recognizing multiple viewpoints and oppressions, and taking action to reconstruct their realities.

This section includes an overview of methodology, personal standpoint, ethical considerations, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations. In order to better understand the perceptions of district curriculum leaders and their conceptualized role in creating and leading curricular priorities in the current climate of accountability, and to the extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for students, the following research questions provided direction for the study:

1. What are the current curriculum priorities in high schools?
2. How are curriculum priorities determined in high schools?
3. What is the role of curriculum leaders in establishing curriculum priorities?
4. What role does critical consciousness play in the development of curriculum?
5. In what ways do/can district curriculum leaders foster critical consciousness practices within high school curriculum?
Overview of Methodology

Selection of a research approach is a crucial decision made by the researcher. The objective of this decision is to select the approach that offers the “best fit” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 17) for the questions considered by the study. Determining which research approach to use to conduct a study is affected by several factors. The researcher conceptualizes the study using a particular set of “assumptions about the world,” the topic selected for study, and “methodological preferences” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 37). The researcher looks for the approach that will provide the best match or “best fit” that will guide decisions regarding research design, data collection and reporting, and eventually, responses to the research questions (Maxwell, 2005).

Qualitative research is interested in (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This research methodology was appropriate as I was interested in understanding the perceptions of curriculum leaders in their current interactions with the curriculum and conceptualization of their roles in light of accountability measures. Further support for this methodology was provided by Maxwell (2005), who stated that, “The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers” (p. 22). Qualitative research was more beneficial for this study than quantitative research as I wanted to understand curriculum priorities and conceptualized roles of curriculum leaders in the context of accountability “We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it—whether this context is their home, family, or work” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40).

The type of qualitative research I utilized was a phenomenological approach, which was appropriate as I was interested in understanding the lived experiences and conceptualized roles
of curriculum leaders as they lead curriculum efforts during an age of accountability and sought to understand their role in providing opportunities for students to experience critical consciousness in the high school curriculum. Wiersma (2000) elaborated that phenomenology is an approach that “emphasizes that the meaning of reality is, in essence, in the “eyes and minds of the beholders, the way the individuals being studied perceive their experience” (p. 238). By researching this phenomenon, I described what all of the participants have in common as they experience prioritizing curriculum foci for high school students (Creswell, 2007). This approach was correct, as it is important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices and policies for the future (Creswell, 2007). By researching curriculum leadership perspectives in light of accountability, new knowledge was gained that can inform future policy and practices for schools in curriculum planning and refinement, as well as leadership development.

To understand leadership perspectives in light of accountability and to what extent they support the development of critical consciousness in high school curricula meant embracing Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological procedures, which focus less on the interpretation of the researcher, and more on the descriptions and experiences of the participants. Phenomenological research encompasses the following attributes for research:

1. It recognizes the value of qualitative designs and methodologies. Studies of human experiences are not approachable through quantitative approaches.
2. It focuses on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts.
3. It searches for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations.
4. It obtains obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews.
5. It regards the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations.
It formulates questions and problems that reflect interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher.

It views experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 20).

To accomplish this phenomenological approach, I utilized an online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group with participants in order to gain a deeper understanding of others’ experiences and perspectives in prioritizing curriculum. By using three different ways of gathering individual understandings, I investigated the experience of curriculum leadership as the participants lived it (Van Manen, 1990).

Traditional phenomenological research utilizes what Husserl (1970), as cited in Moustakas (1994), calls epoche, or bracketing. This traditional first step in phenomenological research meant that I had to put aside my own experiences as a curriculum leader and view curriculum leadership with a “fresh perspective” to the extent possible. This definition meant setting aside my understandings, biases, and judgments as a curriculum leader and initiating the research interviews with an unbiased, open existence.

This is not only critical for scientific determination but for living itself—the opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning, not being hampered by voices of the past that tell us the way things are or voices of the present that direct our thinking. The Epoche is a way of looking and being, an unfettered stance. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85)

Moustakas (1994) stated that this portion of the research is challenging to achieve perfectly, and requires focused concentration and patience. It required the ability to reflect and self-meditate as I considered my preconceptions and biases, and consciously cleared my mind of distortions. In doing so, I would attain the fundamental understanding of “pure consciousness.”

What remains after epoche is, “that the actual nature and essence of things will be disclosed more fully, [and] will reveal themselves to us and enable us to find a clearing and light to knowledge and truth” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).
While I acknowledge Husserl’s aim of epoche and science of “bracketing,” I found what Duarte (2000) calls a “Freireian rewriting of Husserl” (p. 187) a more useful approach to construct meaning in this study. In the strictest sense, Husserl’s definition of “consciousness” involves intentionality as “the unity of one consciousness,” a singular act of constructing meaning in the world (Duarte, 2000). I used Duarte’s interpretation of Freire in regards to phenomenology as being a “co-intentional” act of producing meaning through dialogue with others. “Given Husserl’s depiction of intentionality, we should not underestimate the significance of Freire’s describing co-intentionality as a common reflection” (Duarte, 2000, p. 186). As I engaged in dialogue with the participants of this study, I experienced a critical consciousness of “thinking together” (p. 180) to fully understand the perceptions and experiences of the curriculum leaders.

**Personal Standpoint**

In early July 2010, I began a position as an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum for a K-12 school district south of Chicago. Prior to accepting the position, I was an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum in a 9-12 high school district in the northern suburbs of Chicago. As the district curriculum leader in that position, I was challenged by my leadership peers as to my views of curriculum priorities encompassing more than just a “test mentality.” Consequently, I found it harder each day to lead in a system that challenged my own perceptions of curriculum priorities without any kind of room for discussion with my peers. Within a matter of months, my position as an assistant superintendent was eliminated due to “budget cuts.” As a school leader, I had never had anything like this happen to me, and it made me question my abilities and positioning. This event was instrumental in having me reflect on leadership and curriculum priorities in light of accountability measures, and question if any district curriculum leaders in
high school districts had experienced any common experiences, as I had, in their day-to-day functions as curriculum leaders (Creswell, 2007).

In this research study I was interested in describing, examining, and understanding curriculum priorities of high schools and the conceptualization of the leadership role at the district level. I wanted to explore how, or if, curriculum priorities consider a wider definition than “ACT testing skills,” and provide high school students to think critically about the world around them. I am an educator and district leader who believes that high schools must be places where the public sphere is discovered and encouraged, and that students must have opportunities to develop their thinking in order to participate in that sphere. I approached this research with a critical perspective, as I was concerned and wanted to examine the extent that we allow our students to bring their lived experiences to the conversations in classrooms, challenge their assumptions about others, and foster thinking about equity and justice (Capper, 1998). I believe that the current accountability measures placed on high schools are encouraging conformity, a culture of performance, and leading to an abandonment of fostering critical consciousness, not only for our students, but also for our leaders.

I assert that curriculum leadership must involve being politically aware of how neoliberal agendas can be an obstacle to student-centered curriculum. Current school improvement efforts that focus on a “performance culture” foster the impression that school leaders should act more like corporate CEO’s, than that of leaders who advocate for the “authentic education” of their students (Anderson, 2009). I ascribe, like Freire (2010), that:

Our traditional curriculum, disconnected from life, centered on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity, could never develop a critical consciousness. Indeed, its own naïve dependence on high-sounding phrases, reliance on rote, and tendency toward abstractness actually intensified our naïveté. (p. 33)
School leaders must be concerned with how students engage in curriculum and provide students opportunities to search for deeper understandings that will lead to justice and compassion. All students must have access to this vision of curriculum, and curriculum leaders must take up the role of social justice advocates. While I acknowledge that some leaders may not have the knowledge or awareness of the importance of a social justice lens in curriculum leadership, I was interested in discovering if there is a critical mass of educators who can, and do, advocate for curriculum that fosters critical consciousness, despite accountability measures.

**Ethical Considerations**

“In qualitative research, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 230). Because I was interested in collecting authentic, personal data from participants regarding their personal perspectives on curriculum priorities in light of accountability, and to what extent those priorities include fostering critical consciousness in high school students, I took measures to address the ethical issues that commonly arise in qualitative research. Some ethical considerations of this phenomenological research were the effects on the participants as a result of engaging in this study, effects on the institutions in which the research is being conducted, and the effect on the researcher (Van Manen, 1990).

First, this study was designed to eliminate as much as possible risk to participants by initially disclosing the purpose of the study, seeking voluntary participants, and assuring their confidentiality and anonymity. Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB), and was also obtained from the individual participants. The identification of participants and their schools was
not made public, and pseudonyms were utilized, so that the true identity of the participants was not detectable.

“The researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the informant(s)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 201). In this research study, there were no known risks to subjects who participate in the online surveys, as all information that was gathered was done anonymously. Risks to participants who volunteered for an individual or focus group interview included expressing honest feedback regarding the current climate of school reform and accountability made them unpopular with their peers, or introduced conflicting perspectives in the group. I minimized these risks by editing from transcriptions any identifying information regarding the participant’s schools or districts. Confidentiality of the session was an expectation of consent. All participants utilized pseudonyms, and all participants could have declined to respond to any question during the interview, or “opt out” at any time in the process. During the focus group interview, I focused the discussions on how these curriculum leaders conceptualized their role as a school leader in a general sense, and did not focus on specific details about individual districts or specific district policies.

The researcher was expected to protect the research process, as well as the participants. I achieved this as I disclosed to the participants (when obtaining participant consent) the purpose, process, and nature of the study. Accurate data collection and the reporting of findings, as well as the use of integrity in interpretation and drawing conclusions, provided evidence that an ethical study was conducted.

Once respondents indicated a willingness to participate, an online survey was given to them. While surveys are not commonly utilized in qualitative research, I utilized one to promote further participation in this study, as well as providing the entire group an anonymous opportunity
to engage in the study by asking semi-structured questions that they responded to online at their convenience. Following the survey, individual interview responses were gathered from volunteer participants. With respondent permission, individual interviews were digitally audio-taped for transcription (no dissemination) purposes. To ensure confidentiality and non-indentification, participants selected psydonyms. All audio taped interview and transcription files were identified by pseudonyms, and saved to a web-based off-site server during the process of analysis. Prior to the focus group interviews, I made participants aware that the information shared was confidential and should not leave the room. All participants chose a pseudonym, and this protocol was included in the consent form. The focus group interview was audio/video taped utilizing a digital media device known as a FlipCam. Only I had access to the interviews, and the files were password-protected and encrypted. I coded all audio/digital audio files based on date and pseudonym, and the responses were only utilized by me for research purposes.

In phenomenological research, one strives to access the “essence of the experience” from individuals. “A trusting relationship, where both [the participant and researcher] are committed to better understanding the experience being explored, allows for greater access to the richness of their experience” (Worthen, 2002, p. 140). Due to the fact that I have been a district curriculum leader for the past 7 years, my understanding of the complexities in navigating accountability measures and prior experience with the group of participants assisted me in quickly establishing a comfortable rapport, and allowed me to be sensitive to the broad environment and general climate in which the participants conceptualized their roles as curriculum leaders. I was aware that during this study, the research could have had a “transformative effect,” and that the research itself is a “form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness,” not only for me (the researcher), but also for the participants (Van Manen, 1990, p. 163). Although I
was an advocate for the importance of critical consciousness in curriculum planning and leadership, the curriculum leaders who participated in this study were not jeopardized by my advocacy lens in that I had no power over them in any way.

Finally, I made participants aware of the benefits of this study. My hope was that the survey and interview feedback and the data analysis contributed to filling the gap in the research and informed each participant’s knowledge of curriculum to support critical consciousness as a priority for high school students. Curriculum leadership perspectives in today’s accountability climate have not been captured in depth to provide a dialogue regarding the nature of curriculum in high school classrooms in light of current accountability measures. This research was beneficial to provide an arena for honest conversations regarding accountability and its impact to the curriculum of high schools and outcomes for students. The ability to be “critically conscious” of the world around us, both for students and for school leaders, is necessary for individuals who will engage and relate to a larger picture of the world and promote a socially just society.

**Participant Selection**

This study was conducted to discover from district curriculum leaders the perceptions and meanings they construct regarding curriculum leadership in light of accountability measures. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the participants of this study. Patton (2002) stated that, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 230). Creswell (2007) stated that purposeful sampling is important, as it can inform an understanding of the research problem as well as provide consistency in respect to the method of approach. This study utilized a criterion strategy of sampling at the participant level. The general criteria that was used for the selection of all participants was that each participant was a district curriculum leader within an Illinois school district and all had experienced leading curriculum
priorities during the current climate of accountability. Other criteria included a willingness to participate in individual interviews or a focus group, granting permission to be video/audio recorded, and permission to publish data utilized in this study.

The participants are all members of a curriculum leadership network that was informally created in 1980 called Chicago Area Directors of Curriculum and Assessment (CADCA). This group of approximately 65 curriculum leaders (38 females and 27 males) meets on a monthly basis to network and collaborate on various curricular initiatives in the high school arena. I felt that this sample would be appropriate for the study, as this Illinois high-profile high school curriculum network is afforded a “voice” in providing input, at both the state and federal level, on political schooling reforms such as the re-authorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the Common Core Standards, and the state’s standardized testing measures. It was beneficial for this study to understand their contextual references for the outcomes of high school education, as well as their perceived role in determining curriculum priorities for high schools in light of such power.

All the participants of CADCA had the opportunity to participate in the initial online survey. This was to ensure that the sample size was adequate to maximize the information for the study (Merriam, 2009). While the invitation to engage in this study was sent out three times, only 24 individuals (or 37%) elected to participate. The samples for the individual and focus group interviews were smaller as 10 individual interviews were gathered, and four individuals participated in the focus group. This small number of participants was widely supported in the literature about phenomenological research. Maxwell (2005) stated, “Qualitative researchers typically study a relatively small number of individuals or situations, and preserve the individuality of each of these in their analyses” (p. 22). Qualitative researchers seek to work with
smaller samples of individuals in their context and study them more deeply to yield rich qualitative data, rather than quantitative statistical significance (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to more deeply understand the perspectives of curriculum leaders in conceptualizing their roles in determining curriculum priorities in light of accountability measures, the interviews (both the focus group and individual) provided additional data that were not captured in the initial survey.

**Data Collection**

Phenomenological research was appropriate to address meanings and perspectives of research participants. This study sought to understand the perceptions of curriculum leaders in their role of identifying curriculum priorities for high school students and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness in the curriculum. The primary data collection methods for this study were an initial online survey and face-to-face in-depth interviews with volunteer participants both in the form of individual interviews and a focus group interview. In this form of interviewing the focus is on “the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 113).

Initially, all individuals in the sample received a recruitment letter and consent form (Appendix A). Gaining the trust and support of research participants is critical to informed and ethical inquiry and phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Merriam, 2009). Once consent had been secured from the participants, an online survey (Appendix B) was given to provide an anonymous forum to answer the research questions that established leadership perspectives on what curriculum priorities were in place at the high school level, how they were determined, the role of curriculum leaders in this process, and the participants’ understandings of critical consciousness. The data gleaned from this survey
provided more information regarding the sample through general information (number of years as a curriculum leader, size of school district, etc.), as well as perceptual data from the curriculum leader. The questions were open-ended, with spaces for participants to answer in their “own words” and provide their own meaning. The reason that the initial survey was given was to gather preliminary data about the sample and provide an opportunity for all in the sample to participate in the study, as some might not wish to be interviewed face-to-face. My hope was that the online survey would “awaken further interest and concern and account for passionate involvement with whatever is being experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59) by the participants, and lead to the involvement of individuals in individual interviews and a focus group.

Participants were invited to partake in either as individual interview or focus group, or both, in the initial recruitment letter. Participants contacted me via e-mail if they were interested in participating, and all who contacted me were interviewed.

Data for this research study were also gathered in the form of 10 individual interviews, as interviewing is necessary “when behaviors, feelings, or how people interpret the world cannot be observed” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). Once I received consent (Appendix C), I approached the interviews at a more “conversational level,” to better describe and capture the understandings of the participants (Kvale, 2006). Semi-structured interview questions were utilized as they were guided by the research issues to be explored (Merriam, 2009). Questions crafted included issues regarding curriculum priorities, leadership in light of accountability, and how critical thinking is fostered by the curriculum (Appendix D). However, I remained flexible and open to asking additional questions or probes when needed for clarification, to deepen meaning, or to continue along an emerging path of interest that seemed important to the research study. During the individual interviews, I took field notes during the interviews. Rather than trying to capture the
participants’ responses verbatim, the notes focused more on my observations of the participant as they responded, identified questions that arose as the interview unfolded, key words or phrases that were repeated or emphasized by the participant, and topics or statements raised that required clarification (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for later analysis.

