

SCRIPTED CURRICULUM, PAST AND PRESENT

“NOW WHAT?”

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A note to the reader: I begin with a story—a curriculum fragment—about my own experience with scripted curriculum as a 6th grade student in 1974. To save you from struggling with the math problem embedded in the first sentence, I’ll turn 64 years of age in December 2026. Perhaps the story and I are ancient history. But at this point, I would certainly like to see a shift in the field and yearn for a reverse in history, in curriculum theory and practice, that could impact the politics, social understanding, and practices in schooling and education, at all levels, as soon as possible. The fragment sets the context for this paper; it serves as an allegory of what we are facing on a larger scale with the incursion of scripted curriculum, in all of its forms of standardization (Pinar, 2019, pp. 27–29; McNeil, 2000).

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 1: MY OWN TAKE ON “SCRIPTED CURRICULUM”

I grew up in a small, Northwestern Ohio city called St. Marys. About 8,000 residents or so. Good public schools. Some racial diversity, but a mostly white population; not an economically depressed area but certainly strained for some; a good number of family farms still intact, with some light to heavy industrial jobs as well as service jobs; some professional opportunities exist with a local hospital and lots of churches, and of course, public and private schools. Children mostly aspire, some go to college, many play sports and thrive as youngsters and graduate from high school and have seen little to no crime or participated in it. In the Midwest, this frame describes hundreds of small towns and cities.

My parents both had college educations, not so common back then, and my father served as the pastor of a prominent mainline protestant church in St. Marys, 1961–1976, before dying suddenly from heart disease in November 1976. My mother put her occupational therapy degree from the University of Kansas to work after her long, nearly 30-year career as a pastor’s wife and put three children through college. I was born in late 1962, started kindergarten in 1968, and graduated from high school in 1981. I liked school and did well in it and played sports and in the band. I had a feeling all the way back that I would be an educator of some sort.

Even though my schooling, in retrospect, could be described as fairly traditional, the curriculum was mostly unscripted (that I knew of), except for the reading program in 6th grade (1974–1975): Science Reading Associate’s (SRA) scripted reading program, based on principles of direct instruction and sold as a box of reading cards, a program for multiple levels of readers—The SRA Reading Lab Box. The reading lab program broke down into eight or so levels (lower to higher proficiency) depending on the box purchased, with the levels noted by different colors. Students could choose the cards they wanted to read from their prescribed/designated reading level, or as in the case of our class, everyone started at the beginner level (rose, red, orange) and proceeded, if they could, through the beginning levels, the intermediate levels (gold, olive, blue,



brown), then finally to the highest levels (green, purple) (Watters, 2015). Lots of people over 50 years of age experienced this program in school. But here's the thing: I got stuck in orange.

I hated everything about that SRA box and those orange cards. Why? By the time I got to the orange cards, the readings on the cards were extraordinarily boring, mostly covering non-fiction topics. I like non-fiction today, especially narrative historical works, biographies, and memoirs, but I just couldn't stand to read one more card (or re-read one!) about logging or shipping or street cleaning or blah, blah, blah. I became so disinterested in the cards during "reading time" that I didn't read them, or I tried to read them again and again and then *failed the quizzes*! Passing the quizzes was the only way we could "advance." So, I got perpetually stuck at the orange level, unable to move for boredom, as well as for my disdain for the topics and my underperformance on the quizzes. I just didn't care and hated it. I knew the whole thing with the program was wrong but just couldn't voice *how* or advocate for myself at that age.

And, the result, at least in the short term—since we couldn't read another book in class, only the SRA box could be used for free reading time—was that I stopped reading books in the 6th grade. My mom (God rest her soul), thank goodness, became so concerned that I wasn't reading at home anymore that she started putting books in front of me late in the spring and all summer after 6th grade: *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*, biographies of Willie Mays and Henry Aaron and Johnny Bench, etc. As a result, I never looked back, really, reading-wise. But I got lucky, by birth; I was probably hard wired to read and study. But what about all of the readers whose spirited interest in stories and reading got murdered by SRA in the 6th grade, or later, or earlier, or whenever over those past years—forever?

