

THE EMERGENCE OF MY CREATIVE VOICE

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There are a million different ideas and questions running through my mind at this very moment, mostly due to the fact that I haven't taken my much-needed ADHD meds in over a week and I'm having a "squirrel" moment, both seemingly and dramatically, every five nanoseconds, but despite all the squirreling, my mind keeps drifting back to just one concern. Although now a doctoral student, I still suffer from imposter syndrome, which in this very moment is driving my mind to doubt that I can engage you, my readers, in what I am hoping will be my very first published article. See, I've already done it, you're already completely engaged. Your engagement is key as you continue reading, because I will be challenging two of our educational system's most controversial topics currently in our country, the mandated utilization of scripted curriculum and its implications for the national teacher shortage.

This leads me to the question: how am I going to share theories, perspectives, and research findings about these two crucial topics while ensuring that my audience stays engaged? The answer is actually quite simple. I will be sharing all those nuances right alongside my very own curriculum fragments, which, as Poetter (2024, p. 221) explains in *Curriculum Fragments: A Currere Journey through Life Processes*, are fragments or parts of the story of your life experiences, not one's whole life, but moments that help give the reader a glimpse into the whole story.

CONSTRAINED BY SCRIPTED CURRICULA: THE STRIPPING OF TEACHER AUTONOMY AND CREATIVITY

"How could this be happening?" was the question that kept repeating in my mind as I looked at the three large boxes delivered to my classroom and the spiral-bound instructor's manual in my hands. Without warning, notice, or training, my district had decided to implement a new state-mandated, district-adopted curriculum. As educators of young learners, we were not asked for input, consulted, or included in the decision to begin using the new curriculum. Instead, we were told how we would teach students by people who knew little about their needs, learning styles, or challenges. It felt as though history were repeating. In that moment, the scene before me brought back painful memories of my fourth-grade math teacher and the scripted curriculum that had shaped one of the hardest periods of my own education. As I reflected on everything I had experienced as a child in elementary school, as a struggling high school student, and as a discouraged district employee, I realized that I had finally reached the point where I could make a difference for the students in my care. I had promised myself that what happened to me would not happen to the 20 students in my classroom. Yet now, in my second year as a teacher in that same district, I was being forced to conform to the very kind of teaching that had failed me years before.

This experience also reopened old wounds from my years as a paraprofessional. During that time, my administrator often encouraged me to become a teacher, telling me I had the presence and potential to do more for students. Although I appreciated the support, I resisted because I knew how demanding the role would be. I did not want the paperwork, meetings, and responsibilities



that would take me away from my family and from the students I already enjoyed supporting. However, that was only part of the truth. Beneath my hesitation was a much deeper fear rooted in my own educational trauma.

In elementary school, math had been taught through a rigid scripted curriculum, and my teacher had refused to meet students where they were. Because of that experience, I never fully developed the math skills I needed, and I struggled for years. That struggle followed me into adulthood and surfaced again when I could not pass the math portion of the Praxis I exam, which was required for my teaching license. Although the university allowed me to complete my Early Childhood Education program, I could not receive my diploma or license until I passed that final section. I took the test five times and failed each time. With every failure, I felt as though I had disappointed my administrator, my family, myself, and the students I longed to teach. More importantly, those failures reminded me how deeply the refusal to meet students' needs can shape an entire life. In that way, my experience became the foundation of my purpose and persistence as an educator.

Back in my classroom, my paraprofessional called out to me, asking what was in the boxes and why I looked so upset. I tried to respond, but my mind was still caught between past and present. As a new teacher, I did not feel I had the power to resist the curriculum, but I also knew I should not silently participate in something that might harm my students. With only a few years of experience and little support from peers willing to advocate alongside me, I felt trapped. In that moment, I realized that compliance meant more than following a district directive; it meant beginning the process of failing my own students in the same way I had once been failed.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SCRIPTED CURRICULA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The frustration, disbelief, and disappointment you have just read about stem from my own learning experiences, which will be revealed as you continue reading. Those experiences shaped me into the teacher I introduced in the fragment above. Because of moments of great joy and excitement through planned learning experiences, and even greater moments of sadness and confusion throughout my educational journey, I purposed in my heart to become a teacher who is passionate, engaging, and creative, and who, as Love (2020) states, advocates for students to have authentic learning experiences that impact their lives beyond the classroom.