A focus group interview with four participants took place after the individual interviews. Individuals indicated a willingness to participate by e-mailing me, per the initial recruitment letter, and all granted consent prior to the interview (Appendix E). The focus group interview was appropriate as all participants had knowledge as curriculum leaders in the current climate of accountability, as well as the importance of examining their understandings of critical consciousness as a curriculum priority. A focus group interview afforded me the time to go back and probe more deeply into the responses from individual interviews (Creswell, 2007). A focus group interview (Appendix F) was beneficial for this study as interaction among the interviewees yielded the best information as the participants were similar and cooperative with each other as they were from the same collegial network, and benefited from “hearing” each other’s perceptions on curriculum leadership (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). The purpose of the focus group interview was to stimulate each other to articulate their perspectives, and possibly realize what their own views were on how they conceptualized their roles as curriculum leaders (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). The focus group interview was video/audio taped and transcribed for later analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data that has been collected for the study with the practical goal of answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009). For this
phenomenological study, it meant using the information gathered in the survey and interviews to understand the perceptions of district curriculum leaders and their role in leading curriculum priorities in light of accountability measures, and to what extent those priorities include fostering critical consciousness. A structured approach to data analysis proved to be beneficial (Creswell, 2007), and Moustakas (1994) outlined a step-by-step process that was utilized when analyzing the data, known as the “modified van Kaam method.” It included listing every relevant statement about the experience, placing equal value on all statements, and placing them in groups (Horizontalization), testing each statement to ensure that it was essential to the experience and eliminating any overlapping or vague statements (Reduction and Elimination); gathering relevant statements into clusters and themes (Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents); checking validity of the statements to ensure that they were compatible with other participant experiences (Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation); developing textural descriptions including specific quotes from transcriptions (Individual Textural Description); developing descriptions of the context or setting that influenced the participants experiences (Individual Structural Description); and developing descriptions of the statements and experiences of each individual for “meanings and essences” of the experience, incorporating themes (Textural-Structural Description; Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121).

As described above, this study employed coding and clustering in order to analyze the data. Common and related statements were grouped into major categories and were organized on a matrix spreadsheet in order to provide clarity when examining the data. This facilitated spotting commonalities and relationships, missing data, and data that did not follow a pattern (Krathwohl, 1998). Finally, from the structural and textural description, I developed a
“Composite Description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121), which focuses on the common experiences of the participants and that presents the “essence” of the phenomenon—how curriculum leaders perceive the creation of curriculum priorities and to the extent that those priorities foster the ability for our high school students to engage in critical consciousness. This was provided by an in-depth analysis of the data in light of the theoretical framework (Figure 1). This narrative utilized “thick description” (Miles & Huberman, 1984), and what Denzin (2005) encompassed as “detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships so that the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard” (p. 83).

Trustworthiness

“Trustworthiness” is a term utilized by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to describe qualitative research that is “rigorous” in nature, and one that I am most comfortable using as a researcher. Creswell (2007) recommends that researchers “employ accepted strategies to document the ‘accuracy’ of their studies” (p. 207), as it is not enough to simply state validation terms or perspectives. I utilized triangulation, peer review, member-checking, rich-thick description, and the clarification of my perspective within the research process as purposeful strategies to maintain the credibility and rigor of my study. Additionally, this study provided participants with opportunities to reinforce the authenticity of this study.

Triangulation was achieved by the fact that I used multiple sources of data (survey, focus group, and individual interviews) and multiple theories to corroborate evidence from different sources to illuminate themes or perspectives (Creswell, 2007). Peer-review was utilized by having one of my doctoral classmates act as a third-party professional who examined my research design, and played “devil’s advocate “in regards to my methods and interpretations, as well as listening to my concerns. Peer-review logs were kept in order to document these sessions.
(Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Member-checking took place after both the individual and focus group interviews. As Creswell (2007) suggested, all participants received the transcript of the interview and my preliminary analyses of the data in order to judge the accuracy and provide “alternative observations or interpretations” (p. 209). For transferability of the study, thick descriptive data was utilized in the findings narrative “so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 19). Finally, I made clear from the onset of the research study my perspective on the research, as I commented on my past experiences and orientations that have likely shaped the approach to the study (Merriam, 2009).

The focus group and individual interviews in this study provided authenticity for the study. Through dialogue with other participants in the study, some individuals (including me) constructed and reconstructed their beliefs regarding curriculum priorities and critical consciousness. This was displayed by the comments and questions posed to me during the interview process. This aspect of the study secured “ontological authentication” in which consciousness about an experience is raised, or divided consciousness is integrated to provide a more sophisticated construction of the experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). One of the goals of this study was to increase the appreciation and awareness of critical consciousness in curriculum priorities and curriculum leadership needed in today’s climate of accountability. While all leaders did not engage in this experience, I witnessed three who did.

Additionally, the focus group provided opportunities for individuals in the study to hear other’s perceptions and become educated about other’s positioning and values regarding the curriculum and leadership. Lincoln and Guba (1986) refer to this as “educative authentication.” This study provided an opportunity for curriculum leaders to become “educated” in a variety of
perspectives regarding curriculum priorities for high school students. Curriculum leaders are “gatekeepers” and have access to influence and educate a number of stakeholder audiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). “As such, they can act to increase the sophistication of their respective constituencies” (p. 23). Another goal of this study was for curriculum leaders to act upon the information that they might construct after participating in this study, and invite other stakeholders in increasing their consciousness regarding what curricular experiences our students should be engaged in to foster democratic education. Due to the limited consciousness about the importance of critical consciousness in fostering a culture of democratic community by the curriculum leaders, it was uncertain if this goal was attained.

**Significance of Research**

Curriculum leaders at the district level are important to study, as they are charged with the responsibility of facilitating curricular outcomes for the schools in their district. The reduction of curriculum to a “test-score” mentality is depriving our high school students of the opportunities to develop critical consciousness which is necessary to fully engage in a democratic society.

This study sought to fill a gap in the literature about leadership for democratic schooling and social justice. While there is extensive literature on democratic schooling (Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005; Goodlad, 2001; Hirsch, 2009), curriculum theory and politics (Beyer & Apple, 1988; Pinar et al., 2008; Posner, 1998; Slattery, 2006), and the need for leadership for social justice (Apple, 2010; Bogotch, 2002; Brown, 2004; Shields, 2009), there is a lack of research and literature providing a “voice” to curriculum leaders at the district office level in the discussions about curriculum that fosters critical consciousness. The findings of this study suggested that much of the current accountability measures and policy simply do not bring about the true
education that our high school students need and deserve for equal participation in a democratic society.
Chapter 4

Data

“Men are disturbed not by the things that happen, but by their opinion of the things that happen.”
—Epictetus

Curriculum leadership at the school district level is important to examine as these individuals are charged with the responsibility of prioritizing and facilitating curricular goals. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of district high school curriculum leaders and to understand the conceptualization of their roles with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to explore to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students.

In order to better understand the perceptions of district curriculum leaders and their conceptualized role in creating and leading curricular priorities in the current climate of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness in our high school students, the following research questions provided direction for this study:

- What are the current curriculum priorities in high schools?
- How are curriculum priorities determined in high schools?
- What is the role of curriculum leaders in establishing curriculum priorities?
- What role does critical consciousness play in the development of curriculum?
- In what ways do/can district curriculum leaders foster critical consciousness practices within high school curriculum?

The participants in this study are all members of a curriculum leadership network that was informally created in 1980 called Chicago Area Directors of Curriculum and Assessment...
(CADCA). This group of approximately 65 curriculum leaders (38 females and 27 males) meets on a monthly basis to network and collaborate on various curricular initiatives in the high school arena. I felt that this sample was appropriate for the study as this Illinois high-profile high school curriculum network are afforded a “voice” in providing input, at both the state and federal level, on political school reforms such as the re-authorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the Common Core Standards, and the state’s standardized testing measures. It warranted study to understand their contextual references for the outcomes of high school education, as well as their perceived role in determining curriculum priorities for high schools in light of such power.

To answer the research questions, I collected data in three different ways: an anonymous online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group. Each data source was coded into significant statements and then into individual reoccurring themes. This chapter presents the results of each data source in individual sections due to the fact that I asked slightly different questions on each data instrument. I examined responses for significant statements or reoccurring patterns for each instrument, as well as unusual or outlier responses. These statements were grouped into categories and were coded on a matrix. Eventually, the major themes, such as external and technical curriculum priorities and the roles of leaders as secondary in identifying curricular priorities presented themselves in each of the three data sources; these themes are identified and discussed in each section of this chapter. A synthesis and initial analysis of all three data sources in answering the research study questions is provided at the end of this chapter. A final analysis of the data against my theoretical framework (Figure 1) of democratic schooling that focuses on critical consciousness as a curriculum priority for high school student is provided in chapter five.
Online Survey Results

While surveys are not typically found in qualitative research, I utilized one to promote access to this study and foster interest among participants for further participation in the study. The survey provided an opportunity to gather anonymously the perception of curriculum leaders’ in short anecdotal responses. A recruitment e-mail was sent to each participant via the CADCA listserv (Appendix A). SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, was utilized to capture participant’s responses and the results were downloaded in an Excel spreadsheet and stored on a secure server.

Three basic demographic questions were initially asked to gather an overall profile of the sample (Questions 2, 3, & 4). A total of 24 individuals participated in the survey, all indicating that they were district curriculum leaders of districts that had a student population of more than 1,500 students. The leadership experience in the group ranged from as high as 18 years to 1 year, with the average being a total of 7 years of experience as a curriculum leader.

The survey (Appendix B) was divided into three areas (Curriculum Priorities, Curriculum Leadership, and Thinking in the Curriculum) with a total of 11 open-ended response questions. All responses provided were coded into significant statements initially, and then clustered into themes.

Questions were developed in order to ascertain how curriculum priorities are established and what they actually are (Question 4, 5, 6, 7), leadership in light of accountability (Questions 8,9,10,11), and thinking that takes place in the curriculum (Questions 12,13,14).

Curriculum and Leadership: External and Technical

Participants were asked to respond to several questions regarding curriculum, leadership, and how thinking takes place in the curriculum. Leaders who participated in this survey indicated
that many aspects regarding curriculum are the results of external factors, most of which come from federal and state legislative efforts. The results of this survey indicated that leaders perceived curriculum to be one-dimensional and technical in nature with priorities being pre-determined.

Curriculum, as described by the participants, was understood to be a structural framework—a product that utilizes standards and assessments (Question 12). The standards that were identified most frequently (10 different times in 13 responses) in the survey were the Common Core standards, created by a federal commission of governors and business leaders to have more students “college and career ready.” Five participants described curriculum as the experiences the student has in school, and defined it as standards, instruction, assessment and learning materials. Some leaders described their understanding of curriculum as core subjects “intertwined with instruction and assessment.” Only one response indicated a broader understanding of curriculum outside of that of standards and assessments. This leader described curriculum as “what we want students to learn with an overarching goal or mission.”

The external factors that influence curriculum priorities described by respondents were consistent with the perceptions of curriculum (Question 6, 7, 9, 10, 11). The Common Core standards and assessments aligned to them were identified as having the greatest influence on the curriculum and were conceptualized by respondents as a positive curricular change (Question 10). Also articulated as positive curricular influences were STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) federal and state initiatives, which assert that the state’s success in the global marketplace is directly linked to the educational system, and a systematized RtI (Response to Intervention) process which ensures that “research based” interventions are utilized with “at-risk” learners. Both of these initiatives are driven by federal legislation and resources to promote
academic success in the areas of reading and math (tested subjects). These efforts are the external and normalized influences on high school curriculum today.

Leaders described a reliance on standardized testing data (31.3%; ACT and Advanced Placement [AP]), graduation rates, and honor and AP enrollment numbers in courses as influences on curriculum priorities, as well as school improvement plans (43.8%), which utilize SMART (Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) goals, to increase student achievement in reading and mathematics (Questions 6, 9). These responses clearly illustrate the technical and external influences of accountability measures on the curriculum, one where learning must be quantified and measured. This perception of influence and leadership is seen as routine, and not associated as an accountability measure as only one leader commented that “the overreach of NCLB—the emphasis of skill acquisition over concept attainment and creative thinking” was a negative change that has happened to high school curriculum.

Participants in this survey were asked to comment on how students were afforded an opportunity to “think deeply about the world around them” (Question 13) and how high school courses allowed students to “consider multiple perspectives” (Question 14). It is interesting to note that 50% of the participants chose not to respond to these questions. Responses by leaders indicated that thinking in the curriculum is also considered a technical aspect in the curriculum—one that is external of curriculum leadership and left to the discretion of the teacher. Three participants indicated that curriculum that allows for students to think deeply about the world around them can be found by interdisciplinary connections and designs in the curriculum and relevance brought in by individual teachers. Three other participants indicated that “it’s an area of weakness,” “a tough question—I think it is only found in certain classes,” and “I don’t think it does—otherwise we would see more high-level, complex learning tasks and performance based
assessments.” Other statements indicated that Bloom’s Taxonomy aligned to assessments and higher level thinking strategies utilized by teachers were the ways that students experience “thinking deeply” about the world around them.

The majority of responses stated thinking that involved multiple perspectives took place in only certain courses. Most leaders commented that AP and honors courses provide this opportunity, as well as English, social studies, humanities, and fine arts courses. Only three responses indicated that considerations of multiple perspectives should be happening in every course and “that it is a fundamental district belief statement for all courses.”

Individual Interview Results

Ten individual interviews with district curriculum leaders (6 female, 4 male) were obtained from participants who responded to the online survey. Participants indicated interest on the survey and provided contact information. I interviewed each individual at a location of their choice, obtained participant consent prior to the interview (Appendix C), and utilized the individual interview script and questions (Appendix D). All participants chose a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity in recording responses. The interviews ranged from 1 hour and 30 minutes to 35 minutes, with the average interview lasting 40 minutes in length.

The participants were all district high school curriculum leaders in districts in both the north and south suburbs of Illinois (Table 1). I was acquainted with five of the leaders due to my membership in the CADCA group 2 years ago, but had not met the other five previously.
Table 1

*Individual Interview Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>District enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1,637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6,604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2,874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5,994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4,730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Six semi-structured open-ended questions were asked of the participants with follow-up or clarifying questions as well. The participants were allowed to share any other thoughts regarding the interview at its conclusion.

**Determination of Curricular Priorities**

All ten leaders responded that there are several ways in which curricular priorities get determined for high schools. Eight leaders identified federal initiatives such as NCLB, Common Core Standards, ACT College Readiness Standards, and district/school improvement planning as factors in determining priorities. Another factor that was stated by seven of the 10 leaders was student achievement data. Specific examples from the participants included “EPAS data,” “PSAE,” “ACT testing data,” “AP testing and enrollments,” and “local common assessment data.” All of these influences are external factors aligned to the current accountability measures that are in place for high schools today.

Financial resources were identified as an impact. Mike, who is a leader in a K-12 district, stated, “One way is through federal or state initiatives related to—that effect funding,” and Bree, a high school district leader, described how aligning to the Common Core standards has her
district “anticipating how much the cost will be if we need to make shifts in resource acquisition and workshop planning.”

Less mentioned by the participants are internal forces from within the district that drive curriculum priorities. Only two leaders, Mary and Doug, described their identification of priorities as a “collective process involving teachers, students, administrators, Board members and community members.” They both described “mission of the district” and alignment to “vision” and “Board goals” of the district. Mary expounded on their involvement of students in determining priorities:

One of the things that I think is really kind of different from what other districts do is rely on student voice to inform our work. We’ve included them around the table in helping us identify what’s working for them and not working for them in their classes. And we’ve done this with interviews and videos.

This use of “mission and vision” was absent from the other interviews, and I found it interesting that both Doug and Mary currently lead in “affluent” districts with small minority populations whose students are “high-achieving” as measured by standardized test scores. It seemed that due to the lack of pressure to succeed on accountability measures, they had the “luxury” of considering curriculum outcomes in a broader sense.

Hailey, Susie, and Natalie, leaders in high school districts, identified post-secondary schools as a factor in determining curricular priorities. Hailey stated, “I think that post-secondary transition is going to be a huge piece for high schools.” Susie shared, “My kids feed into a community college on the South Shore, and we found that 65% of the students who go there are in need of remedial mathematics, and that was the call to action.” Natalie stated, “I mean, it’s coming from our community college, too. They’ve been articulating with us, what we can do to make sure that all students are prepared for college level work.” From these comments, it would appear that the community college network has played a large role in the determination of
curricular priorities of high schools. However, right now that definition of “college and career ready” is interpreted as the ability to enroll in courses that are not remedial in nature. These enrollments are currently determined by utilizing a standardized test by ACT known as the COMPASS test. This computer adapted assessment evaluates students’ skill levels in reading, writing skills, writing essay, math, and English as a Second Language. Again, it is a standardized view of learning which is driving the priorities of high school curriculum today.

**Accountability Measures as Limitations to the Curriculum**

Participants in interviews were asked if the current accountability measures were limiting high school curriculum. Five participants saw accountability measures limiting only if they drove leadership to approach them with a “test-only” mentality. Hailey stated, “If you come at it through a viewpoint that the test is everything—then Yes.” Doug stated, ‘We [districts] allow it to happen more than it’s done to us.” Mike responded, “if all you make a priority is math and reading goals then that’s what you wind up with” and Mary stated, “I think that they [accountability measures] can be limiting if you allow them to, and what some districts do in response is to overemphasize or put more focus on test preparation.” These leaders indicated that schools have the power to determine curriculum priorities despite the narrow view of testing accountability, but they did not believe that their districts embraced such a view.

Demographics of the district were discussed in three leaders’ responses as a factor when considering accountability. It was clear through the responses of these leaders that diversity and socio-economic status was something that people did not consider when identifying current accountability measures. Donald, a high school curriculum leader from a well-performing and financially secure north suburban district, stated:

I think it’s more of an impact when you have a different student population. You know, we have two schools, and they have very different populations. In terms of—they both
have the same population. It’s just at one school there’s not as many of them. So they have a more diverse population. But we really, from what I’ve seen anyways, the accountability measures are just kind of out there. On one hand we have a school that makes AYP. This is the first year it didn’t make AYP, and it had like 46 kids in a special ed breakout group, and that’s why they didn’t make AYP. And so it’s different. So from both perspectives, it becomes a meaningless thing.

