

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 *curre*, 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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FOLLOW THE KING OR FOLLOW THE SCRIPT?

CURRERE FRAGMENTS ON SCHOOL AND BECOMING

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Imagine a regimented school life where your days are structured so completely that even your sense of self begins to feel scripted. Imagine living within a system where discipline is praised as excellence, routine becomes identity, and obedience quietly shapes the kind of person you are expected to become. Now imagine returning to that same institution years later, only to realize that, although the technologies of control have changed, the script itself remains. This is where my experience at School A comes in.

School A is one of the most prestigious and widely known girls' senior high schools in Ghana. Founded by the Methodist Church in the early nineteenth century, the school carries a deep history that is inseparable from the colonial history of the Gold Coast and from the long project of shaping girls' education through Christian discipline, British ideals, and institutional order (Odei-Tettey et al., 2023). That history matters because the school I personally experienced was never just a place of learning.

It was also a place where how we walked, spoke, and aspired were arranged according to a script, under the guise of holistic education. This analysis is a *currere* meditation on that experience. It draws from three fragments: a regressive fragment that returns to a day-in-the-life memory of my experience at School A, a progressive fragment that imagines a dystopian future in which I teach in the same scripted system, and an analytic synthesis that makes sense of the two. *Currere*, as Pinar (1994, 2019) frames it, is not simply autobiography. It is a method for understanding curriculum as lived experience, historical force, and even future possibility (Baszile, 2015; Poetter, 2025). In that spirit, I ask what kind of person a scripted school makes—what it asks of girls and what it leaves behind.

I use “scripted” here in both a narrow and broad sense. In the narrow sense, I’m referring to a tightly structured curriculum and standardized testing, where teachers and students are pressured to move through predetermined content and measure learning through uniform outcomes (Golann, 2021). In the broader sense, scripting is a way of organizing school life so that bodies, emotions, expectations, and identities are made manageable for the institution. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) describe scripted curriculum as pre-structured and highly controlling, and they argue that it limits the intellectual participation of teachers and students. At this institution, that logic extended beyond lessons. It was woven into the everyday life of the school.

The scripting at this school operated on several levels at once. It existed in the formal curriculum, in test-driven academic expectations, and in the everyday regulation of school life (Pinar et al., 2002). It also existed in older missionary and colonial traditions that shaped how young girls were taught to walk, speak, sit, pray, and imagine their futures (Fenuku & Akpaku, 2024; Odei-Tettey et al., 2023). Standardization can certainly create order, but it can also become a system of containment when it narrows teacher judgment (Vaughn et al., 2021) and student freedom (Timberlake et al., 2017). In School A’s case, the curriculum trained us not only to succeed, but to conform. In this article, I highlight how the scripted curriculum operates as a

continuation of colonial and missionary logics, structuring not only academic outcomes but the identities, behaviors, and aspirations of its students.

COLONIAL INHERITANCE

To understand the makings of School A, one must begin with the Methodist missionary project in Ghana. Odei-Tettey et al. (2023) argue that Ghanaian education predates European influence and once reflected indigenous values, social organization, and moral formation. The Methodist Church entered a pre-colonial world that already had its own forms of education, socialization, and moral training. Indigenous systems taught responsibility, honesty, respect, labor, and communal belonging long before European missionaries arrived (Odei-Tettey et al., 2023). Yet, missionary schooling often positioned those indigenous systems as incomplete or inferior. In their place, schools like this promoted Christianity, English literacy, vocational skills, discipline, and maintaining order as markers of civilization. Colonial schooling redirected the curriculum toward imported epistemologies and global pressures rather than local cultural needs. The point was not simply to teach girls reading and writing, but to make them into a certain kind of social subject. That is the historical backdrop of my schooling. The practices I experienced were not accidental. They were inherited.

This colonial inheritance matters because it helped develop the institutional culture that followed. School A's prestige was not only academic; it was historical. It was one of those places where legacy became tradition, and tradition became authority. The school's old traditions were not simply preserved because they were old but because they were understood as signs of quality and prestige. Practices persisted because they were understood as part of what made the school excellent. Yet what they often preserved was a colonial logic of order, hierarchy, and moral regulation (Odei-Tettey et al., 2023). The school's greatness, in other words, was built in part through forms of scripting that made the institution appear stable while narrowing the range of student becoming. The legacy of missionary education was visible in the school's emphasis on discipline, respectability, and the formation of girls into particular kinds of women.

This is why the school's rituals felt bigger than any one classroom. They shaped how we conducted ourselves, how we studied, and how we understood ourselves. At School A, the script was not only instructional but institutional. It regulated the body as much as the mind. It taught us how to take up space, how to be seen, and how to be trained. Some of those practices may have once served a particular purpose in a colonial and missionary era. Yet by the time I attended the school over 185 years later, many of them no longer fit the world we inhabited. Still, they remained.

FRAGMENT 1 – BECOMING THROUGH ROUTINE

Afiba wakes up with a jolt. For a moment, her face is burning from the chemicals in the mosquito net she aired out earlier that afternoon, but there is no time to dwell on discomfort. She glances at the clock hanging to her left in the dorm. It's 4:50 a.m. She sighs, knowing the chaotic cycle is about to repeat itself. Ten minutes later, the loud megaphone siren cuts through the dormitory, pulling her out of her drowsy state. Around her, beds creak, girls groan, and voices rise, urging everyone to hurry. "Form One sisters, hurry up!" The day has already started.

She quickly changes into a pair of khaki shorts and a house jersey and joins the rush to complete her assigned duties. Her task is to clean the second-floor staircase, a job that must be done well and on time. But like many mornings, there is a problem: the taps are dry. She and the others run to the closest borehole about a mile away, buckets in hand, knowing that any delay could lead to punishment. Time feels tight, always moving faster than she can keep up with. By the time she returns to finish her work, she is already thinking about what comes next.

After quickly bathing, dressing, and making her bed to the expected standard, Afiba joins the other girls for morning assembly. They move in straight lines, carefully arranged, their movements controlled and watched. It is a known and well-kept tradition of walking in lines of two on campus or anywhere in public to ensure orderliness. She holds her Bible and Methodist hymn book firmly, aware that forgetting them could single her out. Morning assembly is less a moment of reflection and more another step in a tightly structured routine.

Classes begin immediately after. There is no easing into the day ... only instructions, questions, and tasks. A surprise quiz greets them in their first lesson, setting the tone for what follows. Most of her time is spent copying notes, trying to keep up, and making sure she does not fall behind. Learning feels less like understanding and more like endurance. Breakfast comes and goes quickly. The smell of rice porridge and *bofrot* (a sweet, round, fried flour pastry also known as puff-puff) fills the dining hall, but there is little time to enjoy it. The older students eat first, and Afiba takes what remains, eating quickly before being hurried along again. Even moments that should feel comforting are shaped by time and order. The rest of the morning passes in a blur of lessons, a short break, and even more writing. Her wrist begins to ache from all the notes-copying, but she keeps going. There is no space to slow down. By the time the academic day ends, she is already tired, yet the schedule continues without pause.

After lunch, she looks forward to a compulsory hour of uninterrupted napping, hoping for relief. But even then, her mind stays active, thinking about everything still ahead. The quiet does not fully feel like rest; it feels like waiting. Soon, the siren sounds again, and the day moves into the next phase. Afiba joins her extracurricular activity—choir practice, not simply out of interest but because participation is expected. Even these moments are part of the larger structure, guided by responsibility rather than choice.

In the evening, she returns to her desk for *prep*. This is supposed to be study time, but it feels more like a routine of memorization. She reads and repeats, trying to hold onto information just long enough to use it. “Chew and pour,” everybody calls it: memorize, reproduce, and forget about it. In that moment, she begins to question what learning really means in this place. When the final siren sounds at night signaling lights out, Afiba finally lies down. The day replays in her mind—the rushing, the rules, the constant pressure to stay in line. From morning to night, every part of her day has been planned and controlled.

As she drifts toward sleep, she realizes that, beyond the subjects she is taught, she is learning something else entirely. She is learning how to follow, how to endure, and how to fit into a system that leaves little room for her own thoughts or identity. And in that quiet moment, surrounded by others yet alone in her thoughts, she begins to wonder who she is becoming, and whether there is even space for her to become anything else.

FRAGMENT 1 ANALYSIS

In my regressive look at the past, I returned to my days as a young student at School A. Founded by the Methodist Church in the 1800s, this school is very well-known and has a long history that goes back to the colonial era. When the British missionaries ran the school, they brought with them a specific idea of what a “proper lady” should be. This history has been passed down for generations, and it created a system where every tiny detail of our lives was controlled. We had to wake up at 5:00 a.m. every morning. The dull, yet intense sound of a megaphone siren would boom through the air, announcing that our sleep time was over. This siren was the script we lived by—all day every day, across decades and generations, from dawn to dusk. It told us when to wake up, do our chores, pray, study, and even when to eat. We learned how to “survive” the system, but we didn’t always learn how to think for ourselves.

The regression is an excavation of feeling, routine, and pressure (Pinar et al., 2002; Poetter, 2025). It acknowledges the siren, the routines, uniforms, rules, and the fact that time itself seemed to belong to the institution. We were always being trained into the next thing: the next class, the next inspection, the next competition, and the next measure of excellence. The school and the siren made the concept of time visible to everyone. It divided the day into sections that carried meaning and discipline. If one part of the day went badly, the whole routine got messed up. If one house, class, or club failed in a competition, the loss belonged not just to those individuals but to the entire community. In this way, the school produced solidarity, but it also produced constant pressure.

At the same time, the school could feel deeply meaningful. There is something powerful about belonging to a place that is both demanding and celebrated. We wore the prestige of the school like an alternative uniform. To be a student of this school was to be recognized as part of a tradition of excellence, and I must admit, that recognition felt good. But it also made the pressure harder to question. If everyone around you says the system is valuable, then your discomfort can begin to feel like a personal weakness rather than a structural issue.

Still, the regressive fragment is not only a critique. It also captures admiration, belonging, and the emotional power of being part of a school with a celebrated reputation. That tension matters because School A was both formative and constraining. It gave us excellence as an identity, but it also gave us excellence as a demand, and that demand was made to feel natural. That is what scripting does well. It makes its own logic feel natural.

FRAGMENT 2 – TEACHING THE SCRIPT: LIFE BEYOND THE SIREN

Miss B, a facilitator at School A, arrives just before 7:40 a.m., her face and ID scanned at the gate as it opens without question. The campus looks familiar ... neat hedges, clean paths, freshly painted buildings, and tall trees, but there is a quiet shift in how things work now. Her wristband vibrates gently, reminding her of her shift, role, and place in the system. She still finds the title “facilitator” strange. Twenty years ago, teachers stood at the center of learning. Now, the system leads, and she follows alongside it.

As she walks toward the chapel, she passes groups of girls moving in pairs, their uniforms crisp, their steps almost synchronized—a routine so familiar, yet so distant. Their wristbands pulse softly, guiding them along. They greet her warmly, calling her name with excitement. Alumnae like her (referred to as “old girls”) are symbols in this school, almost idolized, proof that one can pass through the system and come out the other side. She smiles back, but her wristband records



even that small interaction. Assembly begins with hymns and prayers, but behind it all a large screen displays daily targets and scores that update in real time. The school no longer needs the loud megaphone siren that once controlled everything. Now, the rhythm of the day lives on each student's wrist—a constant that is impossible to ignore.

In her classroom, everything is already prepared. The students are seated, their tablet screens lit, the lesson loaded. Miss B greets them and begins teaching French, but even as she speaks, the system guides her pace and her next steps. She tries to create small moments of warmth and encouragement, but each time she does so, her wristband pulls her back to the script. Teaching feels less like a conversation and more like following instructions. The students respond quickly and correctly because they know what is expected. When the system prompts them to check in with their emotions, one girl hesitates, unsure of how to answer. Miss B pauses, wanting to respond in a more human way, but she is guided toward a standard response.

Throughout the day, everything is measured. Participation, performance, and even small acts of kindness are tracked and recorded. The classroom feels calm, but it is a controlled calm, shaped by constant monitoring. Students adjust themselves before correction comes, their wristbands reminding them before a teacher ever has to.

In the afternoon, during Visual Arts club, the atmosphere softens slightly. The girls bring their artwork forward with excitement, eager to be seen. But even here, the system lingers in the background in the form of an eagle-shaped tracking device. Miss B notices one student quietly drawing on paper instead of using the digital tools provided. The drawing shows a girl standing amongst her peers, without a wristband, free in a way the others are not. The student asks a question that stays with Miss B, "Will we ever stop wearing the wrist bands?" It is a simple question, but not an easy one to answer. Miss B knows she has to be careful. Even her words feel tracked. So, she responds gently, without saying too much and offering something that sounds like hope but feels uncertain even to her.

By the end of the day, as students move across campus guided by their glowing wristbands, Miss B feels the weight of what has changed and what has not. The system is quieter now, more advanced and precise. But its presence is everywhere, shaping how students learn, behave, and even feel.

When her shift ends, she sits alone in her car for a moment before leaving. The campus continues behind her, moving in its steady rhythm. She thinks about her own time as a student, when the siren dictated every part of the day. Now, that same control has taken a different form. And as she drives away, she realizes that, despite all the changes, the lesson remains the same: the system continues to teach students (and now teachers) how to live within it.

FRAGMENT 2 ANALYSIS

The progressive fragment above imagines what it would mean for me to return to School A as a teacher. The future I imagine is dystopian because it reveals what is already embedded in the present, in a somewhat unrealistic way. If students are expected to perform within scripts, then teachers are, too. In the imagined classroom, I am asked to deliver content with precision and measurable results, while my ability to adapt, question, or improvise is treated as suspicious.

I imagine walking into a classroom before school begins. There are lesson plans to follow, records to keep, assessments to prepare, and performance expectations to satisfy. The first question

is not what my students need or what I know about them. It is whether I will cover the required content, keep the pace, or protect the school's reputation.

This dystopian image aligns closely with critiques of scripted curriculum. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argue that scripted curriculum undermines democratic education because it constrains teacher autonomy and student participation. In the imagined future, the teacher is reduced to a technician. Vaughn et al. (2021) also argue that adaptive teaching is essential precisely because restrictive curricula fail to meet the linguistic, cultural, and instructional needs of diverse learners. In an institution like School A, however, the pressure to maintain prestige can easily turn script into orthodoxy.

The teacher version of School A is also emotionally tiring. To teach in such a system would mean constantly balancing what students need against what the institution demands. It would mean knowing that some students require more time, more explanation, more flexibility, or more care, but not always being able to give it. It would mean seeing curiosity appear in the room and having to decide whether the curriculum can afford to pause for it. In a scripted system, even a seemingly good question can feel like a disruption from the norm.

The progressive fragment also exposes the emotional cost of such schooling. Powell et al. (2017) found that teachers in scripted programs can feel trapped in hierarchical systems that harm students and damage teacher well-being. That insight is important here because the teacher in my imagined future does not use her free will to teach human beings; she is asked to preserve the movements of a machine. This is what happens when we “deintellectualize” teaching, turning a creative profession into a mechanical job (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). The result is exhaustion, alienation, and a narrowing of professional identity. The scripted curriculum does not just organize instruction; it reorganizes the self.

In this imagined future, even resistance is risky. A teacher who improvises too much, slows down for a student's question, adds a relatable example, and makes the lesson more responsive can easily be read as unprofessional or insufficiently rigorous. Yet the very students the school says it serves best are often the ones who need such flexibility most. This is one of the most painful contradictions of scripted schooling. It claims to be designed for excellence, but it often leaves no room for the forms of teaching that make learning alive.

While technology changes from the old megaphone *siren* to a glowing wristband, the feeling of being “colonized” and controlled stays exactly the same. This kind of future is *dystopian* because it continues to take away our autonomy ... our ability to make our own choices.

STANDARDIZATION AND PERFORMANCE

One of the strongest features of School A was its academic rigor. The school consistently produced high-achieving students and strong examination results at the national level, and that success became part of the institution's moral capital. But rigor can become dangerous when it becomes the only story a school tells about itself. Fenuku and Akpaku's (2024) study reveals that standardized teaching in Ghana may improve student performance while also compromising teacher autonomy and culturally responsive instruction. They help explain the double bind of prestigious schools in that they can be effective and limiting at the same time.

Timberlake et al. (2017) make a related argument when they show that scripted curricula often appeal to teachers because they promise fairness, but in practice, they flatten differences and reduce equity to sameness. That pattern is visible in School A's culture of excellence. We were

expected to meet the same standards regardless of our starting points. We were ranked, sorted, pushed, and the idea “that school is a leveler,” that everyone should be treated the same, often obscured the fact that students do bring different histories, resources, and capacities into the classroom.

Standardized testing intensified that logic. At a school like that, performance is not incidental; it is central to institutional identity. But when school life is organized around test results, comparisons, and competition, students can begin to understand themselves as statistics rather than as people. Fenuku and Akpaku (2024) note that standardized systems can bring structure and clarity, yet they also warn that they may limit flexibility and responsiveness. That warning fits the logic of School A exactly. We often memorized huge amounts of information just to pass a test and then forgot it all the next day. This kind of schooling is what scholars call “standardization,” where everyone is expected to be exactly the same (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). At School A, we were part of the “chosen ones” because of our high grades, but the system worked to wipe away our natural curiosity so we could fit into a mold.

This is also why it’s important to highlight the voice of the *old girls*. After seeing the state of the school they left decades after graduation, they often shake their heads in disapproval, saying, “the standards have fallen; they’ve fallen so far below the belt!” They are often referring not only to failing test scores but to a broader sense of decline in discipline, prestige, and institutional identity. Yet that complaint can obscure a deeper question: standards for whom, and to what end? A school can preserve high averages while still maintaining a narrow vision of success. A school can also maintain its status while reproducing a model of education that leaves little room for difference, creativity, or care.

GENDERED FORMATION

The school’s scripting was also deeply gendered. We were not simply being prepared to be educated women; we were being prepared to be particular kinds of women. The repeated lessons about being ladies, wives, mothers, and keepers of the home made clear that academic excellence and domestic femininity were supposed to coexist without contradiction. The contradiction, however, was real. On one hand, the school demanded intellectual rigor. On the other hand, it trained us in a moral script of womanhood tied to religion, service, and domesticity.

This was especially visible in the gendered lessons of the school. International Women’s Day, for example, was often marked by classroom activities that simulated domestic futures: babysitting a make-shift baby made from bundled up cloths (or a baby doll for extra points), cooking without fire, or transforming classrooms into domestic spaces to prepare us for homemaking. These were framed as empowerment or preparation, but they also narrowed womanhood to domestic labor.

The school’s gender ideology felt powerful because it did not present itself as oppressive. It presented itself as practical, moral, and forward-looking. We were told that these lessons would help us become good citizens and respectable women. Yet what counted as “good” was already defined in advance. The school did not ask what kinds of women we might imagine ourselves to be. It told us what kind of women we ought to become, and the training often felt like obedience dressed as care. Love (2018) reminds us that education should not merely train students to survive systems of control; it should cultivate freedom and human dignity.

Love's (2018) work is helpful here because it frames education as a site of freedom, care, and political possibility rather than as merely a site of compliance. A school that teaches girls to obey, to perform, and preserve respectability without also teaching them to question power risks reproducing the very structures that limit them. Valdez (2020) provides a useful counterexample, showing how teachers can interrupt scripted curriculum through ethnic studies inquiry that centers resistance, identity, and decolonial knowledge. Her work suggests that, even within restrictive structures, teachers can make room for more expansive forms of becoming.

This is precisely the kind of opening School A rarely allowed. It often seemed to treat order as a moral achievement in itself. Yet, order alone does not educate. Order can prepare students for systems, but it does not necessarily prepare them for freedom. That distinction matters. When schools overvalue order, they may produce students who know how to comply but not how to question. They may produce girls who know how to represent the institution but not how to imagine beyond it.

ANALYTIC SYNTHESIS

The analytic fragment is where we make our strongest claim: School A did not simply use structure; it depended on scripting as a way of shaping identity. Pinar's *curre* treats educational experience as historical and subjective at once (Pinar, 2019). Through that lens, my story is not just personal. It is also about curriculum as a political and cultural force in history.

Mohammed (2023) argues that curriculum theory in Ghana is inseparable from questions of politics and power. That is why School A cannot be understood outside the history of missionary schooling, colonial education, and postcolonial prestige. Odei-Tettey et al. (2023) similarly argue that Ghana's curriculum debates often privilege external models over indigenous priorities. In that light, the school's traditions look less like neutral tradition and more like inherited ideology.

This also explains why the language of "standards" is so powerful. Standards seem objective, but they always hide judgments about whose knowledge matters and whose behavior counts as proper. Timberlake et al. (2017) show how "holding everyone to the same [high] level" can become a simplified notion of equity that ignores structural barriers (p. 49). At School A, high standards were a badge of honor, but they could also become a way of normalizing pressure, punishing differences, and rewarding those already closest to the institution's ideal.

The same dynamic shows up in the broader Ghanaian curriculum conversation. Mordzheh-Ekpampo et al. (2025) show that teachers' perceptions of the Standards-Based Curriculum in Ghana are shaped not just by the curriculum's design but by training, resources, class size, and implementation support. They argue that curriculum reform is never just about policy documents, but about conditions as well. A curriculum may sound progressive, but if teachers are underprepared and under-resourced, the curriculum becomes another burden placed on them from above. That insight connects directly to School A, where expectations often seemed to arrive fully formed without matching space for teacher or student adaptation.

My analysis, therefore, makes a larger argument: schooling should not be reduced to compliance, performance, or prestige. If the curriculum is only a script, then students become actors reciting lines written elsewhere. If the curriculum is understood as lived, political, and relational, then students can enter it as thinkers, makers, and questioners (Pinar, 1994).

It is also important to remember that script and resistance coexist. Even in highly controlled settings, people choose to improvise. Teachers alter their lessons; students ask unexpected

questions. Communities reinterpret inherited systems. That is why valency in the curriculum matters. A school can have structure without suffocation, but only if the structure remains open to revision. School A in my experience, often wanted structure without interruption. That is where the danger lies.

RESISTANCE VS. POSSIBILITY

One of the most important things literature shows is that teachers and students do resist scripted systems, even when the resistance is small. Powell et al. (2017) found that teachers in scripted settings supplemented, adapted, and sometimes refused the program in order to meet student need. Vaughn et al. (2021) likewise argue that adaptive teaching can counter restrictive curricula by giving teachers room to respond to students in real time. These studies matter because they remind us that agency survives even inside systems designed to suppress it. The script is never total.

This is the part of the argument that matters most for the future. Resistance does not always look dramatic. Sometimes it looks like adding a relatable example to a lesson, slowing down to answer a student's question, or choosing not to let a curriculum dictate the whole meaning of the classroom. These small acts preserve the human side of teaching, insisting that students are not simply recipients of a script.

