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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose is to examine how recent conservative cultural political shifts have affected the meanings of curriculum leadership in schools. The author examines four principals in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act and other related policies and trends. Design: This is a critical ethnographic study of principals' curriculum leadership in four northeastern U.S. elementary schools. All four principals were highly aware of the politics surrounding curriculum decision making, pedagogy, and assessments. The researcher conducted monthly observations and interviews with the four principals, teachers, parents, and students from the fall of 2003 to the spring of 2006. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the superintendent and community members who were involved in curriculum issues. Findings: Drawing on a theoretical framework at the intersection of educational leadership, curriculum theory, and cultural politics, the data revealed two categories of curriculum leadership in a conservative era—namely, new professional curriculum leadership and critical curriculum leadership. These curriculum leadership categories emerged over time and were constructed in relation to “other” curriculum leaders and broader cultural political shifts. Implications and Significance: There is growing interest in curriculum leadership among educational administration and curriculum scholars as well as practitioners. Although instructional or curriculum leadership has been studied extensively in educational administration, these studies do not explicitly consider curriculum theory or the role of politics. In curriculum

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studies, leadership has received little attention. Findings from this study suggest the need for a new field of curriculum leadership at the intersection of educational administration and curriculum studies.

**Keywords**
critical curriculum theory, curriculum leadership, ethnography, neoconservativism, neoliberalism

Recent curriculum reform policies and discourses indicate a profound shift toward a particular set of (conservative) ideologies. Some scholars (e.g., Apple, 1996, 2004; McCarthy, 1990; Pedroni, 2007) have argued that the conservative restoration, which includes neoconservative, neoliberal, and increasingly, neonationalist perspectives, has been successful in imposing its ideology by circulating certain kinds of discourses to create a new “common sense” about curriculum and pedagogy in schools. Critical education studies (e.g., Apple, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Pedroni, 2007) indicate that these discourses related to accountability, standardized curriculum, and competition permeate communities and schools (including curriculum leadership). Whereas many texts on educational administration use instructional leadership to describe the principal’s role as the top pedagogical decision maker in a school, I purposefully use curriculum leadership (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2001) because the meaning of curriculum (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995) extends beyond teaching practice to the sociocultural and political aspects of educational content decisions: what is taught, to whom, and by whom. Curriculum leaders (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2001) who are grounded in understandings of cultural politics (Apple, 2004) and curriculum theory (Pinar, 2004; Dewey, 1916/2008) recognize curriculum as complicated conversation and curriculum decisions as political acts.

Today’s curriculum leaders must have such understandings to navigate within a broader, and increasingly conservative, political sphere. And although many educational administration studies of instructional or curriculum leadership provide principals and other school members with many understandings about how to improve classroom practice and promote positive, inclusive learning cultures that affect student learning, even the most recent social justice-oriented models (e.g., Frattura & Capper, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001) give little attention to curriculum theory (Pinar, 2004; Pinar et al., 1995), curriculum theories (e.g., Dewey, 1916/2008; Freire, 1993), and cultural politics (Apple, 2004). The purpose of this article is twofold: (a) to explore, through a review of the
literature and empirical evidence from a recent ethnographic study of U.S. principals, how recent cultural political shifts have affected the meanings of curriculum leadership and curriculum in schools and (b) to propose a new field of curriculum leadership at the intersection of educational leadership, curriculum theory, and critical education studies of cultural politics that may be appropriate for curriculum leadership in a conservative era.

This article is organized into five sections. First, I explore recent cultural and political shifts in U.S. education that encompass the so-called conservative era—trends and shifts that clear the way for the formation of these new curriculum leadership identities. Next, I discuss curriculum theory and theories that may be relevant for curriculum leadership with regard to analysis of self in relation to the growth of a democratic society in a conservative era. I then examine the strengths and shortcomings of curriculum leadership studies in educational administration and curriculum fields. Following a description of my critical ethnographic research methods, I examine curriculum leadership identities that emerged in the years following the No Child Left Behind Act, 2002 to 2006. The article concludes with a call for a new curriculum leadership field as well as implications for leadership practice, preparation, and future research in such a field.

**Current Cultural Political Movements and Policies**

The period from 1995 to 2003 witnessed a resurgence of conservative ideology related to curriculum. Critical education and curriculum scholar Michael Apple (1996, p. 6) wrote about the current Right’s agenda as a new hegemonic alliance with a wide umbrella that creatively encompasses and unites the contradictions and tensions in its various submovements. Specifically, Apple identified four major groups in the new hegemonic alliance of the current conservative era: (a) *neoliberalists*, dominant economic and political elites intent on “modernizing” the economy and the institutions connected to it, with parents and students considered educational consumers in a marketplace; (b) *authoritarian populists*, largely White working-class and middle-class groups who mistrust the state and are concerned with security, the family, mainstream religion, and traditional knowledge and values and who form an increasingly active segment of what might be called authoritarian populists; (c) *neoconservativists*, economic and cultural conservatives, such as Bill Bennett, who wants to return to “high standards,” discipline, and social Darwinist competition; and (d) *the new middle class*, a fraction who may not totally agree with these other groups but whose own professional
interests and advancement depend on the expanded use of accountability, efficiency, and management procedures that are their own cultural capital. These seemingly disparate agendas find room to compromise on the belief that schools are failing. Furthermore, as some critical education scholars (e.g., Apple, 1996, 2004; McCarthy, 1990; Pedroni, 2007) have recently argued, the groups within this alliance have been successful in imposing its ideology by circulating certain kinds of discourses to create a new “common sense” about curriculum and pedagogy in schools. In other words, many educators have articulated with conservative movements in response to their concerns about curriculum (Oliver & Apple, 2003).

Recent federal policies and state mandates likewise reflect the conservative restoration in a new paradigm of educational leadership defined by performance outcomes and curriculum reforms defined by standardization. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and, more recently, Race to the Top (2009). The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to attain a goal of 100% proficiency on state tests by the year 2012. Consequences for failure to make adequate yearly progress on state tests are articulated in current policies. If schools do not make adequate yearly progress goals across a series of years, consequences include conversion to charter school status, staff restructuring, and reconstitution. Going further, Race to the Top rewards schools for attaining “labels” of high performance. When principals or curriculum leaders communicate these current policy requirements, they can unwittingly circulate a particular set of discourses associated with the conservative restoration in their schools and communities. Today’s leaders must be able to examine and question current curriculum discourses and policies regardless of their personal ideologies; however, curriculum theory and politics receive little attention in the mainstream educational administration literature. In the next section, I examine curriculum theory and theories as lenses to examine the extant curriculum leadership literature.

**Curriculum Theory and Theories**

This section discusses curriculum theory and selected (critical) curriculum theories that have implications for curriculum leadership in a conservative era. To begin, I draw on Pinar and colleagues’ (1995) definition of curriculum theory as “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience in which academic knowledge, subjectivity and society are inextricably linked” (p. 167). According to Pinar (2004), public school curriculum is about understanding the relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment in
which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendants will someday live. Furthermore, according to Pinar et al. (1995), curriculum (a) informs the ethical obligation to care for ourselves and our fellow human beings and (b) enables us to think and act with intelligence, sensitivity, and courage in the public sphere (as citizens aspiring to establish a democratic society) and in the private sphere (as individuals committed to other individuals). In other words, curriculum work is simultaneously autobiographical and political (Pinar, 2004). Later, Pinar (2004) argued that these curriculum understandings must stimulate complicated conversation:

A complicated conversation illustrates a curriculum in which academic knowledge, subjectivity, and society are inextricably linked. It is this link, this promise of education for our private-and-public lives as Americans, which curriculum theory elaborates. If we persist in our cause—the cause of public education—someday the schools and those of us who work in them can deflect displaced and deferred racism. When we do, schools will no longer be knowledge-and-skill factories, not academic businesses but schools: sites of education for creativity, erudition, and interdisciplinary intellectuality. Someday—if we remember the past, study the future, analyze, then mobilize in the present—education will permit the progressive pursuit of “new modes of life, eroticism, and social relations.” (p. 31)

Curriculum, then, becomes the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world. In the next several paragraphs, I discuss selected curriculum theories that further inform understandings of curriculum as complicated, nuanced, interdisciplinary conversations about school knowledge, self, and society.

Dewey (1916/2008) also emphasized the idea of educational and social connections in his theories. As he described,

In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young. Since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter’s nature will largely turn upon the direction children’s activities were given at an earlier period. This cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth. (Dewey, 1916/2008, pp. 29-30)

In other words, education has no greater end than to create the capacity for further education in students; a democratic way of life is not a means to some
larger end or outcome. It is in itself the realization of political, social, and educational ends supportive of growth. According to Dewey, such a democratic society must have a type of education that gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind that secure social change without introducing disorder.

Regarding curriculum subjects, Dewey (1916/2008) argued that the subject matter of education consists primarily of the meanings that supply content to existing social life. The continuity of social life means that many of these meanings are contributed to present activity by past collective experience. As social life grows more complex, these factors increase in number and importance.

There is need of special selection, formulation, and organization in order that they may be adequately transmitted to the new generation. But this very process tends to set up subject matter as something of value just by itself, apart from its function in promoting the realization of the meanings implied in the present experience of the immature. Especially is the educator exposed to the temptation to conceive his task in terms of the pupil’s ability to appropriate and reproduce subject matter in set statements, irrespective of its organization into his activities as a developing social member. (Dewey, 1916/2008, p. 127)

Dewey’s words have been echoed in the recent curriculum trends (e.g., pacing guides) aimed at quickly improving student outcomes as measured on standardized tests. As Apple (1992, 2004) reminds us, school curricula can also function as “cultural reproduction”—that is, reproducing in each new generation the social patterns and power relations of the prior one. According to Apple (2004), the United States is governed by the interests of capitalist big business and corporations, which control the media and the production, consumption, and distribution of goods. These dominant interests exercise hegemony on everyone in society through sometimes subtle but very powerful mechanisms of domination in which schools play a major part. Schools preserve the existing power relations of society through the “hidden curriculum,” that is, the school rules that all students know but were never explicitly taught (Apple, 2004).

