

LOSING MY RELIGION

A FORMER TEACHER'S FRUSTRATION WITH A SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

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In a 1998 episode of VH1 Storytellers, Michael Stipe revealed that the title of R.E.M.'s 1991 single, "Losing My Religion," comes from an idiom that is commonly used in the southern United States (Chloe, 1998). It refers to a feeling that someone or something has frustrated you to the point of questioning your faith. There is a tremendous amount of power being wielded in that statement. Something or someone has rocked the speaker to their core. The speaker is in a position in which they feel powerless, and they must either change beliefs or convictions in order to cope with their new experience or somehow reject the experience entirely as if it were just an aberration. Their previous experiences and beliefs don't have an answer for whatever situation they have just encountered.

I lost my religion during the 2020-2021 school year. I spent that year working at a small charter school that utilized a strictly scripted curriculum. My experience in this environment resulted in me slowly losing faith in my career and the education system as a whole. In what follows, I will describe how my experience working with a strictly scripted curriculum caused me to have my own crisis of faith—my personal process of losing my religion. Readers can think of this as a collection of short curriculum fragments that demonstrate my personal journey. Curriculum fragments are short autobiographical stories that utilize the *currere* method in order to highlight the curricular journey of an individual's lived experiences (Pinar, 2019; Poetter, 2025).

To tell this story effectively, I must go back to the start of my journey in education. The first fragment will chart the foundation of my educational philosophy. It is a regressive introduction to how I came to understand teaching and learning as an undergraduate student. The second fragment will explain my first interaction with a scripted curriculum as a Teach for America employee. This fragment demonstrates the beginnings of my conflicts with scripted curriculum and the impact that it has on the teaching profession. The third fragment outlines my one year as a 4th and 5th grade teacher in a charter school in Ohio that utilized a strictly scripted curriculum. This fragment demonstrates where my faith in education completely broke down and ultimately why I felt pushed from the field entirely. The final section is a synthesis piece that ties my regressive fragments in with the scripted curriculum scholarship. Providing a more robust discussion of the literature than what can be weaved into the individual fragments. Ultimately, this is a story of how the lack of autonomy and the redefinition of a teacher's role through a strictly scripted curriculum pushed one educator out of the classroom.

FRAGMENT 1: MY BEGINNING

I did not want to go to college. I did well in school, but I didn't really like any of it. School just felt like a means to an end. I needed to earn a high school diploma, and I probably needed to earn a bachelor's degree to be able to live the life I wanted. My family expected me to go to college, and my girlfriend (now wife) had already committed to a school, so I felt like I was supposed to



go too. My girlfriend was a grade ahead of me, and she had decided to attend a regional state university (RS). I did not even visit any other schools. I didn't understand the nuance that normally goes into choosing a school, so I assumed that if RS was the right school for her it would be the right school for me. I applied as an early action candidate and never looked back.

I entered college in August of 2013 as a Psychology major. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but psychology sounded vaguely interesting, so I ran with it. During my first semester, an advisor informed me that I would need to go on and earn a PhD to become a practicing psychologist. I had a general apathy towards school, so the concept of attending a university any longer than the 4 years I needed for an undergraduate degree was unappealing. I left my advisor's office and immediately began exploring programs that would allow me to graduate in 4 years and get straight to work.

I ended up choosing Adolescent Young Adult Social Studies Education as my major. My decision to change my major to education was not rooted in any passion for teaching. It boiled down to a few key logical points: My mom always told me that I would make a great teacher, my girlfriend and several of my friends were education majors, summers off sounded nice, and I figured that teaching could lead me to the basic white picket fence lifestyle that I hoped to live. It was purely a logical decision that I knew could lead to the basic life I wanted to live.

Fortunately, my perspective on education shifted during my undergraduate program thanks mostly to one professor who became my mentor and friend. All of his students just called him Doc. Doc taught Intro to Education and ran a Learning Community at RS. Learning Communities at RS were both academic and residential programs that allowed students who had similar interests to live together in a residence hall and take part in a co-curricular learning experience. In this learning community, these learning experiences consisted of a weekly seminar, weekly field placements, an annual conference, and a myriad of student run events.