Valdez's (2020) work makes that agency visible in the classroom by showing how teachers can use inquiry to disrupt colonial narratives and build more meaningful learning. That possibility is important for Ghana as well. The challenge is not to reject structure altogether but to refuse structures that erase human judgment, local knowledge, and cultural responsiveness.

Fenuku and Akpaku's (2024) study acknowledges that standardization may support achievement but only if it does not silence the teacher or flatten the learner's experience. The same is true for girls' schooling. A strong school does not have to be a rigid school, and excellence does not have to mean control. Neither does discipline have to mean dehumanization. If School A taught me anything, it is that institutions can make themselves feel permanent even though they are made by people and can, therefore, be changed by people. That realization is part of what this paper is trying to hold open.

CONCLUSION

What emerges from these fragments is a theory of scripted schooling as a form of becoming. At School A, the script was influenced by Christian missionary intervention and was colonial, gendered, and academic all at once (Fenuku & Akpaku, 2024; Odei-Tettey et al., 2023; Timberlake et al., 2017). It produced excellence, but it also produced conformity. It taught discipline, but it also narrowed imagination. It offered prestige, but it also trained us to fit into a system whose priorities were inherited long before we entered its gates.

The deeper lesson is not simply that the school was harsh or that it was old-fashioned. It is that the curriculum is never neutral. It carries histories, values, and assumptions about what kind of people schools should produce. In a place like School A, those assumptions were tied to colonial mission, gender ideology, and standardized testing culture. They were also tied to the belief that



structure itself is a virtue. But a structure without flexibility becomes a cage. Rigor without care becomes coercion. Tradition without reflection becomes repetition.

Currere gives me a way to tell that story without flattening it. It lets me hold memory, critique, longing, and analysis together. More importantly, it allows me to say that the school did not finish me. It shaped me, but it did not end me. The school system felt like a scripted machine, yes, but it was also the place where I began to understand that scripts can be questioned, revised, and refused (Pinar, 1994, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021).

If I now imagine a better curriculum, it is not one without structure. It is one that leaves room for context, responsiveness, and humanity. It is one that treats teachers as thinkers and students as more than outcomes. It is one that recognizes that education should not merely maintain a system as if those involved were mere components of a machine. It should help people become more fully alive within and beyond it.

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LIVING THE SCRIPT

IMPACT OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM IN SHAPING IDENTITY, AND ADAPTATION ACROSS EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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To have a clear understanding of the education system of Sri Lanka, one must peer into its colonial past. The country was under colonial rule for nearly 450 years, from 1505 to 1948, first by the Portuguese and Dutch and later by the British. Among these, British rule had the strongest and most lasting impact on education. According to Batatota (2025), during the nineteenth century, the British expanded formal schooling mainly to train local people for administrative roles and maintain social order. This education was not designed only to share knowledge but to produce disciplined and manageable citizens who would be obedient to the British rulers. Because these systems were used for centuries, many of their features continue today. Therefore, it is important to critically examine how these colonial foundations continue to control thinking, behavior, and social structures in modern Sri Lanka, which is a burden that we cannot unlearn. This unavoidable colonial pressure within the Sri Lankan education system can be metaphorically described as an “albatross of racial hegemony” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 264).

Colonial influences are still clearly visible in current schooling practices. For example, national examinations such as the Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L) closely follow British models. They place heavy emphasis on standardized testing rather than creativity or critical thinking (Proweller, 1998). In classrooms, teaching methods often rely on memorization, strict discipline, and teacher authority. Students are expected to follow instructions rather than question ideas. While many Western education systems, including the British education system, have now moved toward more flexible and student-centered learning, Sri Lankan schools largely continue to maintain the hierarchical structures continuing since British colonization. This can also be seen in school environments. For example, colonial style buildings, strict daily routines, and activities like cadeting, scouting, and drills all promote order and uniformity (Batatota, 2025). Together, these elements show that education functions not only as academic training but also as a system that shapes behavior through control. It often creates rigid ways of thinking that are strongly binary, such as ideas of superiority versus inferiority, order versus disorder, etc., which can limit students’ broader personal development. Another emerging reality is suppression and control over the fluid identities of gender. Although anthropological evolution has proven and accepted fluid identities within society, Sri Lanka, including its school systems, tries to control those identities and frame them into the dominant gender ideologies, either male or female.

One clear example of this control is seen in gender separation within elite cluster schools. In many cases, schools do not bring students together but instead reinforce social divisions. In early 21st century Sri Lanka, social expectations still encourage girls to follow traditional roles such as maintaining chastity, getting married, and becoming mothers (Proweller, 1998). At the same time, boys and girls, especially in the upper middle class, in gender-segregated schools have very limited interaction with each other, except through family relationships like siblings or cousins (Albrecht, 2022, p. 4). This lack of interaction can affect students’ ability to develop social and communication skills. It also raises an important question, “Why do such strict separations

continue?” These concerns can basically be categorized as hidden curricula. According to reproduction theory, “it is part of the bureaucratic and managerial ‘press’ of the school—the combined forces by which students are induced to comply with the dominant ideologies and social practices related to authority, behavior and morality” (Pinar et al., 2002, p. 244).

At the same time, the education system of Sri Lanka has made important progress in expanding access. Compared to many other South Asian countries, it has achieved relatively high levels of literacy and school participation (Letchamanan & Dhar, 2018). Policies such as the 1997 education reforms introduced free textbooks, uniforms, and transport, making education more accessible to a wider population (Proweller, 1998). However, access alone does not guarantee equality. There are still major differences between schools. Urban elite schools have better facilities, more resources, and higher social status, while rural schools often struggle with limited infrastructure and support (Letchamanan & Dhar, 2018). Although all students follow the same curriculum and sit for the same exams, their actual learning experiences are very different. This is partly due to what is known as the “hidden curriculum,” (Jackson, 1968, as cited in Rossouw & Frick, 2023), the unspoken rules about behavior, identity, and belonging within schools. These differences show that true educational equality requires more than just access; it also requires fairness in experience and opportunity.

Gender separation becomes even more visible in elite schools, where it often combines with divisions based on ethnicity and religion. While many government schools are mixed, top schools are usually divided into boys’ and girls’ institutions. In addition, some schools are closely associated with specific religious or ethnic groups, such as Buddhist, Tamil, Catholic, or Muslim (Albrecht, 2022, p. 4). In these environments, religion is not just a subject but a central part of daily life and identity. This can strengthen group identity, but it can also deepen divisions in a multi-ethnic society. As Albrecht (2022) points out, students in these schools experience religion as a core framework that shapes their worldview (p. 4). This raises a critical concern: Instead of promoting unity, the education system may unintentionally reinforce social and cultural separation.

Elite schools also play a powerful role in shaping social status, identity, and future opportunities. This influence is particularly strong for girls, as these schools often promote specific ideas about femininity and proper behavior. According to Albrecht (2022), these institutions shape students during their most formative years, making their impact long lasting. Some elite schools even position themselves as historically important institutions, often supported by state recognition, which further increases their prestige (Albrecht, 2022, p. 6). Admission to these schools is highly competitive. Students often need strong social connections, such as links through parent-teacher associations or alumni networks or must perform exceptionally well in key exams like the Grade 5 scholarship or O/Ls (Albrecht, 2022). This creates a system where privilege is concentrated among a small group, limiting equal opportunities for others and reducing social mobility.

Buddhist girls’ schools, specifically, actively shape students’ identities around traditional Sinhalese Buddhist values. From a very early stage, such as Grade 1, school mottos, visions, and missions introduce and reinforce these cultural and religious ideals. The goal is to guide each student toward becoming an “ideal Sinhala Buddhist lady.” School activities, lessons, and daily practices are all designed to support this goal. While this can help build cultural pride and a sense of belonging, it may also limit individuality by encouraging students to fit into a fixed model and to a fetish mentality that internally inculcates that they are superior to the other schools (De Mel, 2001).

Thus, the education system of Sri Lanka continues to reflect its colonial roots, especially through its focus on discipline, memorization, and control. Elite schools further strengthen this structure by promoting fixed ideas about gender and cultural identity, particularly the ideal of the “Sinhala Buddhist lady.” Over time, students internalize these expectations through daily routines, strict rules, and exam pressures. While this system can produce academic success and preserve cultural values, it can also restrict creativity, independence, and personal growth. As a result, many students who were injected to this pipeline may find it difficult to adapt to more open and flexible environments later in life (Golann, 2021). This highlights an important challenge: The education system of Sri Lanka must find a balance between discipline and adaptability in order to develop more confident, independent, and well-rounded individuals.

HOW I INCORPORATE MY OWN BACKGROUND IN DEVELOPING THE ARGUMENT

My own educational experience is not separate from the system I analyze, rather, it is deeply embedded within it. Growing up in Sri Lanka, my schooling pathway was largely predetermined long before I fully understood its implications. From an early age, it was assumed that I would attend a prestigious girls’ school where both my mother and elder sister had studied. Similarly, my brother was expected to attend a corresponding boys’ school aligned with my father’s educational background. At the time, this felt natural, even inevitable. However, when examined more critically, this pattern reflects how access to elite schooling is structured through intergenerational continuity, where family history, social networks, and cultural capital shape educational trajectories (Albrecht, 2022).

While systems such as the Grade 5 Scholarship and O-Level examinations are often presented as meritocratic pathways that enable upward mobility, my experience suggests a more complex reality. These examinations do allow academically strong students, including those from rural or less privileged backgrounds, to enter elite schools. However, they also function as mechanisms of intellectual filtering. In this sense, access is controlled rather than fully democratized. Elite schools are, thus, able to maintain both exclusivity and high academic performance, reinforcing their status within national hierarchies. Reflecting on this, I now understand my own position within this system not simply as an individual achievement but as part of a broader structure that privileges certain forms of knowledge, behavior, and background.

Once inside this institutional space, I began to recognize that identity formation was not left to chance. Rather, it was carefully structured through everyday practices and expectations. As Proweller (1998) argues, schools are “deeply invested in the transmission of class privilege and exist as a primary socializing agency for reinforcing the aesthetics of middle class family life” (p. 6). This observation strongly resonates with my own experience. From the way we dressed to how we spoke and behaved, every aspect of school life was regulated. Students were expected to embody discipline, order, and respectability at all times.

Looking back, I realize that this process of shaping identity began even before I formally entered school. Some of my earliest memories involve watching my sister prepare for school each morning. Her uniform had to be perfectly arranged, her white shoes polished, and her overall appearance carefully managed. At the time, these seemed like simple routines. However, I now interpret them differently. These daily practices were not merely about neatness or discipline; they were part of a broader process of socialization and a strong indication of how different or prestigious we were when compared with other school girls whom we saw along the way. As

Proweller (1998) further explains, schools produce “representational forms that inscribe and institutionalize class identity on school walls, in classrooms, rituals, and routines” (p. 7). What I witnessed as a child was, in fact, the early internalization of these institutional expectations, where identity is gradually shaped to align with dominant norms.

This process of identity formation is closely connected to broader cultural and historical narratives. In my schooling context, a particular ideal of femininity was consistently promoted, what scholars describe as the “Sinhala-Buddhist lady” (Proweller, 1998). This identity was not imposed in a single moment, rather, it was reinforced continuously through subtle and visible means. School mottos, vision statements, and value systems were displayed prominently in classrooms and assembly halls, serving as constant reminders of who we were expected to become. We were encouraged to be respectful, disciplined, academically successful, and culturally grounded. While these values were often presented as positive and aspirational, I began to see how they also narrowed the range of acceptable identities, especially for girls.

This tension is captured well in Batatota’s (2025) observation that schooling functions as both a vehicle for cultural transmission and a site of contradiction. As she notes,

it symbolizes the institution’s position as a vehicle in which to inculcate national and cultural identity [while also] highlight[ing] the tensions of preserving these values ... while adapting to the modern world. (Batatota, 2025, p. 14)

I found myself negotiating this tension throughout my schooling years. On the one hand, I developed a strong sense of cultural belonging and pride. On the other hand, I increasingly felt the constraints of a system that defined what it meant to be an “ideal” student and, more specifically, becoming an ideal Sinhala-Buddhist-Lady.

The school I attended, established in 1946 during the late colonial period, reflects this layered and hybrid structure. As Kumari Jayawardena (as cited in De Mel, 2001) suggests, a colonized culture is multi-layered and deeply influenced by the coloniser’s culture, where Western values, habits, and modes of thought become embedded within local contexts. This description closely aligns with my experience. My school combined British style discipline, hierarchy, and academic rigor with a strong emphasis on Sinhala Buddhist cultural values. This concept is called “white-Buddhist” (Proweller, 1998). The school was known for producing high achieving students, yet this success was closely tied to colonial, behavioral expectations, particularly those linked to gender concerns of Buddhist-Sinhalese values. The discipline we practiced was not neutral; it was shaped by a specific vision of femininity that emphasized obedience, modesty, and conformity.

Across other elite girls’ schools in Sri Lanka, similar patterns can be observed. Education becomes a space where gendered, cultural, and ethnic identities are not only taught but actively reproduced. Reflecting on this, I began to understand that schooling was shaping not just what I learned but who I was expected to become. As Batatota (2025) notes, education in Sri Lanka plays a central role in structuring identity along lines of language, ethnicity, religion, and class. This was evident in the expectations placed upon us to achieve high academic results, to enter university, to secure stable employment, and to fulfill socially defined gender roles. These expectations were not presented as optional but were embedded within the very fabric of schooling.

Over time, I became aware of the tension between these institutional expectations and my own emerging sense of self. While the system provided clear pathways for success, it also limited the space for alternative ways of thinking and being. In this sense, education functioned as both

enabling and constraining. This dual role can be understood through the concept of cultural capital, where certain forms of knowledge, behavior, and disposition are valued and rewarded within institutional settings (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). I began to see how those who naturally aligned with these expectations were able to succeed more easily, while others had to adapt and negotiate or remain marginalized.

This realization also connects with Delpit's (1988) concept of the "silenced dialogue," which highlights how dominant systems of power often limit whose voices are heard and valued (Golann, 2021). Reflecting on my own experience, I recognize that not all students were equally able to express themselves within the structured environment of elite schooling. Certain ways of speaking, thinking, and behaving were encouraged, while others were subtly discouraged or excluded. This raises important analytical questions that continue to shape my research. Whose identities are validated within educational spaces, whose voices remain unheard, and how can education move beyond simply reproducing dominant norms? Through this lens, my personal experience becomes more than a narrative, it becomes a critical entry point into understanding how education in the Sri Lankan education system operates as a system of power. It reveals how identities are carefully constructed, how inequalities are carefully maintained, and how students, including myself, learn to navigate, internalize, and sometimes resist these structures.

The following regressive fragment serves as an example of how my personal experience within this system has actively shaped my identity in ways that align with its institutional expectations. More specifically, it highlights how elite schooling in Sri Lanka operates through a structured process that constructs and reinforces a Buddhist Sinhala nationalistic framework. This framework is not incidental but is produced through the everyday practices, values, and disciplinary structures embedded within these institutions. The fragment, therefore, illustrates not only the depth of this influence but also its subtle and internalized nature. At the same time, it raises a critical uncertainty within my own self that, without this institutional framework, it remains unclear who I might have become or what direction my sense of self might have taken.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT

I grew up in Sri Lanka and attended the top cluster Buddhist girls' school in Kurunegala, one of the top state schools in the district. It was the same school my mother attended. My elder sister was already a student there when I entered. In many ways, I felt that my place in that school was already decided long before I walked through its gates in my white uniform for the first time.

From the beginning, the curriculum felt very scripted, not only academically, but socially and culturally. There was a clear way to be a girl from that school. We were told it directly and indirectly.

"There is a way daughters of this school should behave," teachers would remind us at assemblies. "You are continuing a legacy. You must be different."

Everything had a rule. Our uniforms had to be a specific length. Our white socks had to reach a particular height. Our shoes had to be clean and perfectly white. Our hair had to be braided in a certain way. The school tie and badge were compulsory. We had to enter the main gate in an orderly manner (two girls together in a line). We had to enter classrooms properly. We were not supposed to wander in the corridors, even during free periods.

There was also a way to speak to teachers, a way to stand, a way to sit, a way to address elders. Even teachers followed visible codes regarding how they dressed and how they tied their hair. The structure was everywhere.

For me, it did not feel strange. I had heard about these rules since childhood because my sister was already studying there. My parents knew the system well. By the time I entered at age five, I already knew how a student at our school should behave. I adapted naturally. It felt normal. It felt safe.

But I remember clearly when my friend joined our school in Grade 12 for Advanced Level studies. She had come from a rural school. One afternoon during a free period, we were sitting in the classroom. She looked at me and whispered, “How do you live like this? It feels like a prison.” I laughed at first, thinking she was exaggerating. But she continued, “There are too many rules. Even the way we walk is controlled. I’m scared of doing something wrong all the time.”

I remember feeling surprised. I had never seen it that way. To me, these were just habits. But I could see the discomfort in her face. She struggled in the beginning, even to stay still when the teacher was teaching. She was careful about her uniform. She adjusted how she spoke. She watched others closely to learn the “correct” way.

By the end of the first year, she had adapted. She braided her hair the same way. She walked with the same posture. She no longer questioned the routines. Watching her change made me realize how powerful the scripted environment was. For 13 years, I lived inside that structure. I rarely questioned it. I felt proud to belong. The word “Maya Devian” carried weight. There was a sense of identity, discipline, and prestige attached to it.

One moment stays very clearly in my memory. Five years after leaving school, after completing my bachelor’s degree, I went to a dental appointment near my old school. I was sitting in the waiting area with my mother, speaking casually. A woman across from me kept looking at me. Finally, she asked, “Which grade are you in?” I smiled and said, “I finished school a few years ago.” She paused and asked, “Were you a student of Maya Devi?” I was surprised. “Yes... how did you know?” She smiled. “I teach there. I can recognize a girl from that school by the way she behaves.” In that moment, I felt a quiet happiness. I felt recognized. I felt proud. Something in my posture, my tone, my manner had revealed my schooling even years later. At that time, I felt it was a compliment.

Looking back at those years, what I experienced was a very static, scripted curriculum, not only in textbooks but in behavior, identity, and daily life. At the time, I mostly felt belonging, discipline, and pride. I learned how to follow structure. I learned how to present myself in a certain way. I learned how to fit into an established legacy.

ANALYTICAL INSIGHTS

I wanted to unpack how scripted and hidden curricula actively shape identity in postcolonial contexts of Sri Lanka. This enabled me to gain a significant vantage point from which to explore my own identity as I moved away from the system within which I had grown since my earliest memories. My understanding of the educational landscape broadened and became clearer as I stepped outside the familiar system and began to examine it from a more unbiased and expansive perspective as an emerging scholar in a foreign country. As Gloria Anzaldúa (in Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015) states, “I discover what I’m trying to say as the writing progresses” (p. 7). Accordingly, I argue that schooling extends far beyond formal instruction, operating through

subtle, normalized, and often unspoken practices that structure how students learn to see themselves and others. Drawing on Jackson's (1968, as cited in Chavanne & Williams, 2024) concept of the hidden curriculum, I demonstrate how elite Buddhist girls' schools reproduce the ideal of the "Sinhala-Buddhist lady" through everyday routines, disciplinary expectations, and cultural performances, even when such ideals are not explicitly articulated. These practices, when viewed through Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital, reveal how Sinhala-Buddhist norms are institutionalized as markers of legitimacy and refinement, while other ethnic, linguistic, and gendered identities are rendered peripheral (Albrecht, 2022). Further, it emphasized the construction and continuation of "White-Sinhalese" (Proweller, 1998), which means the long-term frame of colonial legacies and Western structural frameworks layered precisely on the ideal of "Sinhala-Buddhist-nationalist" concerns that has continued since colonization.

At the same time, I position these practices within broader scholarship on scripted curricula. Scholars such as Golann (2021) and Timberlake et al. (2017) highlight that scripted pedagogies, while often criticized, can offer structure, consistency, and a form of procedural equity, particularly in under-resourced contexts. In Sri Lanka, where disparities between rural and urban schooling remain significant, such standardization can ensure a baseline of access to knowledge. However, as Valdez (2020) and Powell et al. (2017) argue, these benefits are accompanied by significant constraints. Scripted curricula tend to reduce teacher autonomy, as teachers have to adopt a different personality within the school premises, limit responsiveness to student diversity, as the minority representation within the school context that I am talking about is highly demarcated to Sinhalese-Buddhist cultural norms, and prioritize compliance over critical engagement and "fail to teach all students the codes they need to acquire power" (Golann, 2021, p. 12). In my analysis, I observe how these rigid instructional forms are embedded closely with the hidden curriculum, reinforcing obedience, discipline, and conformity as valued traits. However, another insightful concern Golann (2021) highlights is that those students who experience the rigid scripts within schools for a considerably longer time will not learn how to be at ease with authority, will not learn when it is appropriate to interrupt; a student who is told not to talk back, even if falsely accused, will not learn how to negotiate. "Because culture is complex and situations are difficult to predict, individuals need interpretative skills to read a situation and choose among alternatives-skills that are difficult to transfer through a rigid script" (Golann, 2021, p. 13).

This duality is crucial. Scripted and hidden curricula are not entirely oppressive nor entirely beneficial. Rather, they function as regulatory frameworks that both enable and constrain. For instance, while they can produce disciplined, high-achieving students who succeed within examination-oriented systems, they simultaneously suppress creativity, voice, and alternative ways of knowing. This tension becomes particularly visible when students transition to more flexible educational environments like contemporary Western education systems (USA and UK). Drawing on Fanon (1961/2002), I argue that students internalize these structures, developing a habitus oriented toward compliance. As a result, when placed in contexts that value agency, discussion, and critique, they often experience disorientation and struggle to adapt (Golann, 2021).

Delpit's notion of silenced dialogue further illuminates how classroom spaces restrict open expression, especially for girls from minority ethnic backgrounds who must navigate layered and often invisible power hierarchies (Delpit, 1988). Further, Moran (1981 as cited by Pinar et al, 2002) notes,

If education truly encounters religion ..., education would take on a diversity of forms with qualities I have called rooted and reverent. Education would have roots in the earth, the body, and the family Education can be reconceptualized to include family life, daily work, and contemplative quiet. Education would be centered on how people are living and would be concerned with improving the main forms in which people learn the art of living. (p. 629)

This is another practical insight that I repeatedly observed in my own school context in Sri Lanka. Although my school appeared to promote uniformity and discipline, this often came at the cost of erasing minority identities. The very small percentage of students who were from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds were expected to conform to the same rules and regulations, regardless of their own cultural or religious values. For instance, a Muslim girl in my class was required to strictly adhere to the school's expectations: wearing the prescribed uniform (white knee-length pleated frock), participating in Buddhist religious observances, and engaging in Sinhala cultural festivals. She was not permitted to cover her face or wear long trousers that Muslim girls wear, which are significant aspects of her religious practice. Moreover, she was not given space for weekly Friday prayers, nor was she excused from academic commitments during the fasting season; whereas, in Muslim girls' schools, the fasting month is a vacation. What becomes evident here is that the school's "neutral" rules were not neutral at all, rather, they reflected the dominance of a particular cultural and religious identity. In contrast, if she had been in a Muslim school, her religious practices and cultural needs would have been acknowledged and accommodated. This highlights how schooling, through its everyday practices, subtly enforces assimilation while marginalizing difference, reinforcing a singular ideal of belonging.