Freire (1993) similarly argues that the main purpose of curriculum development is to stimulate and sustain critical consciousness among oppressed people. Treating oppressed people as objects whose behaviors are to be transformed by educators cannot develop critical consciousness. Rather, they must be treated as active human agents who deserve teachers’ help in achieving their
own emancipation through dialogue. The educator’s task is to pose “the problems of men in their relations with the world” (Freire, 1993, p. 10). Students and teachers thus become collaborators or co-investigators developing a shared consciousness of reality and images of a possible, better reality. Pinar’s (2004) curriculum theory and related theories (e.g., Apple, 2004; Dewey, 1916/2008; Freire, 1993) suggest a nuanced, interdisciplinary socio-cultural-political perspective on curriculum that will inform my examination of curriculum leadership studies below and findings from my own study.

Curriculum Leadership Studies

This section consists of two large subsections that examine empirical literature on curriculum leadership in two largely distinct fields, educational administration and curriculum studies.

Educational Administration Field

The educational leadership field is replete with studies of curriculum (“instructional”) leadership studies, beginning with the role of the principal in effective schools and evolving to distributed and social justice–oriented models.

Instructional leadership and the role of the principal. In empirical literature, the term instructional leadership emerged from the effective schools research on “outlier schools,” that is, those schools that effectively educated children from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds (e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Louis & Miles, 1990). Following this same tradition, Murphy (1984) conducted a large-scale survey of principals and other educators and identified four leadership tasks or functions that distinguish high-achieving from low-achieving schools. According to Murphy’s findings, effective instructional leaders (a) develop mission and goals; (b) promote quality instruction through supervision; (c) promote a positive learning culture through rewards, high expectations, and professional development; and (d) develop a safe and orderly school environment with appropriate economic and community resources. Similarly, Hallinger (1984) identified several “instructional leadership behaviors” that yielded improved student outcomes—namely, setting high expectations and goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. Hallinger did not, however, find any connections between curriculum decision-making structures or learning culture and student achievement. Essentially, early instructional leadership models
emerged from an empirical base that quantitatively measured principals’ tasks and functions as variables that contributed to student outcomes in effective low-SES schools.

A decade later, Shephard (1996) replicated Hallinger’s study and identified the additional school factors of teacher commitment, professional involvement, and innovativeness as essential influences on classroom practice (with practice defined as instructional processes and student behavior). Similarly, other studies assumed a focus on the principal’s leadership practices, including most often supervision and staff development, that contributed to improvements in teacher instruction (e.g., Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Hallinger & Heck, 1997; Leithwood & Duke, 1998). These studies also included a focus on motivation variables defined in psychology and learning theories rather than curriculum theory, curriculum theories, or any disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, that might have illuminated the leader’s work through sociopolitical and historical lenses essential for understanding curriculum experiences (Pinar, 2004).

**Distributed leadership.** More recent studies and leadership training programs have also demonstrated that “instructional” leadership is not the exclusive domain of the principal, since teachers and other support professionals play a vital leadership role in the improvement of classroom practices (e.g., Hallinger, 2004; Jackson, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003). Such a shared or integrated model conceptualizes instructional leadership as a capacity for school improvement in which the principal models appropriate instructional leadership behaviors (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982; Hallinger, 1984; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Shephard, 1996) and invites teachers and others to join their efforts to change and improve their teaching practices. For example, Jackson (2000) used a mixed-methods approach to examine schools that consistently performed well on various assessment measures; he found that an “interactive leadership model”—whereby principals invited teachers to lead instructional improvement efforts and then worked with them in a shared instructional leadership capacity to develop instructional innovations—could improve student learning. Like earlier instructional leadership studies that focused on individual principals, Jackson emphasized the distributed leader’s role in pedagogical improvements more than curriculum content decisions (Pinar, 2004). Spillane and colleagues (2001) come closer to an interdisciplinary perspective when they define distributed instructional leadership in terms of the various forms of capital that followers value (e.g., social, cultural, human). Here Spillane et al.’s definition of human capital encompasses academic content knowledge and implies the importance of leaders’ understandings about the state of society, but it fails to consider leaders’ and followers’ subjectivities and the
linkages among these (Pinar et al., 1995). Furthermore, individual and distributed instructional leadership studies rarely mention what educational content leaders should influence, much less how academic content knowledge relates to social and self-formations. And although these distributed models allow for teachers’ voices in curriculum leadership, these models do not explicitly articulate the underlying curriculum theories and politics relevant for distributed leadership work, particularly with regard to leaders’ ethical obligations to care for themselves and their fellow human beings or their courage in the increasingly virulent public sphere (Pinar, 2004). In other words, traditional (principal-focused) and distributed instructional leadership models account for instructional leaders’ abilities to recognize excellent instruction but not necessarily leaders’ abilities to engage teachers and others in complicated conversations about equitable access to excellent curriculum content and instruction for all students. A social justice orientation toward instructional leadership is considered below.

**Instructional leadership for academic, social justice, and equity.** More recently, a growing number of scholars have expanded instructional leadership to focus on social justice with regard to curriculum and instruction (e.g., Oakes et al., 2000; Scheurich, 1998; Theoharis, 2007; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001). For instance, Touchton and Acker-Hocevar (2001) examined schools that were restructured to improve academic performance for students from traditionally marginalized groups. In this study, the school was the unit of analysis; however, Touchton and Acker-Hocevar focused on the role of the leader in the development of inclusive decision-making processes and classroom instructional practices. Likewise, Dantley and Tillman (2006) examined school restructuring and policy change efforts aimed at transforming procedures that perpetuate social inequalities and marginalization attributable to race, class, gender, and other markers of otherness.

Focusing more specifically on the leader, Theoharis (2007) studied principals’ social justice orientations and argued that leaders must create inclusive instructional programs that account for race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions (p. 223). Furthermore, Theoharis argued that to challenge the status quo of currently marginalizing instructional practices, such as segregating special education students, social justice leaders must have ideological clarity, self-awareness, passion, and courage. Frattura and Capper (2007) agree, arguing that the primary leadership characteristic of social justice leaders is that “leaders must believe in their core that students learn best when they are educated in heterogeneous educational settings” (p. 19). These and other social justice leadership studies move the needs of traditionally marginalized groups to the
center of instructional leaders’ efforts and push instructional leadership to incorporate dispositions and practices associated with critical theory (e.g., ideological clarity, critical self-awareness, aims for radical social change).

Marshall (2004, p. 7) argues that for leaders to develop critical self-awareness and ideological clarity, educational leadership preparation programs must have “more skills beyond scientific management or quick fixes” (p. 43) to address complex educational dilemmas steeped in an array of social, cultural, and political contexts. More specifically, McKenzie and colleagues (2008) posit three goals for educational leaders who seek educational equity and excellence: (a) They must believe that high test scores matter and raise the academic achievement for all students in the school, (b) they must prepare their students to live as critical citizens in society, and (c) they must recognize that both of these goals can be achieved only when leaders assign students to inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms that provide all students with access to a rich and engaging curriculum. According to McKenzie and colleagues, a critical consciousness about power, privilege, and social inequities motivates leaders to ensure that schools are safe places for all children and that academic achievement is explicitly linked with activism. To date, the literature on social justice and social equity leadership has primarily documented how principals have raised the achievement of typically marginalized students and, in some cases, done so in inclusive ways (e.g., Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001). As a result, instructional leadership preparation has expanded to include a clear focus on social justice and equity as well as pedagogical excellence and learning. However, this literature does not explicitly consider how principals enact a critical consciousness with their teachers and students using curriculum as a vehicle to improve student learning and achievement. The next section considers curriculum leadership from the curriculum studies field.

**Curriculum Studies Field**

Fewer curriculum studies scholars have taken up questions of leadership; however, there are scholars who have conceptualized leadership from curriculum lenses, developed curriculum leadership using frameworks that parallel curriculum theory, and conducted empirical examinations.

**Conceptions of curriculum leaders.** Curriculum and critical education studies scholars (e.g., Bourdieu, 1996; Gramsci, 2001) frequently draw on social change theories regarding the role of intellectuals in curriculum and social change. Giroux (2001) and Bourdieu (1996), for instance, draw on Gramsci’s (Hoare & Smith, 1971) social change theories when they write about the role
of public intellectuals in political activism aimed at curriculum and pedagogical change. According to Gramsci, there is a direct correlation between thought and action and between intellectuals and the social groups to which they correspond; such connections are essential for the kind of fundamental social transformation that critical curriculum scholars envision. Sears (2004) wrote about curriculum leaders as public moral intellectuals who work within an embryonic democratic infrastructure, unafraid of stirring controversy, stimulating critical analysis, challenging orthodoxy, pursuing collaboration, and searching for consensus (p. 8). Going deeper, Giroux drew from Gramsci when he argued that educators should become “public intellectuals” who provide opportunities for praxis and critical pedagogy.