Donald views accountability as an issue for schools only when looking at student demographics as defined by the “subgroups” of NCLB (White, Black, IEP, and Economically Disadvantaged). His perspective illustrates that he believes the current AYP accountability measures to be “meaningless,” as he does not expect certain groups of students to achieve the AYP benchmarks—primarily students with IEP’s and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. What is disconcerting is that his statement reflects a deficit thinking paradigm and fails to consider that the responsibility of the school is to educate all children. His statement infers that there are “acceptable losses” when looking at student achievement, and accountability becomes “meaningless” to him, as he does not expect students from diverse background to meet the expectations of the AYP benchmarks.

Natalie, who works in a south suburban district, stated:

I’m not a fan of the negative sanctions of No Child Left Behind. I think it’s sinful, and I think it’s made so many schools and so many educators in so many communities feel so bad about themselves. You know, I hate that. We know success in school is closely tied to socioeconomic. And when you have a poor population, you’re going to have more kids who are struggling. We also know the older students get, the harder it is to move them.

Natalie’s comment displays her perspective that the current accountability measures do not take into account students from poverty and the fact that they may have academic deficiencies as measured by standardized testing, and the results are demoralizing for both educators and communities. But, she also fails to take into consideration the responsibility of schools to educate all children, and reveals a perspective of deficit thinking.

Peter, who leads in a south suburban high school district, commented:
We kind of knew back in the day when these Title I schools and districts that were diverse like mine, that we knew it was just inevitable that other districts would face the same sanctions . . . this huge range of SES, high mobility rates, high poverty rates—so all that stuff that goes into poor test scores is in the district.

Peter’s comment illustrates his perception that accountability sanctions, once seen as “commonplace” for low performing (and usually low socioeconomic—as they accept Title I funding) districts, have now surfaced for districts that were once placed as “high achieving,” as student subgroups in those districts are currently not meeting the increased NCLB AYP benchmarks. He believes that accountability models were always flawed, but it is only now that high achieving (and typically high socio-economic) districts are not meeting the increased benchmarks with their subgroup populations, that the current accountability models are being challenged. Again, his comments mirror his colleagues, as he views socioeconomic status and mobility as factors that are “norms” for poor achievement in schools.

These three leaders articulated their perceptions of how the current accountability measures in high schools do not address or identify the issues that students may face while in the learning environment. What was absent from their responses was the response of the school in meeting the needs of students who were struggling and the possible need for alternative definitions of accountability in different educational environments. They saw testing accountability to be an educational norm, but displayed unconscious deficit thinking when considerations of diverse student groups were discussed.

Nine curriculum leaders saw accountability measures as necessary and having benefit for their districts. Most leaders communicated that they saw benefit in accountability measures as they helped focus on students differently. Comments such as “it uncovered gaps in reading and math that we didn’t know were there,” “helped us identify students who were not considered before,” and “it allowed me to make an argument for the bottom quartile” were stated. Natalie
stated that accountability measures provided benefits for professional development, feeder articulation, and a common curricular focus in her district. “I think there’s been some very, you know, the standards movement, the government pushing its way into the school doors, that’s been a very big silver lining. For us, it’s helped us expand our curriculum—there’s more reading, writing and math in every content area. It has provided a common language of literacy and common reading strategies.”

One leader, Ann, who is a leader in a north suburban district, disagreed with her colleagues and articulated that current accountability measures have limited the curriculum. She stated, “Absolutely correct. There’s not a hesitation whatsoever. It’s unbelievable. And the AYP, the PSAE and developing all that; we have dumbed down our curriculum because we do not allow students to think critically in some of our classes.” She went on to describe at length a Simulation Government class that was a graduation requirement in her district as a model to clarify her earlier statement. She stated:

I mean, some of things that the kids do break the stereotypic barriers that keep students from different races or classes apart. That is one of my most favorite classes. They’re never going get rid of that one. Over my dead body on that one. That’s real life, and that’s what our school system is based on, building democracies. And those kids are learning how to be democratic. They’re learning how to cite their own opinions, and why it’s important. That’s the end all, be all class in our district.

Ann’s statement reflects her understanding of a broader definition of curriculum, one which can foster equity within the classroom among students from different races or socioeconomic status. The student interactions she described in the interview fostered breaking down barriers for students as all students participated in the course as a part of her district graduation requirements. Her commitment as a curriculum leader to ensure that this type of curricular programming continues is important to notice in light of the conversations of accountability. Her statement also
reflects an understanding of the role of education being paramount to the support of a democratic society.

**Perceived Role of a High School Education**

Participants were asked for their perspective on the role of education for high school students in the interviews. Five leaders expressed that college and career readiness and preparing students for their futures was the most important priority for schools. Those leaders also stated that more education outside of high school was necessary to secure employment in a global economy.

Doug and Mary were more specific as they saw the role of education as providing students with “21st Century Learning” skills. These skills were defined by them as “media literacy, speaking experience, and reading for information,” “accessing and weighing the value of information,” “collaboration, problem solving, and engaging in real-world tasks,” and “communicating with their peers in meaningful ways.” Both specifically named the 21st Century Learning Standards, which are embedded in the Common Core standards. These standards promote learning beyond the core subjects and encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration as skills necessary for college, career and life. The standards were created by the P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills) group, consisting of the U.S. Department of Education, several large technology corporations, and the National Educators Association (NEA). These standards are stated to be embedded in the recently adopted Common Core Standards, but exist as a separate set of standards which are non-mandatory and were not mentioned by the other leaders, as they are not specifically tested by the state. Doug and Mary believe that these standards provide students with a broader experience in schooling, rather than that of just acquisition of content knowledge.
Donald, Hailey, and Ann shared that schools should be places that not only teach students content knowledge, but social-emotional learning. Donald stated:

We have to give them those soft skills to be able to function and not just cognitively and intellectually, but also socially. It has to do with developing empathy, developing relationships, being able to deal with conflict, being able to collaborate and work with others.

Hailey indicated, “Providing the skills that a civilized society needs—citizens to be productive in the workplace, but also how to operate within the society so that you have self-fulfilling, self-actualizing outlets.” Ann specified:

Education should be about self-assessment. Why is life important to me? What is my passion? What is my interest? Students should be problem solvers. It allows students to be critical thinkers. It allows students to practice interaction and communication with one another.

These leaders all expressed a much deeper understanding of what schools should provide for students. These three leaders perceive that education should encompasses more than the one-dimensional aspect of accountability as measured by standardized tests, but rather for the development of individuals to interact with each other and develop intellectually outside of content based knowledge.

“Thinking” in the Curriculum

In the interviews, I asked curriculum leaders how students are afforded the opportunity to “think deeply” about the world around them. I purposely did not utilize the term “critical consciousness” as I knew that they might not be familiar with it. Eight leaders indicated in their responses that primarily “thinking deeply” in the curriculum comes in the form of pedagogical activities of the teacher in content area courses, primarily the “real-life connections” that teachers provided in their classrooms. Interdisciplinary unit planning utilizing the curriculum framework, Understanding by Design (UbD), providing role playing scenarios, and project-based learning
were the most frequently mentioned activities. The most importance aspect of “thinking deeply” described by the leaders was how the teacher was making the curriculum “relevant” for students. This was described as teachers bringing “timely real world situations” into the curriculum and providing students with the opportunity to make connections to it. Absent from the leader responses was the role of the student in making meaning of their learning, as the teacher was seen by these curriculum leaders as the primary facilitator of this type of thinking, although there is a hint of it here.

Technology was cited in five responses as being “key” and “critical” to “thinking deeply” in the curriculum, particularly in the way that the content is delivered to students. Leaders described avenues supported by technology as providing the access to “think deeply.” Some examples of these curriculum avenues were “podcasts,” “blogs,” “discussion boards,” “Edmoto,” and “Blackboard.” Peter stated, “The more kids are connected to the Internet—they can just get deeper into the content” and Ann noted, “Technology has made the world so small.” These responses indicate that technological access is important to providing our students with the ability to critically think about the world around them, but can we assume that Internet access alone teaches students to do so? The ability to communicate and access information outside of the classroom was seen to be a major understanding of “thinking deeply” within the curriculum.

Two leaders, Ann and Hailey, stated that the current high school curriculum does not provide students the opportunity to “think deeply.” Ann shared, “It doesn’t. Courses are content driven, but not always in the right context—not in the real world. They’ve [teachers] got to put it in the right context.” Ann stated:

The teacher will make all the difference in the world. That’s how . . . the teacher—the key is the teacher, not the curriculum. Nope. It’s the teacher, and how the teacher teaches. Curriculum is finite. The teacher, the instructional strategies of a teacher can have a tremendous amount of power over poor curriculum. So you can have a poor curriculum,
but that teacher can inspire you and motivate you and they can get resources and they can get you to think.

Hailey stated:

I don’t think it does. I think currently it’s pretty shallow. And it kind of goes back to that coverage type of model where we’re just going to cram in a lot of information in a short amount of time and never get in depth to anything. No problem based learning, no ability to apply it to real-world problems and perhaps coming up with solutions. And I see this, too, echoed at the college level.

Ann and Hailey recognized that in most classrooms thinking deeply does not happen as content coverage is the norm for high school curriculum. Their understanding is consistent with the dominant finding that “thinking deeply” is left to the discretion of the teacher, and is not a priority of the curriculum.

Donald felt that the traditional curriculum is not where you look to answer this question and reinforced that to provide students with critical consciousness or “thinking deeply,” it must come from a broader definition of curriculum. He shared:

I don’t know that high school curriculum is, you know, whatever you think curriculum is—I don’t think it’s built necessarily for that. I just think that in this district it seems to be something that we value. That we learn a lot, but that we connect it to something that matters. And I don’t know where that comes from. Is it just an effect of good teaching or is it that we have a culture here that really helps us understand curriculum in terms of something that is content, but is something bigger than that? And we’re always trying to get outside. I don’t know where it comes from. It’s impressive.

While Donald expressed his uncertainty as to how “thinking deeply” comes about, he understood “thinking deeply” to be something bigger than strictly content knowledge and teacher pedagogical ability. His description of learning that connects students to “something that matters” is an indication of his perception that “thinking deeply” in the curriculum must be a “cultural norm” in his district. Inadvertently, he described a partial understanding of critical consciousness as a curriculum priority.
**Curricular “Competitions”**

Competitions that exist among curricular offerings were described almost verbatim by all 10 leaders interviewed. Leaders described the competition among course offerings as a primary factor when looking at curricular priorities and accountability measures. Statements from the leaders described tensions between college readiness courses vs. electives, Advanced Placement (AP) vs. honors level, core courses vs. electives, reading and math intervention courses vs. electives, electives vs. electives, and graduation requirements vs. electives. Leaders described that many times students are forced to make choices regarding their courses based on their academic ability as measured on standardized assessment data. An example provided by three leaders was the placement criteria (EXPLORE testing scores) for incoming freshman utilized to determine if students needed reading or math interventions which would impact the student’s ability to take an elective course. Other examples described by leaders included how increased graduation requirements in the core content areas monopolized the time afforded in student schedules. These are clear examples where student individual development based on their interests has been limited by the current accountability climate.

Resources for personnel, described as FTE (Full Time Employees), were stated by four leaders as competing interests on curriculum as a result of the competition among course offerings. In most cases, elective courses are provided based on student enrollment, which foster elective teachers to compete for students to sign up for their courses ensuring their departments’ survival, and ultimately, their jobs. Ann stated:

> Those are competing interests that we do—foreign language is a great example. There’s only two offered, Spanish and French. So Spanish gets the lead on that just because the teachers are nicer teachers. Teachers are advocating, unfortunately, for their jobs. You know, it’s not what programs are best for kids, “It’s I want to keep a full time job.”
Peter shared, “Some of that competition is also a result of the teachers teaching in those programs. It’s not a mystery, but if you’ve got a crappy teacher, those programs barely survive.”

Susie stated, “I see competing interests—for example, I have an applied science technology department and I have a fine arts department. They’re at each other’s throats because they want the same kid.” Bree also commented:

But then when you have this smorgasbord of offerings, kids only have so much time, and they have to pick and choose. And of course, it’s linked to FTE, and then there’s that end. There’re also sometimes the self-preservation piece where teachers don’t want to let go of certain levels.

Resource allocation to support the definition of learning as measured by current accountability measures has resulted in teacher competitions to “survive” rather than to “thrive.” The performance on standardized tests is directly related to how school personnel are hired and utilized. This perspective was considered a normal reality by the curriculum leaders who admitted that the elective areas were most impacted by this aspect of curricular planning.

Teaching methodologies were also described as competing interests in the curriculum. Hailey and Mary both stated that “traditional methods vs. innovative teaching methods” and “content based vs. skilled based” caused conflict in high school curriculum. Mary stated,

I think the most troublesome competing interests occur between teachers who are really imbued in traditional teaching methods and who believe that they’re doing well by students by adhering to those traditional methods (“That’s the way I was taught. It worked for me. It prepared me for college and the real world, and I need to do the same for these kids in my classroom”) and those who see things differently, who see that the world is changing, who see that they’re preparing students for a world and for jobs that we don’t even imagine yet.

Hailey stated, “A content teacher feels a great need to deliver all of the knowledge of their entire content area in a particular course, versus what are those underlying skills, you know, that are more—that transcend a course. . . .” Both statements reflect an understanding by the leaders that curricular priorities are impacting the pedagogical acts of the teacher. Each leader has a different
understanding of what the curriculum should offer students. Mary’s statement would reflect the curriculum to support preparing students for a job, but Hailey’s perception is that teaching should address needs above and beyond content knowledge and develop student skills in a multi-dimensional manner.

**Leadership Experiences with Accountability**

Participants in these interviews were asked to discuss their roles in offering leadership related to accountability measures. Responses from nine leaders indicated that it was necessary and important for schools to have some sort of accountability to their communities as they are public schools. Leaders shared that the benefits of accountability created a consistency in approaching school improvement, a common understanding of how data are utilized to increase student achievement, the identification of students who were normally overlooked in needing support, and the opportunity to get additional resources from the federal government to provide interventions necessary to support student learning. While all of the leaders deemed the current expectation of 100% of students meeting AYP benchmarks in 2014 as unrealistic, four leaders specifically expressed “hope” about the new vision for accountability (under the reauthorization of NCLB) with cohort and individual student growth being a focus in the future for accountability measures. They stated that growth model calculations (utilizing mandated assessments) for measurement of student achievement was “fair” and “more about learning over time” and considered the needs of the individual student.

Concerns regarding the future of accountability measures, namely the PERA Act (Senate Bill 7), were identified by three leaders as it pertains to teacher evaluations and student growth models. Leader comments included perceptions that “teaching is not quantifiable work” and that “there are too many variables” that impact the learning of students. One leader expressed
concern over the “question of local student assessment validity” when using student achievement data to determine learning growth. He was concerned that the assessments would not be valid as teachers are not scientifically trained to build psychometrically-valid assessments, and further described how his district was looking in to hire a company to come and critique the local assessments developed by teachers to ensure their validity, as teachers future employment was now at risk. What I found interesting was that the leaders were very aware of how standardized testing data may not measure true aspects of teaching, but this was not a perspective shared when discussing accountability measures for student learning.

The roles of curriculum leaders related to accountability measures can be summarized as educator/communicator and protector/defender. Statements captured from the respondents to describe their current roles were “listening to concerns and educating why we need to address—why it’s important,” “monitoring implementation,” “providing and developing staff development opportunities,” “dealing with accountability and working with data,” “creating balance between federal and local,” “shielding our curriculum from them [accountability measures] and find what’s useful,” and “defending really good work not measured by PSAE scores.” Mike stated, “It’s important for the leader to be the chief communicator and face of the district, and frame the national and state politics.” These responses indicate a perception that the curriculum leader must balance the demands of accountability measures while maintaining a purpose that resonates with the district and school community. Leaders saw their role as supporting and educating many stakeholders in the district (i.e. parents, Board of Education, community members) as to the meaning of current accountability measures and its connection (or lack thereof) to the curriculum.
Four leaders shared concerns about accountability measures being disconnected from larger educational goals. Doug shared:

I feel very lucky. . . . Seeing colleague’s schools that trim things back in order to just focus on state or federal mandates is unnerving and doesn’t fit my philosophy . . . it doesn’t really, I feel, prepare kids for where they’re headed. I think they’re losing out on so much. The national conversation on education is schools are failing, kids can’t read, they can’t do math. But if you look at those conversations, what the conversations are lacking is an understanding of the depth and breadth of schooling and what kids need. So you have politically the people who are making those accusations being the people who had way more than that in their own schooling. So looking at it from a supply and demand, producer/employer relationship, you know, we want our worker bees to know more. That’s not, for me anyway, I don’t think that fits that model of an educated citizenry.

Doug’s response indicated a direct awareness of the impact of accountability measures and their implicit role in serving an economic imperative rather than one that truly educates students in a broader capacity. He acknowledged that he was “lucky,” as most schools and districts react in a different manner when looking at meeting accountability pressures.

Mike also commented:

The national and state politics influence the local policy makers when making decisions for schools which negatively impact programs that are in the best interest of students at the school level. For example, both nationally and locally it is shared that our schools are not preparing our students for colleges or careers, however, this is mainly based on test scores rather than real experience.