Situating this within a postcolonial frame, I argue that Sri Lanka remains deeply entangled in educational structures inherited from British colonial rule. The emphasis on discipline, hierarchy, standardization, and examination mirrors colonial modes of governance that sought to produce compliant, governable subjects rather than critical thinkers. What is particularly striking is the contrast with contemporary shifts in Western educational thought. In many Western contexts, there is a growing movement toward reclaiming "third spaces" (Bhabha, 1994), hybrid, dialogic, and culturally responsive forms of learning that challenge rigid binaries and dominant epistemologies. Ironically, while such spaces were historically suppressed under colonialism, they are now being reimagined and valued in the West; whereas, postcolonial systems like Sri Lanka continue to operate within the very structures that marginalized their own indigenous knowledge systems, which were closely aligned with wellness concerns and spirituality. However, my current research concerns in a foreign land are now inching towards embedding mind-body-spirit wellness in education systems. This reveals a persistent epistemic dependency of Sri Lanka, where colonial logics remain embedded in institutional practices despite political independence, while the Western world is re-exploring what they once tried to erase.

Building on these insights, I highlight several implications for policy and practice. I argue that education systems in Sri Lanka, and more broadly in South Asia, must critically re-evaluate their reliance on rigid and scripted pedagogies. While such approaches may offer short term efficiency and standardization, they ultimately limit students' ability to think critically and engage meaningfully with knowledge. I suggest a shift toward more flexible and dialogic pedagogies that create space for questioning, reflection, and multiplicity. For example, classrooms can be reimagined as participatory spaces where students are encouraged to challenge dominant cultural narratives, including the idealized "Sinhala-Buddhist lady." This aligns with broader discussions

on epistemic justice, which emphasize the importance of recognizing diverse voices and ways of knowing in the construction of knowledge (Conner et al., 2024).

However, I also remain cautious about the challenges of reform. In Sri Lanka, past educational reforms have often faltered due to weak implementation and insufficient teacher preparation. Therefore, meaningful change must include sustained professional development that enables teachers to recognize and challenge hidden biases embedded in everyday practices. Drawing again on Delpit, I argue that fostering genuine dialogue in classrooms requires not only structural change but also a shift in teacher beliefs and pedagogical orientations.

The implications of these dynamics extend beyond the classroom. I show how hidden curricula reinforce ethnic hierarchies by normalizing Sinhala-Buddhist dominance, thereby marginalizing Tamil and Muslim students both materially and symbolically within the Buddhist school contexts. On the other hand, the same thing happens the other way around if we look into a Muslim or Tamil-dominant school. Gender norms are similarly regulated, with girls' behavior and self-expression tightly controlled in ways that reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal expectations. These processes have long term consequences for social mobility. Students from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to be positioned as lacking or deviant, which limits their opportunities and perpetuates cycles of inequality. Bourdieu's framework is particularly useful here in explaining how schools convert dominant cultural norms into social advantage while delegitimizing alternative forms of knowledge and identity.

Yet, I also see potential for transformation. If these hidden and scripted structures are made visible and critically engaged, education can become a site for reimagining identity and fostering inclusion. Further, it will reduce the standardized exam-oriented nature of the whole country. By creating space for diverse cultural expressions and encouraging critical engagement, schools can support more equitable forms of identity formation and contribute to broader social cohesion.

Finally, my reflections point toward several directions for future research. There is a need for studies that examine how students' identities evolve over time, particularly as they move across different educational and cultural contexts. Comparative research across South Asian countries could further illuminate how similar colonial legacies manifest in diverse ways. I also identify teacher agency as a critical area for exploration, particularly in understanding how educators navigate, reproduce, or resist dominant norms in their daily practices. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate sociological and psychological perspectives would provide deeper insight into the emotional and cognitive dimensions of identity formation, especially for students negotiating multiple and often conflicting cultural expectations. Through these reflections, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how scripted and hidden curricula operate not merely as educational tools but as powerful forces that shape identity, reproduce inequality, and, potentially, open pathways for transformation in a globalized yet uneven world.

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BREAKING FREE FROM THE SCRIPT

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ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL: A SCRIPT SO UBIQUITOUS, IT WAS INVISIBLE

I remember standing in a single-file line as a first-grader. After getting dropped off at school, I stood in line in the parking lot, waiting to enter the building; in cold weather, we lined up in the gym. We lined up to walk outside to recess and after that, to walk to lunch, and again to return to the classroom. We lined up to walk to music class once a week, to go to the bathroom, to leave for the day. When we weren't standing in line, we sat in desks arranged in rows (assigned seating, of course), and when sitting on the floor, we were instructed to sit crisscross applesauce. I attended one of the dozens of Catholic schools on the west side of Cincinnati; all of us competed against each other in soccer or basketball, representing schools that began with "Saint" or "Our Lady." And, every Monday afternoon, we got in line to go to "liturgical music" (or "churchical music" as that was what I thought it was called). We walked to the church next to our school, sat in the pews, and practiced the music that would be sung at Mass later in the week.

In science class, we learned the three states of matter by calling them out repetitively after the teacher asked us to name them. I dutifully called out, "solid, liquid, gas," over and over until the teacher deemed our knowledge sufficient. In language arts, I remember breezing through the SRA bin in the back of the classroom. I couldn't wait to finish, but I also liked completing them and seeing myself move from red to orange and eventually to the coveted purple section. I actually enjoyed these scripted, static activities. I was good at them, especially the language arts activities, and they didn't give me the feeling of dread that artistic expression induced. In the fourth grade, we were to design a mobile for our book report project, which drove me to near panic. From this project, I learned to procrastinate and ended up staying up past midnight drawing stick figures depicting characters and scenes since I postponed starting the project until right after dinner the night before it was due. Worksheets and SRAs could be finished quickly, and I didn't have to draw anything.

One rare week, in the first grade, my parents were out of town. My mom randomly entered her name in a contest at the local Thriftway grocery store for a trip for two to the Bahamas, and she won. I never thought that anyone actually ever won those contests, yet here we were staying with my grandparents for a week, the only week I remember my parents taking a trip alone together in the 17 years that I lived at home with them. My grandparents were Italian immigrants, and with that came the most delicious food you can imagine but also some severely strict rules. The surfaces of their home were filled with my grandma's replicas of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints, which we weren't allowed to touch, and my grandpa worked second shift, and he habitually laid on his side on the floor of the living room watching TV, half sleeping, half watching *Gunsmoke* before he left for his shift at the Ford plant in Sharonville. We could not disturb him, nor could we go outside.

When my grandma wasn't cooking or cleaning, we would play hangman or tic tac toe. After we exhausted our game time, I turned to my books and homework. I had a thick language arts workbook and started the pages assigned to us for the weekend, then I kept going. At school the following Monday, Mrs. Uhlner began her lesson, and I continued to complete the workbook

pages. I kept the book on my lap and slyly flipped back and forth from the page we were on as a class to the page I was completing.

“Miss Minniti. What page are you on in the workbook?” I snapped to attention. Mrs. Uhlner had halted her lesson, and all eyes were staring at me.

“Um, I was working ahead.” I could feel my face flush, the shame enveloping me. I did not like to be called out. I was an obedient child. I didn’t cause trouble, I raised my hand and participated in class, I did my homework, and I didn’t talk when we weren’t supposed to talk. I lined up when we were supposed to line up. And, here I was, the center of attention in language arts class, working on the wrong page.

“What *page* are you on?” She continued, walking over and picking up my book and holding it in the air. The pink eraser marking my page dropped to the floor, bouncing on its corner once or twice before it settled, evidence of my misbehavior.

“Uh, page 184,” I stammered.

“We are not on that page. We are on page 79. You are not able to complete the lesson on page 184 because you haven’t learned it yet. We do not work ahead. We work together. Give me your pencil and eraser. And, do not work any further ahead than you already have. Do you understand me?” I had never been scolded like this before.

She continued, “Is everyone else on page 79?”

The entire class nodded and some snickered. I could feel them thinking, “How could she be so stupid to be working on page 184? Why would she do that?”

I felt mortified and ashamed. I remember slumping in my seat after this, my mind drifting as Mrs. Uhlner continued her lesson. I felt bored and detached. At that moment, I learned that it was more important to follow the rules than to challenge myself. I learned not to call attention to myself and to keep my head down and do the work assigned to me. I put my head down and pretended to do the work.

After this incident, I strived not to call attention to myself, yet the drive to push back remained under the surface. Several years later, in the seventh grade, I attended a funeral. It was a Catholic funeral, like most of the funerals I attended (I was the great-grandchild of German and Italian immigrants who lived on the west side of Cincinnati; Catholicism was ubiquitous). This funeral took place in a different part of town, at a small parish, and what struck me about this funeral in particular was that girls were the altar servers. I had never seen a girl in the role of an altar server so I asked my mom why girls weren’t servers at my westside parish. She shared that because there weren’t enough boys who volunteered, girls were allowed to serve.

“That is ridiculous! Girls can only serve if there aren’t enough boys to do it!” I exclaimed.

“You’re right; that is kind of silly, isn’t it? Why don’t you write a petition to the archbishop?” she responded.

And thus began my activism, albeit accidentally, fueled by my incredulity about the gender inequity that had just become apparent to me. I recruited my best friend, and we drafted a petition to the Archbishop, outlining the reasons why the Church should update its rules to allow youth of both genders to participate in Mass as altar servers. We circulated our petition around the 7th grade classrooms, rewriting it and recirculating it after Timmy Peters ripped it up, walked up to the garbage can in the front of the room, and threw it away. We mailed it off to the archdiocese and waited for a reply. Something shifted in me. I had begun to stray from the scripted curriculum of the Catholic church, which had been the backdrop of my life: hierarchical and bureaucratic, rigid and prescriptive, and almost entirely outwardly invisible to me until this moment.

THE DAMAGE DONE: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND GROWTH

My Catholic education was not unlike the scripted curriculum in “no-excuses” schools, part of the character education movement that proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s and that continue apace today (Golann, 2021; Love, 2018). We had our own prescribed responses, our scripted movements: kneel after this recitation, stand after that, perform the sign of the cross here, shake hands there, but be careful not to shake too many people’s hands as that can be disruptive. The response to my petition was lackluster. The Archbishop didn’t budge in his decision. My research prior to writing the petition showed that individual dioceses could, in fact, decide to allow girls to be altar servers so long as “such an authorization may not, in any way, exclude men, or, in particular, boys from the service at the altar” (John Paul II, 1994, as cited in Nash, n.d., para. 13) In our diocese, we had enough boys to do the job; thus, girls were not needed. The bottom of the letter included a cursory thank you for taking the time to write and an invitation to remain faithful to the Church.

Though frustrated, I had gained a glimpse of the “*tools of interaction*, the attitudes, skills, and styles that allow certain groups to effectively navigate complex institutions and shifting expectations” (Golann, 2021, p. 3, emphasis in original). Ironically, these scripted curricula, pervasive in schools a decade after my petition-writing experience, failed to do what they purported to do—prepare students for life. Instead, they chased test scores set in motion by the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001 and left out the crucial experience of taking risks that can ultimately lead to successfully navigating complexity and context.

Though in a scripted reality, I was given an opportunity to understand the hidden curriculum, the cultural capital, that would serve me well in my future. In Golann’s study of the SLANT curriculum in a “No-Excuses” charter school, student (mis)behavior is strictly categorized. Students who do not follow directions, including continuing to write after the teacher has instructed students to put their pencils down, are seen as “incompetent” or “opportunistic.” Students learn to blindly follow instructions and are given “little latitude to question authority, bend rules to their advantage, or act spontaneously during the day” (Golann, 2021, p. 6). How can students learn these nuanced, crucial skills without practice and what better place to practice than in schools, when the stakes should be low?

Was I, too, deemed “opportunistic” or “incompetent” through my persistent questioning? I continued to bump up against the script. My 7th grade experience stuck with me. I gained a glimpse into a different way of being and began to question why things were the way they were. Three years after I mailed the petition to the Archbishop, I was invited to serve as a student representative on a “mission effectiveness” committee at my all-girls’ Catholic high school. This mission statement included verbiage about preparing students to be women of service to others. I felt unsettled about this statement since nothing in our school outwardly provided opportunities for us to engage in service to the community. The all-boys’ high school next door offered a community service class where students volunteered in local elementary schools, nursing homes, or with Habitat for Humanity during the last bell of the day. They each had a service site then came together to engage in reflection. If the mission of my high school was to prepare young women to be of service to others, why didn’t we have such a class? I surfaced this issue, and Sister Barbara, my principal, told me that there wasn’t enough interest in community service to merit a class.

“Why don’t you start a club?” Sister Brenda said.

Starting a club in the 1990s was a much more rudimentary undertaking than it is today. There were no official or standard administrative processes. I made a request to the class co-

presidents to make an announcement over the P.A. system and tacked a piece of looseleaf paper on the oversized “Club Bulletin Board” hanging outside the school lunchroom. I had written “Service Club Sign-Up Sheet” at the top and drawn two columns underneath asking for students to list their names and phone numbers (an * by their name meant they could drive to the site). I proceeded to organize visits to the local soup kitchen, ReSTOC, and Imago Earth Center. Students would meet in the school parking lot, and we would spend a few hours together on Saturday mornings or after school. Though the early service activities only included one or two other students (sometimes just my high school boyfriend and me), over 200 students had joined the “Service Club” by the end of the school year. When I graduated high school, my school still didn’t offer a class, but one currently exists (and an administrator manages all of the logistics now that schools have more defined risk management protocol).

My questions continued. In high school, I sat in the pew on Sunday while the priest spent his homily outlining the “sin of homosexuality.” He preached “love the sinner, but hate the sin.” I felt my temperature rise and my breath shorten. What, exactly, is this priest pontificating about? Loving another person? My uncle had just gotten married to his long-term partner. The unconditional love between them was palpable; it was the most beautiful and powerful wedding I had ever attended. I witnessed my uncle and his husband declare their love to each other publicly, amid constant scrutiny, discrimination, and harassment and even in the face of rejection by my uncle’s own parents who chose not to attend. I failed to understand this “sin of homosexuality” that the priest chastised. I had seen nothing but love and respect. I walked out of the church that day and sat outside until Mass was over.

“I can’t stay,” I admitted to myself.

FREE AS A BIRD: LEAVING THE SCRIPT BEHIND

In looking back on my intertwined school and church experiences, the instances when I pushed up against the script resulted in the most learning and growth. I continually felt a dissonance between what was being preached and what I experienced, including the ironic hymns proclaiming “happiness and joy” in a monotone, flat chorus, the furthest thing from demonstrating happiness and joy. At my 10-year high school reunion, I was surprised by how many people asked where I lived and whether or not my husband graduated from the all-boys’ Catholic school next door to ours. I moved away to go to college when I was 17, but I had only traveled 20 minutes. My husband didn’t attend that school, but he was from a Cincinnati neighborhood in what would best be described as north or central. I didn’t realize that I had left the script until I looked around at my former classmates most of whom were married to their high school sweethearts, had starter houses purchased in their childhood neighborhoods, and were poised to send their children to their neighborhood schools and churches.

What had pulled me out of the script? When I pushed up against it, I was often told no, and my response to no quickly became “Why not?” or “I’ll show you.” I pushed against the script, and while it was minimally tolerated, it wasn’t invited or encouraged. How might my experience have been different if Mrs. Uhlner had responded to my zeal for grammar with opportunities to extend my learning or adapted the curriculum in such a way that felt relevant (Valdez, 2020). Truth be told, I didn’t leave the church right after I walked out. I continued to yearn for authentic experiences of learning and growth, something bigger, perhaps a “feeling connected to something larger than the self” that felt missing from my religious, educational upbringing, but I kept running

into dead ends (Keltner, 2023, p. 15). How do we untangle ourselves from the script that has been the backdrop of our life?

Teachers in schools with scripted curricula struggle with this tension of adopting or adapting, staying or leaving. Some teachers embrace the newly imposed scripted curriculum for the simplicity it provides and the “equal access to rigorous curriculum” for all students (Timberlake et al., 2017, p. 49). Many teachers using scripted curricula report low morale, feelings of powerlessness, resentment, anger, frustration, guilt, pain, and for many teachers, it pushes them out of the classroom entirely. As one teacher proclaimed, it “squelch[ed] [her] passion” (Powell et al., 2017, p. 107).

Haroon Moghul writes of this reality in his memoir, *How to Be a Muslim: An American Story*. Moghul spends his life following the script of a Pakistani, Muslim American, a child of immigrant parents. He gets good grades, attends mosque, applies to Ivy league and highly ranked schools, and eventually goes to law school as his brother did. Even after examining his path through deep analysis of Islamic philosophy, he determined that “knowing you need to do something is still not doing that thing” (Moghul, 2017, p. 90). Moghul calls us to question *how* we may break free from the script after we know it’s what we need to do.

EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD: POWER AND CONTROL

More than a decade after coming to terms with the Catholic script that shaped my upbringing, it was time for my husband and me to decide where to send our children to school. Even with our limited exposure to the scripted curricula ensconced in public schools, we knew we didn’t want that experience for our children. We knew the doctrine and rules of the Catholic school system were not an option, and my husband’s experience attending public school was no better. As a child in the 1980s with undiagnosed ADHD, he spent the majority of his childhood being sent into the hallway or having the sides of a cardboard box erected on his desk to keep him from getting distracted. We wanted an environment where our children would have meaningful experiences, and we certainly did not want an environment where teachers “taught to the test.”

We agonized most deeply about where to send our son to school. He spent the first three years of his life home with my husband, a stay-at-home dad. When we did send him to pre-school in the fall of 2019, he cried every morning as I dropped him off in carline, and at the end of the week when they sent home the work that he produced for the week, his backpack was full of sketches of giant sad faces with the word “DADEE DADEE” and large frown faces etched on them. Everyone knows what happened next. School shut down in March of 2020. In 2021, schools reopened with students in person and wearing masks every other day with remote school happening on the alternate days. We opted out of school from March 2020 through August 2022.

Post-COVID, we asked ourselves what kind of environment would provide meaningful learning. What would need to be in place for our children, for all children, to actually learn? We ultimately chose Montessori education and, more specifically, a newly created nature-Montessori school in our own neighborhood. We believed this school embodied our values. It was nonhierarchical, committed to equity and community, and embedded time in nature into the curriculum. We asked ourselves what could possibly be more important than educating our children in a community environment with a focus on stewardship and care for the environment—our children’s future? However, by the school’s second year, it had doubled in size, and a new classroom opened. Our son was placed in the “lower elementary” classroom, led by two newly

hired teachers. We had an open mind but started to get concerned when he began to ruminate over whether or not this teacher would yell at him the next day. He came home reporting that he and his friends were sent to the hallway or kept in from recess (this was a nature school). Our son was shutting down, unable to learn. One afternoon, he came home with a severe rash on his hands. He is allergic to latex, and it mirrored the rash he got when we learned of his allergy (after he put on a latex Band-Aid). We asked our son what happened, and he shared that he was instructed to put on a pair of latex gloves. He said that he told the teachers that he was allergic to latex but was told to put them on anyway. We assumed there was a miscommunication, so the next day, I called the school to let them know that he was allergic to latex (Miss Amelia was new, after all) and was interrupted mid-sentence.

“He didn’t wear any gloves yesterday,” she stated.

“Um, he said that he did and has a rash that he has gotten before. I’m not mad, I just... “

“I told you he didn’t wear any gloves.”

I was flabbergasted. My husband and I began to talk to other parents, and we noticed a pattern. The high energy seven and eight-year-old boys were constantly “in trouble.”

While chaperoning a field trip, I witnessed a boy being told to sit down and stay still numerous times after the children were invited to get in line for a snack. He was as confused as I was. I wish I could tell you that the issues resolved themselves or that the teacher’s behavior changed after a heartfelt conversation and realization that she was treating the boys differently from the girls. Ultimately, the defensiveness persisted, and her need to control (versus be in control) overshadowed any possibility of understanding.

Though we had allegedly broken free from the script, our experience felt eerily familiar. Reliving our son’s issues brought me back to a previous toxic work environment I experienced. My former boss, a Vice President, consistently scheduled meetings without consulting our shared calendars stating, “You can cancel any meetings you have.” He often asked if we were “competitive or collaborative” and forced us to choose one over the other, refusing to entertain the possibility that one might be both or that collaboration could, in fact, yield positive results. Basic decisions had to be approved by him, and he required that his direct reports copy him on any emails to the Dean or above, including for standard operating procedures. I began to re-write my emails multiple times, second guessing myself. My confidence shattered, and my experience at work started to bleed into my home life. On the weekends, I either lashed out in anger or laid in bed for half the day, too exhausted to get up. And, I was completely unaware of my own behavior. I had no space for learning or growth; I was in closed, protective mode.

In hindsight, in these examples, the need for control (or protection?) created an environment where learning and flourishing were impossible. Though rather extreme, the script in schools, in workplaces—and even children’s sports teams—is to control, to expect the students, participants, or employees to blindly follow the teacher or leader. Power and control are the real force behind scripted curricula. But, who is actually in control? Teachers are beholden to administrators who serve the districts who, in some cases, end up serving the testing companies. And the testing companies hold a disproportionate amount of power due to their promise of meeting coveted test scores and needed funding (Powell et al., 2017). It’s striking how far removed the locus of control sits from actual students.

Twenty years after I told myself I needed to leave the church, I found myself stuck in a similar reality. I stayed in that job—a scripted, controlled environment—for six years. “That’s a really long time to stay in a toxic situation,” a colleague told me. I joked with friends that I would list “ability to withstand dysfunction for indefinite periods of time” on my resume. Yet, under the



surface, there was a sense of comfort in my situation. Even though I didn't like it, I knew what to expect. I knew how to handle it. I was starting to succumb to this system. And, when creative, engaged, non-scripted teachers either stop pushing back or leave because of a district adopted curriculum, who remains? Is this the point of the scripted curriculum or an unintended consequence?