In Gramsci’s view, the public intellectual leader unveils the politics of educational content decisions and thereby intervenes in the power relations between groups and classes, perhaps even helping to modify them. Asserting that a leader can guide curriculum decisions in ways that potentially modify relations between social classes amounts to a strong claim for the power of school knowledge in modern stratified societies and for the role of the curriculum leader in influencing public policy. More specifically, Giroux suggested that educators must be leaders who empower teachers, community members, and students to take an active political stance against prevailing ideologies that are not in the best interests of children in a democratic society. However, Giroux’s arguments about empowerment and critical pedagogy are not without criticism. From a poststructuralist perspective, Ellsworth (1997) reports on how critical pedagogy failed when she taught a graduate course on racism. She argues that critical pedagogy’s ideals about democratic participation and rational debate were inadequate and actually reinforced relations of domination.

Empirical examinations of curriculum leaders. A few curriculum scholars have examined questions of leadership, with teachers and students most often serving as primary participants (e.g., Brady, 1998; Breault & Breault, 2005; Dentith, 2004). Drawing from empirical findings of youth leadership and identity among Las Vegas adolescents, Dentith (2004) studied youth leadership and identity among Las Vegas adolescents and argued for a curriculum that problematizes issues of power, identity, and culture that might provide students with emancipatory leadership possibilities. At the same time, Dentith does not give explicit attention to the role of school leadership in such curriculum work. Similarly, Brady (1998) conducted a qualitative study of curriculum leaders (teachers and students) with curriculum leadership defined as a shared phenomenon that has unique expressions at each teaching site. Brady’s findings indicate the importance of readiness for leadership, content knowledge, and context, dimensions that echo Pinar et al.’s (1995) definition
of curriculum described earlier. With curriculum leadership defined as a shared phenomenon, Brady’s definition assumes that various people who have a stake in curriculum will have a voice in it. Her curriculum leadership conception has distinct similarities to Spillane’s notion of distributed instructional leadership but gives more explicit attention to curriculum. At the same time, Brady’s (1998) shared curriculum leadership idea ignores the role of formal leadership and its inherent value to teachers and students.

**Curriculum leadership development.** Some curriculum scholars have used curriculum theory (e.g., Pinar, 2004) and related theorists’ work on democratic education (e.g., Dewey, Greene) to propose curriculum leadership development frameworks aimed at school and social transformation. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) developed one of the most frequently cited curriculum leadership development models, drawing on Pinar et al.’s (1995) theory of curriculum described earlier, Dewey’s (1916/2008) work on education as growth, and Greene’s (1988) vision for sophisticated teaching to propose the elements and processes of a curriculum leadership practice that is centered on the educational interests of all children in societies with democratic ideas.

More specifically, Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) defined transformative curriculum leadership as “a collaborative process of fundamental change involving a progressive team of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders who systematically address overlapping educational, school, and social reforms” (p. 181). In this model, learning to be a curriculum leader requires deep understandings and commitments to an integrated “3S” model of learning: (a) integration of deep subject matter understanding with (b) democratic self and (c) social learning. Transformative subject learning engages adults and students in thinking about the content that they are leaning and teaching. Similarly, Bean (1997) proposed an integrated approach to leadership for transformative education, arguing that “curriculum development must be concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration” (pp. x-xi). Regarding curriculum, Bean advised leaders to “cultivate an integrated design focused on thematically based learning organized around significant problems and issues (e.g., jobs, money, careers, living for the future) collaboratively identified by educators and young people” (p. xi).

Henderson and Gornik’s (2007) study substantiated Henderson and Hawthorne’s (2000) transformative curriculum leadership framework in a study of teachers and principals across Ohio. Findings supported Pinar et al.’s (1995) curriculum theory as understanding the relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and historical context in that participants constructed autobiographies of their journeys
as curriculum leaders focused on social changes. While Henderson and Gornik evidenced positive changes in leaders’ agencies with regard to curriculum change, they also documented curriculum struggles involved when teachers and administrators engage in curriculum as complicated conversation amid current right-wing reforms that have converted the schools into businesses focused on “the bottom line” (standardized test scores) and that have controlled what teachers are permitted to teach and what children are permitted to study. It is important to note that leadership influence strategies characteristic of educational administration literature (e.g., Hallinger, 1984; Murphy, 1984; Blasé & Blasé, 1999) and public intellectual strategies characteristic of critical education studies (Giroux, 2003) were not part of Henderson and Hawthorne’s (2001) process. Similarly, Breault and Breault (2005) developed a curriculum leadership development process drawing on Dewey’s theory of inquiry as it relates to public spaces in education. Breault and Breault cultivate teachers’ as well as educational administrators’ subject knowledge and self-awareness, and like Henderson and Gornik, they document numerous challenges when leaders attempt to step out of traditional discourses and expectations and engage in complicated conversations. Thus, although curriculum scholars provide understandings of how to develop teacher and student leadership through curriculum theory lenses, they do not explicitly consider how leaders (individually and collectively) cultivate readiness for leadership, influence curriculum transformation in schools and communities (e.g., Hallinger, 2004; Jackson, 2000), and transform broader cultural politics (Apple, 2004; Pedroni, 2007). Curriculum studies’ work on leadership falls short with regard to understanding how leaders work with resistance to cultivate a shared direction for curriculum. At the same time, educational administration studies give little attention to curriculum theory or cultural politics.

**Conceptual Framework: Curriculum, Leadership, and Cultural Politics**

The educational administration and curriculum fields may not be sufficient in and of themselves to develop curriculum leadership agendas for research and transformative education amid recent cultural political shifts; however, they are a starting point for those of us embedded in their structures. Educational administration studies provided understandings about leadership capacities and influence on classroom practice (e.g., Hallinger, 1984, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003). The curriculum field expands understandings of classroom practice beyond even the most inclusive instructional practice to
consider deep understandings of curriculum subjects, the process of self-formation, and social transformation (e.g., Breault & Breault, 2005; Henderson & Hawthorne, 2001). More broadly, critical education studies of cultural politics provided my conceptual framework with understandings about the role of politics and policy realities that shape leadership narratives, lives, and ultimately, the content of education (curriculum). Critical education studies (e.g., Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Pedroni, 2007) offer the potential to understand discursive shifts in common sense about curriculum and, more importantly, how to create an alternate narrative centered on new (progressive) social and educational movements. As curriculum theorist Pinar (2004) argued, the point of the public school curriculum is understanding—understanding the relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment in which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendants will someday live.

A Critical Ethnographic Study: Research Method and Design

In this study, I explore empirically and longitudinally the reshaping of curriculum leadership identity both discursively and behaviorally (with regard to curriculum work) inside four schools (Ylimaki, 2011). Specifically, I asked the question, How do principals narrate their curriculum leadership in relation to policy requirements and the broader social and political contexts of their schools? Beginning in 2001, immediately following the passage of No Child Left Behind, I observed and interviewed principals, teachers, students, and parents in the same four schools across a 4-year period. From a critical perspective on social theory and cultural politics (Apple, 2004), I explore curriculum leadership among principals in relation to the school, community, broader cultural political movements, and curriculum reforms, capturing the complex relations among curriculum, leadership and public and private intellectual agency, and the formation of critical consciousness within a radically changing social and cultural political context. I draw on Carspecken (1995), Foley and Valenzuela (2005), and Fine and Weis (2005), who conduct qualitative research from critical perspectives. Following Fine and Weis’s (2005, p. 67) lead, I situated my analysis of communities, schools, and curriculum leaders’ lives, positioning them historically, economically, culturally, and socially so that the material context within which participants are "making sense" of curriculum and leadership can be linked to their very efforts to reflect on and transform these conditions.
Sampling

This study featured four principals from the northeastern region of the United States selected through purposeful sampling (Glesne, 2008). More specifically, I used a snowball network method and examination of local newspapers, looking for principals with an awareness of current politics related to curriculum decisions. That is, I looked for articles in which principals discussed the politics of accountability and related curriculum decisions (e.g., lack of multicultural representation in standards, political pressures to implement standardized curriculum programs and pacing guides). Principals and curriculum leaders were also selected to enhance representativeness, serving in a balance of urban, suburban, and rural schools; race-ethnicity; and gender. The principals and primary participants included 2 men (1 Caucasian and 1 African American) and 2 women (1 Caucasian and 1 African American), ranging in age from late 30s to early 50s. Two out of the 4 principals had doctoral degrees. The principal participants were from different districts in the same northeast region.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection followed classic critical ethnographic processes grounded in critical perspectives (e.g., Carspecken, 1995; Fine & Weis, 2005; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1998), with simultaneous aims to advance theoretical and practical knowledge (Foley & Valenzuala, 2005). My study met guidelines for longitudinal ethnographic research, examining curriculum meanings (and leadership thereof) across a 4-year period of time (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Carspecken (1995) offers a five-stage scheme or framework for data collection and analysis in critical ethnographic research. During Stage 1, Carspecken recommends the “method of priority observation,” or taking the record of everything the participant says or does in field observations as thickly as possible. To ensure the validation claim, I used a number of research procedures. For example, I used a recording device, had a flexible observation schedule, wrote with a low-inference vocabulary, used peer debriefing, and used participant checks to insure validity. Intensive naturalistic observations in classrooms and curriculum meetings (30 per school across a 4-year period (a total of 120 observations) provided categories of data that arose from the context and the school participants rather than strictly from the researcher. This is important for an inquiry into the bases for curriculum leadership that people actually use at this point in time rather than precepts from theories selected a priori.
In Stage 2 of the data collection and analysis process, following the observations, meetings were held with participants to share, clarify, and analyze the field notes and site documents, such as school curriculum meeting minutes; curriculum maps; notes from school board or community meetings dealing with curriculum, instruction, and/or policy; and newspaper articles quoting the principal or curriculum leader’s interpretation of the state accountability and curriculum policies for which he or she was an active participant in policy making. As Foley (2002) advocated, this stage included reflexive and participatory practices of critical ethnography in which participants were involved in data analysis from various standpoints.