Mike indicated that the political conversations at both the federal and state level are limited to the perceptions based on accountability measures as interpreted by standardized test scores.

Ann shared that the current accountability climate seems to be a direct result of the lack of leadership and desire for political gain at the top district level—one based on job security and monetary gain for leaders. She stated:

It’s political. Superintendents let it happen. It’s egos. It’s saving jobs. It’s big top dollars. “I get big raises. I have a nice bonus package because I’m doing such a good job here. I get us in the newspaper. We make us look good to other districts. The media can highlight what we do, so I must get a good raise here.” Ask the superintendents that. How much is good enough for you? What are you trying to do, keep the Board happy or do the
right things for your kids in your district? Are you walking a fence, because you’re afraid to pick one side or the other? And most superintendents are afraid to pick one side or another, because they’re working for that damn pension.

The perception that accountability measures are a threat to public schooling to perpetuate the current socio-economic system was shared by Hailey:

I think it does a tremendous disservice to really quality schools because of those strict, you know, AYP guidelines and standards. I mean, the fact that what is it... all but 8 schools in the Chicago area are not meeting AYP? That’s ridiculous. And that gives the public a feeling that public education is not doing its job, and that’s not true at all. So I think that, when people in the public see the literal numbers, that’s the greatest disservice. And, you know, it really is destroying public education. And I think that’s one of America’s greatest strengths is that everybody has access to public education, and that it is possible to move up in your—I don’t want to say cast system—but where you’re situated in society, that’s how you get higher pay, higher socioeconomic status is through education. So you know, if people have a bad feeling of public education, then they’re going withdraw their support.

Each of these four leaders was very aware of the impact that the current accountability measures have in high schools today. While most of the leaders in the interviews did not share these perceptions, it was clear that some of the curriculum leaders interviewed were aware of the political and economic influences in education, and could identify the detrimental effects of state and federal initiatives. While the leaders were not fully aware of the concepts of critical consciousness and schooling for a culture of democratic community, their responses indicate that they demonstrate a proclivity for this vision of schooling. What was not clear is if they understood themselves to be empowered leaders to support this definition of curriculum and learning.

**Focus Group Interview Results**

A focus group interview was conducted with curriculum leaders in order to explore curriculum priorities in light of accountability in the context of a group setting. A recruitment e-mail was sent to the CADCA listserv (Appendix E) and four curriculum leaders (three females,
one male) volunteered (Table 2). One of the individuals, Ann, also participated in an individual interview. The other three participants, Zaria, Leigh, and Jake did not participate in an individual interview. Consent was obtained from all participants (Appendix E) and the focus group script and questions (Appendix F) were utilized during the interview.

Table 2

*Focus Group Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>District enrollment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1,637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2,403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4,064</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus group was held at a satellite location of a university, which was a central location for all of the participants. The focus group interview lasted approximately 1 hour. Each participant chose a pseudonym for anonymity and used it throughout the interview. Five semi-structured questions were asked regarding high school curriculum priorities, “thinking” deeply in the curriculum, and the role of curriculum leaders in accountability at the district/school level.

The focus group interview revealed one theme—disconnects and mixed messages that schools are sending and receiving as a result of the current climate of accountability. As participants commented on the interview questions, more and more disconnects were articulated by the curriculum leaders. These disconnects can be seen when examining curricular priorities and perceived leadership roles. I found the focus group to be very important and interesting as
the dynamic of the group allowed for sharing insights and perceptions among the leaders, which led to rich conversations and new understandings.

**Disconnection of Curriculum Priorities and the Role of Education**

Participants in the focus group were asked to comment on the current curricular priorities established by high schools today and the role of education for high school students. The group identified instruction, the Common Core Standards, and formative assessments as the priorities in schools today. Ann focused the conversation on instructional priorities, rather than simply curriculum content. She described the curriculum as “not about the content they’re teaching; it’s about the processes that they use to teach the student to make them self-sufficient in their thinking and their problem solving.” Ann stated her hope that, “We just don’t teach kids in school so that they can be great at school, and then when they walk out of the school buildings—they fall apart.” She described the decision-making, resiliency, and self-discipline of entrepreneurs as examples of types of skills students should have as a result of curriculum.

The four curriculum leaders described an understanding of the role of education as preparing students “not just academically, but intellectually” for life outside of high school. They articulated that education should prepare each student to be “a viable worker in our democracy” and “prepared for life as far as a career.” Other comments by the respondents expressed the need to have an “educated citizenry” and provide students with “a quality of life with different experiences and mindsets.” These priorities and perceptions of the role of education were somewhat different from the responses of the leaders in the individual interviews. They encompassed a much broader understanding of curriculum than that of content knowledge to be tested by standardized tests.
Zaria stated that a “disconnect” existed for teachers and curriculum leaders between content, and the understanding of curriculum as content and instruction. She stated that new technologies have the capacity of doing things differently, but “you have another group of people who are still so mired in content.” Zaria described an emphasis on accessing and communicating using technology tools as was also articulated in the individual interviews.

Leigh shared that she struggled as a new curriculum leader “understanding bridging the instruction vs. standards,” but expressed excitement at the prospect of the Common Core as it would “allow for us to really look at what has been the practice and what could be our practice.” Jake commented that conversations in his district regarding the Common Core have more to do with “conversations about skills to improve student’s quality of life.” When I asked him to elaborate on this thought, he stated:

We’re trying to find ways where we can approach curriculum with a focus on assessment that measures what a kid is learning, where he or she came in, where he or she is, and the potential impact on their life because the curriculum is being placed outside of being able to recall facts or talk about the main character of the story.

He went on to describe that the curriculum has to be about objectives that students are able to master each year, and “understanding what students come in with.”

Zaria proceeded to point out another “disconnect” by asking the group and most specifically, Jake, what “assessments” look like outside of school. She stated,

Just as I described that disconnect that we have with curriculum, I think then that also creates disconnect with assessments. So are we trying to tool kids according to some current high stakes testing? But that’s not what this table and what our conversations have been about. And so there tends to be that disconnect that we’re all wrestling with.

Zaria had a clear perspective that the articulated priorities and the current focus on accountability measures are misaligned. Ann and Leigh stated that they were “hopeful” that the new assessments for the Common Core would provide assessments that measured more thinking
application and creative thinking. Zaria became very quiet during this portion of the interview. She sat and listened, but did not offer any response. Her non-verbal behavior (looking down, drawing on her paper) would indicate that she did not share in Ann and Leigh’s hope for the new assessments.

The group also discussed a series of conflicts within education that supported their definitions of the role of education. A lack of a common vision shared by both administrators and teachers in districts was discussed as a “disconnect,” as well as the focus for every student to attend college, which they attributed to the current economic conditions. Leigh stated:

So then I guess it gets me back to my ideals of the Common Core and college and career ready. And so then we need to make them prepared for life as far as a career, and we don’t even know some of the careers that exist or are going to exist in order to get them ready.

Zaria stated:

So how is it that they need more math skills or more algebra or more science, you know? Right. It might not be . . . but that seems to be our mantra of what we’re doing, instead of those critical thinking skills and abilities.

Ann answered Zaria with this comment:

It’s easier to quantify that—and it makes us comfortable. So if we’re more comfortable, we’re going to do that. And it’s easier to report to a Board of Education that information. You can’t report to a Board of Education that a student who failed in their experiment or test and really learned—that was really successful. You know, you would get all kinds of push back, because it’s about what’s printed in the newspaper. It’s still that old traditional thinking of competition. And if I win then you have to lose. It’s not a win-win type of situation.

Ann’s perception reflects the culture of school improvement that currently exists for students as learning must be quantifiable and public and there is the perception of “winners” and “losers.”

All four leaders described specific courses, technologies, and teacher instructional practices to encourage students to “think deeply” about the world around them. Their responses were consistent with responses made in individual interviews with the dominant perception that
critical consciousness or “thinking deeply” in the curriculum is more or less left up to the teacher and relies heavily on the teacher creating relevance for students in the curriculum. Statements such as “real-world experiences,” “project-based,” “not textbook driven,” and “teacher driven” were used to describe this aspect of the curriculum. Teacher “passion” was described as the main factor in providing students with this opportunity. Leigh stated, “And if we could get our teachers to have that passion about learning and teaching, I mean the sky’s the limit. And like, you know, instead of that reliance on the textbook and this is my curriculum.” Leaders did not see their role in providing this aspect of the curriculum, again, perceiving it to be a teacher-directed activity.

The leaders identified other disconnects as misunderstandings of curriculum and assessment by existing teachers and new teachers being “underprepared” by pre-service programs. These understandings are informed by the current focus on learning targets and assessments. Zaria commented:

Then you own, I think, the individual teachers because many of them, especially coming out of pre-service, or they’ve been teaching for years, they walk away from those experiences and they are, let me do all these core activities to raise my content. They’re not in line with what they’re delivering as the instructional activities in line with the assessments that will show you the preponderance of if the students are mapping to the learning targets.

Her comment described her perceived disconnect with the current accountability measures of learning targets and assessment and that of the training of pre-service teachers. Zaria’s contextual understandings of curriculum included a heavy emphasis on “target-assessment-instruction” as she went on to describe a “diagnose and prescribe” approach to instruction. These perceptions are based heavily on the current conversations of quantifiable and scientific approaches to teaching and learning.
**Disconnects between Curriculum and Leadership Perspectives**

The group identified their primary role as holding principals and teachers accountable for student growth in learning. This is perceived to happen through the development of formative assessments and valid learning targets, alignment of curriculum targets and instructional activities and providing professional development to teachers. When I asked specifically about their role in AYP accountability measures, all four leaders indicated that in their perspective it was no longer an issue as the current accountability measures for the state were changing due to the current “ridiculous” expectations of the law. Benefits of accountability that were expressed were consistent with what was denoted by their peers in the individual interviews: identification of students who were normally not given attention, increased resources, and a more focused definition of accountability.

The role of the leaders was talked about at length and disconnects in leadership perceptions were identified. All four curriculum leaders emphasized that curriculum leadership should not be solely up to them, but shared by all leaders in the district—specifically, the Board of Education, superintendent, principals, department chairs, and teachers. Zaria elaborated:

I think that the challenge is, again, I’m going to go back to the institutions called education and districts, is it used to be the one or the two people. And you’ve got many places where still it’s, “Why aren’t you getting it done?” I think that’s an unfair comment for anybody who tries to walk this job anymore, because it has too many variables—political, economic, and social. It’s not just a “my office job” anymore. And I think a lot of institutions still treat it that way.

All four leaders discussed the need for shared understandings that build a “culture for learning” that allows for innovation, conversation and dialogue, and risk-taking. The definition of curriculum discussed by the group was more than just a “set of content and skills, but considers a broader base” which has to be understood by the leaders in the district, beyond the curriculum leader.
Disconnects were discussed at length by the group about leadership within district administration and specifically, local Boards of Education were focused on several times. Ann commented that “Boards of Education have to hold superintendents more accountable” for their commitment to their positions. “Superintendents—the average is 3 to 5 years in a superintendency. So how can they bring systemic change to an organization when there’s turnover at the top on a consistent basis?” Ann, Leigh, and Zaria described that the lack of understanding of the current research and “best practices” in instruction by local boards and other administrators was problematic for them as curriculum leaders. The idea of “just because you had a school experience, doesn’t mean you understand what should be going on” was discussed in terms of policies being determined by boards that limited positive instructional practices. Grading policies were mentioned specifically by Ann, and Leigh stated:

    Whether it is a Board member or whether it is a community member, educating them and getting them to know and understand that there is broader purpose is very hard. And that’s a barrier that we’re coming up against, like you can have a policy or practice that the Board will mandate. But you know that there is a better best practice that would get kids to do the level of thinking that we need to start happening.

Zaria commented:

    So I think there’s . . . in this day and age, especially of the quick pacing that’s going on with accountability, (I guess disconnect is my word of the day) but there really is a disconnect, because how can they lead when they barely know it themselves? I agree that it goes all the way to the Boards of Ed, because as you said, “If I went to school I know school.” They’re not even close to where they need to be for this age of accountability and this whole new twist. And yet, especially at the high school level, they’re setting policies, they’re determining “We want this type of high school, with these types of opportunities for students.”

It seemed clear from Zaria’s comments that accountability measures and leadership in the district are impacting the type of policies being created at the district level. Leadership perspectives were also shared that described the lack of understanding by district leaders and Boards of students
growing up in poverty and the exclusion of those students from the curriculum and the impact to teaching and learning.

Teachers are being impacted heavily by disconnects that exist as they receive mixed messages by leadership at the building and district level. Both Jake and Zaria described the teacher impact of disconnects with curriculum leadership. Zaria stated:

And if everybody doesn’t own it, you really—what I’m finding is, the teachers are getting the raw end of the deal. And by that I’m saying that they feel like we’re giving them one message this day and a different message this day, making them do all these hoops to jump through and they don’t even see their reasons for it.

Jake commented:

I’d be driven crazy if I were a teacher, because on one hand, we’re talking about mastery learning, second chance learning, all these things, but then we’re held to certain passing rates and PSAE scores and AP scores. So it’s really tough to be a teacher. And as a curriculum leader, as part of the curriculum leadership team, you have to consider all those different perspectives and impact the things you’re doing, the choices you make, and are having down to the classroom level.

These leaders expressed a need that their Board of Education, superintendents, and building principals understand a broader definition of education than that of testing scores, but perceive that the majority of the responsibility rests on them and sometimes with little or no support.

**Desired Role of Curriculum Leaders**

The role of the curriculum leaders was discussed at length by the group in discussing this question. The group described themselves as “coaches” who guided, fostered trust, and “provided permission” to teachers to provide students with better learning experiences in the classroom. Zaria described her “ah-ha” moment in the interview as she described her role to the group. She stated:

I think our role is to start providing teachers and students with new mental models. That is where we have to start. We have teachers who go to math conferences, the social studies conferences and whatever. But they’re not coming back with new mental models of how those courses, those environments for students can now be different. They might
be coming back with a way to teach this skill a little differently, or this textbook, or this tool, but they’re not helping us create.

Her conceptualized role is important as the leadership described is one that fosters an entirely new “mental model” and a new approach to learning, one that does not consider the current structure of standardized accountability. Zaria’s vision for teachers was not to replicate or duplicate in non-authentic ways, but to reconstruct the learning environment and her role was to support them in that creation.

Qualities of curriculum leaders were then discussed by the group in light of accountability. “Balance,” “passion,” “possessing facilitation skills,” “considering other perspectives,” “courage,” and “conversations” were some of the attributes that were shared by the group as qualities that leaders needed to possess in order to combat the negative aspect of accountability. Ann stated:

But you have to have creative conversations and courageous conversations. You have to have courage. Sometimes to go against those Board members, go against that Superintendent, if you know it’s not okay with what's best for kids . . . what’s right.

Jake stated:

I think of situations where the teachers put curriculum in isolation of everything else that is going on. They have to have a role in creating it, and coaching them along the way sort of to develop curriculum that is relevant to what they [teachers] are trying to do.

Through these comments, both Jake and Ann perceived their desired role to support teachers in taking an active stance in the development of curriculum and developing it in a larger context.

**Synthesis and Initial Analysis of Data**

I utilized three different instruments in order to ascertain understandings from leaders about curriculum priorities and leadership in light of current accountability measures: an anonymous online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group. While each tool asked
slightly different questions, all three were utilized to gather perceptual data regarding the curriculum priorities of high schools and factors that influenced curriculum priorities, the role of curriculum leaders in establishing priorities, the role of critical consciousness in the curriculum, and the role of curriculum leaders in fostering critical consciousness practices within the curriculum. A synthesis from all three data instruments and an initial analysis in light of the research questions is presented below.

**Curriculum Priorities: College, Standards, and Assessment**

Leaders who participated in this study indicated that “college and career readiness” was a priority in their districts for their high school students to prepare them for “beyond high school” and their “futures.” Leaders described the necessity for high school students to be prepared for post-secondary experiences, as it related to providing opportunities for students to address the changes in our economy and a global society. The definition of readiness is informed by the use of standards and the assessment of students on specific standards. Data from all three sources specifically indicated that curriculum alignment to the Common Core standards, ACT College Readiness Standards, 21st Century Learning Standards, and less mentioned, the Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards were a current priority, as it would provide the “rigor” and “skills” necessary to function outside of the high school experience. Common assessments, whether formative or summative, were also stated as a curricular priority as districts are working to create measurements of “college and career readiness.”

**Influence on Curriculum Priorities: Federal / State Initiatives, Data, and Finances**

Data from all three sources indicate that federal and state initiatives, data, and financial resources are major factors that influence the curriculum priorities in high schools. Less mentioned, but present in the data from individual and focus group interviews, was that the
“mission” or “vision” of the district, as established by its stakeholders, provided focus for curriculum priorities.

Leaders described specifically the adoption of the Common Core Standards by Illinois as one of the major factors influencing the curriculum today. District and school improvement plans and processes were also identified as driving priorities. Specifically mentioned was the new “Rising Star” online tool utilized by Illinois in monitoring schools for improvement. These plans utilize standardized assessment data (PSAE and ACT College Readiness Benchmarks) to identify areas of strength and weakness in Reading and Math, as well as providing research-based strategies for improving many aspects of school culture, such as leadership, instruction, and involvement of stakeholders in educational decision making.