HERE COMES THE SUN: THE UNTANGLING

What is the extent to which scripted curriculum is robbing our children—and our teachers? Students experiencing scripted curricula are denied the opportunity to have a voice in society (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020), do not have opportunities to practice flexibility and adaptability needed for interacting with authority figures (Golann, 2021), and participate in a learning environment that is devoid of meaning (Powell et al., 2017). Teachers are robbed of their own authority and agency as their effectiveness is judged by whether or not they stuck to the script versus whether or not they reached their students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Powell et al., 2017). The potential consequences are grave.

Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argue the undemocratic nature of scripted curriculum due to its inability to prepare students authentically for civic life. This is especially problematic since those who have been historically marginalized are most likely to experience scripted curricula (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017). College essays and job interviews ask for examples of “taking initiative.” But when students are instructed through scripted curricula, they lose these opportunities. Taking initiative requires real learning, and real learning is never scripted. Authentic learning includes meaningful content and autonomy, both for the students and teachers. Scripted curriculum results in the opposite: content void of context and control over what teachers can teach and even how they teach it.

How then might teachers free themselves from the scripted curricula that they so often find themselves butting up against? Scripted curricula have become so pervasive in our schools—and are reinforced by the longstanding scripts of religion, military, and now authoritarian governments—that breaking free from them will not be easy. Without self-reflection and an analysis of our contexts and beliefs, teachers can convince themselves that the scripted curriculum creates equality since all students are being taught the same way (Timberlake et al., 2017). Engaging in *currere* can help. The purpose of *currere* is to pull oneself out of unquestioned assumptions, to make meaning out of the experiences that have remained with us, and to pull us out of our linear timeline. . A reckoning of ourselves and a rejection of unconsciously living for “unconsciousness perpetuates itself” (Pinar, 1994, p. 22).

While I gained a crucial glimpse of independent thinking and autonomy in spite of my scripted Catholic educational setting, I often ask myself, what would it look like if opportunities for students to practice using these tools of interaction were consciously integrated into the curriculum? What is needed to create a learning environment that prepares students to think critically and engage meaningfully in society? Real learning is not scripted. In second language learning, “meaningful output” is considered the most influential factor in actually learning a language. Real learning is meaningful, authentic, and requires agency of both student and teacher. What is the risk of allowing students to lead the learning? What might occur if we refuse to cling fast to our comfortable structures and systems?

Brian Schultz's experience in a 5th grade classroom at Carr Academy in a Chicago housing project provides a compelling counternarrative to scripted curricula. Through the Project Citizen curriculum, he invites his students to identify a problem facing their community. After collectively brainstorming 89 different problems, one student proclaimed, "our school is a dump," thus resulting in a year-long project where advocating for their new school building became the curriculum. Students experienced civics through researching government processes for educational-decision making, they practiced literacy through writing letters about their experiences to local leaders, conducted interviews with local leaders, and learned statistics through survey production and distribution. The learning was relevant and provided the experiences needed to gain cultural capital (Golann, 2021; Schultz, 2018).

Though not quite as all-encompassing, Valdez (2020) utilized critical analysis to introduce non-dominant narratives into her classroom, making the content more meaningful for her students, while still adhering to the imposed Common Core standards. Students engaged in inquiry projects related to relevant content. "They saw themselves reflected in the topics they researched" (Valdez, 2020, p. 591). Students ultimately shared their learning through a poster presentation celebration, which providing meaningful learning around critical content (Valdez, 2020). Her adaptive approach created a work-around of sorts and an avenue for students to find meaning within the script.

And, yet, reimagined approaches are not without critique. High ranking school and government officials refused to believe that Schultz's students were capable of this type of inquiry and self-advocacy (Schultz, 2018). Moreover, it's a lot easier to stay within a system—which, even while toxic, provides some comfort in familiarity—or to point out the flaws in a current system without providing an alternative. Even in environments where the script is less prevalent, and especially in those where it is adopted, ruthless self-examination and self-interrogation is critical. While in college, a wise mentor once told me, "we don't learn from our experiences; we learn from reflecting on our experiences." Deep reflection has been the focus on this immersion into scripted curricula, and this sentiment about reflecting on our experiences has framed my analysis throughout this course; aptly, I learned this quote is popularly attributed to educational philosopher, John Dewey. To engage in *curre*, in fact, is to do just this, to engage in deep reflection, to ruthlessly examine oneself and one's contexts in order to make meaning, to place oneself and context together (Pinar, 1994). What chance is there for change without self-examination, the courage to lead with love, and the imagination of what might be possible (Byrne-Jiménez & Yoon, 2019)?

Even though I learned valuable lessons by pushing up against the script, I stayed too long; bmy hope is that we pulled my son out in time. After a year of tense conversations following the latex glove incident, he was moved into a different classroom. The teachers in his new classroom employ a "just in time" learning approach, one based upon the Montessori principle of following the child. In this type of learning, the instruction flows from students' interests (Montessori, 1995). When he expressed interest in trees, he was invited to collect leaves while on a nature walk. He then brought them back to the classroom and looked up the type of leaf in a reference book and made his own leaf identification book that he subsequently (and nervously at first) presented to his class. This approach requires humility, flexibility, and trust—trust both in the process of learning and discovery and the mutual trust among the teachers and families that learning will occur, even if not in a traditional, linear sense.

Our son is finally flourishing. In the midst of writing this paper, I overheard him talking with his friend, our neighbor, who attends a different school.

“I really like my school!” he exclaimed.

“Why?” his friend questioned.

“I don’t know ... we just ... we learn stuff,” he paused and smiled. I wondered what activity he was remembering at that moment.

COME TOGETHER: LIVING WITH INTENTIONALITY

As I reflect upon my experiences as a child and student within the Catholic school script, and now as a parent and organizational leader, I’ve learned that it’s extremely difficult to avoid the script. Despite spending countless hours deliberating where to send our children to school and even after selecting an environment we thought would embrace creativity and inquiry, we *still* did not escape the script (although I believe these experiences were undoubtedly fewer than what we would have experienced in a more traditional education setting). And, the script has continued to show up in my workplaces, my children’s scout troops, and even within extended family conversations and expectations. The notion that “this is how you should do it” rears its ugly head so continuously that I wonder if human nature is wired to follow scripts. It’s often simply easier to follow the script.

When I analyze my examples of working against the script as a child, teen, and parent, I notice that the person upholding the script is often avoiding a more difficult path and following the script without even realizing that they are perpetuating it. Early in my life, I pushed against the script without intentionality. I didn’t like being told no. I questioned the hypocrisy that I saw in front of me. But, I did this without a framework, and without actively questioning the power and control that often bolstered the script—or led others to leave it unquestioned. In this “placing together” (Pinar, 1994, p. 27) of my experiences, I’ve come to realize that reflection and intentionality can help me (and my children) sustain a life outside of the script or at least recognize it and openly question its existence and purpose. As parents, my husband and I have welcomed questioning (although, I’ll admit, it’s quite exhausting at times). When one of our children asked why rules exist, we seriously considered our answer and came up with three possibilities: rules exist for safety, for order, or for control. And, we told them that they could question rules that exist only for the sake of control; these are the most dangerous rules.

It’s my hope that we have instilled reflection and intentionality and have begun to build a framework for our children to question the scripts they encounter, as well as to carefully discern when it is time to work against the script from within or to leave it behind (Powell et al., 2017). This can be a daunting reality but one that is too important to ignore. I saw my own son’s spirit get broken before my eyes as he labeled himself a “bad” child. And, I experienced it myself in a toxic, controlled workplace. As I consider parenting, leading, and living against the script, I’m consistently convinced of the importance of imagination and care required in cultivating new spaces where questioning is encouraged, individuality is embraced, and real learning is the goal.

How might workplaces flourish if honest feedback were solicited and acted upon, if leaders responded with empathetic listening instead of defensiveness? How might our school systems be transformed if, instead of measuring against a prescribed set of standards, we were to focus on learning? What might be possible if we were to reexamine the script from an independent lens, especially with the acknowledgement that those who are most prone to be put on a script are those who are already marginalized (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017)? How might

communities be transformed and move along from just “alright” to flourishing (Love, 2018)? It’s too big of a risk not to reexamine these ever-present scripts. The future of our children is at stake.

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EMPATHY AND RELATIONAL CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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FRAGMENT ONE: DO YOU BELIEVE IN PROPHETS?

In the Spring of 2019, I was eighteen years old and sitting in a religion course at a university operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as the Mormon church. Mandatory religion courses were a key part of the University's curriculum. These classes were predictable: opening prayer, singing a hymn, and a professor moving through church-issued curriculum. There were often several sections of the same course with different professors teaching the same content.

One day in early May, the lesson was on pre-mortal existence. The professor taught that, before we were born, each of us made decisions about right and wrong and that everyone who has ever lived already accepted God's plan of salvation in the pre-mortal existence (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.). However, certain spirits were particularly valiant and faithful in the pre-mortal existence, and those are the spirits that were rewarded with being born into the covenant of eternal marriage or, simply, born into a faithful Mormon family.

Nobody reacted to what the professor was saying, but I felt a familiar tightening in my chest. I was not born into a Mormon family. My brief dance with Mormonism started during my senior year of high school and concluded upon graduation from this university. It was jarring to hear this theology taught for the first time. I raised my hand. My voice wavered as I tried, and failed, to prevent any visible displays of emotion. "Are you saying that people who weren't born into our church were sinning before they were born?" The professor corrected me, "They weren't sinning, but they were less valiant in their obedience." The next slide was a quote from former church leader and tenth prophet in the latter days, Joseph Fielding Smith (1931), which he asked me to read aloud: "The Lord reserved the right to send into the world a chosen lineage of faithful spirits who were entitled to special favors based on pre-mortal obedience" (p. 129). This was meant to be the final word, but I was not convinced. My eyes were stinging with tears as I felt embarrassed and confused.

Still, I questioned where these ideas originated from. In response, the professor spoke with conviction, "Do you believe in prophets?" I did not answer. He continued with the same predictable, scripted explanation of Jesus Christ appearing to Joseph Smith in 1820 and restoring priesthood authority and, subsequently, the one, true church. The professor did not wait for me to answer before posing another question: "Do you believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God?" This time, I responded without hesitation, "No." He paused, processing my deviation. Without any reservation, the professor spoke bluntly, "Why don't you write these questions down instead of bringing them up in class?" I was, and still am, taken aback by such an abrupt response to what was an honest question.

This religion class taught me only one thing: questioning is shameful. However, what stayed with me most was the absence of curiosity. The professor never asked where my question



was coming from. There was no follow-up. He did not ask what it meant that I had raised my hand, visibly emotional, and pushed back on something he considered unquestionable. There was no curiosity about what I carried into the classroom or who I was outside of it. When I pushed back, he did not lean in. Instead, I was referred to a PowerPoint slide with a quote on it. Through this, the professor taught me something far more lasting than anything on those slides. This curriculum was not designed to know students and teach them in a truly meaningful way. It was designed to shape them into something predetermined—good, faithful, and obedient Mormons.

CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES

Children thrive when they feel truly known by their teachers (Ansari et al., 2020). That does not change the moment they turn eighteen. For young adults, relationships are often a form of curriculum. When faculty and staff engage students as whole people, rather than grade-seekers who come and go with each semester, students feel genuinely seen. The sense of being seen is central to their time in higher education. Strayhorn (2019) describes this as a sense of belonging—the experience of mattering, of being cared about, accepted, and valued by the institution and the people within it (pp. 28–29). The consequences of its absence are equally significant. Even a single instance of isolation or rejection can undermine belonging, and its deprivation often leads to “diminished interest in activities, loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement from life (often through suicide), or, in the context of education, disengagement from college through attrition or disinvestment” (Cohen, 2011, as cited in Strayhorn, 2019, p. 40).

This article includes two personal reflections in the form of regressive curriculum fragments (Poetter, 2024, p. 23) for which I also provide in-depth, ongoing analysis throughout the paper. The concept of the regressive step in the *currere* method was established by Pinar (1994), who described the regressive as observing the functioning past, taking “special notice of one’s past life-in-schools, with one’s past life-with-school teachers and one’s past life-with-books and other school-related artifacts” (p. 23). Reflecting on my undergraduate experiences in this way allows me to examine how scripted curriculum compromises human connection and the conditions under which empathy can be given and received. When there is limited space for critical thought, nuance, or for questioning what happens when the reality of a student’s life does not fit into the curriculum they are taught, there is equally little space for empathy. The first fragment reflects what is compromised when curriculum is designed to shape students rather than to know them. The second reflects on what becomes possible when relationship and empathy are prioritized in higher education.

The fragments represent intentionally contrasting experiences. One is defined by a form of scripted curriculum and the absence of empathy. The other is defined by relationships and the deliberate prioritization of empathy over rigidity. Scripted curriculum

refers to a wide variety of curricular materials or pre-packaged lesson plans that explicitly script out exactly what the teacher will say, show, and do—and often even how students are expected to respond—so that the teacher only need read from a manual in order to deliver the lesson. (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020, p. 195)

At my university, students were expected to respond to the curriculum with religious devotion.

UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

To understand how relationships function as a form of curriculum, it is important to establish the connections to empathy: what empathy is, how it develops, and how the relational conditions of education (or the lack thereof) are impacted. The word “empathy” is relatively new to the English language, first referenced around 1908 as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning “feeling-into” (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 15). When discussing empathy, it is important to distinguish it from sympathy. The terms are often used interchangeably, but sympathy refers to something more shallow. Sympathy involves acknowledging another’s suffering from a distance, but empathy is much more active as it requires one “to imagine how others feel in their shoes, rather than thinking about how you would feel if you were in their shoes” (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 16). Empathy is not an internal feeling or sensation but, rather, the active, outward practice of being genuinely curious about the inner workings of another person’s life.

There are two main dimensions of empathy. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person’s perspective and emotional state, and affective empathy is the willingness to share in another’s emotions (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 13). Together, these dimensions form what empathy researchers consider to be essential to both individual and societal development as empathy forms the foundation of self-worth, healthy relationships, productive friendships, and strong communities (Brennan & Dolan, 2022, p. 335). Empathy is, at its core, deeply relational. It is not something that is given or received in isolation.

Integrating empathy into higher education and its curriculum need not be complicated. In its simplest form, listening is itself an empathetic act (Murphy, 2022, p. 12). In any classroom, when educators are openly curious about who their students are and genuinely listen, they model empathy. Those who are never on the receiving end of empathy are rarely equipped to offer it to others. Similarly, within education, students who rarely or never receive empathy are often unprepared to extend it to their peers and, as their development continues, to their co-workers, family members, and neighbors.

If empathy is relational, then so must be education and curriculum. In *Education and Human Relations*, Ashley Montagu (1958) argued that schools are places for “the practice of human relations” and that education begins to lose value when it is not informed by the principle of humanity (pp. 13, 21). To teach without attending to the student is to miss the point of education entirely. Montagu (1958) goes on to state that “education is for humanity first, and in the facts afterwards” (p. 16). This framework has direct implications for how curriculum and its relational potential is understood. Traditionally, curriculum pertains to the planned and often scripted content of education. Pinar’s (1994, 2019) view of curriculum invites a more expansive, potential-filled understanding.

According to Pinar (1994), curriculum is not only what is taught but it also includes “the self-conscious conceptualization” of lived experience through time (p. 19). That is, curriculum is the ongoing process of examining how an individual’s personal and intellectual history is actively shaping who they are and who they are becoming. Educators cannot accompany students in this process without first coming to know them. When curriculum is rigid and scripted, there is little space for students’ individual histories, questions, and identities to be truly known and engaged with. Without recognizing students as whole people with unique histories and experiences, education will continue to fall short.



LIMITATIONS OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

Not all educational environments are conducive to the relational dimensions that empathy requires. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) explain that scripted curriculum is a means of advancing traditionalism and standardization in education (p. 196). The form of scripted curriculum that I experienced in the religion class was a means of advancing conformity to church doctrine and diminishing nuance.

Proponents of scripted curriculum might argue that it is a means of ensuring consistency and structure. However, when considering scripted curriculum through a relational lens, the limitations and harms are evident. Positioning students as passive recipients of standardized curriculum limits the potential for genuine human connection. Furthermore, scripted curriculum limits the ability of an educator to be curious about their students and to adjust the curriculum to better meet their needs. It becomes difficult for students to bring their full selves into the learning environment because, before they even enrolled in the class, the ideal and expected responses had been predetermined.

When a deviation from the script occurs, students may feel diminished, belittled, or silenced. The inability of the educator to deviate from the script may cause them to be unable to respond to the student who has deviated in a meaningful way. This communicates to students, just as the religion professor communicated to me, that experiences outside of the dominant norms are inconvenient. When students feel like they are an inconvenience or an afterthought, there is no meaningful relationship, and there is no potential for empathy. In my experience, this led me to believe that the part of myself that didn't fit neatly into the script was not worth seeing.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND RELATIONAL CURRICULUM

The consequences of invisibility are particularly evident in higher education. Strayhorn (2019) explains that sense of belonging pertains to the student's perceived social support on campus, as in experiences of mattering, being cared about, accepted, and valued by the institution and campus community (pp. 28–29). Sense of belonging is essential to student success, and it is built through human encounters and the exchange of empathy.

Schlossberg (1989) puts words to this experience more precisely through her theory of mattering and marginality. When students feel noticed, cared for, needed, valued, and appreciated in ways that do not require them to separate themselves from parts of their identity, a foundation is established that supports further development, social relationships, and academic growth. Marginality, its opposite, is the experience of not fitting in, of occupying space in an institution without being fully welcomed by it. As Schlossberg's (1989) argument supports, true mattering happens when a student knows that every part of them is noticed and valued, and not only the parts that align with institutional expectations.

Relational curriculum describes all of the ways in which institutions and individual educators teach students that their identities, questions, and experiences are welcome. It operates through formal pedagogy and institutional culture, but it also operates, and perhaps operates most powerfully, in the individual interactions between a student and a faculty member, a student and an administrator, and a student and anyone within the institution who has the opportunity to either see or overlook them. These moments need not be monumental, as the day-to-day interactions can



culminate into something significant. Empathy lives in these spaces, regardless of their perceived (in)significance.

At the heart of these interactions is something deeper than pedagogy or policy. Montagu (1958) understood this well, stating that the most significant human desire is to be loved and to love others (p. 48). It is through this love, care, respect, and knowledge of others, that we “value them, come into a relationship with them, and very often, fulfill our purposes in the world” (Poetter, 2024, p. 150). Relational curriculum, at its best, is the practice of that fulfillment.

PEDAGOGIES OF CARE

Scripted curriculum forecloses the conditions under which genuine teaching relationships can form. It limits the potential for human connection and the conditions that support students in feeling a sense of belonging or mattering. Care theory, as established in the work of Nel Noddings (1984), provides a framework for understanding what such conditions make possible. This perspective on caring in education conceptualizes teaching as a personal relation that is built through listening, dialogue, reflective response, and trust (Noddings, 1984, as cited in M. Smith, 2024). The distinction between caring as a virtue and caring as a relation is central to this framework. An educator can work hard, hold high standards, and sincerely believe that they care for students yet fail to fully establish a caring relationship. This is caring as a virtue. Caring as a relation is only fully realized when the person being cared for recognizes it (Noddings, 1984, 2005). With this, it becomes clear that a curriculum can be designed, or scripted, with the best of intentions and the best of virtues. However, if the students do not experience feelings of being seen, known, and valued within, the caring potential of curriculum is unrealized.

Gravett et al. (2024) extend this through “pedagogies of mattering.” They argue that, within higher education, there has been an emphasis on “discourses on the significance of relationships within learning and teaching as a means to offer a counter-view to an uncaring marketised HE (higher education) system” (p. 388). Pedagogies of mattering expand the relational emphasis as they question who matters within educational spaces and make plain the notion that “who matters and how care is distributed entails ethical and political questions” (Gravett et al., 2024, p. 392). This framing is useful for understanding that deciding who matters, and whose questions are welcome, whose identity is acceptable, and whose full self is worth knowing are not neutral decisions. They are often politically, socially, or, as was demonstrated in my experience, religiously motivated. Pedagogies of mattering emphasize that the relational choices that educators make, such as whose questions are welcome, are forms of curriculum.

FRAGMENT ONE ANALYSIS

My experience in the religion class was uncomfortable, but it also demonstrates what scripted curriculum does to the relationship between a student and an educator. The professor was not curious about me or the life experiences behind my emotional reaction. The script had the answers: quotes from church leaders and repetitive professions of faith that took the place of genuine engagement. The script, created by the Mormon church and executed by the university, was designed to produce religious devotion. It also predetermined what constituted an ideal student: one who fits neatly into what the church teaches and does not question.



When I deviated, the professor's default response was to redirect me back to the script and advise me to keep future deviations written down rather than voiced in class. This supports the argument of Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020), who believe that scripted curriculum and the prioritization of compliance limit the intellectual participation of both teachers and students (p. 196). A relational response would have displayed curiosity about which parts of my experience led to my question and emotional reaction. It would have been an opportunity for discussion and learning from each other, rather than from a script. Instead, the professor defaulted to what the church had deemed appropriate. This is not to say that he committed any personal moral failing. The problem at hand is structural. He, too, had been subject to the script.

The impact of this religion class lingered far beyond that classroom. For the remainder of my time at that university, I felt a jolt of anxiety whenever I saw him on campus and planned my remaining required religion courses carefully. I was determined never to sit in his classroom again. Even when I succeeded, I struggled to distance myself from the defensiveness his class had taught me. I entered every subsequent religion course already closed off, anxious, and braced for the moment when questions would be unwelcome or I would be reminded that did not fit into the Mormon ideal. A single interaction had made an entire dimension of my education feel like something to survive rather than something to engage with. As Strayhorn (2019) describes, the consequences of lacking belonging on campus are significant: diminished interest, loneliness, and disengagement (p. 40). I knew all of these well. However, within those same years, there were equally significant experiences in which I was encountered as a whole person in spaces where empathy and relationship took priority over rigidity and compliance.

FRAGMENT TWO: THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

It took me a long time to feel settled as an undergraduate student. Off-putting experiences like the one I had in religion class had crushed any sense of belonging that I may have been developing within my first few semesters as a student. I struggled to feel secure on campus, and I struggled to engage with my academics. This changed during my last two years there.

After bouncing from major to major, I finally settled on sociology. I was told it was a pointless major and that earning a bachelor's degree in sociology was essentially signing myself up for graduate school, as if that were a bad thing. The concerns did not deter me from pursuing what, for the first time in my undergraduate experience, felt truly engaging. It was in a sociology class that I remember first thinking to myself, "I wish this class were longer."