My goal for these participatory data analysis sessions was to involve principals and teachers in reflexive opportunities to analyze self-growth, social change programs, and curriculum decisions as political acts (Apple, 1992). In so doing, I and we began to observe formation of curriculum leadership identity formation over time and the meaning of the roles as well as the ways in which broader cultural politics mediate curriculum leadership development. This stage is coined “reconstructive analysis” because it reconstructs into “explicit discourse, cultural and subjective factors that are largely tacit in nature” (Carspecken, 1995, p. 93). Using emerging understandings from the observations and analysis sessions, I conducted interviews, asking participants to explain and reflect on their participation in curriculum development and leadership.

Stage 3 included further gathering data through interviews. In particular, I consider how principals, teachers, and students use words to construct explicit and implicit meaning and to perform different leadership and social roles and relationships. From this perspective, the meaning and significance of leadership to the designation of official school knowledge(s) and cultural reproduction (or transformation) are public and in process, not established in labels on a chart of administrative roles and responsibilities or a curriculum improvement plan. Principals, teachers, and students make curriculum leadership visible and consequential in their daily lives of school and beyond. At the end of each academic year, I also met with each principal to reflect on emerging themes in curriculum leadership formation and practice.

Throughout the study, qualitative interview questions and protocol were developed in a manner that allowed for maximum flexibility. As Carspecken (1995) suggests, I used two to five lead-off interview questions and from these questions used other, more probing questions as the interviews progressed. Principals were interviewed at least once per month throughout all 4 academic school years. In each school, I interviewed 12 teachers regularly (a total of 174 principal interviews and 225 teacher interviews). I did not
interview parents and community members to the extent of principals and teachers (a total of 28 interviews). All interviews lasted about 1 hr, were audiotaped, and were transcribed.

Stages 4 and 5 seek to explain and critique the meaning of the curriculum leadership phenomenon. Theoretical concepts make it possible to link the analysis to cultural politics, related systems of power and subordination, and meanings of curriculum. More specifically, my categories (refined throughout the study) featured politics, curriculum discourse, standardization, power relations, shifting leadership identities, constructing the “Other,” progressive aims, and shifting curriculum meanings. At this point, I was able to suggest reasons for the experiences and structures the curriculum leaders and other study participants encountered. Carspecken (1995) suggests that it is the fifth stage that truly gives the study its force and contributes to real social change. In my study, as described below, two of the principals noted that reflections on interviews and collaborative data analysis and their curriculum leadership work aimed at neoprogressive social and educational movements.

**Findings: Curriculum Leadership in a Conservative Era**

The Findings section begins with descriptions of the 4 principals, and school-community contexts are presented along with narrative interview examples and field notes that explore the relationships among the principals’ curriculum leadership and recent cultural political shifts. In the course of 4 years, two interrelated curriculum leadership identities emerged, from (a) new professional toward (b) critical curriculum leadership. More specifically, I found two cases that primarily exhibited a constructed “new” professional curriculum leadership identity and two cases in which principals primarily exhibited critical curriculum leadership. It is important to note that these curriculum leadership identities are not mutually exclusive but rather dynamic and constantly in process as the principals reflect on their own leadership autobiographies and agencies in relation to emerging cultural political movements, social changes, and related curriculum meanings. It is also important to note that all four schools improved student achievement to the point of “proficiency” by the end of the study.

**New Professional Curriculum Leadership**

This section presents two cases of curriculum leaders (Dr. Draper and Mr. Grant) who began to articulate with neoliberal and neoconservative
discourses as a partial response to concerns about equitable student achievement in their schools. In the process, they both repositioned their previously progressive commitments to holistic education and gradually incorporated the related (dominant) discourses about data-driven decision making and skills-based standardized curricula. And although these curriculum leaders directed their efforts toward inclusive instruction and achievement for previously marginalized students of color and students of high poverty, they lacked the curriculum backgrounds to recognize the sociocultural and political discourses driving curriculum reform trends. Both principals struggled to create curricula appropriate for increasingly diverse student populations in the midst of strong political pressures for accountability and back-to-basics curriculum.

**Dr. Margaret Draper.** Dr. Draper is the African American principal of an urban middle school in the U.S. Northeast. She has a doctoral degree and 17 years of experience as a principal. In 2002, Draper was recognized as Principal of the Year by a local reading association, described as a leader who “stays current in best practices for literacy instruction.” Her school, Greenway, has a population of more than 1,200 students in Grades 5 through 8, 95% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. Greenway is located in the high-crime neighborhood of Hillside, and many students complain that they have to cross through gang and drug problem areas on their way to and from school. In fact, Dr. Draper has been actively involved with local law enforcement, trying to prevent drug dealing on her school playground. Although parent participation in various school decision-making venues has historically been low, in Draper’s tenure, parents have become more active in a few school programs.

**Mr. Michael Grant.** Mr. Grant is the White principal of Pinehurst School, located in an area of Treeline characterized by changing demographics, moving from largely middle class to a mix of residents in the middle class, in the working class, and in poverty. In recent years, absentee landlords have been problematic, with evidence in three dilapidated homes across from the school. Pinehurst enrolls 800 primarily White students in Grades K-8, and only 3% qualify for free or reduced lunch. The state report card for Pinehurst reflects high student achievement in all academic areas. Yet middle-class parents continue to demand higher performance, particularly as their children compete for placement in nearby private and public high schools. Grant has a master’s degree, has 12 years of experience, and is a former resident of the formerly working-class neighborhood. When Grant lived in the neighborhood, he attended a different school because of differences in boundary requirements at the time.
Curriculum Concerns Clear the Way for Articulation With Conservative Ideologies

Over time, Draper and Grant gravitated toward more conservative ideologies in part because of concerns about district curriculum directions for children of color and children from low-SES families. In 2003, Dr. Draper stated, “Over time, I began to realize that many children were not learning from the holistic kinds of curriculum practices with shared reading of Big Books and real literature sets. I felt like we needed to incorporate more skills instruction.” A year later, Draper added, “We have to sneak because the district still insists we teach these holistic materials, thematic units, and literature so I used a small grant to buy test preparation and skills worksheets.” In the spring of 2005, she added, “Students have to pass the tests, and the tests focus on skills. Teachers really need the structure to focus efforts on tested skills and they can supplement with literature.” Likewise, in 2003, Mr. Grant described the challenges involved when “students need more direct instruction but the district curriculum people insist on thematic units.” By the end of data collection in 2006, Grant echoed broader neoconservative agendas for back-to-basics standards instruction that gets tested by the state when he said, “I really had to step back from all this holistic instruction to get teachers to focus on the standards and the skills needed for all children to attain high academic achievement.”

 Whereas traditional instructional leadership literature has frequently identified instructional supervision as well within the principal’s realm of control and influence, these principals were required by their district curriculum departments to monitor the development and use of (whole-language) thematic units. In both schools, central office curriculum administrators then approved (or rejected) the thematic- and literature-based units so developed, meaning that as Dr. Draper put it, “teachers’ time might have been completely wasted.” Furthermore, district administrators visited their schools on a regular basis to evaluate principals on how they spent their time as instructional leaders with a clear expectation for an emphasis on reading and math achievement. Inevitably, classroom supervision time and curriculum content decisions became key arenas of struggle. These two principals particularly resented their lack of control over curriculum decisions that affected their schools and the control that other institutional authorities—specifically, central office administrators—had over their work lives in general. As Mr. Grant put it,

We’re expected to supervise standards-based instruction in thematic units. Our school ratings depend on how well we do on tests so schools
compete with each other in open enrollment. It doesn’t make sense. These things are not exactly lining up for all of our kids.

Grant later acknowledged, “It’s difficult to talk about these discrepancies because people argue and we just go round and round and don’t really get to the bottom line of how to improve achievement for all kids.”

Yet as noted in the theoretical descriptions of cultural politics (Apple, 2004) and curriculum theory (Pinar, 2004), the curriculum tensions and struggles described by Draper and Grant do make sense. Michael Apple (1993, 2004) explains that seemingly disparate ideas regarding education find room to compromise on the belief that schools are failing. And as Pinar (2004) argues, curriculum always involves struggles, tensions, and complicated conversation.

Grant and Draper and many teachers also exhibited considerable concern about children of color lowering the overall school test scores, while at the same time asserting a protective stance that these children had a right to academic achievement. As Draper put it, “Kids have to pass these tests or they will not be able to do anything ‘out there.’ We have to focus our attention where it counts.” In many ways, these two principals and many teachers had to reposition their progressive, whole-language instructional efforts toward a greater emphasis on the kind of skills-based instruction more likely to quickly improve academic achievement. A teacher in Grant’s school put it well when he said, “We used to focus on thematic instruction and a lot of reading and writing in context. Now we spend a lot more time on direct instruction to help our students do well on the tests.” The next section further describes the tensions involved in closing achievement gaps without focusing on broader social issues (e.g., Dewey, 1916/2008; Pinar et al., 1995).