REFLECTION: How have you been impacted by scripted curriculum in your own educational experiences as a student or educator? What impact have those experiences had on you, your educational journey, and your professional life? Write your own regressive (about the past) curriculum fragment in response.

STAGE SETTING: WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

In Spring 2026, I taught a curriculum course at the doctoral level (in two sections, one PhD group and one EdD group, with 21 students total) and challenged students to engage their past, present, and future understandings of the curriculum field, curriculum theory, and the perceived relationships between curriculum and pedagogy in the field, in their own experience, and in the literature. We used Pinar's (1994) method of *currere*, informed by my current work on "curriculum fragments," focusing in on the creation and surfacing of specific, sticky autobiographical memories and stories to frame important curriculum topics for relating and analyzing (Poetter, 2025). My aim was to draw students and readers into the "complicated conversation that is the curriculum" through deep reflection on their own educational experiences and their academic study of the field (Pinar, 2019, p. 28). My reflection in Curriculum Fragment 1 above about my own experience with a scripted curriculum is a regressive curriculum fragment, focusing on my experiences of education in the past and my reflections on them.

For the course sessions, the students read and discussed extensively in the curriculum field more broadly (see Love, 2018; Pinar, 2019; Pinar et al., 2002; and Poetter, 2025) and more specifically curriculum and pedagogy chapters/articles about how the curriculum field could and should react to the prevalence of scripted curriculum in use in our schools today (Golann, 2021;



Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Powell et al., 2017; Timberlake et al., 2017; Valdez, 2020; and Vaughn et al., 2021).

The class members shared regressive (about the past), progressive (about an imagined future), and analytical (about the present) curriculum fragments throughout the semester with each other (part of the *currere* process of revisiting/visiting the past, future, and present), discussed them, and analyzed their reflections in small and large groups. The prompts for the fragments that I gave them had to do with the big picture regarding their response to Pinar's (1994) question, "What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (p. 20).

Specifically, I wanted students to connect their deep reflections about the past, present, and future with regard to specific insights related to their own experiences as students and teachers with scripted curriculum. The end goal was for each student to workshop their own journal length article about scripted curriculum in the final month of the course, using the *currere* approach to say something unique and resonant regarding current challenges in their own personal/professional lives, in schooling today, and in society with regard to the historical and current phenomenon (my actual name for it is scourge) of "scripted curriculum." All of the pieces were peer-reviewed and appear in this special edition of *The Currere Exchange Journal* (www.currereexchange.com) on scripted curriculum.

IMMEDIATE PRE-CURSORS TO THE COURSE

I have been very concerned for decades with the degree to which we have allowed public schooling to fall prey to scripted curriculum and, therefore, standardization of the curriculum and ultimately to the massive turn to measure those efforts through standardized testing as the only "valuable" way to (punish) judge levels of (in)effectiveness in subject matter achievement in U.S. public schooling (the stakes attached to these movements typically only have an impact on public schooling, not private school efforts).

In fact, some of my earliest scholarly work attacked the organized and collective movement through the law and established practices to script the curriculum and measure the supposed outcomes of those efforts non-stop through standardized testing (Poetter, 2006a, 2006b). These are perhaps the ultimate steps of a larger, macro-system of influence focused on exterminating student interest in the subject matter and deeper learning as well as deskilling the work of professional teachers, "teacher proofing" the classroom, and removing autonomy, decision-making, relationality, and certain teaching skills (curricularizing!) from the work and calling of teachers. The end goal? Privatization. By ramping up the neo-liberal process of deskilling teachers and teaching, driving down support for public education, and moving politically and economically toward a complete, private takeover of the education "industry" by business interests, the money can, thereby, flow to private businesses (including religious organizations) unfettered, as in Ohio, not through and back to the public through public schools—which are represented by elected officials all over the country—whose officers have to follow strict legal and monetary policies to protect the very public they represent (see the EdChoice Voucher movement in Ohio, for instance, Poetter et al., 2023). Scripted curriculum and an over-emphasis on standardized testing as the summative measure of educational "achievement" both contribute to the murders of student interest, teacher autonomy, and relationality in the classroom, while cementing the school as a scene of control, authoritarianism, behaviorism, and, in my opinion in many cases, demise.