Standardized testing data was mentioned by all leaders as primary sources of identifying curricular priorities. Sources that were specifically mentioned by leaders was standardized testing data (EPAS, PSAE, ACT, and AP), course enrollment data (honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses), and graduation rates. This achievement data is utilized in the development of district and school improvement planning as well as in having conversations with staff, district and building leaders, Boards of Education, and the community.

Monetary resources were described by leaders in both the individual interviews and focus groups as constraints as the financial costs in hiring personnel were described by leaders as influencing curricular priorities. Districts with fewer resources are forced to make decisions that impact curricular offerings and student opportunities. Leaders indicated that the elective areas of curriculum are impacted the most by financial constraints. Leaders described competitions among departments (core and electives) as a result of this factor, as well as by increased graduation requirements in the core areas to support tested academic subjects.
Role of Curriculum Leaders in Establishing Priorities: They Don’t

From the data collected by all three instruments, curriculum leaders do not perceive themselves as the individuals who establish specific curricular priorities in high school, but rather support the work in meeting curricular priorities that are already established—whether it be from federal/state initiatives, or from a shared group of district stakeholders. Absent from the majority of leader responses was mention of their role in leading curriculum priorities that addressed a broader picture of curriculum. Leaders described that their role is to provide direction and support in meeting external curricular priorities – ones established by the state and federal government. The participants described this support as embodied in staff development efforts to support building leaders and teachers in understanding and monitoring curriculum initiatives. Specifically mentioned were technical and structuralized frameworks such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC), the Understanding by Design (UbD) curriculum framework, Response to Intervention (RtI), and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) initiatives from the state. Respondents perceive themselves as “coaches” and “facilitators” who educate the staff, Board of Education, and the community about curriculum priorities, usually to justify why these external priorities were important. Individual interviews usually ended with the sentiment of “Was that right? Did I give you the right answer?”

The focus group interview identified a new desired leadership role—one that does not exist for most curriculum leaders. This desired role would be one that fosters an entirely new “mental model” and a new approach to learning, one that does not consider the current structure of standardized accountability. This finding was a contrast to the experiences of the individual interviews as the dynamic of the focus group allowed the participants to challenge each other on their understandings of the impact of current accountability measures.
Role of Critical Consciousness in Curriculum: Certain Courses, Some Teachers

The term “critical consciousness” was not used specifically in the research instruments, as it is a term with which curriculum leaders may not be familiar; nevertheless, for them, “thinking deeply” in the curriculum seems to take place in the form of providing certain courses to students, or in the instructional practices of the teachers. “Disconnects,” particularly in the individual interviews and focus group, were identified when looking at curriculum that affords students the opportunities to “think deeply” about the world around them, as it impacts curriculum priorities and district/building leadership.

Curriculum leaders identified honors level, Advanced Placement (AP), English, or social studies courses as having curriculum which affords students the opportunities to “think deeply” about the world around them. Leaders stated that these courses would include in their content “big questions” and “connections” that students could make beyond strictly the academic content. Instructional practices that were described included providing connections between the academic content in relationship to the outside world to provide relevance, Socratic seminars, problem-based activities, and providing activities and assessments that mirror the higher end of Bloom’s Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis).

Technology was one of the major facets described when considering “thinking deeply” in the curriculum. Leaders described access to technological tools as primary to provide timely information and interaction opportunities for students. 21st Century Learning skills were mentioned specifically as the ability to access and weigh the value of information, collaborate with others, and problem solve. Technology was described as a way to provide more collaboration with others and provide relevance to the curriculum by gaining multiple perspectives on topics.
Misalignment of curriculum priorities and critical consciousness in the curriculum were revealed by the participants of this study. Leaders, particularly in the individual interviews and focus group, described how the current accountability measures do not focus on the “critical thinking” experiences that students can have in the classroom, or developing “the whole child” when looking at the curriculum. This misalignment was described as having an impact on Board of Education and district/building leadership in determining curricular priorities that include critical consciousness, as well as an impact to the overall definition of “curriculum” by teachers in the school district.

Leadership for Critical Consciousness: Educator, Navigator/Negotiator, Protector

While curriculum leaders did not use the term “critical consciousness” specifically in their discussion of their roles in fostering practices within the curriculum, they did describe how they provided support for innovation and negotiation of accountability measures to provide teachers the ability to deliver deeper curriculum experiences for students. This was described by the leaders as providing staff development on the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework of identifying “big ideas” of the curriculum, conversations and dialogue with district and building leaders and the Board of Education to understand broader meaning of curriculum as opposed to strictly content knowledge, or learning which is not currently measured by standardized testing. Their role of a “coach” and “protector” was specifically mentioned as providing support for innovative instructional practices of teachers, defense of meaningful curriculum work that may not be measured by the current accountability measures and advocacy for activities and courses that lend themselves to critical consciousness practices.
**Summary**

This chapter provided the results from district curriculum leaders from an online survey, ten individual interviews, and a focus group. Leadership perspectives were shared and contextualized in regards to the current curriculum priorities of high schools, the roles that curriculum leader’s play in establishing those priorities, to what extent the priorities include developing critical consciousness for high school students and the role that leaders play in fostering critical consciousness practices within the curriculum. Additionally, a synthesis and initial analysis of the data from all three instruments in light of the study’s research questions was provided.

The next chapter, chapter five, will provide an analysis of the data utilizing the theoretical framework (Figure 1) that was discussed in chapter two as well as providing my own experiences and comments. This analysis, utilizing the data from the participants, leads to a discussion of whether curriculum priorities in high schools currently focus on content-centered/tested priorities, which characterize schooling for accountability, or critical consciousness, which defines a focus for democratic schooling.
Chapter 5

Data Analysis and Discussion

“But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”—Buddha

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of district high school curriculum leaders and to understand the conceptualization of their roles with respect as to how curriculum priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. Critical consciousness, as defined this study, is critical thinking that involves engaging students in learning that focuses on the “continuous improvement and transformation of self and reality” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 72), and requires teachers and students to look critically at knowledge of the world, recognizing multiple viewpoints and oppressions, and taking actions to reconstruct their realities.

In order to better understand the perceptions of curriculum leaders, I gathered data using an online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group. I utilized a “modified van Kaam method” (Moustakas, 1994) when analyzing the data from these sources. Statements from the survey, individual interviews, and focus group interview were given equal value and placed in a matrix by significant statements and then coded into themes. These themes were then analyzed using the theoretical framework (Figure 1) for democratic schooling that focuses on critical consciousness as a curriculum priority discussed in chapter two. The framework, informed by scholarly literature, described the outcomes for high school students if framed in one of two ways—schooling for accountability measures, or democratic schooling.

Schooling for a content-centered/tested curriculum has the focus on accountability measures and leadership for “school improvement” which develops a culture of “performance.”
This type of curriculum priority is mostly informed by standardized testing, and breeds a culture of competition in which there are winners and losers.

Democratic schooling, which focuses on critical consciousness as a curriculum priority, is led by transformative leaders and aims to develop a culture of democratic community. Critical pedagogy, dialogue, relationships and a deeper understanding of content knowledge lead to an awareness of “other and self.” That is not to say that accountability does not exist in a vision for democratic schooling, but rather, it does not strictly foster a technical approach to learning outcomes for students with an economic and efficiency as its focus.

Additionally, I placed my own experiences and perspectives in the analysis of the data. This provided me the opportunity to co-construct knowledge and meaning with my leadership colleagues through dialogue in the interviews practicing my own critical consciousness. “Freire’s co-intentionality signifies the profound unanimity that emerges between subjects who meet, in dialogue, to name the world” (Duarte, 2000, p. 186).

**Focus on Accountability vs. Democratic Schooling**

All but one curriculum leader in this study indicated that accountability is “good” and “necessary,” as all of the leaders who participated were “public school” administrators. They perceived accountability to be a benefit to “a coordinated approach to school improvement.” Another benefit determined by leaders were the identification of groups of students who were not being successful in the school environment, as measured by reading and math scores in accountability frameworks currently in place—namely Prairie State Examination Scores (PSAE). One leader stated, “I would say what it’s been able to do in our district is to make an argument for the bottom quartile, and say, ‘We’ve got to do something here.’”
Most leaders described disagreement with how districts and schools are measured using current accountability frameworks (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] Benchmarks), but see accountability frameworks as a legitimate process that brings about improvement for schools. One leader stated:

I think we should have policed ourselves better. We shouldn’t have waited for the state to say, “We need to figure something out for ELLs [English Language Learners], and the PSAE isn’t going to work. So we’ll wait and wait and wait, and maybe it will go away.” Then all of a sudden we are testing our ELL students with the ACT, which in no way was designed to do that.

Three leaders identified the current accountability frameworks (NCLB AYP targets) as hollow indicators of school success as in their perspective it does not consider students from diverse backgrounds. Their responses however, gave evidence that their own belief about their students was one of deficit thinking. During the individual interviews, I tried not to be shocked by the unconscious remarks by my colleagues, but it provided me with insight as to their limited experience with critical consciousness. They described their belief that certain groups of students could not be expected to achieve on AYP benchmarks due to the students’ background. School policies and norms emerging from the deficit thinking model often obscure both student and teacher potential and ability (Weiner, 2006). These leaders made no mention of accountability looking differently, or how their school addressed the different needs of the students in looking outside of accountability, but rather described why the current accountability models were “unfair.” Their comments support research by Skrla and Scheurich (2001) on district leadership and deficit thinking:

Because of the insidiously pervasive deficit thinking in which superintendents, along with the vast majority of other educators including teachers and principals, have more or less marinated throughout their careers, these superintendents tend to view the broad-scale underperformance of children of color and children from low income homes in their schools as inevitable, something that is not within their power to change. (p. 237)
Democratic schooling was not described as the focus of most of the leaders interviewed; however, it is interesting to note that while the curriculum priorities (below) lend themselves to schooling for accountability, leader responses as to the “role of a high school education” would indicate that they believe that high school should focus on democratic schooling. Leaders described the intended role of high schools as providing the skills that a civilized society needs, by “developing empathy, developing relationships,” and “being able to deal with conflict, being able to collaborate and work with others.” “Communicating with their peers in meaningful ways,” and “preparing them [students] to be critical thinkers and allows students to practice interaction and communication with one another” was also described as an outcome for high school students. Moreover, leaders expressed the importance of making an educated citizenry to promote our democracy. A misalignment of the priorities and outcomes for students was clearly defined in this study. Leader responses indicated that what they actually “do” do not support the intended outcomes for high school students, but they do acknowledge other desirable goals and outcomes. I believe this to be true for most curriculum leaders. In my own district, while we have a district mission and vision which celebrates student diversity, we still have programs that segregate our student populations (gifted vs. non-gifted, magnet vs. non-magnet) as well as curriculum and teaching practices that speak to a deficit-thinking paradigm.

One leader, Ann, who was individually interviewed and participated in the focus group, was a visible outlier when looking at the sample. Ann is a very passionate leader about teaching and learning and was excited to be a part of the study. She shared with me her disillusionment of the current educational environment of accountability and “politics,” and is hopeful that it can change. She articulated a great deal of disconnects between what high schools “say” they want to accomplish, and what the actual practices are today. She felt schooling with a focus on
accountability impacted the curriculum a negative fashion and deprived students of what they really need—”critical thinking skills in order to participate in a democratic society.” She stated:

Education is based on, to continue the democracy in these United States, so that everyone has the ability to think, speak freely about their thoughts and vote for people who have their like views. I think we’ve warehoused it or manufactured it with that era to try to be efficient in educating large numbers of people. And we haven’t moved off that particular platform so much.

Ann’s responses were quite unique among respondents. She articulated a vision of schooling that supports the development of critical consciousness and a culture of democratic schooling without being completely familiar with the terms or concepts of such a vision. While Ann was identified by the small sample in this particular study, it would be interesting to see if other leaders display such an understanding of the broader definition of curriculum and schooling.

Curriculum Priorities: Subject Centered/Tested Curriculum vs. Critical Consciousness

Leaders in this study indicated that the current curriculum priorities included getting every student “college and career ready,” and the vehicle for doing so was through content, instruction, and assessment alignment to standards. Statements from six of the ten leaders to define curriculum included the word “standards” in the definition. One leader stated:

Curriculum matters. It should embody the learning educators commit to in cause and should be stated as clearly articulated standards of what each student should know and be able to do as a result of completing a course or unit of study.

Another statement included in its definition of curriculum, “the WHAT students are supposed to know, understand, and linked to an established set of standards.” The most commonly mentioned standards were the ACT College Readiness standards and the Common Core standards. These content area standards are specifically defined as the knowledge and skills students need to have in order to be successful outside of the high school environment, whether students go on to
college or the workplace. The ACT College Readiness standards strictly address the content areas tested on the ACT (English, Math, Reading, and Science) with content skills benchmarks that are aligned to predict the score on the test. The Common Core standards, adopted by 48 states and Illinois in June of 2010, focus on the areas of English/language arts and mathematics. These standards are slightly different from the ACT College Readiness standards as they employ “21st Century skills” utilizing technology within them:

The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy. (Common Core Website)

Both sets of standards “standardize” the experience of students in the high school classroom, and have created the need, in light of curriculum leader responses, to assess students on them. Many of the leaders stated that “common formative and summative” assessments aligned to the standards were a major curriculum priority of the district. They were very positive about the adoption of the Common Core, and anxious to see what the assessments (from the state level) will encompass. One leader explained, “And I also think it will tighten up the kinds of assessments—and again, this is out in nebulous world because everyone is waiting with baited breath to see what the assessments are going to be.” Two leaders in the focus groups stated that they were “hopeful” that the Common Core assessments, which will be determined by the state from a national group called the Partnership for Assessment and Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), will assess students on more “formative approaches” which involve “creative thinking,” but in that same conversation one leader stated, “But logistically now they’ve had to back off of that. So it makes me a little reticent to think that perhaps we’re going to get to that level where I’m hoping we’ll be. So I don’t know.” Pertinent to the discussion of schooling for accountability, it important to note that the PARCC group is funded by a four year, $186 million
dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Education, and is managed by Achieve (a group of
governors and corporate leaders) who work with states to improve K-12 student achievement by
“aligning K-12 education policies with the expectations of employers and the postsecondary
community” (http://www.parconline.org/about-parcc).

While many of the leaders interviewed for this study were optimistic regarding the
adoption of the Common Core standards, I am guardedly skeptical. I do not believe that by
adopting a set of standards or changing the tests to assess them will bring about the school
cultures that foster critical consciousness. It is still just NCLB in a different form, and “fixing
NCLB” is not going to bring about any change as reading and math will still be tested and
therefore, considered a main content focus (Rothstein, 2008). The focus of critical consciousness
as a curriculum priority must be purposeful, driven, communicated, and modeled by curriculum
leaders in public schools.

I believe it to be important to clarify that I am not against high academic standards, just
“standardization” of learning, learning that is framed strictly by academic standards and
measured by standardized norm-referenced assessments that are used to depict the success of a
district or school. I don’t believe that anyone could argue against having high expectations for
learning, but the reality is that standards and assessments to measure them are business models
that have been applied to education to quantify learning and promote an economic imperative
an editorial 11 years ago stating a direct stance against the standards movement:

The standards movement in this country was born not of insight into child development,
learning, or teaching, but of the corporately driven agenda to use the failing American
economy of the 1970’s as a lever to generate a more productive workforce and robust
consumer market. (p. 3)
Reading the Common Core mission from its professional literature, it doesn’t appear that much has changed. These standards are being driven by the business leaders of this country and governors of the 48 states that adopted them. They focus on the ability to create students who are equipped to navigate in the global economy. There is no mention of creating students who are ready to face the societal, cultural, and political challenges of our country. Additionally, I am astounded by how many salesmen call my office with a curricular product or assessment to “meet the expectations of the Core.” I get no less than five phone calls and numerous e-mails trying to solicit sales for packaged curriculum. It does not escape my notice the huge corporate markets that were created and continue to be created by the adoption of the Common Core standards.

Absent from the majority of responses of the leaders of this study was the priority of critical consciousness as a curriculum focus. I purposely didn’t utilize the term “critical consciousness” when asking about priorities, due to the fact that leaders may have been unfamiliar with the actual word. Overwhelmingly, the leaders responses indicated that the alignment of curriculum and assessments to the Common Core were a priority, as these standards would provide the students with the knowledge and skills to attain access to post-secondary education. While a few leaders indicated that social-emotional learning was a priority, missing from the majority of responses was the focus on developing students who can navigate in a democratic society outside of that for strictly employment.

Ann, the outlier of the group, stated that the reason that the priorities for high school reflect more of a technical academic focus rather than a multi-dimensional intellectual focus was due to “comfort” and reporting. She stated:

It’s easier to quantify that—and it makes us more comfortable. So if we’re more comfortable, we’re going to do that. And it's easier to report to a Board of Education that
information. You can’t report to a Board of Education that a student who failed their experiment or test and really learned—that was successful. You know, you would get all kinds of push back because it’s about what is printed in the newspaper. It’s still that old traditional thinking of competition. And if I win, then you have to lose. It’s not a win-win type of situation.

Ann’s statement reflects her unconscious understandings of what Ball (2003) calls “performativity” in schools. This type of quantification of learning and visibility in the newspapers is essential to its meaning that complex social process (like schooling) can be translated into simple figures or categories of judgment (Ball, 2003).