**Tensions Between Academic Curriculum and Community Social Problems**

At the same time, both principals focused their attention and resources on what they can control within the school to make a difference in children’s lives. Social problems—and community development or service-learning kinds of solutions—were considered “out there” and not the focus of curriculum leadership in these two schools. Consider, for example, the following tensions within arguments about curriculum and needs of the surrounding community that were offered like mantras during monthly faculty meetings:

If we get parents in to help and we get community organizations to support our school, that’s a bonus; we cannot depend on our tough, high-poverty, high-crime communities with all their problems. . . . It’s great to
work with parents and community members, but we have to prioritize our time on academic achievement, especially with the tests. (Grant)

I’m not saying parents don’t care, but they have so much to worry about trying to put food on the table and other things, we can’t count on them. If I focus my attention outside, I’m not putting attention where it needs to be: inside the school and creating a school culture in which everyone is focused on student achievement. (Draper)

Both schools are situated in fairly segregated communities, with Whites living in different areas from African Americans and Latinos. Although the neighborhoods surrounding both schools saw growing cultural diversity and racial tensions, these issues were rarely discussed inside the school. In fact, principal and teacher comments in numerous meetings and personal interviews echoed the sentiment that “schools must turn away from problems like poverty and racial tension out there” and instead “focus on what schools can control.” At the same time, to develop curricula aimed at closing achievement gaps among White students and students of color, principals and teachers must talk about race-ethnicity. That is, Draper and Grant focused their attention on academic subjects (as defined by tests) and gave little consideration to broader social and cultural issues of the surrounding community. As Dewey (1916/2008) warned, “The continuity of social life means that many of these meanings are contributed to present activity by past collective experience. As social life grows more complex, these factors increase in number and importance” (p. 127). As noted earlier, curriculum involves understandings of society as well as academic knowledge (Pinar et al., 1995).

**Shifting Meanings of Curriculum and Diminished Leadership Agency**

Between 2002 and 2006, Principals Draper and Grant also demonstrated noticeable shifts in their understandings of curriculum and related subjectivity about what it means to lead curriculum. Both principals had been considered experts in curriculum development, meaning that they led their teachers in making decisions about content, instructional processes, and materials. Over time, Draper and Grant became increasingly supportive of teacher reliance on textbooks and externally developed, research-based models. In fact, between 2002 and 2006, both principals developed strong reputations as experts on management of these externally developed models. In 2005, Dr. Draper stated, “I have learned to be really good at managing all of the data and aligning test results to formative assessments and curriculum standards, develop
improvement goals and clear expectations for all students.” Likewise, Mr. Grant said, “I think the best skill I can develop is data analysis. It’s come to a point where curriculum is really developed at the state level. It’s my job to help all children access the curriculum in equitable ways.” Such comments are reminiscent of early instructional leadership literature (e.g., Hallinger, 1984; Murphy, 1984) and its emphasis on vision, expectations, and curriculum management skills but with additional emphasis on data analysis. Although not explicit, these comments reflect a social justice leadership orientation toward access and equity (e.g., McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007). At the same time, it is important to note that across a 4-year period, the curriculum leaders or principals and teachers exhibited a diminished sense of agency to engage in content decisions about what to teach and to whom. Consider the following shifts in curriculum meanings over time.

**Grant’s Faculty Meeting, September 2003**

Grant: Okay. We need to work on our thematic units for social studies and language arts in grade-level teams.

Maria: I think it’s important to really look at what we’re teaching in relation to the benchmarks. If we use the process the way it was intended, we can use the information to move the children forward.

David: I have a new thematic unit focused on the economy or uses of money that is really getting the kids interested.

Sara: I have been looking for something like that. It would help teach the economic section of the social studies standards.

Grant: Work on these charts between now and the next faculty meeting and we’ll look at what you have at that point.

**Draper’s School Faculty Meeting, December 2005**

Draper: We need to make sure our benchmark assessments align with the text structure questions on the state tests.

Sara: I don’t see where African American students are getting the writing questions as well as the White students on the tests. Maybe we need to increase the benchmark tests.

David: I agree. We’re not spending enough time on those writing test items. We need to shift these test items into priority in our instruction.

[Two teachers, Sara and David, volunteer to examine and revise the benchmarks and bring the results back to the next faculty meeting.]
The significant point here is that principals and teachers at both schools express increasing affirmation of state testing requirements along with a decreasing curriculum leadership agency and confidence in their own deep academic subject knowledge that Pinar (2004) and others consider essential for curriculum work. As the examples below illustrate, the principals act on this affirmation by continually communicating policy requirements and promoting programs that appear to support conservative ideologies and goals for improving academic achievement.

**Grant’s Faculty Meeting, December 2004**

Grant: Our first agenda item is test item analysis as required by state and district policies. Get out your test results from the spring testing. What trends do you notice on the reading section?

Susan: Most of our kids seem to be doing well on the literal comprehension sections, but the critical analysis across texts sections show less proficiency.

Grant: Why do we think that is?

Bob: Well, we have focused more on getting the basic skills back in order, and now we need to have students focus more on reading critically across tests.

Grant: Yes, we have a clear trend there.

Beth: Yes, but we cannot let up on the basic skills work. Remember where we were a couple years ago with so many kids at the 2 level? McGraw-Hill is sponsoring a workshop on critical thinking skills for passing the state tests. It might be good for some of us to attend that. We would also get a look at their new series, and the language arts is up for adoption next year.

Grant: I agree. I think we can free up funds for three of you and me to attend that workshop. Please let me know if you are interested by the end of the week.

**Draper’s Faculty Meeting, November 2004**

Draper: The state requires us to look at the highlighted items on the data from benchmark assessments [designed to align with state tests the previous year]. Where are our kids doing well, getting 3s and 4s? [On these state tests, a 3 designates proficiency, and 4, exceeding proficiency. Students must attain a Level 3 to “pass.”]
Seth: Writing has gone up. We have more students getting 3s.
Daryl: Yes, but spelling is also going down. If you look at the high-
lights in the reading section, I see a correlation. Students who scored
1s or 2s seem to have difficulty with spelling and phonics.
Draper: Yes, spelling and reading pronunciation are parallel skills.
Seth: There’s a spelling workshop coming up. I think its part of the
Four Blocks Series.
Draper: I like that idea because it builds on our writing strength. What
does everyone else think?
[Murmurs of agreement]

In both cases, I also noted that the principals and teachers or curriculum
leaders increased the school focus on state test performance and, therefore,
reduced the use of a holistic curriculum.

Simultaneously, the principals’ narratives began to reflect constructed per-
ceptions of “other” (progressive) curriculum leaders. These principals talked
at length about what they perceive as a lack of standards-based instruction in
relatively holistic or progressive schools. They differentiate themselves and
their teacher leaders from such curriculum leaders and the practices within
those schools in various ways. In Draper’s words, “[Peer principal] spends
way too much time on service learning projects. It’s fine to plant flowers, but
let’s plant the basic skills first. In this time, we have to be data-driven leaders
capable of raising student achievement.” Likewise, Grant commented, “We
have to be expert at data analysis and have our priorities on the academics.
[Peer principals] would do well to figure that out. [Peer principal] is my idol.
He has his test scores posted all over the school on charts.” Both principals and
teachers in these “other” schools are portrayed as laissez-faire and less con-
cerned with standards-based instruction and academic outcomes.

It is also significant that the new professional curriculum leaders describe
themselves as having “higher levels of curriculum mapping expertise” in
comparison to their holistically oriented peers. Certainly, the principals’ new
curriculum leadership identities as “data-driven” leaders and experts in exter-
nally developed curriculum models are connected to broader neoconservative
discourses that emphasize an increase in standardized test performance of
basic skills. These principals use standardized academic performance mea-
sures as a basis to denigrate their district peer principals who support more
traditional holistic philosophies and practices and to portray themselves as
better curriculum leaders in the current political era of high-stakes account-
ability. Thus, curriculum leadership processes that support holistic or
progressive instruction are seen as inappropriate in an accountability era—in contrast to their own professional processes. Their own standards-based, data-driven curriculum leadership is, in contrast, seen as positive. As Grant stated,

We have good principals in the district, but I think some of them are misguided, holding onto the old sort of progressive approaches. I really learn more from [principals] who can implement the standards, raise the test scores, and foster professional learning about how to do that in their buildings.

In the final analysis, new professional principals elaborate their curriculum leadership identity in contrast to the ideologically constructed curriculum leadership identity of traditional progressive (laissez-faire) principals and teachers who work in schools with lower academic performance and underperforming labels on state tests. Thereby, in terms of subjectivity, these principals set themselves up as contemporary curriculum leaders “other than” and “better than” their progressive peers in both groups. Furthermore, they identify with their conservative ideological peers who have promoted standards-led instruction and high academic performance for all students.

In 2002, Dr. Draper talked about curriculum leadership in ways that emphasized “curriculum based upon the latest research and needs of our students.” In 2006, Dr. Draper described curriculum leadership as “the one that keeps on top of new [externally developed] programs and is able to provide overall leadership to see how these pieces fit in a particular school.” Dr. Draper went on to say, “We had standards before so in that way, the federal and state policies are making us more accountable for excellence.” Interestingly, several of my first participant observations of Dr. Draper involved her working with teachers to establish curriculum standards for the school. Similarly, in 2006, Mr. Grant talked about curriculum leadership as “the lead learner of a professional learning community who can align standards with tests and monitor data relative to outcomes for all students.” Although this language reflects altruistic goals to provide quality curriculum and instruction for all students, it also reflects neoconservative ideology in popular reforms marketed as an acritical solution to the “crisis in public education.” Curriculum involves such complicated conversation (Pinar, 2004) and struggle (Apple, 2004). Few could fault Draper’s and Grant’s focus on academic excellence and equity; however, their efforts do not fully consider the relationships among academic knowledge, broader cultural politics, and their own subjectivities and agencies as curriculum leaders. As Pinar (2004) reminds us—
If we persist in our cause—the cause of public education—someday the schools and those of us who work in them can deflect displaced and deferred racism. When we do, schools will no longer be knowledge-and-skill factories, not academic businesses but schools: sites of education for creativity, erudition, and interdisciplinary intellectuality. (p. 169)

In the next section, I present two cases that illustrate a more critical curriculum leadership with attention to social issues (equity), cultural politics, and agency as well as a strong focus on academic excellence.