Two additional “historical” (regressive) curriculum fragments help frame the conversation from my point of view and may connect the reader, personally, to the issues at stake.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 2: VETERAN TEACHERS FOCUSED ON STUDENTS AND AN ENGAGING CURRICULUM

Are the following types of teachers described below—the kind focused on students and creating, perhaps even with students, an engaging curriculum—extinct, endangered, hidden? When I first started teaching high school English in 1988, I developed my own curriculum for Freshman and Sophomore English, with the only requirements being to “cover” the grammar text and to read from the literature anthology assigned to each student. The rest was up to me to cobble together. And I loved the work. I developed curriculum units that combined reading and grammar and literature all together in hopes of engaging students and helping them to develop a deeper love for language and learning. I “stole” some of my colleagues’ best stuff and morphed it to fit what I wanted to do. I looked for resources and shared copies of interesting items and of my own activities. That is, I curricularized the courses and taught. Isn’t this what all teachers do? All of the time?

Later, as a student teaching supervisor at IU during my graduate student years (1991-1994), I never saw or heard of a student teacher or class they were assigned to near Bloomington as requiring allegiance to any curriculum scripted for them. Then, as a teacher educator in Texas (1994-1997), nothing resembling a scripted curriculum in any subject area appeared in my vicinity, ever, even as the rise of Ross Perot and the Texas drive to the TAAS Testing Regime (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) was taking shape post haste (McNeil, 2000). When I came home to Ohio and Miami University in the late 1990s, and then through the early 2000s as NCLB took shape and began to dominate everything in public school education, I worked with mostly veteran teachers in master’s programs. They consistently resisted the onslaught of administrative moves to *adopt scripted curricula* or to subjugate them to the test. They vehemently vocalized their disdain for standardized testing, canned curriculum products, and the push to marginalize them professionally, to deskill the profession, and, more deeply, to remove them from the learning equation as planners and thinkers, *as teachers*. The students, almost all public school teachers, said things in class like:

“I’m never teaching anything scripted, because that’s not teaching.”

“No one will ever tell me how to teach third grade. No principal, no curriculum supervisor. After 20 years, no one knows how to do it better than I do.”

“If someone says, ‘Here’s your curriculum, follow the script,’ to me, that’s only happening over my dead body.”

I learned so much from those veteran teachers. Yes, they were interested in the pay bump that came with earning a master’s degree. But they also committed themselves to learning, to discussing their lives and commitments and leadership in schools and classrooms. They inspired me with their ongoing love of the work and their expertise and their motivation to help and serve students and the public. I miss them.

Quite a lot has changed since the early-mid 2000s. During that time, I became so distraught at the degree to which NCLB infringed on teachers’ work that I wrote the dystopian novel, *The Education of Sam Sanders* (Poetter, 2006b), in hopes of calling out the ridiculous movements afoot and reversing the tide. A few people read it, but by the time it was in print (I wrote it in sections



over a five year period 2001-2006) almost all of what I thought could never happen had started to happen. One of the most disturbing parts of it all came in the disappearance of school libraries and librarians all across Ohio. They still exist, but many districts eliminated them. Many schools don't have a library or media center that is staffed. Students have limited access to real books in school, and teachers have largely stopped investing their own funds and time in building classroom libraries. Many schools are now "literary deserts."