**Standardized Testing vs. Critical Pedagogy**

As stated previously, I purposely did not use the term “critical consciousness” in this study as I knew that some of the leaders would not be familiar with the term. I utilized the term “thinking deeply” and provided room for interpretation of the phrase in order to ascertain if students were provided with the opportunity to expand their awareness of multiple perspectives and knowledge of the world. The leaders in this study believed that critical consciousness (thinking deeply) is part of certain courses (honors, Advanced Placement, social studies, and English) and in the instructional pedagogy of teachers. Many leaders used the term “critical thinking” when describing this aspect of the curriculum. The understanding of critical thinking by the leaders was primarily described as content learning activities aligned with the higher spectrum of Bloom’s taxonomy. When some leaders described a partial understanding of critical thinking beyond Bloom, their responses reflected the idea of argument, evidence, and logic, rather than that of being critical for transformation or challenging the status quo (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

Course content was believed to provide this aspect of the curriculum, and most leaders indicated that only specific courses would provide students with this opportunity. Advanced
Placement (AP) courses are described as being “rigorous” with college level expectations. The College Board provides this description of Advanced Placement courses on their web site:

From the moment you enter an AP classroom, you’ll notice the difference—in the teacher’s approach to the subject, in the attitude of your classmates, in the way you start to think. In AP classrooms, the focus is not on memorizing facts and figures. Instead you’ll engage in intense discussions, solve problems collaboratively, and learn to write clearly and persuasively. (http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html)

While I do not believe that AP courses may engage in a true experience of critical consciousness for high school students, it is problematic that although this type of educational experience should exist for all high school students, only students deemed as “honors or AP” have access to them. While the leaders did specifically state that efforts were being made to include more students in these courses, many other students are excluded. One leader stated, “I think this is an area of weakness for our district. Students may be exposed to it [critical consciousness] during the upper level honors and AP courses, but not sure how often it happens for the regular student.” One leader provided a description of what a “regular” course looks like when considering “thinking deeply” in the curriculum:

I think currently it’s very shallow. And it kind of goes back to that coverage type of model, where we’re just going to cram in a lot of information in a very short period of time and never get in depth to anything, no problem based learning, no ability to apply it to real world problems and perhaps coming up with solutions.

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education described by Giroux (2010) as an “educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action.” Instructional practices of the teacher were shared by curriculum leaders when considering if critical pedagogy leads to the focus on critical consciousness. While the strict definition of the term “critical pedagogy” was not found in their responses, descriptions such as “real-life experiences,” “discussions and conversations that are student centered,” and
“relevant” were used to describe where the curriculum may somewhat provide students the opportunities to develop critical consciousness. A partial understanding of this pedagogical approach was described by one leader:

It’s kids working in groups, having conversations about a topic, presenting that topic to their peers and having dialogue with their peers. That the discussion is, you don’t go right away from here’s the problem, now give me a solution. It’s much more interactive and collaborative. You have to figure out how to think for yourself, how to coalesce an argument, how to get people to come to your side, how to present fact. So the more that you engage in those activities, it’s critical thinking. It’s taking what’s in front of you and making sense out of it—not to get a right answer necessarily, but to come to an answer or move in a direction.

Leaders also expressed technology as a primary tool in providing students the ability to “think deeply” in the curriculum. The majority of the participants mentioned learning activities that utilized communication/collaboration tools and informational web sites on the Internet as ways to provide students with opportunities to engage in critical consciousness. While I believe the Internet to be a powerful tool to access a bigger world with different perspectives, access to the Internet alone will not provide our students to practice critical consciousness. Curriculum leaders and teachers must have a complete understanding of the traditions of critical consciousness (examining power) and how it differs from that of critical thinking (assessing evidence) (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Additionally, the issue of content filtering, mandated by the Child Internet Protection Act (CIPA) if schools accept federal E-Rate monies, poses problems in utilizing technology as a tool for critical consciousness. Many school districts (mine included) filter Internet content due to this legislation; both teachers and students are restricted from resources that they might find relevant, interesting, or important to learning. Callister and Burbules (2004) call filtering “anti-educational” and “antithetical to the democratic values of educational opportunity” and state:

But perhaps even more important, filtering is anti-educational in its implicit messages about what adults think about education. That is, it promotes a notion of education
steeped in the importance of obedience and acquiescence, while compromising opportunities for independent questioning and discovery. (p. 652)

If critical consciousness is essential to maintain democratic citizenry, Internet filtering for schools can be seen as threat as a form of censorship.

The debate over filtering reflects conflicting ideas about liberal democracy and the importance of open public spaces (including schools and the Internet). In this country, there is a widely held but not unanimous belief that, in a liberal democracy, people should be free to read pretty much whatever they want. (Callister & Burbules, 2004, p. 652)

While standardized testing was not a focus of conversation with leaders, the use of standardized testing data, specifically the ACT and common local content area tests, and discussion of the tests was revealed by all of the curriculum leaders as major factor in driving curriculum priorities. One leader stated, “That’s all we look at—reading and math. That data drives most of the priorities in the district.” Although discussed by all leaders, standardized testing in isolation does not seem to be the focus for these leaders; however, it is left up to the teacher to provide students with opportunities to experience critical consciousness in the classroom.

**Leadership for School Improvement vs. Transformative Leadership**

The role of curriculum leaders was defined in many parts of the interview. Leaders articulated that they did not see their role as actually determining curriculum priorities for the district, but rather supporting and directing the “work” to meet the priorities. Their responses indicated that they “balance” the demands of school improvement leadership with attributes of transformative leadership. As one leader stated:

We can only do so much, with all of the external factors we are up against like standardized assessments at the local and national level: it creates a culture that focuses on test scores as a reflection of a school’s effectiveness. The individual student and his or her growth become insignificant.
Their role was described as being a “navigator” through school improvement and accountability measures. Most leaders expressed that accountability measures only limited curriculum if district or school leadership allowed it. One leader stated that he felt his role was to “protect” the curriculum from negative aspects of accountability while “finding what was useful” to the district to improve learning for students.

Leadership for school improvement was a large part of what the leaders expressed as their role. District and school improvement planning processes were described by most leaders as how they worked with teams of building leaders and teachers and also how the work of the district is documented and communicated. The majority of the curriculum leaders described their role as working with district and school improvement teams, analyzing assessment data, developing plans, and most recently, utilizing Rising Star, the new online school improvement planning system that the state of Illinois uses as a monitoring tool for districts or schools that are “in NCLB status.” The feedback about Rising Star was mixed. One leader stated, “We participate in the Rising Star process, but it is burdensome and takes so much time and energy from where the real work should be done—at the teacher level influencing classroom instruction.” Another leader commented, “One of the benefits to Rising Star is that it gives pretty much standards of what are good practices for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. So you are supposed to judge what you currently do up against the standards.”

Most leaders saw themselves as “educators” and “coaches” for staff, other district leaders, the Board of Education, and the community. Staff development, both leading it and securing resources for it, was defined by the leaders as the way that they could educate and provide support for staff, and helped having “hard conversations” with staff members who “want to keep the status quo.” Specifically, Professional Learning Communities (PLC), a framework by
William DuFour, which focuses on learning rather than teaching, working collaboratively, and holding yourself accountable for results, was mentioned by curriculum leaders as a primary staff development initiative. Other staff development initiatives to provide staff with support included Understanding by Design (UbD), a curriculum framework by Wiggins and McTighe for “essential understandings” in the curriculum, and Response to Intervention (RtI), a method of academic intervention used to provide early, systematic assistance to children who are having difficulty learning.

While the leaders may not have been familiar with the term “transformative” leader, attributes were identified when leaders talked of conversations and dialogue with Board members to understand the broader context of curriculum, beyond just test scores. These conversations were seen as very difficult for curriculum leaders as they expressed that Board members do not always understand the context of schooling today, nor understand how accountability measures are limiting in their depiction of how schools are actually performing.

One leader stated:

You know, it puts pressure on me as a curriculum leader because we’re all feeling responsible for those scores, and we know, I know that I’ve seen some really positive things happen in my district, and at the same time scores have declined. So rather than recognizing the value of the really innovative work that’s being done, and giving that work some time to make a difference in scores, sometimes that work gets questioned. So, you know, it’s troubling to me in that you constantly feel like you have to defend the really good work that’s being done and the people that are doing that really good work.

Some curriculum leaders described incidents where they had to have “difficult” conversations, or actually “stand up” to a Board member or superintendent at one time in their career when they felt that what the school was doing was not in the best interest of staff or students.

Many of the leaders used the terms “dialogue” and “conversations,” although not completely in the strictest sense of transformative leadership goals. Most talked about working with resistance and challenges with teachers, and all conveyed the understanding of what Shields
(2009) states as “the human dimension” of their work. One leader stated, “The last couple years I’ve adopted the notion that even though I disagree with someone wholeheartedly, I think that sometimes—they’re arguing something they really believe in. So I handle that accordingly, and I identify that. Just considering other perspectives will kind of change something.” Other transformative leadership attributes that were self-identified by the participants were “fostering innovation,” “supporting risk-taking” “letting go of control,” and “courage.” Ann stated, “You have to have courage. Sometimes to go against those Board members, go against that Superintendent, if you know it’s not okay with what’s best for kids . . . what’s right.” Moral courage was defined by Jake in the focus group. He stated:

Moral courage is about doing what is right for every student even though your efforts will be met with powerful resistance. Taking on status quo and challenging the embedded practices that many in education are a successful product of and perpetuate as professionals.

Curriculum leaders see their roles involving both leadership for school improvement and trying to engage in transformative leadership practices. While I believe that many of the leaders do not have the complete awareness of what transformative leadership is, or what its goals are in the strictest sense, I do believe that a few leaders in this study have the predisposition to become fully functioning transformative leaders, as each one expressed the desire and need to do what is “right” for students, despite what accountability measures may indicate, and act in new ways to bring about a different vision of schooling for high school students.

The focus group was powerful in gleaning new understandings regarding transformative leadership. Zaria, a participant from the focus group, shared with the group that she had an “aha” moment during the interview. She unconsciously described what Senge (2006) calls “turning the mirror inward” (p. 8). “It includes the ability to carry on ‘learningful’ conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that
thinking open to the influence of others” (pp. 8-9). She described her newly perceived role as a leader to provide new “mental models” for teachers, outside of the demands of accountability structures.

**Culture of “Performance” vs. Culture of Democratic Community**

A culture of “performance” would be one characterized by what Ball (2003) describes: “The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’ or ‘moments of promotion or inspection’” (p. 216). This culture is defined by monitoring systems and the production of data that is constantly collected, recorded, and published. Visibility to the public is important, and districts/schools are subjected to a variety of judgments, measures, comparisons, and targets and are encouraged to “improve themselves” and make them “stand out” from one another (Ball, 2003). The result of a culture of performance is what Ball (2003) states as an environment of resistance, insecurity, and questions, as organizations start to create “fabrications” of themselves. “Fabrications” are what Ball (2003) describes as “versions of the organization (or person) which does not exist—they are “not outside the truth” but neither do they render simply true or direct accounts—they are produced purposefully “in order to be accountable” (p. 224). Leaders in this study described this culture of “performance” through their use of data and monitoring, competitions that exist both internally and externally within the districts, the disconnection of curriculum priorities and their believed role of high school education, and their roles and challenges as curriculum leaders.

Data and monitoring activities using data were described repeatedly by leaders as a normal and necessary part of their workings with the curriculum. “Data based decision making” was mentioned when answering questions regarding identifying curriculum priorities, influences on curriculum priorities, positive changes, and mostly, when describing school accountability
measures. Sources that were specifically mentioned by curriculum leaders were standardized testing data (EPAS, PSAE, ACT, and AP), course enrollment data (honors and Advanced Placement [AP] courses), and graduation rates. I, too, struggle with having conversations to foster critical consciousness in the curriculum as a majority of school initiatives (district and school improvement plans, RtI problem solving models, and high school course placement decisions) demand the use of standardized data to determine overall educational effectiveness.

One leader, well-intentioned in identifying students who may need supports in an AP class, described how this “performance” looked in her district:

So we have done some interesting things with data. In addition to looking at simply AP course taking patterns and scores, we’ve compared that to district enrollment. We’ve compared the demographics of students taking AP course to the overall demographics in the district to know whether in fact our growth has come from overall enrollment growth, or if we are reaching out to a greater number and kind of student. We look at PSAE data, EPAS data. We also take that data and compare it to student course taking patterns. So we track cohorts of students and the courses that they’re enrolled in. And so, is there any discernible pattern in the course taking pattern of students and their performance on standardized exams to determine whether course changes are needed to identify curricular priorities in terms of tracking and students who are tracked into a certain program of study. And then keeping teams and departmental teams looking for specific data, student performance data.

One leader talked about gathering data on teachers through the use of walkthroughs as suggested by state school improvement personnel:

Well, walkthroughs is an administrator practice where an administrator or group of administrators actually just go in, they walk through a classroom and they stop in for about three or four minutes. They’re zeroing in on specific behaviors or student engagement purposes and then noting that to collect data. When you only observe a classroom for three or four minutes you can cover a lot of classrooms. So it’s more like quantity in observations rather than quality. And it’s just gathering as much data as you can on teacher practices and then drawing your conclusions based on that.

Another leader described, in depth, a data-driven “performance” when alluding to the workings of her Professional Learning Communities:

It’s like the PLC teams—they are required to create a SMART goal for how you’re going to improve student achievement in your area. We don’t care what the SMART goal is,
just it needs to be measurable, and something that somehow kids are going to get better in your curricular area. And then you’re working towards that goal. And you have this meeting time. And you have to create meeting time, and you have to create minutes with this specific template, because one of the parts of the template is, not just what we talk about, but, “What’s the focus for the next meeting?,” “What’s our between meeting work?”

The focus on data collection and monitoring described by these statements are clear indicators of performativity practices that have permeated high schools. Teaching and learning is seen as quantifiable and accountability is seen as how much data can be gathered to provide a judgment on value or worth.

Another curriculum leader described her evolution in utilizing data for accountability in her career:

I basically threw data out and said, “Here’s where we are” and that was very ineffective, obviously. And that’s where to me I think the accountability piece sort of sparked in my mind thinking, “We’ve got to not just do something, but we have to show what we’re doing, and we have to show its improving. It’s a journey. It’s not something that you just wake up one day and say, “Oh, I’m a first year administrator” and say “I get it.” You don’t. It takes a lot of time to get there.”

She truly believed that data without the monitoring and action planning (school improvement model) is ineffective. Her statement revealed her perception that data collection and monitoring is a normalized skill acquired by leaders over time.

Monitoring efforts by leaders were manifested in district and school improvement monitoring visits by state personnel, “Late Start reports,” and “department meeting minutes.” Monitoring and reporting is seen a natural part of the work of schools and role that curriculum leaders play. One leader stated:

And I’ll be honest, I think around here there just wasn’t a whole lot of accountability because we have to go back to this whole idea of No Child Left Behind. It’s made everybody more accountable. It’s like we can’t—you can’t ever relax. You have to be vigilant. And so people know I’m going to be checking up.
Ann, again the outlier of the group, voiced her perception of these data-based “performances” in frustration, saying, “Isn’t that what is about—learning? But everything we do is based on points, grades, GPA’s, AYP, ACT. I mean, it’s all based on that, and not about learning.”

Competition, both externally and internally, for districts and schools were described by the leaders in this study. This competition manifested itself in the form of competing course offerings, staff “fighting over” the student population for enrollment numbers, and student demographics of districts in looking at “effectiveness” as measured by accountability structures. Courses described as “relevant for getting students ‘college and career ready,’” “core,” or “state mandated” took precedent over elective courses. One leader commented:

The requirements since I’ve been here just keep going up. We just keep having more and more courses mandated, which offers fewer and fewer options for kids to get into things that they really like to do, to get into an arts class, to take music, to do all the things that in this county anyway is part of a well-rounded education.

Competition among elective staff members vying over student enrollment numbers to keep their courses in existence (due to resource allocation for personnel costs) was stated by a majority of curriculum leaders. This included descriptions of teacher personalities, the need to keep teaching jobs, and “gatekeeping” to keep “control” of what course levels teachers get assigned to teach. Student demographics of districts was identified as a factor in competition, as curriculum leaders from districts with more students from poverty described how NCLB AYP targets do not impact them as much publicly now that the “affluent districts” have “caught up.” One leader stated:

We kind of knew back in the day when these Title I schools and districts that were diverse like mine, that we knew it was inevitable that other districts would face the same sanctions . . . so we just kind of predicted that once New Tree, Greenbriar West, or Howard Central didn’t make it—now that’s just sour grapes on my part, I would imagine . . . however, it does seem to be playing out that way.

The disconnection of curriculum priorities and the perceived role of high school education was another example where a culture of “performance” was described by curriculum
leaders in this study. Identified priorities of standards and assessment conflicted with responses
to the role of education by the leaders. These “disconnects” were related as having an impact on
the definition of curriculum and assessment in the district as well as on teachers. One curriculum
leader elaborated on her perception of the impact to the definition of assessment:

And what does assessment look like outside of school? Because there’s your disconnect. And just as I described that disconnect that I think we have with curriculum, I think then that also creates disconnect with assessments. So are we trying to tool kids according to some current high stakes testing? And so there tends to be that disconnect that we’re all wrestling with. So what does that instruction, what does that curriculum, what are the topics, what are the content, what weights do we put on each of those as we process kids through formal schooling or informal schooling, however you want to look at it, in order to get them to the viability for after school?