It was as a sociology student that I was invited into the sociological imagination, which C. Wright Mills (1959) describes as the capacity to understand how one personally connects to the broader historical and institutional forces that have shaped them (pp. 5–6). The religion class, and every other script that had predetermined what I was expected to believe and become, were no longer things that passively happened to me. The sociological imagination was enabling me to see the structures, systems, and scripts behind them.

In 2021, as we were newly returned to in-person classes after the isolation of the pandemic, I enrolled in a Protest, Conflict, and Social Change course. In the months before this semester, I had been thinking about gender, sexuality, and what it meant to be an LGBTQ+ student at a university that did not have a reputation for welcoming students of diverse identities. In the early weeks of the semester, I decided to approach the professor. I was nervous, but the desire to do something with the thoughts that had been living in my mind for months overpowered my nerves.



I explained what I had been thinking and asked whether there was space within the course to do something with it. To my surprise, the professor was curious. He encouraged me to keep thinking, keep synthesizing, and to do something with my ideas. That encouragement changed the trajectory of my educational journey.

By the end of the semester, the professor had allowed a small group of students in the class to do our final project together, which required us to propose some sort of social change. We centered LGBTQ+ student experiences on our campus. The professor supported us as we prepared to present our project to the Honor Code Office, a place on our campus that was usually associated with discipline and reprimand. On the day of the presentation, we spoke about something that, even with our intention to approach our presentation with respect, felt quite radical: LGBTQ+ students at our university deserved better. Some of the Honor Code Office staff came to our presentation, listened, and engaged. I had not expected that. This project was the foundation that my senior thesis would build upon.

In the semesters that followed, the professor continued to encourage me to keep thinking, keep writing, and keep synthesizing. When I began a thesis project examining how topics like gender and sexuality were discussed at our institution, he supported that, too. When the thesis was complete, he allowed me to present it at a department faculty meeting. The presentation was frightening, to say the least. It was one thing to have done the work, but it was another to stand in a room of professors at a religiously conservative university and speak about it.

My voice was steady, but I was not. As I began to speak, a professor I did not know interrupted with contrarian remarks. Rather than engaging with curiosity or empathy, he engaged with criticism and defensiveness. The room suddenly felt much smaller. My voice grew shaky and my eyes began to sting. Determined to get my point across, I steadied myself enough to respond, although the emotions I would have preferred to keep to myself surfaced anyway: “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m trying to present my work.” I continued, speaking about the reconciliation of sociology, faith, and our obligation to build bridges of understanding.

When the presentation ended, I hurried to the bathroom and leaned against the cold tile wall. My eyes were red as I squeezed them shut and stopped fighting the tears. I thought about how badly I wanted to belong, how carefully I had tried to mask myself and perform the right beliefs. The religion class in the Spring of 2019 had taught me that I had to align myself with what this school believed if I wanted to be accepted. I thought that I had gotten over that. I knew how to think, and I had become increasingly comfortable in voicing my thoughts, even the critical ones. Yet, there I was, several years later, feeling the familiar sting of rejection for suggesting that maybe there was a different way of seeing things.

The series of events that followed was unexpected. The contrarian professor sent me an apology. Faculty members, even ones I had never taken a class from, affirmed my work. Several people from outside the sociology department who I had come to trust and who knew my background and beliefs had attended. They never pressured me to be someone I wasn’t, nor did they ever lecture me or question my faithfulness. They were simply kind.

I am unable to pinpoint a single moment of belonging in the way that I can pinpoint single moments of shame, embarrassment, and rejection. What I do remember is a pattern of curiosity through educators who listened, asked what I thought, and treated student ideas as worth developing. This is empathy in practice. These moments accumulated into something far more impactful than the rejection that had met me at several points along the way. The parts of me that I had been told to write down rather than voice turned out to be starting points for critical reflection.



In receiving empathy, I began to understand, more deeply, what it meant to extend empathy to others.

FRAGMENT TWO ANALYSIS

The experiences described in the second fragment stand in stark contrast to those of the first. Where the religion class offered a script in place of relationship, many of my experiences as a sociology student exemplified the conditions under which genuine care, as Noddings (1984, 2005) describes, could be established, recognized, and felt. The professor who leaned in when I voiced concern about our campus was modeling what Noddings (1984, as cited in M. Smith, 2024) described as the essential work of the caring educator: attentive listening, motivational displacement toward the needs and concerns of the student, and a willingness to respond in ways that affirmed rather than redirected. I was not redirected to scripted curriculum. This is certainly an example of care, but it is also an example of empathy.

CARE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The religion professor likely believed that he was acting in my best interest by redirecting me to the script of religious doctrine. However, as Noddings (1984, 2005) explains, he may have “cared” in the virtue sense but had not adopted the relational sense of caring. My recognition of care within the sociology department aligns with what Noddings (2005) is describing when she says, “In a caring relation or encounter, the cared-for recognizes the caring and responds in some detectable manner A student may acknowledge her teacher’s caring directly, with verbal gratitude, or simply pursue her own project more confidently” (para. 6). The sociology professor’s response and encouragement for me to keep thinking, writing, and synthesizing was, without a doubt, essential in allowing me to “pursue [my] project more confidently” (Noddings, 2005, para. 6). My education in the sociology department also closed the relational gap that the religion class had left open. In alignment with Gravett et al. (2024), these experiences allowed me to feel that I mattered and belonged within my educational space. The questions of who mattered, who belonged, whose questions were worth pursuing, whose ideas were worth developing, and whose full self was welcomed were receiving vastly different answers in the sociology department.

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

The presentation of my senior thesis exemplifies the new answers that I was beginning to internalize. While I certainly knew that the script still existed, it was gradually becoming less impactful in my life. This was clear when the contrarian professor emailed me an apology, when other professors affirmed my work, and in the consistent exchanges with university administrators who supported me throughout. These were, as Gravett et al. (2024) would say, moments that mattered (p. 396). They mattered not only in the moment, but in what they made possible afterward.



WHO MATTERS?

Schlossberg (1989) argues that true mattering happens when a student knows that every part of them, not only the parts of them which align with institutional expectations, is noticed, valued, and cared for. In my experience, my institution of higher education was inextricably linked to the religious institution of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Aligning myself with the expectations of my university was to align myself with what the Church considered to be God's standard of obedience and goodness. I was keenly aware of the parts of me that failed to align with such values and norms. These were the parts of me that had been treated as inconveniences or deviations. As a sociology student, I received something different through the experience of being known, and the parts of me that I had been instructed to write down rather than express were now starting points for critical reflection. This is precisely what Gravett et al. (2024) mean when they describe pedagogies of mattering as asking who matters within educational spaces and recognizing that "who matters and how care is distributed entails ethical and political questions" (p. 392). At a university where belonging was largely contingent on doctrinal alignment and religious devotion, choosing to extend care to a student whose questions disrupted that alignment was not a neutral pedagogical choice. It was a choice that joined me in questioning if there might be a different way of seeing things, even if that way deviated from the script.

HUMANITY FIRST

Montagu (1958) emphasized that "education is for humanity first, and in the facts afterwards" (p. 16). The sociology department operated within this principle, as their curriculum was not limited to the facts taught during class. It also included "the self-conscious conceptualization" of lived experience through time (Pinar, 1994, p. 19). My senior thesis project and the group presentation to the Honor Code Office were not the point. The point was that I was being accompanied through the ongoing process of examining how my personal and intellectual histories were actively shaping who I was becoming. Those who accompanied me through this process were practicing what Montagu (1958) described as the art and science of being human (p. 21). In doing so, they were modeling something that I, as someone whose past experiences have since motivated me to pursue a career in student affairs and higher education, hope someday to extend to others.

EMPATHY IS THE WHOLE POINT

Empathy is at the heart of all that has been described. As explained by empathy scholars Mark Brennan and Pat Dolan (2022), empathy is the foundation of self-worth, healthy relationships, and strong communities. They go on to argue that empathy is perhaps the central factor in all aspects of individual and societal development (p. 335). Empathy is not a soft skill or something used to simply enhance education. It is at the core of humanity, and it is what makes education meaningful.

Empathy, as Silke and Brady (2022) explain, is not an internal feeling but an active practice, or the ongoing, outward work of being genuinely curious about the inner life of another person (p. 16). It requires both the cognitive willingness to understand another's perspective and



the affective willingness to share in their experience (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 13). Both dimensions were present in the sociology department in ways they were not in the religion class. The professor who leaned in, invited me to think critically, and encouraged me to keep synthesizing was not simply being kind. He was practicing empathy and was teaching me how to do the same.

This is what it means when we discuss learning how to care for others as we ourselves are cared for (Noddings, 2002, as cited in M. Smith, 2024). With this in mind, it is safe to say that those who are unfamiliar with receiving empathy are rarely equipped to extend it to others. The experiences I have described in this fragment were the beginning of my understanding of what it means to extend empathy. As I was seen as a whole person, I began to understand what it means to view others in the same way. This is a practice of humanity, and it is not a small thing. It is, as Montagu (1958) might have agreed, the whole point of education.

THE AFTERMATH

By the start of my final semester, I knew I was done. I would finish my degree, and my relationship with Mormonism would end. I was grateful for all that this institution had given me and equally ready to move forward. The sociological imagination had given me the language and the confidence to examine what had shaped me. The relational curriculum I engaged with had shown me that questions and critical thought were not meant to be written down and stowed away. Deviating from the script was not a moral failure. To think critically, to voice concern, and to push back did not constitute disobedience. I did not leave the faith out of anger or spite but out of the critical thinking that my educators had modeled and encouraged.

There is an irony in this. The university I attended was designed to produce lifelong, faithful members of the Mormon church. They hoped for graduates who would marry in the temple, raise children born in the covenant, and carry the script of faith forward into the next generation. This script did reach me. There was a time when I was faithful. I attended church, studied scripture daily, and prayed day and night. I cherished the words of the prophets, taught Sunday School, participated in temple ceremonies, wore the temple garment, and prayed that I would find an eternal companion and be prepared to fulfill my God-ordained role as a wife and mother. The script was a part of my life for several years, even during times when I was struggling with my faith. I sincerely believed that this script was sacred and ordained by God. Still, as my education provided me with the tools needed to examine my faith, I found the courage to deviate from the script and to do so without shame.

I would be remiss if I were to allow anyone to believe that I harbor any resentment toward my undergraduate experience. I recognize the difficulties, but I also cherish much of my time at that university. The people who showed me kindness and love are dear to me, and their impact did not end at graduation. It was because of them, the empathy they extended, the curiosity they modeled, and the care they provided, that I chose to pursue a career in student affairs and higher education. I hope, in my own work, to share that empathy with others.

CONCLUSION

The experiences reflected upon and analyzed in this article are uniquely personal, but the concerns they raise are not. Scripted curriculum is not limited to religious universities. It exists



whenever an educator prioritizes compliance, conformity, and predetermined ideals rather than curiosity, connection, and the actual students in their classrooms. When this occurs, the relational conditions that empathy requires are diminished.

The concern that education can produce academically capable graduates who lack anything more is not new. In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis (1943/1947) spoke of what happens when individuals are educated without moral and emotional formation: “We make men without chests and expect out of them virtue and enterprise” (p. 16). The warning was clear in the 1940s, and it is clear today. When someone is educated without prioritizing their moral and emotional formation, we cannot be surprised when they fail to demonstrate the virtues that were never modeled to them. One such virtue is empathy. The result is graduates who have been academically shaped but not truly known. They cannot be reasonably expected to extend what they have not received. Still, not all hope is lost. As bell hooks (1994) taught, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12).

Reflecting on my educational journey reminds me of Simon and Garfunkel’s (1970) song, “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” As an undergraduate student, empathy and human connection were a bridge over the troubled water of scripted curriculum and religious pressure. I did not always have access to this bridge. My environment attempted to construct one out of rules and shaky theology. That bridge did not hold. The bridge that would prove to be sturdy enough was built by those who, in Pinar’s (1994) terms, accompanied me through the ongoing process of examining how my personal and intellectual history was actively shaping the person I was becoming. It was built through curiosity rather than compliance, through relationship rather than redirection. Simply, the bridge was built through empathy.

Joseph Smith (1842/1921) wrote 13 statements that describe the basic doctrines and practices of the Mormon church. The 13th article reads:

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things. (p. 58)

In a way, I still believe this. My belief is no longer in the religious doctrine. It is in the virtues that I have seen embodied by some of the most impactful people I crossed paths with throughout my undergraduate education. These are people who listened, asked what I thought, and never led me to believe that my belonging was contingent upon my religious beliefs or my obedience. In doing so, they embodied this article of faith more fully than any script could have enforced. They were honest, benevolent, and good. They had hope in me, which I leaned on when I had no hope in myself. They extended empathy to me and, in doing so, taught me about extending empathy to others. As I enter the field of student affairs and higher education, I hope to be for someone else what those educators were for me.

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WALK WITH ME

AN EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

By Kasi Jordan
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Over the years, I have learned that telling my story can be empowering and even therapeutic. There's some truth to this, because in my current role as an elementary school principal, parents often come in to vent and don't have any other requests beyond that. There is a feeling of freedom that comes after being given the chance to be the narrator of your story. Here, I tell my professional story—a story of a little girl who never wanted to be a teacher, even though I grew up in a family of educators. When thinking about my professional story, there are more highs than lows and even moments that make me feel I defied the odds as a student and woman of color. My trajectory seems to be in contrast to others like me, and by that, I mean like me racially.

THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE TRACKS - HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Growing up on the right side of the tracks literally changed the trajectory of my life. Maybe even saved my life. I grew up in a neighborhood that had a set of railroad tracks that ran right through it. Those tracks were so close that our windows would shake when the train barreled down the tracks. This train was symbolic of the line that I never got to cross, not because of race but because of the perception of the community “over there.” And to add another layer to this community divide, children who lived on the opposite side of the tracks attended a completely different elementary school from those on my side. Now, let's be clear. Even on my side of the tracks, most lived a modest, blue-collar lifestyle. This blue-collar lifestyle benefited from the work of Marian Spencer, who in 1974 was the NAACP Education Committee Chairperson. She undertook the “most important case in the fight for school desegregation in Cincinnati: *Mona Bronson et al. v. Board of Education of the City School District of the City of Cincinnati* in 1974” (University of Cincinnati Libraries, 2026, para. 3).

The work of Marion Spencer promoted the redrawing of district lines and an increase in busing. These results are the root cause of the luck I mentioned earlier. And I now believe that the true name for that luck is more like some sort of spiritual inheritance of all that Mrs. Spencer embodied, because our next move as a family was to a home on a cul-de-sac that had previously been owned by none other than Mr. and Mrs. Donald and Marion Spencer. I spent a decade in that house, but let's return to our original story and home.

Children on my side of the tracks were bused to an elementary school in an affluent neighborhood. This school was a Blue Ribbon award winner. It sat in a beautiful neighborhood surrounded by elegant homes and manicured yards. Children from my neighborhood were the diversity for this school. We were the African-American students bused into a white community. The children on the other side of the tracks were also African-American but attended school in our neighborhood, a school that lacked affluence. It was an underachieving school with minimal support from the community. Even in the present day, the school is home to a student population



that is 76.4% African-American, and 98.8% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged, compared to the school I attended being 20% African-American and 22.9% Economically Disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, 2024).

I had four African-American teachers who were the prettiest women I had ever seen. I wanted to be Mrs. Flora Kavanaugh because she treated me like I was somebody. She never treated me like I was not deserving to be where I was at that moment in time. She made me feel valued. Unfortunately, I have no memory of what I learned outside of a few isolated experiences. But I do remember how all of my teachers made me feel.

For example, in Mrs. Boatwright's first-grade class, I remember her teaching us how the letter /e/, when placed at the end of a word, "jumps back" and makes the middle vowel say his name. I also remember sitting in Mrs. Walter's fifth-grade class watching the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger. But it wasn't until fourth grade that I, for the first time, felt left out of an opportunity. I was good in school, and school was easy for me. However, I didn't get the letter in the manila envelope like so many others in my class. In that envelope was an invitation to be a part of the QUEST gifted program. I'll never know why I was overlooked, but what I do know is that Mrs. Yvonne Neblitt, an African-American teacher, called my mother and advised her to advocate for my admission into that program. My mother did what she was told, and I got in. I had a successful experience in QUEST, and my mother is forever grateful to Mrs. Neblitt for seeing something in me that others ignored. This situation reinforced my mother's belief that hard work in school did count for something. The part that my mother didn't know was that research consistently shows that teachers of color have higher expectations of students of color, which leads to more students of color being referred to gifted programs (Love, 2018).

The rest of my elementary school career was nothing memorable. I was a good student who didn't get in trouble, so every day was basically the same, just an uneventful blur. I have no memory of the curriculum taught, and I definitely didn't know whether what I was being taught matched what those who lived on the other side of the tracks were taught. Completion of elementary school led to six years in a building that I will always remember.

A GREAT MIDDLE AND A BETTER HIGH, UNTIL THE BUZZ WORE OFF

Middle and high school took place in the same building, a school that was nationally known and recognized for its decades-long track record of success. This school, which was recognized by the College Board and *Newsweek*, allowed me to walk the halls and sit in classrooms as my authentic self. The six years spent in this building were memorable to say the least. It almost felt like the teaching staff got to teach whatever they wanted to teach. There didn't seem to be any mandated learning from the Ohio Department of Education, no need to put I-Can statements and objectives on the board. The script seemed to be original to each teacher. In my Junior year, I took an Ethnic Studies class taught by Joe Yoshimura, and it was then that the curriculum I experienced felt authentic. My teacher had the agency to teach how he wanted to teach and not be worried about any sort of curriculum mandate.

When my high school career came to an end, the next chapter lacked any clear direction. It was in that moment I realized that I lacked any sort of post-secondary plan. Hearing stories from friends made it sound like they had a plan because they worked closely with their high school counselor. My high school counselor was an old white lady who looked like she had been born before college was even invented. I don't think I met with her even once. How did this happen?



How did I end up out in the real world without a plan? My mother has always said, “When you don’t know, you don’t know what to ask.” This could not be truer than it was in that moment because my mother didn’t attend college. She knew nothing about making a plan for college, nor did she know the steps to take to gain admission into a reputable college program. Was this why, in her adult years, she valued learning so much? I’ll never really know, and at that point, it really didn’t matter. I needed a plan. I needed some kind of road map that was going to help me become a productive citizen in society.

THE COLLEGE DROPOUT

With no plan and no money, the only option afforded to me was to stay home and go to the local university. This wasn’t where I wanted to go, but it was what I settled on, and it was the biggest mistake ever. School started in September, and I was back home by December. One would assume I dropped out because it was too hard, but classroom success had nothing at all to do with my decision to drop out. I dropped out because a professor told me I didn’t know how to write. This took all the wind out of my sails because the national teacher of the year, a published author, had been my senior year English teacher. This same national teacher of the year had a research paper named after her, and after you successfully completed the paper, you received a t-shirt commemorating the experience and were given clearance to graduate. There was no way what the university professor was saying was true. But either way, I was crushed and went home to rethink life. Today, I believe that I experienced firsthand what it feels like to be a victim of academic spirit-murdering. “Academic spirit murder signifies that racism and other forms of discrimination have the power to spiritually and emotionally murder and destroy not only people’s dreams but also their very essence and desire to exist” (Revilla, 2021, p. 37).

TIME TO TEACH

Taking time to think and regroup, I did what most black women are expected to do: be strong, pull it together, and move on. Six years after leaving that university, I stepped into my very own classroom. I was responsible for 24 children, but the irony was breathtaking. My first classroom was just 1.6 miles away from where I went to elementary school, and my 24 children had been bused into the community. What an amazing opportunity to empower these young people—a responsibility that I did not take lightly. My principal was supportive but not overbearing, and the only requirement was that I use the Ohio State Standards to design my lessons. There was no script, no pacing guide, no road map. It was freedom to be responsive to my students. It was not easy work, but it felt natural; it felt culturally responsive before that was even a thing.

During my second year of teaching, I took my students to Atlanta, Georgia. This was a big idea, but my principal supported this idea and let me have total control of all of the planning. I had to put together something memorable because this was the first time leaving the State of Ohio for some of my students. We visited the Georgia Aquarium, the World of Coca-Cola, CNN news studio, and four historically Black colleges and universities. While there were no direct curricular ties to this trip, I know learning still took place. Pulling this off with kids from the inner city was something I’ll continue to be proud of because this trip provided exposure to something outside of their front yard. It allowed my students a chance to picture themselves on a college campus or in



a professional career. For once, the ceiling that usually restricts them because of where they come from was removed. I refused to be an educator with authority over children and use that power to tear children down. It was my responsibility not only to open minds but to open the world of possibility to these children. I had no clue that two short years later, I would earn my next degree and move on to administration.

YOU CAN CALL ME PRINCIPAL JORDAN

Becoming an administrator was exciting and scary at the same time. There is no script and no standards to follow. I often thought about how I would know if I were doing the correct thing or not. I remember having a feeling of wanting a safety net, and as my usual luck would have it, not only was there no road map, but I was expected to stand up in front of the entire school and hold an assembly after just three days on the job. Unlike my experience with the horrible professor who provoked me to go home, I nailed it. The feedback received affirmed that I was in the right place at the right time. I established myself as someone with confidence who knew what she was talking about. This was huge because my new job as a first-time administrator was at my former high school—another full circle moment.

Returning to my alma mater, I was acutely aware of the contrast I presented to the established leadership. Being nearly two decades younger than my colleagues and the sole African American on the administrative team, I occupied a space of profound visibility. I recognized that, for many students, I was not just a principal but a mirror. This connection became vital in our high-pressure environment, a school characterized by the fierce pursuit of academic excellence. Because I bridged a gap that age and race had previously left open, students frequently sought me out as a confidant, drawn to a sense of shared identity that softened the edges of an otherwise stressful, competitive atmosphere. This experience was not just beneficial for my students; it prepared me for the next stop on my journey. Working at my alma mater ended up being the last time that I would work in the city, as my next stop took me north to the suburbs.

As someone who has always lived and worked in a city, taking a job in the suburbs was a new experience for me. I walked into this new role with no background knowledge and once again without a script to order my steps. Many would argue about the limitations of a scripted experience, and I believe I can see the value of both sides. But for me, a script has been a safety net or, at the bare minimum, confirmation that I was pointed in the right direction. After seven years in my first suburban experience, I moved to a district that would be described as urban-suburban. It was in this place that I truly got to witness a scripted curriculum and the absence of teacher autonomy.

At my new school, students were placed in Reading classes based on their performance level, not grade. It is a system that prioritizes competency-based progression over chronological age. The instructional environment is lively with student collaboration and teacher-led instruction that happens in small groups. Students present in class with confidence because the learning is on their level. This setup also removes the stigma of retention and more closely mirrors a Montessori-type classroom, where multiple ages are in the same room. My role as the principal was to monitor the delivery of our scripted curriculum and remind teachers of the importance of only using the approved materials. It is important to note that only using approved materials is not synonymous with everyone teaching the same thing at the same time. Using the approved materials was our way of promoting a common language amongst instructors and easing transition if or when an



instructor needs to change groups. The overarching goal is to be rigid in structure but fluid in application.