I was not thinking about the conference, events, or seminar when I signed up. I joined strictly because the field placements seemed like they would add value to my education. The learning community offered field experience much earlier than any other program at RS, and I thought that the opportunity to begin shadowing teachers and really understanding the day-to-day role during my first year as a student would be indispensable. While the field placement was incredibly impactful, the real value of the program was Doc. His office was located right outside of the learning community area of the residence hall. It felt a bit like an enclosure at a zoo. It had two walls that were almost entirely windows. One wall looked out over the residence hall's quad. The other wall looked out into the learning community space in the building. I'm not sure how he ever managed to get any work done in that office. Students were always using the community space right outside of his door, looking in through the glass wall just like a kid looking for the tiger in its zoo enclosure. He couldn't exactly hide in his office, so Doc always welcomed us in for a conversation.

Many of my classes and professors were amazing, but these impromptu conversations with Doc were the most important educational experiences of my undergraduate career. We discussed everything from my experience in field placement to the *Star Wars* sequel movies. He taught me about Dewey, helped me process my experiences in the field and the things I was learning in class, and gave me the platform I needed to grow into a competent leader. I can't imagine where I would be if I never crossed paths with him, and I am eternally grateful to be able to call him my friend.

At the time, I would not have been able to explain the scholarly roots of my beliefs about education. I was aware that I experienced them thanks to Doc, and I was aware that he had learned them from reading the hundreds of books that lined his office. I knew that he cited Dewey



frequently. He also introduced me to scholars such as Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy by physically bringing them to campus for our annual conference and providing opportunities for undergraduate students to sit with them and interrogate their ideas.

Through these experiences, I developed a pragmatist view of education. I believed that the point of education was to prepare students to be active participants in our democratic society (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020, p. 198). I believed that becoming an active participant in our democratic society meant more than just voting and learning how our system works. Instead, it is about learning to critically evaluate the world around you, learning how to live in community with one another, and learning how to make decisions together when we don't see eye to eye (Dewey, 1939/1976, p. 3).

Remember that this all occurred during the rise of the modern American right-wing movement, so I developed a belief that the crisis of democracy we were experiencing was similar to the crisis identified by Dewey (1939/1976) in "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." Dewey stated,

the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics. (Dewey, 1939/1976, p. 2)

I felt that the rise of an illiberal philosophy in the United States came, not just from the people's dissatisfaction with government, but also from a basic faith that the democratic systems we have would always exist and that, no matter how many times folks warned that the current regime presented a threat to our system, our systems would not be negatively impacted because they were built so strongly by the authors of our constitution that they would hold against any perceived threat. Surely, the movement would be a shock to the system, but this movement was not a danger to democracy because democracy was a given and would always prevail.

Dewey was not referring to any specific leader in his statements but rather the idea that we have taken the system for granted and that we must purposefully work to create democratic attitudes and behaviors in each and every one of our students in order to preserve our democracy (Dewey, 1939/1976; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Rury, 2002). We must educate our children about civic engagement and create schools that function like democratic communities in order to instill these ideals in our students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Rury, 2002). Doing this effectively requires that educators be able to adapt their lessons to the specific needs of their students and communities, that educators be empowered to moderate discussions on issues of controversy within their community, and that schools be places of collaborative learning where students are able to practice the skills of debate and compromise that are required for a democratic society to thrive. As I found out later, this can be difficult to do in a strictly scripted environment.

FRAGMENT 2: TEACH FOR AMERICA

I graduated from Bowling Green University in 2016 with an education degree but no teaching license. I had chosen to forgo my year of student teaching after having a difficult time finding a student teaching placement. Our program worked hard to match pre-service teachers with schools, and then, they would interview with all of the teachers at the schools that were willing to



take on a student teacher. I had decided early on in this process that I would approach each interview with my authentic thoughts and ideas about education. I did not want to compromise my pedagogy in order to get through student teaching and thought that I would be better off if I could be unapologetically me and find a supervising teacher who had a philosophy that would meld well with mine. I was invited to interview with two schools. I received some great feedback from both but was ultimately not selected to be a student teacher at either school. As the semester progressed, my placement options continued to dwindle, and I became more discouraged by the process. I ended up deciding to forgo student teaching altogether and go into the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at RS. I crammed in every class I needed to graduate at the end of my junior year and started the Public Administration program in the Fall of 2016.