The mismatch of curricular priorities and actual practices were also described by a leader, with
teachers being caught in the middle:

I’d be driven crazy if I were a teacher, because on one hand we’re talking about mastery learning, second chance learning, all these things, but then we’re held to certain passing rates and PSAE scores and AP scores. So it’s really tough to be a teacher.

Mike, a curriculum leader in a K-12 district identified that the curricular priorities of his
district were to get all students “college and career ready,” and described at great length, the need
for high schools to be “more prescriptive of courses that students take—even to the point of
withholding electives until they had achieved proficiency in “college and career” core courses.
He had this to say about the role of education and “critical thinking” in the curriculum, which
clearly illustrates this “disconnect” of priorities of standards and assessment and perceived role
of high school education.

We need to make people be more aware of, you know, what it means to be a good citizen. How are you going to be a protector of our resources? How are you going to further our resources? What does it mean for you to protect our planet? Because what happens is that—that is one thing that gets lost in the standards movement, in the accountability movement. And I think until there’s a way to mirror it all together, but if we don’t have that focus and direction to put everything there—it will get lost.
These leader descriptions are clear indications that there is a mismatch of priorities and expected outcomes for high school students. Again this is characteristic of cultures of “performance” and what Blackmore and Sachs (1997), as cited by Ball (2003, p. 221), call “institutionalized schizophrenia.”

These contradictions are also manifested in the perceptions of the role that curriculum leaders play when looking at curriculum priorities. Leaders in this study saw themselves as “educators,” “protectors,” and “navigators” when working with curriculum priorities and accountability. Doug, a high school curriculum leader, described an example of “fabrication” while creating a restructuring plan for his district—a mandate from the state as a result of being “in status” for not meeting NCLB benchmarks. He stated:

We said, “Well, here’s our restructuring plan. We’re restructuring the school day for our Title I kids.” Sent it off to the state, and they said, “That’s not enough. That’s really, you know, you haven’t really addressed the issue.” So what I had to do was protect our program, because we believe in it. I was given the Charleston plan {another school district}, might have been North, restructuring plan as a model, which was not what we wanted to do at all. It didn’t match our demographics, didn’t match anything that we were trying to do here, but that’s what I was given by the state to look at as a model. I took the wording from some of that document and looked for things that we had in place that matched that or things that we could tweak in a minor way and created a plan that on paper met all the requirements; it was approved by the state.

Doug felt it necessary to do whatever he had to in order to protect his curricular programs from the NCLB sanctions of restructuring. He “fabricated” a document that really did not capture what the district valued, but rather gave the state “what they wanted to hear.” This type of “fabrication” is an unfortunate byproduct of an educational system obsessed with proving itself to the public.

The perception of leaders in “negotiating” their role is to find a balance between priorities and accountability measures. Leaders described a definite awareness between what they believed
to be the real work of curriculum, and the nuances in navigating the expectations of current accountability frameworks. One leader stated:

I’ve gotten to the point where I can educate Boards of Education so that they kind of look at my PSAE reports as sort of a “ho-hum, yeah it’s accountability, we get it,” and we know that our teachers are doing everything they can.

Another leader shared:

So I think we’re trying to negotiate between the emphasis that our society and how we exist to create value ultimately for society by creating educational value for our students that is being placed on math, science, etc. But we also are kind of trying to balance that against what we think is very important in terms of student development.

This comment describes the tensions that exist between culture of performance and a culture for democratic community and it was apparent in the individual and focus group interviews that this “negotiation” is a source of stress for leaders. I work in a district “in status” and each year it is more of a challenge to have conversations beginning with the district’s strengths rather than its weaknesses. The culture of performance is definitely an accepted norm and will continue to flourish unless a broader definition of education is embraced by legislators and the school community.

Summary

The curriculum leaders who participated in this study provided leadership perspectives through anecdotal responses on an online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group. An analysis of the data in light of the theoretical framework (Figure 1), informed by scholarly research and literature, were presented in this chapter as well as my personal perceptions and experiences. Leadership perspectives were analyzed identifying curriculum priorities for high schools that were content-centered/ tested, rather than prioritizing the development of critical consciousness for high school students. Participants described schooling for accountability, rather than that for democratic schooling, and a culture of “performance” rather than a culture for
democratic community characterizing the curriculum focus for today’s high schools. This analysis revealed that curriculum leaders conceptualize their roles as secondary in determining curriculum priorities, as they believe curriculum priorities are primarily driven by federal/state standards and assessments, and that the perceived role of the curriculum leader is to educate, support, and navigate their schools and districts through accountability measures. Participants described the solitary nature of curriculum workings and expressed the need for a collective understanding by more than just the curriculum leader at the district level when considering curriculum priorities. While leadership for “school improvement” was a major part of how they conceptualized their roles as curriculum leaders, transformative leadership qualities were partially described by leaders as they discussed support of curriculum initiatives or teachers who were engaged in curriculum activities that did not directly support the focus of accountability, but partially addressed critical consciousness thinking in the curriculum.

The final chapter, chapter six, will provide an overview of the study, a discussion of its findings, recommendations in light of the analysis, my personal reflection on the study, and concluding comments.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

“Be yourself and think for yourself; and while your conclusions may not be infallible, they will be nearer right than the conclusions forced upon you.”
—Elbert Hubbard

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I utilized anecdotal online survey data and both individual and focus group interviews to establish, from the perspectives of district curriculum leaders, how they conceptualize their roles in establishing curriculum priorities in light of current accountability measures, and to understand to what extent these priorities support the development of critical consciousness.

Moustakas (1994) states, “In phenomenology, perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the sources that cannot be doubted” (p. 52). By examining the perceptions of curriculum leaders, it was my hope to raise an awareness among not only curriculum leaders, but all educators the need to be “critically conscious” when establishing curricular outcomes for students. It was also my hope that this study would raise awareness about the enduring limitations of curriculum that accountability measures impose upon schools and districts. To that end, in chapter five, I also introduced some of my own comments and perceptions in the spirit of Duarte’s (2000) co-construction of critical consciousness as a “co-intentional experience” (p. 180).

In this final chapter, I provide an overview of the study, and discuss findings pertinent to the research questions and literature regarding the importance of critical consciousness as a curriculum priority for high school students. I also provide recommendations for curriculum leaders to become more transformative leaders—ones who will lead with a social justice lens and
improve the experiences of both teachers and students. Additionally, my personal reflection on the study and concluding comments are presented.

**Overview of the Study**

This qualitative study had five guiding research questions and utilized a phenomenological methodology (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) to answer the research questions. An initial analysis of each research question was discussed in chapter four, and chapter five provided a deeper analysis of the data utilizing the theoretical framework (Figure 1) that was discussed in chapter two, as well as my own personal comments and perceptions. This analysis, utilizing the data from the participants, leads to a discussion of whether curriculum priorities in high schools currently focus on content-centered/tested priorities, which characterize schooling for accountability, or critical consciousness, which defines a focus for democratic schooling.

In order to understand the perceptions of district curriculum leaders and their conceptualized role in creating and leading curricular priorities in the current climate of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness in our high school students, the following research questions were used:

1. What are the current curriculum priorities in high schools?
2. How are curriculum priorities determined in high schools?
3. What is the role of curriculum leaders in establishing curriculum priorities?
4. What role does critical consciousness play in the development of curriculum?
5. In what ways do/can district curriculum leaders foster critical consciousness practices within high school curriculum?
Anecdotal responses from an online survey, individual interviews, and a focus group were coded and analyzed. A theoretical framework, informed by scholarly literature, was utilized to answer the research questions.

**Findings and Discussion**

The intent of this study was to understand not only the current curricular outcomes for high school students, but how curriculum leaders believe those priorities get determined and the role that these leaders play in establishing priorities, particularly during this time of accountability measures. Findings of this study and discussion of those findings in a general sense are presented within this section.

**Role of Education and Curriculum Priorities in Today’s High Schools**

The leaders in this study identified the role of a high school education as one that prepares students to be “college and career ready.” This is defined primarily by higher education as enrollment into post-secondary educational programs based on ACT test scores or enrollment without the need for remedial courses. The curriculum priorities for high school students established by leaders in this study focused on the Common Core standards and assessments to measure them. This focus is echoed in the initiatives and conversations of legislators and policy makers at the national level. The descriptions of this role center on an economic rather than social imperative, and the curriculum priorities described by these leaders denote “schooling for accountability,” with standards and assessments driving quantifiable and visible results in order to justify their effectiveness as a learning organization (Anderson, 2005; Ball, 2003). With the exception of one leader, participants in this study were completely unaware of the one-dimensional aspect of this perception of education. While certain aspects of accountability
testing were discussed as “unfair” or “ridiculous,” their own lack of critical consciousness was apparent as they saw accountability practices as a necessary and normal aspect of schooling today.

Schooling for accountability will continue to foster a culture of “performance” and competition, where there are “winners” and “losers” (Anderson, 2005; Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009). Curriculum leaders in this study described competitions that exist both internally and externally that impact curriculum priorities. These competitions are manifested in the tensions between core and elective courses being impacted by standardized testing results and increased graduation requirements, and traditional content based curriculum versus skill-based curriculum. Leaders from low socioeconomic districts described deficit thinking when competition with financially secure districts were discussed. These descriptions were clear illustrations of a bureaucratic culture which, according to Weiner (2006), “fosters the pervasive assumption that when students misbehave or achieve poorly, they must be ‘fixed’ because the problem inheres in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom” (p. 42).

Leaders are managers of “school improvement” efforts where the tested areas of reading and math are the focus, and monitoring “research based” improvement efforts is an organizational norm. Data driven activities and monitoring have become accepted and normalized practices described by leaders in this study. The dominant presence of data usage to determine curricular priorities, educational experiences for students, and teacher performance all illustrate a culture of performance. “The reduction of persons to ‘databases’ and the constant effort devoted to fabrication empties institutions of authentic practices and relationships” (Anderson, 2009, p. 64). A heavy reliance on structured frameworks (RtI, Professional Learning
Communities, Understanding by Design) were also described by leaders in the study. This reliance on technical models “to support standardization and consistency over grassroots curricular development which consider curriculum in relation to broader cultural and political movements threaten teacher-led curriculum development, creativity, and progressive education” (Ylimaki, 2011, p. 185).

This approach to schooling is “consistent with the prevailing industrial/technical model of schooling that focuses almost exclusively on schooling’s instrumental role in producing academic achievement or workforce preparation” (Oakes & Rogers, 2006, p. 30). Schooling for accountability does not consider a broader definition for schooling, and employs the use of “technical knowledge” to bring about equitable change for all students. This is a key flaw of school improvement efforts to improve equitable experiences for all students, as it does not consider “the issues of cultural and political dynamics and engage in issues of power that exist outside of the school” (Oakes & Rogers, 2006, p. 30).

Democratic schooling focuses on shared values for all in the community and strives to actively overcome barriers to the success of all students (Shields, 2009). This type of schooling seeks to teach students to grow not only academically as individuals, but also “to recognize a common humanity, offering an opportunity for them to live and learn in equal, respectful, and mutually beneficial environments to create a society founded on similar principals” (Shields, 2009, p. 11). It requires that schools make the development of critical consciousness a priority of the curriculum. It views schools as communities to practice and engage in this consciousness so students may fully participate in our complex social world.

Public education’s ostensible mission, the development of an intelligent populace and a popular intelligence, requires that all individuals have access to education that prepares them to debate and decide among competing ideas, to weigh the individual and common
good, and to make judgments that sustain democratic institutions and ideals. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 31)

Leaders in this study did not show a complete understanding of the concept of critical consciousness nor of its importance of a curriculum priority. The perspectives of the leaders interviewed for this study stated that “thinking deeply” in the curriculum was a result of utilizing Bloom’s taxonomy in the pedagogical act, determined by the individual teacher, as well as only occurring in certain honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Additionally, leaders saw technology access as being integral as providing opportunities for students to “think deeply” about the world around them.

Schools can be places that exhibit accountability for their students and foster democratic ideas and values. This can be accomplished initially by reconceptualizing the traditional definition of curriculum from that of product (content, standards, and assessments) to praxis (interactions between the teacher and students) and making critical consciousness a purposeful curriculum priority. The definition of “curriculum” by Grundy (1987) is useful when considering curriculum in a broader context:

Curriculum, however, is not an abstract concept which has some existence outside and prior to human experience. Rather, it is a way of organizing a set of human educational practices. (p. 5)

One leader in the individual interviews felt his district had this vision of curriculum, but admitted that he wasn’t sure how it happened. He described the focus of the curriculum as “connecting to something that matters” and attributed to individual teachers. This description is consistent with Grummet’s (1995) vision that curriculum should focus on the ways that students and teachers bring their own experiences to institutional knowledge to “make sense of things” (p. 19).
Grundy’s (1987) definition also captures the importance of curriculum to be understood in terms of history and society:

The curriculum of a society’s schools is an integral part of the culture of that society. To understand the meaning of any set of curriculum practices, they must be seen as both arising out of a set of historical circumstances and as being a reflection of a particular social milieu. (p. 6)

Curriculum that is purposefully designed to promote the development of critical consciousness through the intentional use of critical pedagogy, dialogue, and relationships would contribute to the creation of democratic learning communities, as well as students who have a deeper meaning of the content. In order to achieve such a curriculum, curriculum leadership with a social justice lens is necessary to inform, foster and guide not only teachers, but also building leaders, Board members, and community stakeholders.

Social justice is inextricably linked to democracy in that social justice oriented leaders understand their role in providing students with equitable educational experiences (Theoharis, 2007). More specifically, it is not just enough to discuss or bring forth curricular policies or practices that may exclude students from real learning, curriculum leaders must be seen as transformative leaders to bring about action that will change the “status quo” and revitalize learning for students. This study found that curriculum leaders did not perceive themselves as consciously aware of the limitations of accountability and performativity, and yet described attributes that transformative leaders employ to change the learning environment to benefit all students.

**The Necessity of Transformative Leadership**

Leaders in this study identified their role in a secondary sense, in the fact that they did not see their role in establishing curriculum priorities for their district/school as priorities were determined by state and federal mandates. However, they did describe their roles as educating
and navigating the organization through the nuances of accountability. While the majority of their practices reflected a monitoring for school improvement, “glimmers” of a predisposition for transformative leadership was revealed by some of the leaders. Again, their lack of awareness is witness to their consciousness of the importance of a social justice lens when considering curriculum priorities and learning experiences for high school students.

Transformative leadership is necessary to ensure a curriculum that commits not only to an intellectual or academic focus, but also one that is aware of the social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of society (Shields, 2009). Transformative leaders are educational leaders who work within current school structures and must “exercise effective oppositional power, to resist courageously, to be activists and voices for change and transformation” (Weiner, 2003, p. 102). Shields (2009) describes this resistance as “moral courage” and states, “It requires educational leaders to take risks for the good, not only of the whole community, but often for those whose voices tend not to be heard and whose perspectives may not always be valued by mainstream society” (p. 12). While not having a complete awareness of the concept of transformational leadership, the leaders in this study identified this aspect of “courage” when discussing navigating through accountability reporting and supporting curriculum efforts which may not be measured by standardized tests. Shields (2010) states:

In other words, it is not simply the task of the educational leader to ensure that all students succeed in tasks associated with learning the formal curriculum and demonstrating that learning on norm-referenced standardized tests; it is the essential work of the educational leader to create learning contexts or communities in which social, political, and cultural capital is enhanced in such a way as to provide equity of opportunity for students as they take their place as contributing members of society. (p. 17)

Curriculum leaders need to develop their own sense of critical consciousness as they work with multiple stakeholders of schools and districts. Zaria, a participant in the focus group, identified during the interview a newly understood role of a leader as one to provide for teachers “new
mental models” for teaching and learning apart from accountability measures. She identified disconnects of old mental models (Senge, 2006) to the vision of what curriculum could be for high school students. Transformative leaders would identify the limitations of accountability as measured by standardized tests. Transformative curriculum leaders would advocate and create curriculum and learning environments which support a deeper learning context (the development of critical consciousness as a curriculum priority) for all students.

Recommendations, based on the findings of this study, and informed by the need for a broader definition of curriculum to include the development for critical consciousness and the need for transformative leadership are presented below.

**Recommendations**

Curriculum leaders need to have a complete understanding of transformative leadership and social justice in order to challenge those that would narrow the focus and definition of the curriculum to a “subject tested” mentality and encourage dialogue to understand curriculum as a social construct and vehicle for developing critical consciousness in high school students. The following recommendations are provided for both district/schools, as well as for colleges/universities:

**For Educators, School Leaders, and District Curriculum Leaders**

1. Engage with multiple stakeholders of the school community to establish a shared vision for learning (Shields, 2009) that includes critical consciousness as a curriculum priority. Ask the following questions: What kind of curriculum do our students need? How does our vision impact how we define curriculum? How does it impact the work of our leaders and teachers?

2. Reduce the isolation of the curriculum leader within the district. Empower curriculum leaders to educate and challenge other district leaders (i.e., superintendents, principals) to establish curriculum priorities that address hegemony, privilege, and maintenance of the status quo. Empower curriculum leaders to interrupt the dominant narrative of federal and
state mandates that undermine a curriculum that would empower students to be full participants in a democratic society (Apple, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

3. Critically examine the curriculum currently in use. Reconceptualize a standards-based approach to include a “holistic balance between subject matter understanding, self-understanding, and social understanding” (Henderson & Gornick, 2007, p. 53).