Unfortunately, in the moment you just read, all my hopes and expectations about planning and implementing instruction quickly changed. Following a scripted curriculum became my district's new norm, just as it had for many other districts in our state. State legislators and policymakers, with little to no input from teachers, families, or the students they claim to represent, assumed that teachers need assistance to adequately implement explicit instruction and learning experiences aligned with Common Core State Standards (CCSS). They claimed that the mandated curriculum was merely an optional resource and guide to ensure equitable instruction across the district (Timberlake et al., 2017). However, many teachers across the country, like me, view scripted curriculum not as an option but as a directive. These prepackaged materials and lesson plans, designed to provide explicit instruction, are intended to hold teachers more accountable for student achievement following the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the CCSS (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). While the push for scripted curriculum may have initially been framed as an optional support, expectations from leadership quickly shifted. Policymakers'

expectations were not the only aspect that changed, but their rationale did as well. As teachers began voicing concerns and requesting explanations and supporting data for the sudden transition, their questions were quieted by a rationale that persists today: scripted curriculum benefits inexperienced teachers or those deemed less competent in their subject areas. The implementation of scripted curriculum, whether adopted or adapted, was rooted in the perception that new and alternatively licensed teachers, such as those from Teach for America, lack the training or experience necessary to effectively deliver explicit instruction (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020).

Many teachers, both new and experienced, who were required to implement scripted curriculum became increasingly frustrated and concerned about how it was enforced. They began to notice significant disparities and inequities in both expectations and implementation. While some districts and even schools within the same district were permitted to adapt the curriculum and integrate it into their instruction, others were pressured to adopt it in its entirety, replacing their own lesson plans. This resulted in some teachers being able to selectively use elements that met their students' needs, while others were required to teach lessons verbatim. Teachers who were required to adopt the curriculum were stripped of autonomy over what they taught, how they taught, and which materials they used (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). This led to a clear division among teachers, communities, and students that has evolved into an issue of equity. Many individuals from certain communities felt they and their students were being labeled as deficient or ineffective, as though they were incapable of identifying and supporting their students' needs. This perception resulted in a loss of autonomy and decision-making power. Meanwhile, other communities were viewed as capable, allowing their teachers greater flexibility and professional agency.

Ultimately, the divide between adopting and adapting scripted curriculum had a significant impact on both teachers and students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). However, those forced to adopt it experienced more substantial consequences, as they lost opportunities for creative, dynamic, and engaging instruction, the hallmarks of passionate teaching (Love, 2020). When the boxes of curriculum materials were delivered to my classroom, I felt the same sorrow, disappointment, and frustration that many of my colleagues across the country were experiencing. Like them, I was expected to quietly comply with a curriculum that diminished our creativity, passion, and, in many cases, our motivation to remain in the profession. At the same time, it limited students' agency in their own learning and restricted their access to instruction tailored to their individual needs and success (Timberlake et al., 2017).

COMPLIANCE OVER CREATIVITY: THE DAMAGE OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

There are very few moments in my educational journey when I can say I felt truly happy about learning or excited about going to school. More often, I remember feeling frustrated, overwhelmed and, at times, even traumatized. Some memories are faint but comforting, while others remain vivid and painful. Despite their contrast, these experiences collectively fuel both my passion for education and my frustration with curriculum and pedagogy. To understand these emotions, it is important to examine where they began. One of my earliest memories comes from preschool, where I encountered a teacher whose name I no longer recall but whose presence I will never forget. She nurtured and cared for each student in a way that made learning feel natural and joyful. While I cannot remember every lesson or activity, I clearly remember how she taught with enthusiasm, patience, and encouragement. She used classroom materials to make concepts understandable, welcomed our many questions, and emphasized listening and modeling over direct

instruction. Most importantly, I remember how she made me feel. Her teaching felt warm, comforting, and inviting, like a safe space where learning could flourish. Her lessons were not scripted but intentional and responsive, creating an environment where curiosity thrived.