Critical Curriculum Leadership

In the remaining two cases, the principals were also concerned about academic excellence, but they also gradually experienced critical moments of critique in which they began to recognize and question circulating discourses related to standardization, back-to-basics, and competition. In response, Principals Juidici and Hughes began to look for new analytical tools to help them analyze policies, politics, and curriculum reforms. Whereas Principals Draper and Grant (previous cases) constructed new professional curriculum leadership identities in relation to “laissez-faire, progressive Others,” these two principals began to construct critical curriculum leadership identities in opposition to the dominant conservative discourses circulating in their schools and communities. The relational aspect of curriculum leadership identity formation is important here. Ultimately, Principals Juidici and Hughes made conscious choices to engage their students in community-based curriculum development processes that circulated counterdiscourses and inspired neoprogressive educational and social movements.

Dr. Angela Juidici. Principal Juidici is a Caucasian principal of Babcock Elementary, a small first-ring suburban school in Treelane, a community in the northeastern part of the United States. Babcock Elementary is situated in an open field area just off a major intersection. The building is well kept but modest, with one main entrance at the corner of one wall facing away from the building. Ninety-five percent of students are Caucasian. The remaining 5% include Native American, African American, and Asian students. The Babcock student population has been stable at about 380 students in PreK-5, with 70% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Many interviewees pointed to Principal Juidici’s leadership as the catalyst for changes in the school curriculum philosophy and commitment to critical pedagogy.

Mr. Ken Hughes. Mr. Hughes is the Caucasian male principal of Elmhurst School, which is located in an urban area of the Northeast. Elmhurst is a red
brick two-story K-8 building on the corner of Low Street and Main Street, an address that signaled a declining neighborhood for more than two decades prior to the beginning of Mr. Hughes’ tenure. Mr. Hughes is in his late 30s with expertise in math and technology and 7 years of administrative experience. He has his master’s degree and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program at a local research institution. He is in his 11th year as principal at Elmhurst School. He began his career as a guidance counselor and then earned his master’s degree in a program grounded in sociological theories and social justice aims along with a minor in educational leadership that included certification classes. Elmhurst’s student population is majority minority—90% African American—with 90% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. These school demographics held consistent throughout the 4 years of the study. During Mr. Hughes’ tenure as principal of Elmhurst (prior to the beginning of the study), the school was designated among the state’s most improved, with a steady increase in state test scores and city real estate and crime statistics, indicating a revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood. As a result, many (more affluent) parents wanted to send their children to Elmhurst, an act that required home residence in the school boundaries.

Background: Critical Moments of Critique
About Dominant Ideologies

In contrast to the first two cases, Juidici and Hughes served in districts with strong histories of decentralization about curriculum decisions. Although these districts did not necessarily support critical perspectives, the district leaders did not constrain such tendencies either. As a result, Juidici and Hughes had opportunities to work with teachers, students, and parents on curriculum work. Over time, Juidici and Hughes recognized shifts in teacher and parent beliefs, gradually reflecting neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies. Although gathered in separate interviews, the principals’ quotations are integrated to show the similarity in the principals’ perspectives:

I am getting more and more concerned about the changes in beliefs about the purposes of curriculum around tests. I have to admit that the biggest wake up call for me was when I started nodding my head at a community forum where they had a speaker going on about how our children were just not as knowledgeable about facts as they used to be. (Juidici, September 2004)
I have been getting concerned about how that’s all we talk about now are what the state thinks we should teach to all children regardless of their cultural knowledge and strengths of our communities. More than that, the standards that count are the tested standards. Period. We are, after all, a democratic society. In 2003, it was one parent talking this no-nonsense approach and then the next year [September 2004], it was some teachers talking the same way about the importance of the tests and how we needed to teach the standards and not worry about any extras. I would even find myself nodding as they were talking because it’s just common sense. That logic has potential side effects, though, and I started to see them in the schools. (Hughes, September 2004)

Here, Juidici clearly illustrates awareness of how curriculum discourses affected her own commonsense about education.

Our students come to school with strong forms of knowledge that can be tapped. This knowledge is not recognized on standards and standardized tests. In fact, even in open-ended sections, the children are punished if they do not parrot certain language on the test rubric. (Hughes)

We have to realize that you can test specific sources of knowledge, but we have to start asking, “Whose knowledge?” We may not be able to answer the question definitively or change the tests, but we must ask the question. (Juidici)

These questions and comments do not negate, however, the fact that, like Draper and Grant in the previous two cases, Juidici and Hughes also exhibited a somewhat contradictory relationship with curriculum trends in September of 2004. They accepted and rejected official knowledge of state standards and conservative cultural politics at one and the same time, although not nearly to the same degree that Principals Draper and Grant (from the previous section) did during that same time frame. Furthermore, Juidici and Hughes required teachers to incorporate more basic skills into their literacy and math lessons. Beginning around the spring of 2004, both Juidici and Hughes gradually became more critical of underlying assumptions within current policies. Consider, for example, the following descriptions of how Juidici and Hughes became concerned about curriculum politics:
February, 2004: Juidici’s and Hughes’ Schools

RY: How did you become aware of your concerns?
Juidici: I think the eye opener for me was when we started grouping our children for vocabulary reading instruction because of test scores. We bought books where the teachers would use a script to teach vocabulary words. It had to be so boring to teach. Teacher and student morale started to suffer. That spring, our vocabulary scores went way up. So it’s time to celebrate, right? We have good vocabulary skills but what for?
Hughes: I noticed that we were so focused on the data that we were forgetting who our kids are and who we’d like to see them become as thoughtful, intellectual, and compassionate people. I was looking at our faculty meeting minutes at the end of the year, and I realized all we talked about was numbers and academic achievement and curriculum maps. There was no time left to talk about the arts, humanities, multiculturalism, kindness, and service learning in our communities. Aren’t these things basic?

Although the principals and many teachers in both schools were preparing students for state assessments, they nevertheless challenged the circulating discourses about children as workers for a new economy (Apple, 2004).

Community-Based Curriculum Work

Like the previous two cases, Juidici and Hughes were very concerned about equity in student achievement among White students, students of color, and students living in poverty. Neighborhoods surrounding the schools clearly reflected, as Juidici (echoing Dewey) put it, “stark needs for social equity, which starts with education.” Going further, Juidici and Hughes recognized the need to begin curriculum work with student interests, oppression, and aims for social equity (Dewey, 1916/2008; Freire, 1993). Thus, along with their teachers, Juidici and Hughes both emphasized service learning to help students develop democratic dispositions and ideals, like respect for diversity, caring, and cooperation. As Juidici put it,

I need to make sure that all children, particularly children from previously marginalized groups, realize the relationship between their lives and broader social structures, and they are part of a broader community, that diversity is a value, and that their individual growth is critical, too.
Likewise, Hughes suggested,

*We’re living in an era where society would tell us we should restrict curriculum choices, but we have to remember that children are our future, and it is imperative that increasingly diverse future citizens strive toward their highest ideals of caring for each other and their communities, not just high test scores.*

In these quotes, both principals clearly reflect progressive educational goals (Dewey, 1916; 2008); they recognize the potential threats behind current (conservative) policies and cultural shifts on public education for the masses rather than for privileged children from middle-class and affluent families. At the same time, they understand the real need to help children succeed on standardized tests to gain higher educational opportunities. As Hughes stated, 

*All of the standards and testing issues have created a mechanism where students must compete well on these tests in order to have more equitable, democratic opportunities. That’s the critical approach we take. Academic performance is a vehicle and embedded in community revitalization efforts, needs, and students’ interests, but we always look at the underlying assumptions and make sure we do not fall into the trap of stratification by test score.*

Juidici’s and Hughes’ curriculum leadership efforts, in this regard, reflect and further inspire neoprogressive educational and social movements for the current political era. Dewey (1916/2008) wrote, “A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic” (p. 99).

More specifically, Ms. Juidici and Mr. Hughes led the creation of student-centered (e.g., Bean, 1997; Dewey, 1916/2008; Freire, 1993) curriculum discussion groups that included students, teachers, and members of parent organizations. Briefly, in line with Freirian (1993) pedagogy, these groups were developed from a list of student interests and community organization needs generated in the fall. These interests formed part of the broad themes (e.g., community revitalization, abandoned homes, environmental hazards, multiculturalism) and projects pursued throughout the school year, and related readings were included in teacher professional reading groups and presentations at local organizations. Thus, student interests and community
needs became the basis for a curriculum developed around authentic community service projects. Because the parent and community organizations had a stake in curriculum content and process decisions, they were also willing to provide volunteer and material support for student projects and thematic units. State content standards were addressed within the themes.

**Examples: Juidici’s School.** In response to needs identified at a community forum (e.g., soil lead content around the school neighborhood), students in Mrs. Minor’s English class worked in small groups and analyzed city reports about lead in the soil of a particular neighborhood. As the economy declined, many older houses with lead paint were abandoned and eventually torn down. Lead paint soaked into the soil and eventually into plants. Their assignment was to create a plan to clean up these neighborhood areas, meaning they had to read their textbooks, city reports, and other resources and use what they learned to develop their written reports. Furthermore, the children presented their reports to a parent group and members of a city council.