After more than a decade of using this program, student achievement hit its highest point, four out of five stars on the state report card. While this level of achievement was exciting, why did it take us over a decade to get here? Does this level of achievement really defy the arguments against a scripted curriculum? Powell would suggest that it does not because the result is that “literacy is reduced to mastering a series of decontextualized skills and recalling discrete bits of information. Such managed curricula ultimately deskills teachers by eroding their decision-making authority” (Powell, 2017, p. 110).

How is this possible? I have spent my entire career ensuring I am not a barrier to any student’s growth and success. I have prided myself on being someone who creates opportunities for teachers. I have tried to be transparent in my care for their well-being, not knowing all this time that I may have caused my teachers to feel anger, resentment, and guilt because they were forced to implement this reading program with fidelity.

All that time, I thought I was doing what was right, but was I doing what was easy? I found myself caught in the middle of what I wanted for my students, especially the black and brown ones, and towing the company line. I was holding everyone accountable. That is a good thing, right? To get another perspective on this, I reached out to my network of sister friends.

FRIENDS, BUT MORE LIKE SISTERS

I learned early on that I needed to have authentic professional relationships to really transform the spaces in which I worked. The relationships that I have formed along the way within my journey in education have been very rewarding. I have managed to link arms with six other African American women who give me advice, make me laugh, and show up in all kinds of supportive ways when I need them. Forging relationships is imperative to my social battery because we are often the only people of color in our professional spaces. This affinity group is my safe place.

My friends and I have some common experiences, such as being African American women who have worked in white, affluent school districts, as well as principals who have worked hard to ensure that the state report card that bears each of our names reflects the time and hard work that we have invested in our schools. One of my friends was adamant that a scripted curriculum set the bar extremely low, and this was the reason why her students never experienced any success on the Ohio State Assessments that we are required to administer each spring. She argued that the bar was set so low that, when faced with a higher-level assessment in the area of Reading, the students didn’t stand a chance. They were underprepared. As I listened to my friend, I couldn’t help but reflect on my experiences with curriculum and how this challenged my understanding of what it truly is.

CONCLUSION

Thinking about curriculum through the lens of my own educational journey has highlighted the limitations that are inadvertently placed on teaching and learning. I can admit, there was no script for my Ethnic Studies class, and I flourished. I felt seen, heard, and understood. There was



no script for the trip to Atlanta, Georgia, and all of my students gained something from that experience. The scripted curriculum that exists in education today, to some degree, offers a sense of predictability, but it can also be predictable that a child, specifically a black or brown child, will be invisible in that classroom. A child will be expected to conform to the norms that ignore who they are and where they come from. I now see that it is my duty to encourage my teachers to be vulnerable and see the human side of their students in addition to their blackness. This is how we begin to change the system that has conditioned us, me, to believe the script is comfortably correct.

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SCRIPTED CURRICULUM AND ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

By Elijah Fenwick-Sanders
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In my teaching career, I have found that scripts are like old paper road atlases that, as a young driver, I always had in my car. They are useful navigation tools to adapt to my classroom environment, not a script that is blindly adopted for a reality that does not exist (Timberlake et al., 2017). My course in American history is a vehicle for my students and me to explore the world and our shared histories. Our map is the Ohio model curriculum. My goal is to teach them to understand how the map works in order to see how history has developed to the present in order to navigate the road they will drive on as self-governing, democratic citizens.

While the script, or content standards, can be utilized as a guide, it must be applied to the road as it is because that old paper atlas will not predict the weather or warn you of the potholes, traffic jams, or speed traps that lie ahead. The script will not help me get all my students where they need to be in order to learn—in order to feel connected. The use of innovative technology, like GPS, can be an upgrade to old methods, but attention and critical thinking are required in case it tries to guide you into a lake. Learning did not magically become easier with new technology; we just have new tools. Scripted curriculum, such as that used by the “No excuses charter schools” do not teach democratic engagement centered on civil discourse and civic engagement. Instead, they apply rigid scripts that foster compliance, social control, surveillance, and punishment—the antithesis of a self-governing citizenry (Golann, 2021).

Ben-Peretz and Flores (2018) argued that education should provide access to common knowledge and critical thinking skills that are tailored to students and their communities’ unique cultural contexts. I teach my course in a school community that touts itself as one of the most diverse public high schools in the state of Ohio. I often teach pupils from different racial, ethnic, and religious contexts with a variety of documented IEP, 504, and ELL accommodations. A rigid script simply will not meet the learning needs of my students. In order to be an effective educator, I cannot deny the diversity of my students. I have a legal and civic duty to provide them with equitable learning opportunities. I shape my content to be inclusive so my students can see themselves as historical actors who, one day, may exercise their own agency as responsible democratic citizens. To do otherwise would be a rejection of their dignity and a disservice to their education.

Neo-liberal education policies propose that market-based privatization initiatives, focused on school choice and accountability, will result in a more effective and efficient education system than the public school’s status quo. Harris (2023) provided an economic-based analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of the market-based voucher approach. He found that the structure and function of schools in a market-based approach do not meet the assumptions required for efficiency under effective free markets systems. He argued against the use of market-based solutions for schooling due to the negative impacts the choice has on the school community, a lack of access to good information about schools, a lack of options for parents and students, the economic burdens caused by switching schools, the lack of flexibility in the demand for schooling, and the lack of the ability to monetize intellectual property. Harris (2023) demonstrated that school systems and the pupils they serve are too complex and unique to apply market-based philosophies; thus, when implemented, these philosophies have resulted in unequal educational outcomes.



Neo-liberal scripts that are disconnected from the communities they intend to serve and the pupils they propose to educate take away the creativity and joy of learning. The truth of the matter is that humans are not computers, and their knowledge cannot be assessed through a battery of tests. Intellectual development is about giving in to a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world—navigating the complexity of the world with a community in order to solve real world problems. A teacher must create a learning environment conducive for this learning by inserting joy. As Poetter (2006) argued,

the joy in teaching comes from the exercise of our passion and the remaking of our passion into learning by students ... [through] collaborative, mutual ground of meaning-making, one in which the parties are free and equal, working toward completion of themselves, becoming all that they can. (p. 275)

A script cannot accomplish that task. In fact, it can suck the joy, creativity, and critical thinking out of the entire process of learning as the teacher relinquishes their expertise to the rigidity of an adopted script (Powell et al., 2017).

Lacking a legitimate free-market system, neo-liberal policies and the centralization of knowledge into rigid scripted curriculum will lead to an illiberal democracy—that is, a democracy that no longer represents the majority. Instead, it would reflect the monied powerful elite while the majority is taught compliance. This would be America’s version of an authoritarian state veiled in the colors of Old Glory as it hollows out our Constitutional institutions and collective social contract. On the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, our national purpose, it is time for the American public to push back against corporate centralization of every human interaction and reclaim their rights to self-government. There is no better place to start than our public school systems.

FRAGMENT 1: THE DRIVE FOR MORE

I still remember my 8th grade homeroom and English teacher, Mr. C. He was a beloved teacher in my middle school. He had a number of scripts he adapted in our classroom. From reflections about the book, *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), to the memorization of Robert Frost’s (1916, 1923) poems: “The Road Not Taken” and “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” Each year a different class, each year the same materials. He adapted the material to his pupils and encouraged discussions about what the material meant in our young naive minds.

He and his best friend and colleague, Mr. P, would perform SNL parodies of Hans and Franz at school assemblies as they encouraged students to be active, lift weights, and laugh. They would always dress up, sing, and dance to the band Creed in the hallways in the most cartoonish ways. This was a magnificent method for cracking through our middle school, pubescent angst and bringing joy to the schooling environment. I learned to seek joy in the predictability and mundaneness of our middle school scripts. Yet, one simple announcement from my middle school principal, “Teachers, please check your email,” disrupted the order of this schooling.

I was in the middle of taking an ISTEP test. As a perennial bad test taker, it was my least favorite part of the year—a week of filling in scantron tests with no genuine understanding of why I was doing it. I was caught in feelings of anxiety, stress, and insecurity as I questioned my own intelligence and capabilities. I always plotted how I could hide my scores from my “naturally



smart” peers. During these tests, the school was locked down like the “red door drills” that would become routine in my professional teaching career. The animal cracker snacks were nice, though.

But today was different than any other standardized test I had ever taken or administered. The principal broke a rule. He made an announcement during the test—a big no-no, break from the script and from the predictability. When the test was over, Mr. C collected all our materials. I remember a sense of fear and dread in his eyes as he said, “I don’t know how to explain this, but our country might be under attack. I am going to turn on the TV and answer your questions as best as I can.” The date was September 11, 2001. That day I watched 2,977 people die on live television.

It was a moment in time that everyone who experienced it will vividly recall. Panic, fear, and uncertainty gripped the American people. I wondered, how could this happen? What do we do now? My teachers gave me a sense of calm, that the leaders of our country would protect us from anything like this happening again. Reflecting upon that moment, I realized the instability of our world.

The rest of the day was a blur, but I remember my peers were panicked. They thought our small town, with a GE factory and oil refinery, could be next. I came to realize that a lot of Americans felt this fear amidst the chaos of the day. I remember my mother breaking from her script. For the first time ever, she knelt down with me to pray in front of the family bible. The gravity of the situation washed over me. Something terrible had happened, and it was not going away anytime soon. I learned the power of faith in a crisis.

Ultimately, though, the aftermath of 9/11 would be my break from the sense of normalcy of life. I just had not realized it, yet. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued that the end of the Cold War marked the triumph of western liberal democracy and free market capitalism as the perennial form of global governance. Through 9/11, though, history had come alive again. Change and uncertainty had taken hold.

I still remember President Bush’s (2001) news conference on October 11th where he tried to reassure Americans by hanging onto the “end of history” script. He told the American people they “have got to go about their business. We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don’t ... where we don’t conduct business, where people don’t shop” (para. 23). Shopping? We are really talking about shopping? Even in my adolescent brain, these words fell flat. They failed to reassure me; in fact, I was outraged. I was not trying to hang onto the past. I was searching for leadership to guide me on how we could meaningfully contribute. A self-indulgent trip to Wal-Mart did not seem like it would help.

The neoliberal fantasy that the only virtue and goal in life was to make money and live the American Dream was too shallow. Within the year, the USA Patriot Act (2001) would create the modern security state and militarize the police. Within two years, the Iraq War began, and I realized that sometimes those leaders I was taught to trust acted recklessly. The old scripts would not help. By the end of high school, I knew I wanted to be an American history teacher to inspire the next generation of citizens, not consumers.

American history has demonstrated time and again that, without a sense of collective security and communal cooperation, individuals are pressured to give into their fears and impulses that increasingly turn personal sovereignty over to a security state or centralized and ostensibly more knowledgeable other because the alternative is deemed too risky. We see ourselves as too ignorant or we simply fail to act. Amid this fear, I wanted to teach the courage of historical actors in our past.



FRAGMENT 2: AUTHORITARIAN EDUCATION IN ANOTHER FORM

My first paid teaching position was in China. Graduating from college in 2010, there was no teacher shortage in the United States like the ones that nearly every state in the Union is experiencing today. In fact, neoliberal financial policies, which fetishized deregulation and free market principles in every aspect of human interaction, had crashed the global economy in 2008. Few were held accountable, with many bad actors getting a government bailout. Many teachers delayed retirement to recover their pension, 401k's, and home equity losses. School districts tightened their belts for the inevitable funding loss and some had to freeze hiring and wages. Main Street bailouts were an afterthought. It was a bad time to look for a job. So, I was left with the choice to live at home and work 60 hours a week as a substitute teacher by day and in-home care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at night or move to China to teach Oral English.

I chose China, thinking it would add perspective, experience, and credibility to my social studies expertise, which it certainly did. I opened myself to a new culture and place in the world where I was humbled to assimilate to the norms as a guest in a place that was completely different from my own upbringing, yet I found meaningful connections. I discovered joy in trying new foods and customs. I was privileged to meet new people and experience the community that the culture served. I understood much of what John F. Kennedy (1963) said in his American University Commencement address: "Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal" (para 23). In the local Chinese school where I worked, the teachers, students, and parents all strived and worked for what was best for their family and often their wider extended family. Yet, the stakes were high.

Anecdotally, I was told that many parents had to make the choice of spending their life savings on their child's high school tuition, in the hope they will make enough money to provide for their parents in the future or use the money for their own retirement. Often, the success or failure of this choice depended on a student's scores on the Gaokao national college admissions exam. This led to an immense amount of pressure on the students. There were stories about some schools placing nets outside student dormitories to prevent potential deaths by suicide. On my campus, during Gaokao testing, the school was locked down with armed guards as security checked the ID of every person who walked on or off campus.

Day-to-day, I interacted with students who asked for help in dealing with the stress and pressure as they studied nearly 20 hours a day, 7 days a week. I never had a great answer because I could not relate to being a teenager with the family's entire future on my shoulders. They were kids, but they had to grow up quickly. So, we practiced their English by talking about the NBA, Gossip Girl, and the WWE. I related to teenagers who were not all that different from the students I taught at home in America. Yet, their lives were entirely different.

I also heard stories of unaccountable students, one in particular comes to mind. This student may not have scored well on the Gaokao, but their family could afford tuition at any Big 10 University of their choosing. Following a semester of playing video games and skipping class, this student received an academic expulsion. Apparently, his father literally flew halfway around the world to speak to the dean and bribe him to allow his son to stay. At that time, the offer was rejected with contempt. With 15 years of neoliberal education policies to work their magic, I am unsure if the same could be said today. For many Chinese, this exchange would be a great dishonor to the family and their social face. Yet, regardless of culture, money and power often have the ability to hide many distasteful behaviors.



The hubris, corruption, scheming, and vice of our base human impulses highlighted in the historical documents known as Federalist 10 (Madison, 1787) and Brutus 1 (Brutus, 1787) are universal. In these documents, the founding generation argued whether a large republic could survive the tyranny of the majority, or passionate minority, that was willing to sacrifice the rights and freedoms of others for their own destructive self-interests. Federalist 10 argued that our large republic and its diversity of interests would save us from the consolidation of destructive factions, while Brutus 1 argued that it would be our downfall, as we would be governed by incoherent and unrepresentative laws of exceptions.

Historically, America has leaned on a notion of civic virtue in which we made the right choices for the benefit of ourselves and our community. We strived to give every child an opportunity to acquire knowledge in our public schools. We held those destructive to the communal interests accountable through the rule of law that was built through the representatives of the people's interest. Sometimes at a great reward. Sometimes at a great expense. It was never perfect. Yet, there was a consensus that we were trying to build something better for future generations. In our current neo-liberal form, our civic virtue has diminished into virtues of power and profit while we face the prospects of an illiberal democracy.

FRAGMENT 3: THE PANDEMIC DISRUPTION

When I returned home, I was relieved to be employed in the American education system that aspired to educate all students. While the Chinese education system was demanding, I felt that it was counterproductive as it placed so much emphasis on the result of a series of tests. I believed the pressures placed on students to memorize so much information stifled their creativity and sucked the joy out of learning. Lifelong learning would be fleeting as burnout became inevitable. I also believed that any perceived deficiencies in the American school system were due to America's goal of educating all students, something that the Chinese system did not attempt to provide. Sure, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top emphasized student test scores as the primary accountability measure for schools and teachers, yet I felt that high quality instruction that fosters the growth of knowledge and critical thinking would be reflected by those measures. I was naive. I would come to find that the inadequate funding of all public schools, the growing gap between the rich and poor, as well as the undermining of public schools by education profiteers would shatter any notion of an adequate or equitable public education system in the United States. The full realization of this reality would not come to fruition until nearly 10 years into my career as a public school teacher.

On March 12th, 2020, the wheels fell off of any notions of a useful script. I recall the buzz in the air because it was already coming through on social media.

"Is school going to close, Mr. Sanders?"

"I am not sure, just going to have to see what happens."

At the end of the day, there was an announcement: "All teachers need to report to the media center immediately after school." The Covid-19 pandemic had officially entered my reality.

The schools were closed, teachers were to pivot to asynchronous learning for the next two weeks, which turned into 3 weeks, then the remainder of the semester. Students were not allowed to fail a course. Scheduled online learning attendance was optional. Sitting in the comforts of my front porch rocking chair, with an exceptional group of students, I led an online AP exam review. We hung onto the student-teacher connections we built over the course of the year—connection

we did not know how much we would miss. We held a drive through graduation. I would not have a classroom full of students for another year.

The following year was all online learning, with a hybrid option by the end of the year. The changes to the learning environment were rapid and consequential. School relationships were severed, and distance was created. But the most severe impact was on the relationships that never formed over that year that could have, potentially, lasted a lifetime. There was no ah-ha moment in March when a student finally got it, no inside-jokes or pop culture banter that is inevitable when given the opportunity to interact with people over a long period of time, no story 20 years from now reminiscing about each teacher's quirks from freshman year—the one they tried to provoke, the one they could get away with anything, the one they were afraid of, the teacher who was exceptional at their craft. These human connections were severed by the security students were forced to find in their homes. The crisis of the present was prioritized over any possibility for the future. Everything seemed directed towards our immediate security and comfort. I often said that any teacher who liked the covid classroom didn't like teaching. It would take years to reconnect.

When it came to finding out when the pandemic would end or the science would catch up, reliable sources of information were difficult to find. Many Ohioans turned to the Governor's daily updates, "Wine with DeWine" as some would affectionately call it, as the governor provided more straightforward updates about the pandemic. He was not afraid to say he did not know while laying out how he would find out. He respected the expertise of health care workers and researchers. State and local sources provided reasonable and tangible ways we could help and be safe in our communities. Yet, the updates from the White House could easily be derailed by musings about injecting bleach, which just resulted in more confusion, fear, and anxiety. We were renegotiating the relationship between the citizenry and their government. Who is in charge anyways? Where is our source of stability and hope coming from? The world was spinning so much faster.

By the summer, when the George Floyd and lock-down protests began, I realized that everything was being called into question. No one was really in charge as local and state governments were simply responding to each crisis as it came. The science and research couldn't keep up, so research was rushed. Inevitable mistakes were made to meet the needs of the current crisis. The credibility of many institutions we used to depend on was lost. Anyone with an internet connection could now claim to be an expert.

The divisions in America were revealed by the prioritization of the problems we faced: Who's an essential worker? What businesses should be open? What about shelter, food, and health care for non-essential workers? What's the social distance space now? How long should we isolate before we travel? Where do you find tests? Should schools open? What about the health of elderly guardians? Teachers? Who decides? What are the best practices? Are the kids alright? Are we really talking about a party at an influencer's mansion? What's a Tiger King? It was a top to bottom crisis.

It seemed like no one wanted to be held accountable for the inevitable inefficiencies of our government. Our society was gripped by anxieties and fears that were previously unimaginable, yet in many ways became our norm. While the virtuous did their best to help and profiteers made a fortune, most of us were living in the middle. We lived life on pause. We survived day-to-day without much hope for what the future may hold.

As the hero worship of public educators and health care workers turned toward villainy, it was clear we would be held accountable for the pandemic failures. While coping with all the resource-shortage and trauma-based effects and training of the pandemic, a script was a welcomed



assistant—landing strip from crisis teaching. Yet, we did not understand that, by following a script, teachers were handing over their expertise, creativity, and agency in their classrooms.

The script was also a push for control, a “necessary” oversight by heavy handed politicians. Scripts emerged as a consequence of the fear and anxiety that ran throughout our society. The cooperation of the early days of the pandemic shifted to an atmosphere of confrontation and brinksmanship from parents who soured on perceived “DEI-wokeism.” Control was sought from lawmakers responding to fears and anxieties of their constituents. Control was pushed by education profiteers who saw a moment where they could attack the sanctity of America’s public school system to push their privatization policies. Social media companies gained control of students’ minds by profiting from their attention. The backlash had begun.

It is remarkable how much people have forgotten about the pandemic. My adult life will always be framed between pre- and post-pandemic periods like my pre- and post-9/11 childhood. As the country began to slowly open back up in 2021, the shift against public schools was clear as another round of culture wars would drag them through the mud.

The pandemic pushed America into a renegotiation of the boundaries between the individual, home, local, state, and federal government’s rights and responsibilities. The lines between the public and private sectors were blurred in this renegotiation. Yet, we the people, the public, have not had an honest reckoning that this renegotiation is happening. We are used to distrusting the public institutions that were designed to serve the public interest, not profits. Yet, there was a tangible transparency, through school board oversight and access to public records about what was going on in these institutions for people who cared to look. And now? We are handing over these public institutions to private interests with no transparency, accountability, or oversight.

We know that the profiteers are winning, and many want to wash their hands of it, to seek peace in a time of conflict. Similar to forgetting that the pandemic occurred, we do not acknowledge that we are losing our democratic republic and our public schools. The barriers of screen-based media, the stratification of trusted sources of information, and income inequality have led to stark differences in the lived reality of the people. Americans are divided more than we care to admit. We easily harp at teacher unions protecting “overpaid” and “unaccountable” teachers while we ignore technocrats traumatizing our children with their products, politicians profiting off their positions and access to information, or corporations price gauging consumers with substandard products. Yet, our future is never set in stone. But if we continue down this path, the learning environment of the majority of public school students is bleak.

PROGRESSIVE FRAGMENT: OUR NEOLIBERAL NIGHTMARE

The rational end to these neoliberal public education scripts is the same as any other institution based solely on the pillars of profit and power. Public education will lose its moral purpose, creating gaps between its goals and the needs of the communities it serves until it ceases to function and exist. Without equitable access to public schools, an illiberal political system could develop where government services are only provided to a minority of people with financial capital and socio-political power.

When society only values profit, the real working class puts in 60+ hours a week, takes advantage of every opportunity they have, and will still come up short. It’s the American dream, but it is simply not their dream. They are no longer citizens; they are merely consumers for

corporate profit (Harris, 2023). In the neoliberal nightmare, where everything is commodified, the working class's inability to afford their homes means they live under constant threat of being forced out of their zip codes (Vaughn et al., 2022). The wealthy and powerful set the policies for lower classes out of a misguided belief that they know what's best for them, that they can cut costs, and provide more efficient education with fewer teachers, fewer staff, fewer intervention specialists, and also more technology, more modules, more consolidation of power and choice into the hands of a few corporations that lack transparency and are inaccessible for parental and community critiques. Yet, it will be marketed as their choice. In truth, we will be complicit in our own demise as we disconnect our self-interest from our contributions to our nation as a whole.