As I transitioned into Kindergarten, my experiences shifted but continued to support my growth. Unlike preschool, this setting introduced more structured activities and repetition. I distinctly remember practicing how to write my name, an eight-letter task that often left me frustrated and in tears. I would tell my teacher, Mrs. Rust, that I hated my name because it was so long and made my hand hurt. Instead of dismissing my frustration, she responded with care, reminding me that my name was beautiful and encouraging me to keep trying. Although the repetition felt tedious, it taught me valuable lessons beyond handwriting. Through consistent practice, I developed perseverance, patience, and determination. I learned to focus, take responsibility, and take pride in my progress. While the method relied on rote memorization, the supportive environment allowed me to grow both academically and personally. Together, these early experiences helped me view education as a meaningful path toward self-improvement and possibility.

However, this perception changed significantly during my fourth-grade year. Unlike my earlier experiences, this memory is defined by confusion and frustration. I recall my teacher briefly introducing long division, rushing through the explanation without ensuring understanding. Within minutes, he assigned independent work and instructed us not to ask questions. His approach was rigid and detached, leaving little room for clarification or support. Almost immediately, I felt lost. Questions filled my mind, but I remained silent, unsure, and intimidated. I did not understand where the numbers belonged, why certain steps were necessary, or how to arrive at the correct answer. Unlike my earlier teachers, he did not check for understanding or provide meaningful guidance. Instead, he adhered strictly to a scripted lesson that prioritized task completion over comprehension. Up to that point, math had been a subject I generally enjoyed. Even when concepts became challenging, I relied on the persistence I had developed in earlier years. However, long division required a level of support and explanation that I did not receive. Sitting at my desk, overwhelmed and unsupported, I experienced a turning point. My confidence diminished, my curiosity faded, and my willingness to engage with math began to disappear.

This moment marked my first experience with scripted instruction, and its impact was lasting. Rather than fostering understanding, it created fear, self-doubt, and disengagement. The absence of interaction and encouragement made learning feel isolating, leading me to believe that I had to rely solely on myself even when I did not understand the material. The effects of this experience extended beyond that single lesson. It reshaped my relationship with math and influenced how I viewed education more broadly. Where I once associated learning with warmth and growth, I began to connect it with rigidity and failure. This shift not only affected me as a student but also shaped my perspective as a future educator.

Ultimately, these contrasting experiences highlight the profound impact of teaching practices on student learning. The nurturing, intentional approaches of my early teachers fostered confidence and curiosity, while the rigid, scripted approach I encountered later led to frustration and self-doubt. These moments continue to influence my passion for education and my commitment to advocating for teaching practices that prioritize understanding, engagement, and meaningful learning.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SCRIPTED CURRICULA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Many students have endured such experiences in their academic journeys, which exposes how far our educational systems and frameworks have drifted from the original “freedom school,” as Love (2020) describes schools where students received an education relevant to their lived realities, adapted to meet their individual learning needs, and equipped them with the tools and strategies necessary to achieve their personal goals. Instead, schools have shifted toward environments in which teachers are bound to mandated scripts that dictate the introduction of pre-mapped curriculum elements, stripping them of autonomy by removing their ability to incorporate their creativity, their understanding of student needs, and elements of rigor (Kang, 2016).