4. Define accountability outside of the realm of state and federal mandates. Ask the following questions: How do we define accountability? What do we value as educators and leaders? How do we communicate “really good curriculum work” outside of test scores, school report cards, and school/district improvement plans?

5. Provide staff development on social justice and critical pedagogy and engage in dialogue with staff (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Ask the following questions: What inequities exist in the world? In our school? How can those conversations be brought into the curriculum and before our students?

**For Colleges and Universities**

Because respondents indicated that their own understandings of critical consciousness were limited, and that higher education is directly impacting the definition of “college and career ready” for high schools, the following recommendations are presented:

1. In K-12 articulation, promote a deeper meaning of “college and career” readiness than that of the ability to take courses without remediation, but rather, one that describes students with the ability to engage in critical consciousness.

2. In teacher preparation programs, program to include courses in social justice and critical pedagogy. Make social justice ubiquitous in teacher education and promote teaching as a life-long journey of transformation (Nieto, 2000).

3. In administrative preparation programs, program to include transformative leadership as a focus for school leaders (Brown, 2005). Include courses to address social justice and critical pedagogy.

4. In curriculum studies, program to address underpinnings of “curriculum as praxis” and deeper concepts of curriculum that that of “product” (Grundy, 1987). Include courses in critical pedagogy.

When college and universities begin to comprehensively train new teachers and administrators to address social justice and critical consciousness as a curriculum “staple,” new curricular mental models will emerge to promote democratic practices in schools and districts.
Reflections on the Research

This study was to describe the perceptions of district high school curriculum leaders and to understand the conceptualization of their roles with respect as to how curriculum priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. Current curriculum priorities as described by these leaders support the imperative that all students be “college and career” ready, and the vehicle for determining that “readiness” is seen primarily through the use of standards-aligned curriculum and assessments. The development of critical consciousness (or thinking deeply in the curriculum) was not seen as a priority, but rather as a pedagogical act left up to the discretion of the teacher and not directed by the curriculum. The study illuminated a lack of awareness as to the importance of critical consciousness as a priority, as well as the roles that leaders must play in navigating and critiquing accountability structures that threaten to limit the development of students in social, political, and cultural ways.

While this study focused on exploring and establishing curriculum priorities and perceptions of curriculum leadership in light of accountability measures, further research is encouraged to broaden the definition of curriculum and combat the limiting effects of current accountability measures. Action or participatory research studies that focus on a group of teachers or curriculum leaders who actively engage in curriculum praxis or critical pedagogy and systematically reflect and act to create improvement would contribute further to the existing research on curriculum leadership studies, critical pedagogy, and social justice.

Conclusion

This study was a journey for me as I reflected upon my profession as an educator. Although I hold a district office position, I still consider myself a “teacher at heart” and strive to
stay connected to teachers and students. I was troubled to hear some of the responses of the leaders that I interviewed, as I was aware of unconsciousness remarks that revealed a lack of understanding of how political agendas are manifesting themselves in education, deficit thinking, and in some cases, a sense of disempowerment as leaders. As a result of my doctoral studies and this research study, I consider myself to be a transformative leader and have developed a critical consciousness regarding the role that education must play for the future of this country. If I had taken part in this study prior to my doctoral program, my responses would have been very similar to that of my colleagues in this study. I am grateful for the opportunity to develop this sense of “knowing.” The research confirmed the need for high school curriculum to be re-conceptualized to include critical consciousness as a curriculum priority and for critical pedagogy to be a focus of teaching practice in classrooms for all students.

Furthermore, the accountability reforms that are taking place today are being accepted by district and school leaders without much deliberation, or leaders see themselves as powerless to change their course of action. While I see progress in the adoption of the Common Core standards as they strive to include learning outside of content knowledge, I still have a sense of skepticism, as the focus on quantifiable learning and reporting still seems to be the direction that education is taking. The research confirmed for me the need for transformative leaders who will take a stand against neo-liberal agendas who strive to turn education into a business and narrow its purpose to serve the economy and individuals, rather than that of the “greater good” for society.

Critical consciousness as a curriculum priority would provide high school students an in-depth understanding of themselves and others in the world, allowing them exposure to contradictions in society and the need to transform them (Freire, 2010). If schools were
established to preserve and promote a true democracy, critical consciousness must, by design, be a priority of the curriculum. Leadership to foster critical conscious practices within the curriculum is necessary to transform schools into democratic communities.

All educators, and specifically, curriculum leaders, must be made aware of what critical consciousness is and why it is essential to preserve our democracy. Leaders must engage in transformative leadership practices that support the larger picture of education—to develop individuals who are connected to a larger sense of purpose and life. Only by addressing this deficit in the curriculum and can we transform our schools and ultimately, our society, to reach its potential for real democracy to flourish.
References


Appendix A

Recruitment E-Mail and Informed Consent

“Unconscious or Unwanted? High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives”

“High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives” is a research project that seeks to understand the experiences of district curriculum leaders and to understand how they conceptualize their role with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. Through an initial survey and later, focus groups and individual interviews with district curriculum leaders, I hope to understand these leaders’ contextual references for the outcomes of a high school education, and the role that curriculum leaders play in the formation of curricular outcomes in light of accountability measures.

This research is being conducted by Elizabeth A. Yacobi, district assistant superintendent and doctoral student in the EPOL department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and will be working under the direction of her doctoral advisor, Dr. Carolyn Shields, Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Each participant will be asked to respond online to a series of questions. This will take less than 25 minutes per person, and you may choose not to respond to any question. Participants will not be offered any reward to participate, and there is no penalty for non-participation. Completion of this survey is an indication of your informed consent to participate.

All data will be totally anonymous at point of response. The information you provide will therefore remain totally confidential. The only person who will have access to the anonymous information will be the researcher associated with the project. I anticipate that there are no individual costs or risks to you in completing this survey. The potential benefits for improving curriculum leadership and policy are considerable.

I will ensure that all the data gathered are stored safely and securely in line with the University Codes of Conduct for the responsible practice of research. This requires that all data (including electronic data) must be recorded in a durable and appropriately referenced form. Data management will comply with relevant privacy protocols. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Data will be held for seven years.

I am also looking for individuals to participate in individual interviews or a focus group to further explore responses to this survey. If you are interested in participating in either an individual interview or a focus group, or both, please contact me via e-mail at bethyacobi@yahoo.com after you have completed the online survey. I will communicate with you only if you have contacted me, and will e-mail you a letter with further information regarding these interview opportunities as well as a separate consent form for participation.

If you agree to participate in either the focus groups or individual interviews, you will be asked to select a pseudonym to ensure your confidentiality is protected. Nothing you say will ever be associated with your
name in any scholarly presentations or publications related to this project. You may decline to answer any
question you prefer not to answer, and may stop the interview at any time. To thank you for your time,
when I complete the interviews, I will provide you with a gift card for a local bookstore or coffee shop for
your participation.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me, Elizabeth Yacobi, at
bethyacobi@yahoo.com or by phone at 815 263-1893, or Dr. Carolyn Shields, at cshields@illinois.edu or
by phone at 217 344-2627. If you have questions about the conduct of the study, please contact Anne
Robertson at the Bureau of Educational Research, arobrtsn@illinois.edu or 217-244-0515. If you have
any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois
Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research
participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

I thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Elizabeth A. Yacobi
Appendix B

Online Survey

Consent Form

“Unconscious or Unwanted? High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives” is a research project that seeks to understand the experiences of district curriculum leaders and to understand how they conceptualize their role with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. I would like to invite you to take an initial online survey describing your perceptions of curricular priorities. This is a short survey designed to gather preliminary data and has no identifying aspects to it. If you choose to participate, please indicate below.

I am willing to participate in this online survey for this research project.

Yes  No

General Information
Please type in your responses to the following questions.

1. How many years have you been employed as a district curriculum leader?
2. How many years have you been employed as a district curriculum leader in your current district?
3. Please indicate your district size by current enrollment figures:
   Group A School—$E < 500$ students
   Group B School—$E = 500$ to $1500$ students
   Group C School—$E > 1500$ students

Curriculum Priorities

4. Our district has a comprehensive process to identify curriculum priorities for our high school students.
   A. Agree
   B. Disagree
   Comment:

5. Leadership in determining curricular priorities for the district is PRIMARILY led by:
   A. District curriculum lead
   B. Building principal
   C. Department chairs
   D. Groups of teachers
   Comment:

6. Which of the following factors has the MOST influence curriculum priorities in your district?
A. Standardized testing data  
B. School improvement plans  
C. Parent request  
D. Educational research  
E. Diverse group of school stakeholders (i.e. community, students, parents, and administration)  
Comment:  
Other (please specify):  

7. Briefly describe your district’s curriculum priorities for the high school.  

**Curriculum Leader**  

8. As the district curriculum leader, I work MOST closely with:  

   A. Superintendent  
   B. Principal  
   C. Teachers  
   D. Students  
   E. Community  
Comment:  
Other (please specify)  

9. As a district curriculum leader, briefly describe your perception of school accountability models that are in place in your district.  

10. As a district curriculum leader, briefly describe positive curricular changes that you have seen in your district.  

11. As a district curriculum leader, briefly describe negative curricular changes that you have seen in your district.  

**Critical Consciousness**  

12. Describe your definition of “curriculum” for high school students.  

13. How does the curriculum in your district allow students to “think deeply” about the world around them?  

14. What courses of study does your district offer that allows students to consider multiple perspectives?
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form for Individual Interview

“Unconscious or Unwanted? High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives”

“Unconscious or Unwanted? High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives” is a research project that seeks to understand the experiences of curriculum leaders and to understand how they conceptualize their role with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students. Through individual interviews, I hope to understand these leaders’ contextual references for the outcomes of a high school education, and the role that curriculum leaders play in the formation of curricular outcomes in light of accountability measures. Individual interviews will capture the personal experiences and perspectives on curriculum priorities by curriculum leaders in light of accountability measures by the state and federal government.

This research is being conducted by Elizabeth A. Yacobi, district assistant superintendent and doctoral student in the EPOL department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and will be working under the direction of her doctoral advisor, Dr. Carolyn Shields, Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Individuals will be asked five open-ended questions about their personal experiences and perspectives in the context of being a curriculum leader in the current climate of accountability. The potential risks for participation include conflict with peers’ beliefs about accountability. The individual interviews will take approximately 45 minutes, and you may choose not to respond to any question during the process, and may “opt out” at any time during the interview. Individual interviews will be digitally audio recorded for the purposes of transcription. Participant authorization (see below) must be obtained from participants prior to participation in an individual interview. Participants will be offered a choice of a $20.00 gift card to either a local bookstore or coffee shop as a reward for their participation. There will be no penalty for non-participation.

Individual interviews will be held in a public, private location (i.e. library, restaurant), and the researcher will contact the participant to schedule the interviews at the convenience of the participant.

All individuals who participate in individual interviews will select a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in recording responses, and all steps will be taken to de-identify participants. No identifying features of the participant’s school or district will be asked or disclosed. The only person who will have access to the information collected during the individual interview will be the researcher associated with the project.

The anticipated risks for participants in this project include possible dissonance with peers’ position on current educational accountability measures. Again, participants have the right to stop participating at any point in the research process. The potential benefits for improving curriculum leadership and policy are considerable, as by affording curriculum leaders a “voice” in the study, it may lead to new ways for the participants to think about leadership and provide guidance on alternatives for high school outcomes. The study would provide an arena for curriculum leaders to be heard, as well as hearing others, to inform their perceptions of curriculum in high schools in light of current accountability measures.
I will ensure that all the data gathered are stored safely and securely in line with the University Codes of Conduct for the responsible practice of research. This requires that all data (including electronic data) must be recorded in a durable and appropriately referenced form. Data management will comply with relevant privacy protocols. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Data will be held for seven years and destroyed by the researcher once the time frame has expired.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me, Elizabeth Yacobi, at bethyacobi@yahoo.com or by phone at 815 263-1893, or Dr. Carolyn Shields, at cshields@illinois.edu or by phone at 217 344-2627. If you have questions about the conduct of the study, please contact Anne Robertson at the Bureau of Educational Research, arobrtsn@illinois.edu or 217-244-0515. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

I thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Yacobi

“High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives”
Consent to Participate in an Individual Interview

INDIVIDUAL CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in an individual interview described above. I have been given a copy of this consent letter and form.

_____YES _____NO I agree to have the interview digitally audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription.

Name (PLEASE PRINT): __________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

Signature Date
Appendix D

Individual Interview Script

(To be read to the participants by the researcher prior to the interview.)

“Thank you for your voluntary participation in this research project. You will be asked to respond to five open-ended questions. This individual interview will take approximately 45 minutes, and you may choose not to respond to any question during the process. This interview will be digitally audio recorded for purposes of transcription. You can decline from answering any questions that you want, and you may “opt out” at any time during the interview. Participant authorization was obtained from you prior to participation in this interview.

You will select a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in recording responses. Any identifying information regarding your district or school will be edited in the transcription of this interview. The only person who will have access to the information collected during the focus group interview will be the researcher associated with the project.”

Individual Interview Questions:

1.) In your perspective, how do curricular priorities get determined in high schools?
2.) Some say that accountability measures are limiting curriculum. How would you respond to that?
3.) Describe your understanding of the role of education for today’s high school students.
4.) Tell me about competing curricular interests in high school curriculum today.
5.) Reflecting on your career, describe your personal experiences with accountability measures as a curriculum leader.
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form for Focus Group Interview

“Unconscious or Unwanted? High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives”

“Unconscious or Unwanted? High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives” is a research project that seeks to understand the experiences of district curriculum leaders and to understand how they conceptualize their role with respect to how curricular priorities are determined in an era of accountability, and to what extent those priorities support the development of critical consciousness for high school students.

Through a focus group interview, I hope to understand these leaders’ contextual references for the outcomes of a high school education, and the role that curriculum leaders play in the formation of curricular outcomes in light of accountability measures.

This research is being conducted by Elizabeth A. Yacobi, district assistant superintendent and doctoral student in the EPOL department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and will be working under the direction of her doctoral advisor, Dr. Carolyn Shields, Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. The group, made up of 5-8 individuals, will be asked to respond to five semi-structured questions. This group interview will take approximately 45 minutes, and you may choose not to respond to any question during the process. You also may “opt out” at any time during the focus group interview. This interview will be video and audio recorded for purposes of transcription. Individual authorization (see below) must be obtained from participants prior to participation in this focus group activity. Participants will be offered a choice of a $20.00 gift card to either a local bookstore or coffee shop as a reward for their participation. There will be no penalty for non-participation.

Individuals who volunteer for this research will meet in a public, private location (i.e., library, restaurant) central to the location of all volunteers.

All information shared during the focus group session must remain confidential and should not leave the session. This ensures that the information you provide will remain confidential. All individuals who participate will select a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in recording responses, and all steps will be taken to de-identify participants. The only person who will have access to the information collected during the focus group interview will be the researcher associated with the project.

The anticipated risks for participants in this project include possible dissonance with peers in the group on current educational accountability measures. The potential benefits for improving curriculum leadership and policy are considerable, as by affording curriculum leaders a “voice” in the study, it may lead to new ways for the participants to think about leadership and provide guidance on alternatives for high school outcomes. The study would provide an arena for curriculum leaders to be heard, as well as hearing others, to inform their perceptions of curriculum in high schools in light of current accountability measures.
I will ensure that all the data gathered are stored safely and securely in line with the University Codes of Conduct for the responsible practice of research. This requires that all data (including electronic data) must be recorded in a durable and appropriately referenced form. Data management will comply with relevant privacy protocols. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Data will be held for seven years and destroyed by the researcher once the time frame has expired.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me, Elizabeth Yacobi, at bethyacobi@yahoo.com or by phone at 815 263-1893, or Dr. Carolyn Shields, at cshields@illinois.edu or by phone at 217 344-2627. If you have questions about the conduct of the study, please contact Anne Robertson at the Bureau of Educational Research, arobrtsn@illinois.edu or 217-244-0515. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

I thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Yacobi

“High School Curriculum Priorities: Leadership Perspectives”
Consent to Participate in Focus Group Interview Activity

INDIVIDUAL CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the focus group research project described above. I have been given a copy of this consent letter and form.

_____YES  _____NO I agree to have the interview video/audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription.

Name (PLEASE PRINT): ________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________

Signature  Date
Appendix F

Focus Group Script

(To be read to the participants by the researcher prior to the interview.)

“Thank you for your voluntary participation in this research project. This group will be asked to respond to five semi-structured questions. This group interview will take approximately 45 minutes, and you may choose not to respond to any question during the process. This focus group interview will be video and audio recorded for purposes of transcription. You may “opt out” at any time during the focus group interview. Participant authorization was obtained from each of you prior to participation in this focus group activity.

All information shared during this focus group session must remain confidential and should not leave the session. This ensures that the information you provide will remain confidential. You will all select a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in recording responses. Any identifying information regarding your districts or schools will be edited in the transcription of this interview. The only person who will have access to the information collected during the focus group interview will be the researcher associated with the project.”

Focus Group Questions:

1.) Describe curriculum priorities for high school today.
2.) Describe your perception of curriculum leadership today.
3.) Describe your understanding of the role of education for today’s high school students.
4.) In ways does your leadership play a role in accountability at the district or school level?
5.) In what ways does high school curriculum foster students to “think deeply” about the world around them?