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 3: TEACHERS "IN THE NOW" WHO ADAPT THE SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

I sometimes feel so out of touch even though I'm studying and writing and working with teachers and students constantly. But I haven't spent a great deal of time inside of K-12 classrooms recently. I went back to high school teaching for a semester in both 2002 and 2008 as a school-university partnership activity, and the rules during that time period had changed to some degree as a result of NCLB. I wrote an article entitled, "Recognizing Joy in Teaching" (Poetter, 2006c), about my 2002 experience and a book about the 2008 experience entitled, *Teaching Again* (Poetter, 2012). The school that housed me had a system for putting the existing state standards in your posted curriculum for your class, officially. But high school teachers still had freedom to create their own classroom curricula and outcomes. It feels like yesterday to me, but that was almost two decades ago now.

Before this current semester, I last supervised a student teacher in 2017. The classroom and curriculum still contained a lot of freedom in the high school for teachers at that time as well. I saw the student teacher thriving throughout the semester, unconstrained by any standardized or scripted curriculum, with plenty of freedom to maneuver. But the students I taught in our PK-5 program in Fall 2025—all of them destined for elementary classrooms in the region in Spring or Fall of 2026 as student teachers—had three full weeks of field experience during our course on teacher leadership and what they reported when they came back from field stunned me.

Many of the students had cooperating teachers during their field placements who literally read the scripts during lesson time, then when they finished with the lesson, often early, didn't supplement the lessons with extra learning opportunities. Instead, the teachers allowed the students to play on their district-provided devices—in most cases unsupervised—with the stock learning games that were already loaded on their machines with no coaching, teaching, and/or support. We discussed what that was like, how bored the students quickly became with all of it—with both the lessons and the devices—and how dissatisfied the teachers themselves felt, all around. I felt as though I had finally met the grim reaper of public education who delights in a system we have created—curricularly and pedagogically—wherein the constant and repetitive approaches focus on warehousing children, sowing disdain of schooling, merely filling time and ignoring the potential for deeper learning and the pursuit of equity, literally creating boredom, and contributing little to the well-being and future possibilities for the children in the classroom.

But my hope was restored by one of the students in class that Fall who asked if I would serve as her student teaching supervisor in Spring 2026. I agreed in December 2025, took the "new" supervisor seminar with colleagues in mid-January 2026, and began observing her in early February after the weather calmed down (we had a horrible start back to school in January and early February with multiple, massive Ohio snowfalls). What I saw reminded me of how well a classroom could function and how deeply engaged students could be. Yes, the district-adopted 5th



grade language arts curriculum is scripted. But the student teacher and cooperating teacher have read and digested the curriculum themselves and have *adapted* it on a daily basis for use. They didn't read it word for word!

The student teacher and her cooperating teacher never read the provided script. Ever. They taught the concepts and skills embedded in the published lessons. They branched out and created their own activities. They actually taught. They engaged the students, students participated and tried, and as a result the students were thriving, wanted to be there, rarely created discipline issues, and learned. I saw growth in students every time I visited. And the teachers thrived, too.

Every single classroom in every single public school should have a seasoned teacher who can teach all students, care about them, and help all students achieve to the maximum level possible in all subjects. And, maybe even deeper, teachers should energize student learning and their appreciation for academic subjects and for the kind of high functioning, participatory, community-oriented place school can become when teaching and learning take center stage. The public school, therefore, acts as a central rallying point for teaching, learning, public awareness, social action, and the cultivation of community: the core concepts and actions that should occur in all facets of our democratic republic, including public education.

I think the two contrasting images of classroom life under the conditions dictated by the presence of scripted curriculum that I have portrayed here call into question the approaches being foisted upon teachers and students in our classrooms.

So, I am asking, can we withstand the debilitating impacts of intense, highly surveilled, scripted curriculum *adoption*? Adoption is defined by the extreme commitment to implement the scripted curriculum with high fidelity—that is, word for word, action for scripted action. And, can we deal in the short and long-terms with the loss of student interest, the loss of teacher autonomy, the loss of relational capacity, and the loss of joy in schools caused by merely adopting the script?