For parents of students in large, urban school districts, they could soon live in school deserts where pupils will sit at desks in school warehouses and learn from AI teacher, they will be given a state voucher to purchase technology for unsupervised home schooling, better yet for cost savings and the benefit of profiteers. These students will learn to become the arms, legs, and senses of AI, which will interpret the world for them and teach them to behave on the behalf of technocrats who are deemed more knowledgeable and more capable of responsibility and self-governance. As commodities, humans will become more expendable than the technology they serve.

In the school warehouses, students learn to complete AI-developed modules and obey the adults in the room. With rooms of 50-100 students, these adults aren't teachers; they are compliance officers. The administrators aren't master teachers; they're software engineers. It will be the final, neo-liberal, silver bullet of "reform" that brings on the end of public education and ushers in publicly funded, private education software that advertises its ability to provide multi-cultural education prompts and assessments specifically tailored to the students' learning needs. It'll even be cheaper than teachers, for a while. It'll teach pupils rote memorization and how to clarify what the software wants them to know with no oversight, no human connection—just numbers for politicians to run on in November and money for private profit interests. Cheating or authentic learning will not matter as long as the test scores and profits continue to rise. AI will not teach students how to think for themselves, to cooperate with others, to negotiate, persuade, compromise, or build something new. The pillars of republican citizenship will be stolen from the masses. The working class will be controlled in order to protect the delicate system of profiteering that was created on top of the ashes of the New Deal and the Great Society.

In order to escape urban school warehouses, there will be an increased demand for private schools. Their tuition will be artificially inflated so that even with a state voucher and tuition assistance, without being burdened by massive debt, the price is still out of reach for the working class. This is by design. Privatization will squeeze every dime and every commodity (i.e., student) from the government and from the public at the public's expense. Learning will become a secondary concern. All that matters in this dystopia is profit, efficiency, control, and power.

Parents will not really know where the money goes or why it costs so much, but the State Report card and Google once told them that their neighborhood public school was bad. Social media and their neighbors told them they were bad parents if they sent them there. So, they did not even try to find out for themselves, until eventually the opportunity was gone and the school warehouses were formed. Now, it is a world of education where you either profit or are exploited. The remnants of the middle class from a bygone era will barely hang on by paying increasing tuition in order to provide their child with some semblance of hope for a better life.

In the suburban and rural bubbles, increasingly desperate parents will silently live paycheck to paycheck in order to afford ever increasing mortgages to keep their children in a school district



that they are told actually teaches students. These schools have teachers who are real human beings with real resources and are places where students can create and learn how to use technology as a tool for profit. They have community, alumni, field trips, organized sports, and extracurricular activities. They have a cultural legacy to build upon, something the school warehouses will never attempt to build. Students in these schools have the opportunity to learn leadership skills, how the political and economic system operates to their advantage, and see the possibility of an American dream. There is an actual opportunity to go into a trade school or college. If they play by the rules and stick to the script, a potential life beyond surviving paycheck to paycheck is possible. Outside of temporary entertainment, they are scared of the inner-cities as they present a threat to their dream.

The real working class that everyone pretends to be a part of will know better. They know that the taxes and policies are written for the top and that the rule of law and prison only apply to the majority at the bottom. The entitled are not accountable, but the majority have to be to survive. They will not dare speak up, though, out of fear that they could lose the opportunity their parents worked so hard for them to obtain. They must listen to their teachers and take advantage of every opportunity they are given for 20 years, without error, and maybe they will be able to escape the cycle of poverty (Love, 2020).

In this future, most teachers are too ignorant to see the exploitation around them. They are the product of a successful career in neoliberal education. Some teachers know but dare not say. With AI teachers, there is no more teacher shortage. So, the ones remaining who run the systems are always afraid of losing the salary and health care that keep their family afloat. The real teachers speak in codes to allow for plausible deniability, to pretend that they did not provide their students with knowledge of how the world actually works. That's forbidden. Knowledge of the system is only for the technocrats and elites who benefit from it. After public schools have been destroyed and commodified, there is nothing left but the exploitation of the system for the benefit of the powers that be.

While American history demonstrates that change is inevitable, it has become my professional vocation and civic duty to ensure that this future never comes into existence. Yet, this cannot be accomplished alone. Through my experiences, I have found hope in the belief that the human spirit will prevail as the neo-liberal illusion of efficiency and control will collapse under the weight of its own indignity, hubris, corruption, and vice. Communities and camaraderie develop out of subjugation—where families protect their children from exploitative systems and citizens come together to prevent the nightmare from forming in the first place. We can always pivot back to an education curriculum that fosters democratic values, where every citizen and student is able to contribute to the learning processes, away from the centralized technocrats and their presumed expertise (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020).

SYNTHESIS: THE DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

As an educator of American history, the hubris of authoritarianism that runs throughout our society must be met with a certain urgency in each unit I teach. The pandemic era's sense of urgency to meet the need of the immediate crisis never subsided. But, I must slow things down for my students. These illiberal tendencies have to be taught and balanced with the humility, resolve, and commitment to courageous contribution that many historical actors exercised throughout our history. Students have to see that our history is built upon a series of choices, not inevitability.



They also need the space to be adolescents, to figure out who they are and where they want to fit in this time and place. They have to see that, through their traumatic experience, they are in kinship with people who built our present reality. Whether it was disease, wars, social injustice, or economic calamities, there is a peace in knowing that tumultuous times have occurred in our nation's past and that people have managed to see their way through, with joy and pride along the way.

I always begin my course in American history through America's first trial by fire: The American Revolution. This was when the people of the colonies began to see themselves as citizens, instead of subjects. In this unit, I set up a historical conflict between civic virtue and civic vice that we turn to throughout our study of history. I frame America as a project that is never complete—a place where each generation grapples with the nature of their reality and leaves something behind for the next generation to build upon. Sometimes this is constructive, sometimes destructive. Nevertheless, the Declaration of Independence established our national purpose: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Jefferson, 1776, para. 2). The Northwest Ordinance is our national charter—a way to build a nation based on the values of the Declaration that would include sustainable, democratic communities centered upon republicanism, contribution, and education and be void of subjugation (Black, 2020). Finally, the Constitution is the government structure that each generation could use and build upon to strive toward a more perfect union. The changes to the constitution necessary for advancing our union can be seen in its subsequent 27 amendments, which represent a power for change that our current citizenry and representatives have forgotten about, at least for now.

For weeks, we discuss the founding documents in order for students to understand the peril that people faced in that time. They learn that some of the founders were virtuous statesmen, while others were monsters of human depravity, and some were a bit of both. Yet, that generation created a system where people could work out their issues through negotiation, consensus building, persuasion, and compromise—where they used the system to mitigate the fear and violence with which their time and experience were imbued. They placed a lot of our country's future upon the hope that the enlightened statesmen would carry the day and that the people would give in, as Abraham Lincoln (1861) once said, to the "better angels" of their nature (para. 37).

The history of the United States teaches us, though, that sometimes the monsters win, that vice and greed can carry the day. Yet the lesson is that we persevere. The war is never over. The project is never complete. The people respond. Through 250 years of United States history, hope has survived in its own little pockets, waiting to disseminate into the next movement or awakening of the American conscience. Oftentimes in our history, we the people are not united. Yet, time and again our history has proven that a unified America is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. Whether that power is utilized for virtue or vice is our collective project, perhaps the ultimate project-based learning challenge of our lifetimes.

In February of 2026, I was teaching a lesson on the First Red Scare, including the Red Summer and the Palmer Raids. At one point, while we are looking at the KKK marching down Pennsylvania avenue in Washington D.C., a 15 year-old student blurted out, "I hate living in this country."

It was quick, more impulsive than thoughtful, but I was ready.

Without hesitation, I looked her square in the eyes and responded, "No. I need you to listen and listen real good right now. That story was not over, and you can't ever let people like that

define who we are. Do not give them that power. Their hate and hubris will destroy them. If you believe in something better, go out there and live it.”

I saw the resolve in her face, the agency of a citizen, that the perspective was necessary.

Make no mistake about it, America is in a crisis, and our students know it. While it may bring temporary comfort and predictability, no synoptic script will get us out of our current cascading crises. In fact, students will reject the script and the authority of teachers trying to push it (Ben-Peretz, 2018). In our times of great fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, we will be lulled to give in to an impulse to seek comfort in systems of security, entertainment, and assimilation, but American history shows us that this is not the way. The legacy of America is ultimately in its trailblazers and their recognition and utilization of our greatest asset: our diverse people.

As a teacher of American history in these divided times, my script in 2026 is to show my students our history while trying to get through Ohio’s model curriculum so that, when the next crisis enters my classroom, these will be the moments where Hess and McAvoy’s (2014) “political classroom” is activated. We will, then, be able to practice civil discourse to engage in conversations that ask: How should we live together. We will apply the knowledge and skills from history to provide clarity in our chaotic present. These events will be when my students get to see if civic virtue is real or if this whole experiment is simply a selfish free for all.

As a public school educator, I believe that every student should have a sense of dignity and personal agency to decide what they want to be a part of in their lives, be it virtue, vice, or somewhere in between. The state should facilitate equitable opportunities in our public schools for our students to learn and grow into responsible citizens. The people should have choices built upon rational thought and an acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes. But, more than anything, I want my students to know without a doubt that they are needed in this place and time. I want my students to discover and rediscover our history so that they can build strong, self-reliant communities that can weather the unpredictability and dangers of the world (Valdez, 2020).

Absent the testing and accountability regime, the masses who actually believe in the love and dignity inherent in their humanity will find the courage to seek the solutions to our problems through themselves and their communities and to define and reclaim their American dream outside of the self-interested, neoliberal scripts that led them here. They will volunteer their time and resources to elevate the youth and connect them to neighboring communities. They will invest in something real and create a true legacy. Their networks can connect young people not simply to technology but to more knowledgeable others who also care about their human dignity and civic virtue. They can become people who see the value of money but reject profit as virtue. They will learn the joy of a sustainable life, away from the fleeting joy of materialistic consumerism and the emptiness it inevitably provides. The community provides time, space, and resources to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic in order to understand the perversion of the free market and strive to create something new and sustainable. We can repay the education debt that diverse communities across our country have suffered due to generations of underfunded and under-resourced education systems (Love, 2020).

We must invest our efforts to build an education system and curriculum closer to the justice, self-governance, responsibility, and humility found within America’s foundational documents. This project cannot be simplified into rigid scripts or modules because it has never been built or conceived before. The members of each community must look inward to decide what they value and build bridges to each other. When we overcome our fears and embrace courageous agency, we can build something better than the curriculum of the past. It will be different. It will reflect



the reality that students experience. It will engage our diverse communities. It will be inspiring. It will be truly American.

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INSTRUCTIONAL CREATIVITY V. SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

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Guided by firsthand experiences with both exemplary and ineffective leadership, I developed a leadership philosophy rooted in ethical decision-making, support for instructional innovation, and a commitment to fostering meaningful student learning; however, these beliefs increasingly conflict with political movements toward scripted curriculum and legislative oversight, which have contributed to diminished instructional effectiveness, teacher demoralization, and reduced student engagement. These tensions are deeply connected to both my early experiences as an educator and my current reality as a school administrator.

ASPIRING ADMINISTRATOR

My understanding of effective leadership began to take shape in the summer of 2009, when I was seeking a position as a high school social studies teacher at a Florida high school. After submitting my application, I received a personal phone call within two weeks from the leader. During our conversation, she explained that she would like to hire me; however, I was not yet certified in Florida to teach at the high school level. She informed me that I would need to take and pass the Florida Certification Exam for high school social studies and then contact her once I had done so.

That evening, I immediately registered online to take the exam the following Saturday (in two days). After completing the online test, I received a printed letter indicating a tentative passing score before leaving the exam center. The following Monday, I called the leader to share the news. She invited me to meet with her the next day. During that brief meeting, she officially hired me as a full-time, 11th-grade American History teacher. This initial interaction demonstrated her responsiveness, decisiveness, and willingness to invest in her staff; all of these qualities would later influence my own leadership approach.

During my first few months in the classroom, I primarily relied on teacher-created materials and primary source documents because our textbooks were quite outdated. This was a change of teaching style, because in my previous district, I had successfully used the middle school *History Alive* textbooks and additional supplemental materials to support student learning and engagement. I appreciated their readability and engaging format, which helped students better comprehend historical content. This experience led me to research whether a high school version of *History Alive* existed. I discovered that they did offer a high school American History textbook covering the time-period I was teaching. I purchased a copy on my own to evaluate whether my students would respond more positively to the material compared to our existing textbook. In addition to improving student engagement and comprehension, adopting this resource would reduce the need for printing supplemental reading materials and better support my efforts to design meaningful, skills-based activities aligned to the readings. My students appreciated the organizational charts and critical thinking questions that aligned with the new materials rather than creating content from primary resources or our old textbooks.



For the next month, I selected passages from the new text and used them for in-class readings. Students consistently reported that they preferred these readings over the district-adopted textbook. Additionally, I collected data demonstrating improved performance on assignments that were more inquiry-based and engaging learning experiences when using the new material. With this feedback and data in hand, I approached the leader to request the purchase of a class set of the textbooks. I presented both student input and evidence of improved academic outcomes to support my recommendation. The leader approved the purchase of a class set of 35 textbooks for my American History course. This was an incredible sign of support and trust in my professional judgment (as a 28-year-old and fifth-year teacher), as well as a shared belief that student learning and engagement would improve with the new materials.

A few months later, some of my students shared their concerns about the state graduation assessment, particularly the reading portion, which several had not yet passed. I reassured them that the strategies we had been practicing would support their success, and I also committed to incorporating additional targeted skills and strategies to better prepare them. When they retook the assessment later that year, the results were incredibly rewarding. Many of the students who had previously struggled were able to pass. Their success reflected not only their hard work and perseverance but also our collaborative efforts with the 11th-grade English language arts teacher. We were extremely proud of their growth and determination. Additionally, the introduction of new reading materials played a significant role in their progress, as these resources helped strengthen both their engagement and overall reading comprehension in the classroom. This was all possible with the new materials to reference and our instructional knowledge on skills and reading comprehension, which further supports the need to support teachers' professional skills in creating lessons and activities that meet our students' needs.

The following year, we had a new principal who did not lead with the same style of leadership. During my time under their leadership, I observed a decline in school culture and professional trust. During those two years, I witnessed the stark contrast between the two principals' leadership styles. Observing my former principal build a strong staff and positive school culture and then seeing how quickly that foundation weakened solidified my desire to pursue leadership grounded in ethics, professionalism, and a commitment to people. As a result, I returned to Ohio to complete a two-year Educational Leadership program and earn my principal licensure. My decision was rooted in a desire to model the kind of courageous, student-centered leadership I had observed and to ensure that schools are led with integrity, consistency, and a clear moral compass.

My initial leader's leadership style and unwavering support impacted me professionally well beyond my role as a classroom teacher. Her example inspired me to pursue school leadership myself. One of the most defining moments of her leadership was during a difficult situation involving an assistant principal who faced allegations of misconduct that were later determined to be unfounded. Despite pressure from the district office to terminate the assistant principal or risk losing her own position, the principal chose to stand by her colleague and advocate for what she believed was right. Ultimately, she was removed from her role. Watching her demonstrate integrity and moral courage, even at great personal cost, made a profound impression on me as a young educator.

This experience shaped my leadership philosophy. My leader's confidence in data-informed decision-making and her willingness to support instructional innovation reinforced my belief that effective leaders must trust and empower their teachers. Over the past thirteen years as an administrator, I have sought to embody these principles by remaining reflective, supporting



innovative instructional practices, and carefully considering teacher input when making decisions about curriculum and resources. I strive to be reflective and thoughtful in my decisions, always considering their potential impact on student learning. Additionally, I remain mindful of innovative instructional practices and carefully consider teachers' rationales when they request new materials, ensuring that decisions are grounded in what will best support student growth and engagement. This commitment is evident in the development of a strategic textbook and program rotation plan in each district where I have served. By proactively planning for resource updates, we have ensured that students and staff consistently have access to high-quality instructional materials that support effective teaching and maximize student learning outcomes.

REALITY V. CONVENIENCE

After serving two years as a secondary school principal in another district, I transitioned into the role of Director of Curriculum and Assessment. This was an exciting opportunity and a new challenge. Early on, I met with our elementary staff during their Teacher-Based Team meetings to understand the support they needed following their first diagnostic assessment of the year. These initial meetings were positive and forward-thinking, laying the groundwork for future conversations as we began analyzing data and planning Tier 1, 2, and 3 supports for students.

One grade level team demonstrated strong data practices, effectively using their results to group students across three classrooms during intervention time. Other grade levels, however, were more focused on upcoming assessments and addressing deficits within their individual classrooms rather than using a collective, data-driven approach. This led to a broader discussion during our September faculty meeting about what data teams were collecting and how it was being used. Together, we created three charts outlining Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 data. Through this process, we identified inconsistencies in assessments, data collection, and data usage across grade levels. It became clear that, while we were data-rich, we were action-poor.

As a staff, we agreed on the need for a more comprehensive, cohesive system, supported by only one or two programs as resources. We began by identifying the specific skills and standards that needed to be assessed, then evaluated what our existing tool, i-Ready, covered and where gaps remained. To address those gaps, we added Heggerty and a fluency assessment. Next, we reviewed curricula that were rated "green" on EdReports. After evaluating five programs, we selected two to pilot for the remainder of the year. Ultimately, teachers chose one program in particular due to its comprehensive design and the ability to deliver instruction without piecing together multiple resources. The staff expressed strong enthusiasm for having a cohesive program that streamlined planning and instruction. However, as we anticipated, with the loss of personalized learning and tailoring lessons to our community and students' needs, the interest and fidelity in utilizing the program wavered. As a team, we had to meet and relay expectations that the resources are just that, resources to help staff with teaching and to align terminology and expectations for students. This was not to replace the strong lessons and activities that had produced results. After our meeting, the staff was much more at ease, with some concerned about the use of the program with fidelity and not getting the results that they had desired. We reassured them that the program is there as a resource, but they are the professionals who can interpret the data to know what students need more than an external company's product.

These experiences are some of the reasons why I am wary of school districts being encouraged or required to adopt scripted programs that can limit a teacher's ability to adjust lessons



daily to meet students' needs. Over the years, I have witnessed some of the best teachers in our profession design engaging, responsive lesson plans that inspire even the most reluctant learners to trust their guidance and perform to their fullest potential. It would be a significant loss if this level of professional autonomy were diminished in favor of rigid programs that must be followed each day.

PROGRAM ADOPTION OR SUPPORT?

One of my most memorable roles was being hired as a district leader to improve district performance and student learning. Coming off the fast pace of transitioning between schools, I entered the position energized and eager to begin. I vividly recall my first meeting with the building leaders. I was ready to collaborate to understand where we were and then to work together to determine where we needed to go. To support this, I scheduled a meeting with two of our leaders and prepared a set of guiding questions I would have wanted as a new leader. My goal was to gather meaningful insight into our diagnostic assessment data, as well as identify grade-level strengths and areas for growth. However, the meeting did not unfold as intended. When I raised the idea of revitalizing teacher-based and building-level teams to strengthen collaboration, one leader became visibly frustrated. I shared that I was told her staff was feeling somewhat isolated and that school pride had declined since returning from home instruction during COVID. In response, she left the room, immediately began texting staff, and later returned, accusing me of misrepresenting information. As a result, the meeting stalled, and we made little progress in understanding the school's needs or student outcomes.

I later adjusted my approach by meeting with each leader individually, which proved to be far more productive. These conversations gave me a deeper understanding of each building and its capacity to foster a strong educational environment. During one of these meetings, a leader shared that they had never been expected to serve as an instructional leader and had instead managed the building more like a small business. This insight was striking. It revealed both a significant gap and a meaningful opportunity for growth. I began to recognize the untapped potential within the staff and students, which challenged me to think more intentionally about how to support the development of the entire school community and strengthen its instructional focus.

Part of that support included implementing a streamlined diagnostic tool to monitor student growth over time across grades K–12. This goal progressed over the next two years with the adoption of the diagnostic in the secondary school first, then the following year in the primary grades. We also developed a curriculum rotation plan to accelerate getting high-quality instructional materials into teachers' hands. While this served as a secondary support, it played an important role in aligning instructional language and skills, helping ensure continuity for students as they progressed from one grade level to the next. While it is important to ensure that teachers have updated materials as resources for their daily instruction, please do not confuse this with a scripted curriculum. The state's requirement to implement a high-quality instructional program is important, but the level of usage of the program is what merits a teacher's skills and role in the classroom. Needless to say, we adopted an English language arts program first and followed the next year with the mathematics program. This rotation permitted our staff to all have access to the same materials that were aligned with progression and expectations. We then set time each year to have our teams meet to review the new materials and adapt their curriculum maps with that



alignment. The use of the model curriculum and grade level expectations really helped staff to determine what skills were required at each grade level and how to scaffold them accordingly.

This process further highlights the importance of curriculum alignment while also illustrating the slippery slope between adopting a program and relying on a fully scripted curriculum. In three different districts across Ohio, we used similar alignment processes to strengthen student learning progressions and improve coherence across grade levels. While I understand the rationale for curriculum alignment, I remain cautious about moving toward scripted curricula that reduce the teacher's role to that of a disseminator rather than an instructional professional.

The ongoing lack of coherence among curriculum, standards, and instructional practices reflects broader concerns that many state governments are attempting to address through the adoption of scripted programs. However, as Pinar (2012) argues that teachers are not technicians of curriculum implementation, but intellectuals engaged in ongoing interpretation. This perspective reinforces the idea that teachers are reflective practitioners who must be empowered to personalize learning in ways that meet the diverse needs of their students, while still being supported by effective leadership and meaningful accountability measures.

These concerns point toward a future for our schools that we may neither be fully prepared for nor willing to accept for our students. As Poetter (2025) notes, teachers must make sense of curriculum in ways that respond to their students and contexts. This perspective highlights the critical importance of teacher autonomy and professional judgment, both of which are elements that are increasingly constrained in today's educational landscape.

EXPECTATIONS MAY NOT BE FULLY REALIZED

At the beginning of the school year, our staff engaged in positive opening meetings that established an encouraging and collaborative tone. The first few weeks reflected this momentum, suggesting a strong and productive start. By mid-September, however, our focus shifted to organizing the first round of formal observations. I explained the evaluation process, including the requirements for new teachers, those rated ineffective, individuals on improvement plans, and teachers in the final year of their contracts. Teachers subsequently selected observation dates through a shared scheduling system.

During this time, I met with the math department chair for her pre-conference. She outlined a structured lesson that included reviewing homework, addressing challenging problems, and introducing new content through modeled examples, followed by guided and independent practice. As we discussed, her students, she identified several who were struggling academically, including students with disabilities and those at risk due to attendance and performance concerns. She described her efforts to support them, including modifying assignments and planning small-group instruction, though she acknowledged that these strategies had not been as effective as she had hoped.