Mr. Ricks (a parent) described his reaction:

> I was astounded at the quality of the children’s work. Their papers were well written, grammatically correct, and informative. They also gave a very passionate and professional presentation about how they wanted to clean up the soil with a natural product and then plant flowers in these vacant lot areas.

During some of the early participatory sessions for data analysis, Principal Juidici and some of the teachers recognized the potential for community and social change emerging from these community-based curriculum projects. Two teachers decided to contact a regional journal about publishing a short descriptive article and lesson plans. The teacher-authors received many e-mails indicating broader uses of these plans in an emerging progressive educational movement well beyond the Babcock neighborhoods.

**Examples: Hughes’ School.** Elmhurst students, teachers, and community members identified school and neighborhood beautification as a key educational need. Thus, students, teachers, and a community artist worked together to design and develop a community mural within the school. Students assumed a major leadership role in planning the mural.

> We have diverse students in our school now. We think it’s important for our school to reflect our multicultural student body. Our class
would like to join with the club to design a mural and paint it on the wall that you see when you first come to the school. [Students had read a set of multicultural literature and developed a written proposal for the site council.] (Rob Martin, student)

We were so impressed with the multicultural mural proposal that we approved funding and support for the art teacher to work with a group of students on Saturdays. They designed and painted the mural, and it took several months to finish, but in the end it is absolutely beautiful...a shining moment for our school and our community. (Ms. Martin, site council leader)

The mural reminded me of the significance of that particular wall. Our parents used to gather there to plan rallies during the civil rights era. We gathered there when we were younger to plan war protests and plan community gatherings. The students delved into the history of the wall and interviewed us so our stories are etched into the stones. It makes me think we need to remember this is what we need to do as a community, to gather and solve problems together. (Mr. Hancock, parent)

In April of 2006 (near the end of data collection), the neighborhood group planned a rally to discuss a factory closing problem and how to deal with the economic fallout. As in the previous case, the principal, teachers, and students worked with community organizers to launch community revitalization projects. This plan and others were discussed at a participatory data analysis session.

**Shifting Meanings of Curriculum and Related Discourses**

Juidici’s and Hughes’ awareness of fundamental shifts in beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about curriculum prompted them to seek alternative analytical tools beyond those learned in their educational administration training. At a largely intuitive level, the two principals analyzed discourse practices related to curriculum leadership, standards, and testing policy guidelines. Discourse provided the principals with a manner of questioning basic assumptions, regardless of their personal beliefs or philosophies about the topic. In other words, discourse as an analytical tool enabled individuals (curriculum leaders) to reveal the hidden motivations and meanings behind a statement in a policy guideline as well as curriculum language and practices circulating in the schools. By making assumptions explicit, school members viewed the
“problem” (local experiences with policy mandates) from a “higher” vantage point and gained a comprehensive view of the policy implications and themselves in relation to that problem.

For example, in public meetings, Ms. Juidici enlarged policy language on charts or overhead projectors and then publically questioned, “What does each characteristic really meant to children’s lives, both in terms of benefits and potential problems?” This involved making policy language explicit and open, which meant that she was able to interrupt circulating discursive practices of curriculum and accountability. Juidici asked teachers and parents to “reread the policy documents and question underlying assumptions behind the policy language and practices.” Over time, Ms. Juidici became increasingly concerned when she noted a concurrent increase in use of decontextualized skills-based pedagogy and test preparation materials and a decrease in student engagement during her classroom observations. Juidici hired a university student to interview students about their perceptions of the curriculum content, and she shared their responses with teachers. Michael, a Caucasian male fifth grader, expressed these concerns when he stated, “I used to like reading class but now we read the same short stories over and over and we have to work on these extra books before and after school.” Angela, a Caucasian female student, gave a similar perspective from the vantage point of advanced classes: “I like reading class, but that’s only because I read well. I’d hate to be in the low group with all these worksheets and after-school sessions.” Juidici shared these comments (in anonymous transcriptions) with staff members and asked them how to meet standard guidelines without creating these kinds of affective issues with classroom instruction.

Similarly, Principal Hughes distributed policy documents and asked faculty members to reread the policies and related documents and write their questions about language (and assumptions and philosophies behind that language) in the margins. Teacher narratives from Mr. Hughes’ elementary school also indicated shifts in teachers’ understandings about the underlying implications of curriculum mapping, differentiated instruction, and pullout academic intervention services. Teachers Lily and Stephen provided examples of how the principals circulated counternarratives and discourses over time:

I really do not understand why we were reading and questioning policy documents. What were we supposed to do with that? Mr. Hughes showed us how we need to realize that there are assumptions and meanings behind the language and processes. (Lily, September 2003)
I can see now how important it is for us to have policy reading skills. We need to be able to be thoughtful educators in a political sense as well as a curricular sense and then we can show our students how to do the same. (Lily, September 2006)

I find myself echoing Mr. Hughes when I read descriptions of instructional programs and research when I’m working on my own. He’s got me thinking things like, “What do they mean by differentiated instruction? Whose knowledge is the norm to differentiate? What are we differentiating and to whom?” (Stephen, September 2006)

Very importantly, Mr. Hughes demonstrated intuitive discourse analysis skills that helped him lay bare subtler notion of texts beyond written policy documents and guidelines. At the same time, Hughes initiated counterdiscourses that led teachers to examine differentiated (stratified) opportunities to acquire school knowledge and social and economic inequities in the community and beyond. In the process of policy discourse analysis, teachers, parents, and students gained the skills and confidence to ask their own questions.

At several points during the study, I asked the principals to describe the meaning of curriculum leadership. The following excerpts illustrate changes over time:

RY: What does curriculum leadership mean to you?
Juidici (September 2002): Curriculum leadership involves those activities related to ongoing curriculum writing, implementation, professional development, and supervision skills that improve learning in schools.

Juidici (September 2006): Curriculum leadership is a way of building relationships that support social equity and learning for all children and adults and that create a more equitable, democratic society. Now more than ever, curriculum is political. It’s my job to stand in the gap, help teachers and parents cut through all of the rhetoric and accountability pressures, and teach what is important to children’s lives.

Across a 4-year span, Ms. Juidici made a fairly dramatic shift from a curriculum leader who espoused traditional instructional leadership and supervision (e.g., Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Murphy, 1984) to one who (intuitively) espoused Pinar’s (2004) curriculum theory and related aims for social equity...
and democratic education. She knew that such a shift required political knowledge and skills.

RY: What does curriculum leadership mean to you?
Hughes (September 2002): Curriculum leadership includes practices that focus everyone’s attention on curriculum and instruction, build a strong learning culture, and maintain high expectations for all students and teachers.

In the above quote, Mr. Hughes also gave a nearly textbook answer, naming instructional leadership components also identified by Hallinger and Murphy (1985).

Hughes (September 2006): Curriculum leadership is the process through which school leaders cultivate freedom, equity, and the future for a democratic society. As a curriculum leader, you have to model current thinking and continuous inquiry about curriculum and pedagogy and you have to teach school staff and community members how to question and challenge some of the ideas that everyone is parroting about curriculum, teaching and learning. At the same time, I have to remind myself that children who have the least privilege need to succeed in the tests so they have access to higher education and other opportunities. I have to remember that children are members of the community, and part of their learning experience must draw on their cultural backgrounds and work toward community transformation.

Like Ms. Juidici, Mr. Hughes recognized the good sense in some elements of current policies and the need for subgroups to perform well on state tests. As Mr. Hughes put it

We absolutely need to worry about how all children perform on tests. These tests are access to higher education and job opportunities. They should not be the only focus. In fact, if we dwell on achievement tests to the point where we ignore the democratic aims of curriculum and social needs as curriculum sources, we are not fully educating our students.

Bean and Apple (2007) agree. Furthermore, by 2006, Hughes saw his role as a public intellectual leader (Giroux, 2003) who educated teachers, students,
and parents about their rights in a democratic society. Although these principals, teachers, and community members’ efforts paralleled earlier progressive movements (i.e., authentic materials in authentic contexts, community service projects, multicultural arts), the principals and other school members were cognizant of the necessity of high student outcomes for children to gain access to higher education. They recognized the good sense in the rational technical arguments behind accountability possibilities while, at the same time, challenging underlying assumptions related to promoting the right knowledge and differentiating instruction.

**Discussion**

Drawing literature from educational administration and curriculum fields and findings from four ethnographic cases, this article’s purpose was twofold: (a) to explore, through a review of the literature and empirical evidence from a recent ethnographic study of U.S. principals, how recent cultural political shifts have affected the meanings of curriculum leadership and curriculum in schools and (b) to propose a new field of curriculum leadership at the intersection of educational leadership, curriculum theory, and critical education studies of cultural politics. In the previous cases, Dr. Draper and Mr. Grant recognized the need to increase all students’ academic performance, but they did not explicitly question the underlying assumptions behind current testing policies and related curriculum reforms.

Although not generalizable, four findings emerged from the ethnography. First, in varying ways, curriculum leadership is in the process of being redefined and reshaped with and by current policies and conservative discourses circulating at state and local school levels. In two cases (Draper and Grant), I found curriculum leaders who altered progressive holistic instruction to increase academic achievement. These curriculum leadership practices were simultaneously inclusive and professional, driven by data, efficiency, and productivity. These two principals came to believe that the whole-language movement failed to prepare children for academic skills required on state tests, and they resented district supervision processes that reinforced progressive practices in their schools. Such concerns prompted Principals Draper and Grant to reposition their progressive philosophies beyond whole-language processes to focus on inclusive instructional practices aimed at improving reading and math achievement for all children.