Instead, in contradistinction to adoption, then, can we create the conditions—in terms of local leadership and politics—to foster the *adaptation* of scripted curriculum (they are ubiquitous now) so that teachers use their gifts, skills, knowledge, and power to reach all students so that they in turn can learn, grow, and achieve in school and not merely die on the vine? Adaptation refers to teachers using their experiences and professional skills to implement a curriculum based on the provided guidelines in a way that aligns with student readiness and interest to engage them, meet them where they are, and cultivate deeper learning (Vaughn et al., 2021)?

Is it possible?

REFLECTION: Obviously, I have mortgaged some hope in school districts reversing course immediately, on a dime, by replacing existing scripted curricula with a course guide and teacher/student-centered planning. Is a reversal even possible at this point? How can we work together to reshape the cultural, social, political, and economic landscapes in terms of understanding what is happening in the classroom? How is the script changing teaching permanently? How does the movement make it hard to turn back? Write a progressive fragment (that imagines the future): How can we make a way forward?

SO, HOW DO WE CHANGE THE COURSE OF CURRICULUM HISTORY?

The authors of the articles in this special edition address the continuum of curriculum use from “adopt” to “adapt” (Golann, 2021; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017; and



Vaughn et al., 2021). Meaning, some schools require teachers to follow the curriculum strictly, to read the script and not vary from the curriculum prompts, the activities, and guidelines in any way, that is, to fully “adopt” the curriculum. Other schools encourage teachers to “adapt” the curriculum to their teaching style, to their understanding of what students need or are interested in by creating their own activities and approaches as they are able. My recent experience with a teacher/student teaching team in a public school’s 5th grade classroom has given me hope that a strong curriculum and excellent teaching, even with the current materials in place, are possible.

To be frank, as much as I don’t like it as a curricularist and pedagogue, I understand that schools and school districts have to implement somewhat standardized curriculum programs across the subject areas and that they often have mandates from their states regarding what is acceptable to teach. As in Ohio, there may only be certain reading programs on the approved list that schools have to adopt/purchase and teach, and many of them are scripted (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, 2026). But, the decision about the degree to which teachers implement that curriculum broadly, and the understanding of what curriculum fidelity means, is typically determined locally.

So, as a next step, preliminarily, I want to take some time to examine my students’ own interactions with their fragments and course readings and discussions together regarding scripted curriculum that they engaged in class—and particularly through the conversations they had about their writings in class—in order to advance some themes that might help us think about how we make decisions regarding the tensions between curriculum adoption and curriculum adaptation.

What emerges, I hope, are several ideas to frame and to take with us on the rest of the journey backward to ground zero of NCLB (and maybe even before that, obviously, there are antecedents, the regressive), and then perhaps forward to a new day in educational, curricular, pedagogical, and leadership practices (imagine a possible future, the progressive). All of the themes and questions and ideas and insights below emerged from our classroom conversations and were surfaced and noted in real time. All of the students are educators of some sort, from PK classrooms to higher education settings. Scripted curriculum lives in their experiences as students and as teachers, just as in mine.

PROMINENT IMPLICATIONS/INSIGHTS FROM STUDENT GENERATED FRAGMENTS AND DISCUSSIONS IN THE COURSE

The following bulleted points represent several of our notes from class discussions about the fragments students produced and read and the readings at the core of the course. Several of them are implications, potential consequences of the state we are in at this point regarding the scripted curriculum; and several are insights, deeper patterns in the data that describe the situation and the possibilities they may hold for future action.

- Scripted curriculum makes students “fit into a mold.” Subsequently, students feel bored as well as “detached, deflated, and defeated” in school.
- Scripted curriculum removes/dismisses student and teacher autonomy as learners. Ownership of the learning process can be lost to the script.
- Scripted curriculum often leads to losses in engagement, with teachers and students feeling immersed in activities that seem irrelevant.