I graduated from the MPA program in 2018, which was smack in the middle of the first Trump administration. Public administration positions were hard to find at the time. I applied for every federal, state, and local level job I could find in Ohio, but nothing worked out. I was unemployed for about three months. While being home with our newborn son during that time was an amazing experience, I needed to find a job. My wife had one year left in her graduate program and the graduate student stipend she earned was not quite enough to keep us afloat. I had to make a choice between continuing to apply for positions in my field or changing career directions again. So, I started looking for jobs that were related to my first degree, education. I did not have a teaching license, so my options in the public school system were limited. I ended up finding a position as a Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) Career Specialist in an urban district in Ohio. The JAG program is a nationwide program that seeks to provide job skills training through an in-school, skills-based curriculum and one year of post-graduation mentorship and support. This was the closest thing to teaching I qualified for, and the work helped reignite my passion for teaching. I took that year as almost a trial run of teaching while I searched for alternative licensure pathways that would allow me to get to teaching full-time.

I ended up deciding that Teach for America (TFA) would be the most easily accessible way to obtain an alternative license, so I applied and was accepted to the TFA 2020 cohort. Teach For America is an application-based teacher preparation program. Teach For America aims to attract promising leaders, provide them with the training they need to work in low-income communities, and then build a force of leaders to create change within low-income school districts (Carl, 2014, p. 30). Individuals apply to the program and if selected go through an intensive summer training program that is meant to prepare them to begin teaching immediately after the program ends. Normally, selected participants fly down to Atlanta to do the training in-person. Since I applied during the pandemic, I did not get the traditional TFA training experience. Instead, we did everything through Zoom over an eight-week period.

The training at TFA was primarily built around a scripted curriculum. We were taught that scripted curricula were scientifically backed and were proven methods for raising achievement scores in low-income communities (Carl, 2014, p. 31). The entire cohort was given practical classroom training through a strictly scripted online reading tutoring program. We were each assigned one student that we worked with a couple of times a week. Every interaction with the student and every exercise we did was strictly scripted. There was barely a word that came out of my mouth that was not prescribed for me. I disagreed with much of what I was being taught in our summer institute, but I also acknowledged that the methods made sense for the TFA audience. After all, how can they really expect someone to write and deliver their own lessons with only one summer of training when most teachers go through intensive four-year university training programs? I figured that the scripts would help folks be ready to enter the classroom immediately



and that more detailed personal lesson planning would be learned on the job through continued supervision and mentorship. TFA training felt like I was an actor being trained to play the part of a teacher. I viewed the scripts as a “fake it ‘til you make it” strategy, and I never imagined that I would be required to solely rely on scripted methods for my personal classes. I thought that I may need them until I had my feet firmly underneath me but that I would eventually have the freedom to be creative and make my own materials.

Unfortunately, I did end up in a school that required me to teach strictly from a boxed script. One of the downsides of the TFA program is that graduates do not get any say in the school in which they end up teaching. I had to go to whatever interviews they set up for me and accept the first job that was offered. TFA set up two interviews for me, one with a public school district in the Cincinnati area and one with a charter school network. I desperately wanted to end up at the public school. I had worked within that district as a Career Specialist and absolutely loved it. I had also researched the charter school network and felt that the for-profit structure of their system would not be a good fit for me. In an attempt to gain some control over my future, I decided to “throw” the charter school interview. Despite my best efforts, the charter school offered me a job within hours of my interview. I wanted to wait to see if the public school would make an offer, but it was too late. I had to go to the charter network.

FRAGMENT 3: MY SCHOOL

I started working for a charter school in August of 2020. This school is still operating and is part of a for-profit charter school network that serves over 40,000 students in over 100 different schools in the United States. These schools exist within a convoluted nesting doll-like structure of corporations. The CEO of our school’s parent company also owned the company that sold our learning management system and the company that designed our scripted curriculum.

My first day at the school was August 3rd, 2020. I had to report to the school at 8am for our first day of professional development. The principal was waiting at the entrance to welcome all of the new teachers to the building. That year there were five new teachers, including three from Teach for America. He greeted us all and showed us to our classrooms to get settled. My classroom was on the second floor of the building and was the very first classroom on the left-hand side of the hallway. As I walked in, I noticed a sign above the door that read “DOA.” In the emergency medical field “DOA” stands for “Dead on Arrival,” but in the network, it stands for “Director of Academics.” My classroom just happened to be the old DOA’s office. I found it funny at the time, but in retrospect it feels more like an ominous warning of what was to come.