There are many students who, like me, have witnessed the dismantling of a teacher’s passion for helping students identify both their strengths and the areas where confusion or uncertainty still exists, while also erasing opportunities for instruction tailored to their needs. The students in Ms. Lily’s third-grade class share similar memories of their teacher once being vibrant, designing creative lessons, facilitating engaging activities, and drawing from a variety of resources to support diverse learning styles, only to transition into simply implementing daily lessons from a prescribed curriculum mandated by her school district (MacGillivray et al., 2004). Ms. Lily no longer teaches lessons that genuinely interest her students or connect to the real-life situations they face outside the classroom; instead, she responds to their learning needs with generic and often irrelevant solutions.

This is not a phenomenon that has emerged only in recent years but rather one that has developed over several decades. Mandated curricula and top-down policies have been integral components of the education system even prior to initiatives such as “Common Core,” “No Child Left Behind,” and “Race to the Top.” These bureaucratic controls aim to reform the education system by establishing hierarchical authority over teachers and exerting technical control over instructional practices, strategies, and tools used to design and implement instruction (MacGillivray et al., 2004). The enforcement of standardized instructional practices and educational experiences reflects a troubling return to a historical mindset reminiscent of the colonial control once imposed on individuals. It was the very loss of autonomy and enforced ideology that drove early settlers to seek a new life in America, a place where governance would be shaped by the people. In contrast, today’s educational climate often silences teachers while empowering policymakers to make decisions with limited input from key stakeholders.

MacGillivray and colleagues describe these conditions as a form of recolonization, suggesting that applying neocolonial theory reveals the power structures and inequities within the current educational system. These inequities function to control classroom dynamics through the socialization of teachers, ultimately limiting or even eliminating their professional autonomy (MacGillivray et al., 2004). There is a striking irony in the government’s attempts to control nearly every aspect of the educational system, echoing the authority once exerted by the English monarchy. The forefathers fled colonization, yet their descendants now replicate similar structures of control. Policymakers and district leaders, in this sense, are colonizing teachers by restricting their instructional methods, practices, and procedures, while pressuring them to rely exclusively on scripted curricula to shape both instruction and the learning environment.

What if instead, just as the Pilgrims many decades ago chose to break away from their colonizers and create a new world that would support the needs of their people, we as educators and students chose to break away from modern colonizing forces? What if we chose to no longer



silently comply with top-down policies and mindless mandates that strip teachers of their autonomy and students of authentic, student-centered learning experiences? What example would teachers set for their students if they chose to empower themselves, use their voices, find a way to gain a seat at the decision-making table, and advocate for the return of autonomy and creativity in their classrooms?

What would learning experiences be like in our classrooms if we decided to stand up with and for our students by adapting curricula instead of simply adopting them? Wouldn't our students perform more confidently, apply their knowledge more effectively, achieve their goals more consistently, and become the unapologetically proud learners they deserve to be? In the perfect world I envision in this reflection, they most definitely would be.

CONQUERING THE CURRICULUM: EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND EQUIPPING TEACHERS

The morning meeting had been carefully planned, and each lesson was neatly arranged, ready to be implemented. Yet instead of the excitement I had expected to feel as I prepared to teach my 20 eager students, I felt something entirely different. I felt disappointment, frustration, and even resentment, and although I understood the rationale behind the state-mandated curriculum, I could not ignore the sense that something essential had been lost. Teaching, at its core, is an act of creativity, yet I felt constrained by a structure that left little room for authentic expression or student-driven exploration.

This tension between intention and reality became even more apparent as I began the lesson. The so-called "creative curriculum" reminded me of my own early schooling experiences: a teacher positioned at the front of the room, bound to a script, delivering content that felt disconnected and uninspiring. While my tone may not have been monotone, I still felt tethered to the same limitations. As I sat in my rocking chair, reading from the prescribed text, I realized that, despite years of educational progress, I had unknowingly recreated the very experience I once wished to escape.