- Scripted curriculum creates fear around not following the script, primarily from the teacher's perspective, but also from the administrator's perspective, who sometimes feel pressured (and then pressure others) to exercise a high level of fidelity to the script in order to ensure (supposedly) the most positive results (higher test scores).
- Scripted curriculum creates losses of interest and professionalism in the work, and teachers often quit as a result of these losses.
- Scripted curriculum often creates a spike in discipline issues because students become disengaged and out of relation with the teacher and other students.
- Scripted curriculum teaches obedience, not autonomy or the pursuit of creativity.
- Scripted curriculum often creates feelings of shame and breeds compliance.
- Scripted curriculum sometimes provides security and predictability to those who need it.
- Scripted curriculum can hurt, damage, and/or stunt relationality in the learning process and classroom.
- Scripted curriculum creates students as merely cogs in the machine, or as one author put it, "the paper jammed in the printer."
- Scripted curriculum degrades schools and their purposes: With everything scripted down to the last word and movement, are schools working toward helping students create or find their own "truth"/"meaning"?
- Creativity comes from expressions of individuality and experiences with others and from responding to problems in novel situations.
- What is the school's role in shepherding students? Nurturing them, being tough on them, providing rigor, etc.?
- What are the biases that school and society have against children and families?
- How can schools and teachers value parents and what they do for children more?
- Mere "results-oriented" approaches can drive the notion that the current state of scripted curriculum implementation and adoption are the best way to teach.
- Identity and power are always part of the curriculum equation.
- Curriculum is a complicated conversation, requiring participation in the conversation, at least!
- Teachers now are sometimes ill-at-ease when things are "unscripted."
- *Anyone who can read can "teach"* if the curriculum is scripted (teacher proofing).
- Cut out teachers, and the education business can be even more profitable.
- If business takes over education completely, who helps students to cultivate independence and self-awareness?
- Education and curriculum are always political.
- Testing is trusted by the public as un-biased. No testing, by definition, is un-biased.
- What is the responsibility of each party for educational attainment? Students are responsible for learning, not teachers or parents (Pinar, 2019).
- Scripts devalue teachers—better to spend time and money on teachers' professional development.
- Scripts are mainly about control (efficiency and clarity) v. possibility (autonomy, free thinking, collaboration).
- Here are keys for teachers and the move toward "adaptation": Differentiating, finding loopholes, adapting when adopting is the norm.



- The “script” doesn’t exist only in the classroom and manifest in formal curriculum, but it also appears in how we learn to live and be and function in school and society, how we behave and act and become. We learn to playact and perform and follow many scripts that influence our lives and careers. What are they doing to us? How do we recognize them and manage them?

WHAT YOU WILL SEE IN THE COMING PAGES OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Each student in our curriculum seminars in Spring 2026 developed a paper in response to the notion of the “script,” the curriculum laid out for us in classrooms and in life. All of them responded to three prompts from me throughout the course to write regressive, progressive, and analytical curriculum fragments (See Pinar, 1994; Poetter, 2025). Many of those fragments appear in their final treatments in this special edition of the journal. Students took aim at the challenges presented by the scripts that dominate classroom curriculum, the wider curriculums of schools, and the larger, powerful forces in play that put scripts to follow or to choose from in front of teachers and school leaders throughout their and our professional and personal lives. I found the pieces to be diverse, interesting, and insightful; and they provide a unique, telling, and learning-filled set of journeys through complex, mostly unresolved situations and conflicts confronting learners and teachers on a daily basis. How should we respond to them? What’s at stake? How will our current commitments throughout the educational community to scripted curriculum shift and transform? Given all the evidence and damage being done, I’m hoping for a reversal of fortunes, with a return of focus back to learners, teaching, and curriculum.

REFLECTION: Given your reactions to the articles in this special issue, how do you plan to address the challenges with the “scripts in play” today as a citizen, learner, teacher, school leader, parent, professor, student, etc.? What’s at stake? What are you willing to do? Write an analytical fragment (highlighting present challenges) about the situation at hand from your perspective.

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