I had my first meeting with the DOA directly after our first Professional Development session. I was anxious to get started. I only had two weeks to get my class up and running, so I knew it would take some long days to have the classroom and materials ready to go. I walked into the DOA’s office ready to be inundated with resources that I would need to master before school started in just over two weeks. Instead, I was introduced to a strictly scripted boxed curriculum with accompanying PowerPoint presentations, online exercises for the students, and literal scripts that I needed to read while presenting to the students. On paper, the DOA was responsible for assisting teachers with their lesson planning and assessments. In practice, the DOA was responsible for implementing a standardized, scripted curriculum that was handed down by the charter school’s parent company. I later found out that the company that made our scripted curriculum was one of the many companies owned by our CEO.



I went along with the script the first few weeks. I just wanted to get myself settled, and then I would try to launch into my own creations when I felt I had my feet under me. The scripts were admittedly helpful for getting me started. I did not have enough time to prepare everything I would need to launch my class, and the scripts felt like a band-aid I could use to help me get through the first few weeks.

About a month in, I started working on my own lessons for my class. I was not allowed to build anything social studies or science related. Those subjects were taught through online modules. Anything I made needed to be Math or Language Arts based, so I worked to create thoughtful materials in these two subjects that also wove in social studies and science objectives. That way I could get a feel for where students were in their online modules and ensure that the topics were getting some sort of mediated coverage in my classroom. I worked tirelessly to prep the materials and to be ready to present them to my DOA at our next meeting. I emailed the materials to her ahead of our meeting and went down to speak with her during my planning period. I expected that they may need some revision but was instead told to trash them and just stick to the script.

I walked out of that meeting determined to do the opposite. In a clear act of insubordination, I ignored her and delivered my own materials anyway. I got away with this for a week or two. Eventually, the DOA and Principal heard about my lessons and began randomly sitting in on my classes to ensure I was following the script. We had several heated discussions about the boxed curriculum. I ended up earning several verbal warnings and a formal complaint to TFA about my actions. It was around this time that I started thinking about leaving the school. I decided that I would stick the year out, do my own thing, and likely not have my contract renewed at the end of the year. Worst case scenario, I would be fired, but that was not a deterrent.

Since we were still in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, I taught both the hybrid and virtual 4th and 5th grade classes. Roughly half of my students were fully virtual, and the other half would come into the classroom two days a week. An unfortunate side effect of this setup was that my hybrid students still had to watch me teach on a computer screen when they were physically in the school. I was still responsible for the online students on the hybrid days, so I was required to leave my students in my classroom with a paraprofessional and set up in a different room to teach my lessons. This was by far the worst possible set up for my students. My hybrid students were simply attending virtual school while sitting in a school building. Many of my students had IEPs or were considered high need in some way, and I was not allowed to physically be in the room with them on the two days that they were able to come to the school, which effectively eliminated my ability to differentiate instruction and support students in the individual ways that they needed.

This all came to a head one day when a set of siblings I had in my class ran away from the school. These twins had some severe mental health concerns and desperately needed more support than our school was able to provide. I worked with our intervention specialist to make a case to the school that we needed additional resources to support them. We were told that this was what the paraprofessional in my class was for and that no additional support would be given. While the paraprofessional did her best, she was not able to provide all of the support these two students needed while also overseeing the entire class during our online lessons. One day while I was in another room teaching the math lesson, one of the brothers ran away from the school. To this day I have no idea what the trigger was, but one sibling stood up and began screeching while the other started throwing chairs. Both ran out of the classroom. One ran right out the front door of the school and disappeared. The other ran to the gym but was stopped before he could exit the building. The police were involved, and the boy who fled the school was found safe later that night several



miles away from the school. This was the final straw. I knew that I could not return to this school once my contract ended.

That year killed any love I had for the classroom. I dreaded going to that building every day. I couldn't differentiate instruction for students, I couldn't alter the pace of the subjects to ensure that students received the depth of content they needed, my lessons were being watched or recorded every day, I was forced to have the students complete weekly standardized assessments that took up most of an afternoon, and I couldn't even be in the same room as my students while I taught. I was so frustrated that I ended up picking up smoking again (a habit I had tossed when my first son was born and have since kicked again). I was struggling to deal with immense pressure from the school for my students to perform, pressure from TFA to do exactly as our DOA told me, and the pressure of knowing that the work I was doing was ultimately not helping my students. I was doing more harm than good, and I just couldn't continue. Leaving TFA when I did meant that I never fully earned my teaching license and again needed a career change.