At the same time, Principal Grant’s and Principal Draper’s growing resentments about a district erosion of their curriculum leadership authority opened the door for the principals to, in some ways, articulate with
neoconservative and neoliberal movements. Both principals began to attend workshops aimed at skills-driven, externally developed curricula; curriculum design formats; and test data–driven curriculum decisions. This gradual curriculum leadership articulation with conservative ideologies is not unlike the ways parents “became right” when school officials refused to hear their concerns about literature content (Apple & Oliver, 2003). Although Principals Draper and Grant were both deeply concerned about children’s academic performance, their concerns about curriculum content manifest in a no-nonsense approach to curriculum, focusing on standards, prepackaged programs, and tests rather than students’ cultural backgrounds and social issues. Curriculum concerns and discourses then contributed to their curriculum leadership identification in relation to progressive “others” who led “high-performing” schools with regard to state assessment labels designed to aid competition among district and regional schools. As Draper and Grant communicated their concerns about curriculum failures and school labels, they (perhaps unconsciously) helped circulate conservative discourses in their schools, communities, and regions. Although Principals Draper and Grant supported inclusive instructional practices and academic excellence in their schools, both fell short of developing students as critical democratic citizens (McKenzie et al., 2008) with awareness of social issues (Pinar, 2004) and the broader cultural political context (Apple, 2004).

Going further, in the latter two cases, the principals and curriculum leaders Juidici and Hughes demonstrated the emergence of a critical consciousness in response to their concerns about policies and changes to their own, teachers’, and parents’ commonsensical ideas about what counts as curriculum. Although these principals recognized the realities of the legal requirements and elements of good sense in accountability and conservative curriculum arguments, Juidici and Hughes also realized that neoconservative and neoliberal discourses had saturated language and practices in their schools and communities. It is important to note that in these two cases, the districts did not explicitly constrain or support such critical curriculum leadership. Additional research is needed to examine the relationships between district authority and critical curriculum leadership.

Using more critical responses, Juidici and Hughes taught teachers and community members to read and reread policy and other curriculum language and question the underlying assumptions regardless of personal ideologies. Principals Juidici and Hughes also led community-based curriculum efforts whereby teachers, parents, and students identified content goals and social change projects (Freire, 1993) that inspired community revitalization and, ultimately, neoprogressive movements. More specifically, Juidici and
Hughes led the development of Freirian curriculum themes that included elements of “good sense” in these policies (i.e., responsibility for strong academic performance) as well as community needs, student interests, and critical, authentic pedagogy. In other words, along with academic excellence, Juidici and Hughes emphasized academic achievement through what Dewey (1916/2008, p. 87) called “curriculum democracy,” a mode of living in which there is no truth or ideal for which each individual should strive, particularly in a conservative era. Grounded in the work of the Frankfurt school and curriculum studies (e.g., Apple, Bourdieu, Friere), these critical curriculum leaders (Juidici and Hughes) were ultimately concerned with dialectical relationships among suffering and oppression, curriculum content cultural politics, and social inequities. They believed in the democratic imperative of curriculum leadership and worked toward equitable instructional practice, student achievement, agency, growth, the empowerment of children and adults in their communities while grounding curriculum decisions in compassion as well as critical curriculum theory (i.e., Dewey and Friere) and learning and achievement. Intuitively, Principals Juidici and Hughes developed their own and others’ curriculum leadership identities in relation to societal needs as well as academics.

What the voices of all 4 principals and others in this article suggest is that it is not entirely possible to create any one such conception of curriculum leadership without addressing issues of the broader cultural political context and how the politics apply to particular school settings. In other words, new professional and critical curriculum leadership approaches are not mutually exclusive. For example, the more critically oriented curriculum leaders and principals do not reject current policy requirements for test improvement, yet they purposely question underlying assumptions of these policies. Likewise, the new professional curriculum leaders had glimmers of concern about current policy effects at various times. All four cases demonstrate the challenges and struggles involved in curriculum leadership in a conservative era.

Second, and closely related, regardless of personal and professional responses to broader political shifts, all four cases clearly show that today’s curriculum leadership is inherently political work. In the first two cases, Principals Draper and Grant (perhaps unconsciously) help circulate conservative discourses as they daily communicate that accountability policy requirements necessitate standardized curriculum forms and materials. At the same time, Draper and Grant clearly recognized the good sense in preparing children to do well on the academic achievement tests that give them access to advanced educational opportunities. As public intellectuals (Giroux, 2001), Principals Juidici and Hughes took a step farther and recognized that
curriculum decisions were political acts. Thus, these principals and curriculum leaders publically analyzed policy discourse analysis strategies and developed community-based curricula (Freire, 1993) in ways that began to modify class in their historically stratified communities.

Third, findings from this study suggest that the varying ways in which today’s leaders enact curriculum leadership are relational and grounded in subjective interpretations, arising from self-awareness, personal beliefs, and experiences in their schools and communities. Located in these actions are more socially constructed understandings of what it means to respond to external policies in ways that benefit children in a particular sociocultural and historical context. These curriculum leadership understandings and actions are grounded in Pinar et al.’s (1995) definition of curriculum theory as “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience in which academic knowledge, subjectivity and society are inextricably linked” (p. 167).

Finally, curriculum leaders clearly have opportunities to interrupt and change these ideological constructions through curriculum development. Juidici’s and Hughes’ intuitive understandings and enactments of curriculum theory (e.g., Pinar, 2004) and cultural politics may explain the differences in their curriculum development processes, emerging agency and consciousness of cultural political shifts and discourses, and community-based curriculum work. Yet these curriculum development processes as solutions to narrow, standardized curricula also tend to be articulated in a highly individualized manner. To press for critical curriculum leadership in their schools, districts, and beyond, individual curriculum leadership problems must be seen as shared and needing collective action. In other words, these principals and other curriculum leaders are not conscious of their collective political identity even though the glimmerings of such consciousness are there. The development of such collective consciousness requires understandings beyond evolving educational administration studies of instructional leadership.

Conclusions

Drawing on the literature and my findings, I argue that we need a new field of curriculum leadership at the intersection of educational leadership, curriculum studies, and critical education studies to fully prepare leaders for curriculum work in a conservative era and beyond. What might each field offer to a new curriculum leadership field? How can a dialogue among those with differing backgrounds and visions create an intersection of these fields
as a site of transformation rather than resolution? Each field offers its own frame of reference, its own structure of knowledge that contributes to our understanding of curriculum leadership. Through the study of educational administration, we can understand the capacities for leadership influence on inclusive, socially just classroom practice (e.g., Hallinger, 1984, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003). The curriculum field is committed to deep understandings of curriculum subjects, the process of self-formation, and social transformation (e.g., Breault & Breault, 2005; Henderson & Hawthorne, 2001). Moreover, drawing on critical education studies of cultural politics—with its underlying social foundations—we can engage in critical reflection of the historical, sociocultural, and political realities that shape our leadership narratives, lives, and ultimately, the content of education (curriculum). Critical education studies (e.g., Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Pedroni, 2007) offer the potential for researchers and practitioners to examine and understand discursive shifts in common sense about curriculum and, more importantly, how to create an alternate narrative centered on new (progressive) social and educational movements. As curriculum theorist Pinar (2004) argued, the point of the public school curriculum is understanding—understanding the relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment in which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendants will someday live.

Additional research is needed to confirm and expand findings from this study of curriculum leadership in a conservative era. Going forward, it will be important to follow these and other curriculum leaders as they grow and articulate with new and expanded movements. In particular, it will be important to examine what happens to the emerging moments of critique about the conservative modernization exhibited by critical curriculum leaders of all kinds. Furthermore, research is needed to explore curriculum leadership identities and struggles through a range of critical perspectives, including feminist and critical race theories. At the same time, it will be important for scholars, practitioners, and community leaders to develop and share lesson plans, reflections, and other practical ideas to support new progressive educational and social movements across the United States and the world. Research and study in a new field may also support scholars and practitioners to coalesce and advocate for policy changes.

The case study sample is small ($N = 4$). Additional research is needed to confirm and expand findings from this study in additional regions of the United States beyond the Northeast. Nevertheless, the strength of this study lies in the longitudinal design, tracing shifts and practices of curriculum
leaders from 2002 to 2006. Findings are contextualized with ethnographic observations and interviews over time. Although these four cases offer many particular understandings appropriate for case study research, their complex experiences with cultural political shifts and curriculum leadership formulation over time are unique in educational administration literature. This longitudinal research method has implications for other educational problems, including turnaround schools, retention of new principals, the formation of other neoprogressive movements, and the sustainability of change efforts of all kinds.

This study also has implications for curriculum leadership training and practice. Curriculum leadership preparation and continuing education must be conducted at an intellectual depth, examining curriculum theory and critical education studies and social foundations as well as leadership perspectives and practices. In a conservative era and beyond, curriculum leaders need a broad range of analytical tools and curriculum perspectives to examine underlying assumptions behind policy language and curriculum content decisions in schools. Although the implications of Race to the Top, an extension of the No Child Left Behind Act, have yet to be determined, the role of politics and the effects of cultural political shifts still dominate much of the thinking and practices related to curriculum. Understanding the role of politics in contemporary curriculum and leadership is too important to relegate to small segments of a university course on curriculum or instructional leadership that provides a menu of strategies and “best practices” aimed at improvement of state test scores. In closing, these ethnographic cases—as part of a new curriculum leadership field—extend our understanding of what it means to be a responsive and accountable educator who can work with and through others to foster social justice and academic achievement in the current (conservative) era and beyond.

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