As I introduced the new study topic of "pets," I attempted to infuse enthusiasm into my delivery. I assumed it would be a relatable and engaging subject. However, the students' responses quickly revealed a different reality. They commented, "What are pets?" "Why can't we learn about dinosaurs?" "Pets are boring!" In that moment, their reactions spoke volumes. What I had hoped would spark curiosity instead highlighted the disconnect between mandated content and student interest.

This realization marked a turning point. As I listened more closely, I began to understand that their frustration mirrored my own. They were not simply rejecting the topic; they were expressing a desire for agency. They wanted to explore ideas that mattered to them, to ask questions that reflected their curiosity, and to demonstrate their understanding in meaningful ways. In short, they wanted a voice in their learning. Recognizing this, I made a pivotal decision to shift our approach. Rather than strictly adhering to the prescribed curriculum, we began a year-long journey grounded in student interest and inquiry. Together, we discussed, researched, and voted on topics that emerged from their lived experiences including weather, community, sports, transportation, space, and landforms, among others. This shift not only increased engagement but also transformed the classroom into a space of shared ownership.

As the year progressed, the impact of this change became increasingly evident. Learning was no longer confined to scripted lessons or standardized assessments. Instead, students



demonstrated their understanding through projects that connected classroom learning to real-world experiences. They explored their communities, engaged with their families, and presented their discoveries in ways that reflected both creativity and personal meaning. Consequently, learning became something they actively constructed rather than passively received. What began as a small classroom shift soon expanded beyond its original scope. The success of student-driven learning sparked conversations among colleagues, administrators, and eventually stakeholders across the district. This momentum continued to build, ultimately reaching the state level. What had started as a response to student disengagement evolved into a broader movement advocating for educational practices that center student voice and agency.

This journey culminated in a powerful moment at the state capitol. Students, teachers, and families gathered to share their experiences and advocate for a more inclusive and responsive approach to education. As I stood among them, I observed a striking contrast. On one side were students who were confident, articulate, and empowered, and eager to share their stories. On the other were policymakers and district leaders, their expressions reflecting uncertainty as they witnessed the implications of this shift. In that moment, it became clear that this was more than a presentation; it was educational transformation. The phrase, “We the People,” took on new meaning as these young learners demonstrated their capacity to think critically, speak confidently, and advocate for their own learning. Their message was both simple and profound: education should not be something imposed upon them but something shaped with them.

As I reflected on this journey, I realized that these students had become pioneers of a new educational paradigm. No longer passive recipients of instruction, they had emerged as active participants and partners in their learning. Their growth was not only academic but also personal and civic. They had discovered their voices and, more importantly, learned how to use them. Ultimately, this experience reaffirmed a fundamental truth: meaningful learning occurs when students are empowered to take ownership of their education. By shifting from scripted instruction to authentic inquiry, we created a space where curiosity could thrive and where students could see themselves as capable contributors to their own learning journeys. In doing so, we not only transformed our classroom but also contributed to a broader reimagining of what education can and should be.

NO LONGER SILENTLY COMPLYING BUT SIMPLY COMPROMISING

Hundreds of researchers and scholars agree that there are both gains and losses associated with implementing scripted curricula; however, the voices of students and teachers should never be ignored when decisions about learning experiences are made (Kang, 2016). If policymakers were to place greater emphasis on developing strategic frameworks that encourage meaningful participation from all stakeholders—rather than continuing to search for a “perfect” instructional model or relying on scripted curricula—schools might be better positioned to improve achievement outcomes and nurture a more enduring love of learning among students. A compromise in educational reform is vital if the education system as a whole is to effectively prepare the next generation of civic leaders who will carry the mantle of democracy within this country. Allowing teachers the ability to adapt their district curriculum enables them to individualize learning experiences that are relevant to their students, while also utilizing tools and resources best suited to their learning needs. Entrusting teachers with autonomy and creative



nuance in their instruction will create both enriching and engaging learning experiences for students, while simultaneously encouraging them to take control of their own learning and success.

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