SYNTHESIS

I recognize that the oversight that I had to contend with and the unique conditions of the global pandemic made my experience extreme. Despite these unique pressures, others have had similar experiences. Carl (2014) found that TFA teachers frequently deal with the ethical dilemma of choosing to faithfully implement the full scripted curriculum or risk losing their jobs by deviating from the script to differentiate for their students (p. 45). Carl (2014) also stated that these teachers were concerned that they were completely dispensable to their schools and that many were considering leaving their schools due to the lack of autonomy, fear of dispensability, and the moral dilemmas that they faced as a result of the strictly scripted curricula they were forced to implement (p. 47). I had to contend with every one of these concerns in my time teaching.

One may assume that a better prepared teacher, such as one who went through a traditional teacher licensing program, would not deal with these same pressures or would be better equipped to combat them. Unfortunately, teachers across the country in traditional public schools and charter schools have to struggle with conflicts between what is right for their students and the officially sanctioned knowledge they are required to impart (Ahmed, 2023, p. 633). This is not just a Teach For America issue. It is also not just an issue for teachers in high poverty areas, teachers of high need students, or teachers in charter schools. Teachers nationally must contend with rigid educational regulations that dictate what counts as sanctioned knowledge in the classroom (Ahmed, 2023, p. 634).

Scripted curriculum is a logical progression of the strict regulation of the standardization movement. The government outlines the specific learning targets that are of most value, which creates a need for a curriculum that specifically targets these learning outcomes. Corporations create content that directly addresses these targets and market it to schools as containing scientifically backed methods for achieving the state mandated target. Then school districts purchase these corporate content packages because they must meet these targets or risk sanctions from their state. The specific needs of any individual child or specific community are completely lost in this process. Teachers are put into a position where they must teach the items that are included on the test at the expense of other curricular items that students either need or would derive value from (Rury & Rice, 2017, p. 494).



Scripted curricula leave little room for student interest or for teachers to adapt the content to the relevant lived experiences of their students. We know that relevance to student's lives is critical, both from a student comprehension standpoint and from a student equity standpoint. (Ahmed, 2023; Carl, 2014; Correll, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2022). We cannot separate the student from the context of their lived experiences. They do not exist in cultural silos, and students' learning will be impacted by whatever context they bring into the classroom with them. A strictly scripted and enforced curriculum does not leave teachers the latitude to make adjustments to account for the lived experiences of their students. There cannot be any one-size-fits-all method in an arena where cultural differences demand customization. No one method will reach everyone, which leads to the ethical dilemma identified by Carl (2014), Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020), and Timberlake (2017). Teachers have to choose between potentially losing their jobs due to deviation from the script or keeping their jobs and knowing that they are not providing an equitable education because they cannot differentiate to accommodate the needs of their individual students (Carl, 2014, p. 46). Schools run the risk of reducing equity in education to satisfy the idea that providing equity means all students would not be held to the same high standards (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020, p. 203). But, equity is not equality of access to resources; it is the equality of opportunity (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020, p. 202). Providing equality of opportunity requires that teachers be able to differentiate their methods of instruction to account for the differences in how any one individual student learns.

If teachers cannot differentiate their instruction, then achievement gaps may be viewed as a problem of the individual child rather than a result of structural barriers that the child faces (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017). If everything is the same for everyone, then it can only be the individual teacher or the individual student's fault if they do not achieve. We know that outside barriers exist. We know that systems are set up in a manner that favors some groups over others. A strictly scripted curriculum ignores this entirely and places the blame for failure squarely on the shoulders of the individual student or teacher.

CONCLUSION

I lost my faith in schooling because the strictly enforced scripted curriculum removed my autonomy. My complaints about my experiences are all rooted in the removal of my ability to make informed decisions about my classroom. I could not differentiate my instruction for students to account for the differences in how they learn. I could not adjust material to relate it to the lived experiences of my students. I was not involved in the instruction of social studies or science at all. I was not even able to be in the same physical classroom as my students when I taught. The methods I was required to use were completely antithetical to everything I know about what a teacher should be.

I came to think of my school as if it were a black and white copy machine. We put blank paper in and try to mass-produce exact replicas over and over again. Obviously, "producing" children is not that simple. The copies don't come out exactly the same. The printer leaves lines, the toner fades in and out, or sometimes the paper gets jammed. The system can deal with lines in the copy or the toner fading. There will be some variance in every student, but the system has done its job as long as the basic image is the same. Paper jams are the real problem. Students or teachers who can't get with the program have to be removed from the system, just like the paper that jammed the printer. Teachers can be fired and replaced. Students can be suspended or expelled. I

was a paper jam in this system. The discomfort of being that jam and the pressure to conform to the intended copy job ultimately led me to remove myself.

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