During the formal observation, I noticed a disconnect between her planned instruction and student engagement. A significant number of students had not completed the assigned homework, yet the lesson proceeded as scheduled without additional review or adjustment. While Mrs. Smith maintained the structure of the lesson, only a small group of students actively participated, and several others appeared disengaged or unable to follow along. This was uncharacteristic of her

typical teaching practice, which had previously demonstrated responsiveness and adaptability to student needs.

In our post-conference, I asked the teacher to reflect on the lesson and whether anything had impacted her instruction that day. As the conversation progressed, she became emotional and shared that the district's expectations to adhere closely to the scripted mathematics program had significantly affected her teaching. She explained that she no longer felt empowered to make instructional adjustments in the moment, even when she recognized that students were struggling or disengaged.

This revelation was deeply concerning. The teacher had consistently demonstrated strong instructional practices, including the use of engaging, student-centered strategies such as projects and hands-on learning experiences. These approaches had previously fostered meaningful connections and improved student understanding. However, the current expectations appeared to limit her ability to respond to her students, ultimately diminishing both her effectiveness and her enthusiasm for teaching.

This experience illustrates what Poetter (2025) describes when he notes that what is intended in curriculum policy is rarely what is experienced in classrooms. While the adoption of scripted curriculum is often intended to improve consistency and outcomes, its implementation in this context has constrained teacher agency and reduced the flexibility necessary to meet diverse student needs. As a result, the policy's intended benefits are undermined by its practical impact on classroom instruction.

At the core of this challenge are two competing interpretations of how instructional materials should be used, either as a supportive tool or as a strict guide. These differing approaches can significantly impact curriculum alignment. When used with flexibility and shared understanding, materials can promote consistent vocabulary and instructional strategies across grade levels, helping students experience a coherent progression of learning. However, when implemented rigidly or inconsistently, they can create confusion for students and limit opportunities for meaningful connections.

This tension also places teachers in a difficult position. On one hand, they are expected to follow structured and at times scripted programs with fidelity; on the other, they are tasked with being responsive, innovative, and engaging while addressing individual student needs. Balancing these expectations can be challenging, particularly when programs feel inflexible and limit opportunities to connect content to students' lived experiences.

Compounding this concern is the possibility of extending similar expectations to other content areas, such as mathematics. The prospect of adopting equally scripted programs raises additional anxiety among staff, as it may further restrict instructional autonomy. Moving forward, the challenge will be finding a balance that maintains coherence and alignment while still empowering teachers to exercise professional judgment and respond effectively to their students.

CONCLUSION

Today, as an administrator, I find that the leadership values shaped by these experiences are increasingly at odds with current policy trends. Instructional adaptation depends on teachers' ability to respond dynamically to student needs, as "instructional adaptations require teacher thinking in response to a student stimulus, which determines a teacher's subsequent action" (Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 187). However, the growing push for scripted curricula, often requiring



strict adherence with minimal deviation, undermines this essential professional capacity. Restricting teacher autonomy not only limits their ability to meet the diverse academic, social, and cultural needs of students but also diminishes opportunities for meaningful engagement. Research supports the importance of teacher flexibility, noting that empowering educators has “the potential to move policy away from restrictive, scripted curricula and toward the development of professional learning to support teacher adaptability and improve educational opportunities for those students in our most vulnerable communities” (Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 193). Similarly, culturally responsive instruction has been shown to enhance outcomes for underrepresented students (Powell, 2017).

Taken together, these experiences and research findings reinforce my belief that effective educational leadership must prioritize ethical decision-making, trust in teacher professionalism, and a commitment to instructional responsiveness. As policy environments continue to evolve, it is critical that school leaders advocate for practices that honor these principles and ultimately serve the best interests of students.

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BUILDING FOUNDATIONS

BETWEEN THE SCRIPT AND THE MOMENT

By Monica Rothe
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I am sitting at my desk in my center. The front desk is quiet for the moment. A student has just left after asking where to find an office on campus. My laptop is open in front of me, connected to two additional screens. On those screens are three documents I have written during this semester. They began as course assignments, pieces developed through the *currere* method (Pinar, 1994). Now they sit beside one another, asking for something more.

The space around me is not silent. Someone answers a phone call. A printer hums and stops. Students move in and out of the center. A tutor leans over a paper with another student. Nothing here remains fixed for very long. Questions arise unexpectedly. Plans shift. Meaning is made in conversation. This space feels far removed from the classrooms imagined and remembered in my earlier writing, yet those pieces now seem connected by a common concern: What happens when curriculum becomes so scripted that it leaves little room for human presence?

Scripted curriculum is often justified through the language of consistency, accountability, and efficiency. If every teacher uses the same materials, follows the same pacing guide, and delivers the same lessons, then students are presumed to receive equitable opportunities to learn. Yet scholars have long cautioned that standardization can narrow curriculum, constrain teacher judgment, and reduce learning to measurable outputs (Au, 2011; Timberlake et al., 2017). What appears simple and scalable may also flatten the relational and interpretive dimensions of teaching.

This article uses the *currere* method to examine scripted curriculum through lived experience. *Currere* invites educators to move backward, forward, analytically, and synthetically through their own educational histories in order to understand curriculum as lived rather than merely planned. The article moves through regressive, progressive, analytical, and syncretical moments, weaving autobiographical narrative with curricular analysis to examine how scripted curriculum shapes educational experience. One movement returns to a moment of vulnerability within a structured classroom experience. Another imagines a future in which structure has become totalizing. The final movement reflects on my present work with students and the growing tension I feel between efficiency and responsiveness in educational spaces. Together, these experiences lead me to a central argument: Scripted curriculum is not inherently the problem. The problem emerges when scripting eliminates the interpretive, relational, and responsive space where teaching and learning actually happen.

CURRERE AS METHOD

Curriculum is often discussed as standards, maps, pacing guides, assessments, and materials. These forms matter, but they do not capture the full experience of teaching and learning. Pinar (2019) argued that curriculum must also be understood autobiographically, through lived experiences of those who inhabit educational spaces. *Currere* shifts the question from “What should be taught?” to “What is the nature of my educational experience?” That shift matters

because schools are not merely delivery systems; they are places where identities are formed, constrained, affirmed, and negotiated.

Pinar et al. (2002) similarly framed curriculum as a complicated conversation rather than a fixed package of content. This understanding opens space for contradiction, memory, uncertainty, and self-reflection. It also resists the notion that educational quality can be fully captured through fidelity measures or standardized scripts. Curriculum, in this sense, is not only what is written in guides and pacing charts. It is also what is lived, remembered, feared, revised, resisted, and carried forward.

This autobiographical approach matters particularly within conversations about scripted curriculum because standardization often attempts to minimize variability and unpredictability. *Currere*, however, asks educators to attend closely to precisely those moments. Emotional responses, discomfort, hesitation, and uncertainty are not distractions from educational experience; they are part of it. The body, memory, and self become important curricular texts. Through *currere*, educational experiences that may initially seem isolated or personal begin to reveal larger tensions related to power, professionalism, agency, and control.

This method also aligns with the work of Eisner (2002), who emphasized artistry, judgment, and connoisseurship in teaching. Teaching requires noticing what is emerging in the room, responding to subtle cues, and making decisions in conditions of uncertainty. When curricular systems undervalue these capacities, they risk mistaking uniformity for quality.

My experiences were initially written separately, yet together they reveal a coherent inquiry into structure, agency, and presence. They ask what kinds of educational moments endure in memory and why.

THE FAIRY TALE

We were in a small, windowless classroom on the fourth floor of one of the university's older academic buildings. Once the door closed, the room felt sealed in. The walls were blank. The fluorescent lights cast a flat brightness over everything. I was a mathematics major enrolled in a graduate English course, already feeling out of place before class began. Our assignment was unusual: not to analyze a fairy tale, but to tell one. We were to immerse the class in it. I was last to present.

When my name was called, I walked to the front carrying notes clipped neatly together. They were, in effect, a script. I had practiced them. I had tried to memorize pacing and transitions. I asked the class to close their eyes and began: "Imagine you're standing at the edge of a forest." As I spoke, I described cool air, damp earth, leaves moving, and a crooked cottage glowing faintly in the distance.

Inside my body, however, I was tense. My heart raced. My face felt hot. Part of me focused on pacing the script correctly while another part hovered outside the moment entirely, embarrassed by my own participation in it. I remember thinking that storytelling in this manner felt unnatural to me, almost illegitimate. I was someone who solved equations. I understood numbers, procedures, and solutions. Narrating forests and voicing fairy tale characters felt deeply outside the identity I had constructed for myself academically.

Looking back, I realize that this discomfort was not simply performance anxiety. It also reflected assumptions about what kinds of knowledge and expression are valued within different educational spaces. Mathematics had taught me to value precision, certainty, and correctness. The

assignment required imagination, embodiment, vulnerability, and interpretation. I felt exposed because the activity demanded a different version of myself than the one I had learned to present comfortably in academic settings.

Then, I lost my place. The next line disappeared from memory. The pause felt long. I swallowed, reshaped the sentence, and continued. No one opened their eyes. Someone inhaled sharply during a tense moment in the story. That sound steadied me. It meant they were with me.

This moment has stayed with me not because the presentation went perfectly, but because it did not. The educational experience deepened precisely when the script failed. I had to improvise. I had to respond in real time. The moment still depended on my judgment, pacing, recovery, and willingness to continue. The script supported the experience, but it could not replace me within it.

Research on adaptive teaching suggests that responsive instruction often depends on such moments of adjustment rather than perfect adherence to predetermined plans (Vaughn et al., 2021). Powell et al. (2017) similarly found that teachers working within scripted programs still sought ways to exercise professional agency, even in constrained settings. Structure, then, need not erase humanity. Structure becomes problematic when it seeks to replace the educator rather than support them.

Many classrooms function this way. Teachers prepare lessons, anticipate misconceptions, and organize materials. Yet they must still respond to students in real time. Planning can scaffold meaningful work. It becomes harmful when fidelity matters more than presence.

At the time, I understood the experience primarily as discomfort. I focused on my nervousness, my performance, and my relief when it was over. Years later, however, I began to reconsider what actually stayed with me from that room. What remained was not simply the anxiety of standing in front of others but the realization that, even within structure, the moment still depended on human judgment. The story could not continue without me responding, adjusting, and moving forward.

THE SCRIPT

Years later, I imagined another classroom.

The room is bright, but not in a warm way. Thin ceiling panels cast a steady white glow. Rows of desks face a wall-sized screen. Each desk holds a tablet. Students sit in identical chairs waiting for the lesson to begin. At the front is not a teacher's desk but an instructor station with a docking panel and monitor. When I place my tablet on the panel, the room wakes up. "Lesson 14: Narrative Immersion Exercise." A timer begins counting down from three minutes.

Prompts appear automatically. A forest image fills the front wall. Wind sounds play through speakers. My tablet tells me what to say next: "Imagine you are standing at the edge of a forest." The words feel familiar, though I did not write them. Graphs begin measuring heart rate, focus level, and engagement. A notification appears: "Instructor adherence to curriculum script: 99%." Students later receive their scores: "Narrative engagement level: Proficient."

The number unsettles me because it transforms teaching into compliance. The system does not measure whether students are moved, challenged, or changed by the experience. It measures fidelity. In this imagined classroom, success is defined not through interpretation or connections, but through accurate implementation of predetermined steps. Even engagement becomes quantifiable. Bodies, attention, and responses are translated into data points that can be tracked, stored, and evaluated.

This imagined classroom extends tendencies already present in contemporary schooling. Au (2011) described high-stakes accountability systems as a form of “new Taylorism,” where curriculum and instruction are increasingly standardized, fragmented, and monitored. Golann (2021) similarly documented cultures of control in tightly managed schooling environments where compliance becomes central.

What disappears in this room is not only teacher creativity. What disappears is interpretive space. The educator no longer decides when to pause, when to linger, when to redirect, when to simplify, or when to follow curiosity. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argued that scripted curriculum can undermine democratic educational possibilities by narrowing opportunities for deliberation, responsiveness, and shared meaning-making.

I find myself thinking about the forest in the earlier classroom and the forest projected across the wall in the imagined one. In the first room, the forest emerged imperfectly through memory, nervousness, pacing, and improvisation. The scene shifted slightly depending on my delivery and the reactions within the room. In the imagined classroom, the forest is optimized. The sounds calibrated. The prompts are timed. The experience unfolds exactly as intended. One version depends on interpretation. The other depends on adherence.

The classroom also reveals a paradox. Everything works smoothly because nothing is left open. The system has solved unpredictability by eliminating it. Yet unpredictability is often where education lives. Questions emerge unexpectedly. Misunderstandings surface indirectly. Trust develops in unscripted moments. A classroom can become orderly while becoming less human.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

I return to the center.

A student walks past my office and hesitates. “Do you have a minute?” she asks. She sits down, opens her laptop, and reads a sentence aloud from an assignment. She asks if it makes sense. We talk through it. She rewords part of the sentence, pauses, reads it again, and smiles. “That sounds better,” she says.

Another student arrives holding a planner. Midterms are approaching. We spread his schedule on the desk. He points to classes, work shifts, obligations, and deadlines. I ask questions. He pauses to think. Then he begins crossing things out and rearranging blocks of time. “I think I should move this,” he says. We revise the plan together. Nothing about the conversation follows a script. It moves according to what he says, what he understands, and what he needs in the moment.

These scenes are not dramatic, yet they are deeply educational. They involve reflection, language, planning, confidence, and growth. They also depend on responsiveness. If I ignored hesitation, insisted on predetermined steps, or forced every student through the same sequence, the work would become less effective precisely because it would become less relational.

What makes these moments meaningful is not efficiency, but responsiveness. The conversations move predictably. Students pause, rethink, hesitate, and revise. Often, the most important part of the interaction emerges only after the original question has shifted into something else. A conversation about a sentence becomes a conversation about confidence. A planner becomes a discussion about feeling overwhelmed, managing priorities, or fear of failure. None of these moments could be fully anticipated beforehand.

These experiences have changed how I understand the earlier classroom experiences. Some educational environments resemble the earlier storytelling classroom: structured, planned, but still

human. There is room for forgetting, pausing, redirecting, and recovering. Other environments resemble the imagined classroom: tightly aligned, efficient, and complete, but leaving little room to move outside what has already been decided.

My understanding of teaching has changed since leaving the secondary mathematics classroom. At one point, I associated teaching primarily with lesson delivery, pacing, and content expertise. In my current role, I increasingly understand education through interaction and relational support. Much of my work now happens in conversation rather than presentation. This shift has changed how I think about curriculum itself. I no longer see curriculum only as what is formally delivered. I also see it in the pauses, adjustments, uncertainties, and negotiations that emerge between people in educational spaces.

Giroux (2004) argued that education must remain a democratic practice rooted in dialogue, critique, and human agency rather than mere reproduction of systems. The interactions in the center reflect that insight. Learning emerges through conversation rather than transmission.

I increasingly recognize that the moments I remember most clearly are not the ones that went exactly as planned. They are the ones where something shifted. A student says, “I don’t understand.” A room goes unexpectedly quiet. A plan needs revision. A question opens a new direction. In those moments, curriculum is no longer merely what was written in advance. It becomes what is happening now. Reading Poetter (2025) helped me begin to understand these moments differently—not as interruptions to curriculum, but as curriculum itself. His framing of curriculum as lived, reflective, and continually becoming has reshaped the way I interpreted my own educational experiences and the spaces in which they occur.

WHAT MUST REMAIN UNWRITTEN

I do not argue that all structure is harmful. Students deserve coherent courses, clear expectations, accessible materials, and intentional design. New educators often benefit from models and guidance. Institutions need some degree of consistency. Timberlake et al. (2017) noted that scripted curricula often appeal because they promise simplicity and equity. These desires are understandable. The issue is not whether curriculum should be planned. The issue is whether planning leaves room for professional judgement and human encounter.

All curriculum is written by someone. Decisions about pacing, content, sequencing, assessment, and instructional strategy are always shaped by particular values and assumptions. The problem emerges when those decisions become so fixed that teachers and students are left with little room to interpret, question, or reshape them in response to lived experience. A curriculum that leaves no space for uncertainty may appear efficient, but it risks reducing education to compliance rather than engagement.

A useful curriculum might resemble the notes I carried into the storytelling classroom: prepared enough to guide, open enough to adapt. A harmful curriculum resembles the tablet in the imagined future classroom: precise enough to control, complete enough to render the educator secondary.

Teachers are not merely implementers of content. They are interpreters of moments. Students are not merely recipients of lessons. They are participants whose questions, fears, insights, and misunderstandings shape what learning becomes. Vaughn et al. (2021) argued for adaptive teaching that honors responsiveness over rigid compliance. Bettina Love (2018) urged educators to pursue forms of schooling that move beyond survival toward freedom, dignity, and

humanity. Valdez (2020) similarly demonstrated how educators can “flip” scripted curricula through inquiry-centered and culturally responsive approaches. These works remind us that teachers need not accept scripts as final. Curriculum can be interpreted, expanded, resisted, and humanized.

Increasingly, I believe the most meaningful educational experiences are not the ones that unfold exactly as planned. They are the ones where something changes in the room. A student asks an unexpected question. A lesson slows down. A conversation moves somewhere unanticipated. These moments resist scripting precisely because they require presence. They ask educators not merely to deliver curriculum but to inhabit it alongside students.

Perhaps the most important parts of the curriculum are the parts that cannot be scripted in advance: the pause after confusion, the question that redirects the room, the forgotten line that requires recovery, the conversation neither person expected to have.

CONCLUSION

Another student appears at my office door.

“Can you look at this with me?” she asks.

I turn my chair toward her. She explains what she is working on. I listen, ask a question, and wait. She pauses, thinks, and tries again. The conversation moves in a direction neither of us planned before it began.

This is where I find myself now—between the script and the moment, between what is written and what is happening, between structure and movement. The room in front of me continues to change.

I turn to the student and begin.

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THE OPPORTUNITIES OF A DECONSTRUCTED CURRICULUM

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Knowledge is power.
I know what I know.
The more you learn,
The farther you'll go.
When you get an education,
You'll be taking a stand.
Knowledge is POWER
Get it while you can!

—Author Unknown¹

The phrase “the children are our future” is cliché. Perhaps those words are most famously recalled by Whitney Houston’s (1985) song, “The Greatest Love of All.” Throughout the video, there are vignettes of a young Whitney auditioning before judges, and they lead to Whitney walking on stage toward her younger self. The images “blend” and mature as Whitney continues to sing. She had an opportunity and grew into her destiny—to be a performer. She was exposed to opportunities that started with her mother, and those opportunities took Whitney to unimaginable heights. I strive to enlighten students about positive academic experiences and a pathway toward vocational or professional careers so they can become aware of the possibilities. Because children are our future, they need the space within the classroom to explore options in life. My outlook on this matter has stemmed from my upbringing and exposure to various modes of learning and experiences. I took those thoughts and experiences into my classroom as a teacher and now in my leadership as an assistant principal. I find opportunities to make students’ learning relevant so they can make informed decisions and find pathways to success.

MY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The nature of my educational experience (Pinar, 1994) included home, church, traditional school, and social experiences. Home was my first place of learning, and it was later that I realized not everyone has the same opportunities. I also realized that there are others who had even more experiences than I. Just as Pinar (1994) described his account of his educational experiences, mine too, are multidimensional. My learning began at home, then church, school, and social experiences. In these environments, I was given many opportunities. My upbringing allowed me to see what the world had to offer. My sister and I traveled to various states and attended plays, musicals, and museums. We took art classes and learned ballet and tap dancing. My mother even enrolled me in a Spanish class as an elementary student as an extracurricular activity. Our parents engaged with us at home, so school was not my only place of learning. We had expectations to get homework done and *read*, or play educational games on the computer, very different from the games available to students today.



The notion that “knowledge is power” is an ideal of the Black community. In Muhammad’s (2020) book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, she noted themes that emerged from Black literacy development, which was established in the 1830s when literary societies began to form (p. 23–27), some 100 years before the Harlem Renaissance. These societies were important as free Blacks in the Northern states needed to navigate life against the atrocities of racism. During that time, another era of intellect took shape. Intelligence was a tangible thought, and I hold it close to me still, passing it on to my children. That power, unbeknownst to me, grew as my education continued.

It didn’t matter if homework was assigned by the teacher or not. If I had weekly spelling words, my father had a task laid out Monday through Thursday to prepare me for the Friday spelling test: Monday—write each word 10 times; Tuesday—write each word in a sentence; Wednesday—use the spelling words to write a story, and Thursday—write the words 10 times again to be ready for a quiz on Thursday night. At the end of each week, I was expected to earn full credit on Friday’s spelling test. If summer was in session or school was on a break, I had to read a book a day, log it, and then write a summary of what I read. By the time I reached fifth grade, I realized not all students had the same expectations that mirrored my home life. I also realized that some students in my classroom worked at different levels. I was in the top reading and spelling groups.

Growing up, I thought the extra work was a burden most of the time, unless I was interested in the book I was told to read. During the summer, I usually didn’t go to summer camp but rather to a church member’s house. They were given instructions that I was not to watch television all day, but I had to read a book and draft a summary of what I read. However, when I became a teacher, I appreciated the care my parents took to nurture my education. I try not to labor my children with the same “learning structure” of my childhood because I don’t want them to feel the same pressure. Yet with similar expectation, I am helping them become participatory citizens who will make a difference in the world.

I expect more out of life because I have been shown how much is available to me. That is how my past educational experience “hovers over [my] present” (Pinar, 2004, p. 21); I want my students to know that the world is open to them if they take advantage of presented opportunities. Because I was able to travel, take lessons, and attend functions, I had space to think of my future and the infinite possibilities ahead. This mindset followed me into the classroom, but I didn’t realize it until I started teaching. I knew sharing the open world with students was imperative. The emphasis on education, at home and socially, set me up for skills that I needed in school, and I knew my ultimate career goal from a young age. I recall riding in the car with my father and telling him I wanted to be the principal of all principals. He corrected me and said the correct title is superintendent of schools. That was all I needed to know. Any person who asked me “*what do you want to be when you grow up?*” I always responded proudly that I wanted to be superintendent of schools. Since I already knew my career path, from elementary school, career exploration was easy for me. I didn’t have to waste time with the career aptitude tests that I had to take at various grade levels. Teachers had to differentiate instruction for me. The road was paved, and I stayed the course. Then, life took a turn, and after a few years of teaching, I became a stay-at-home mom, and I didn’t want to be in education anymore. My interests had changed. During any down time, I began to write and explore other opportunities, but after four years away from the classroom, life took another turn and pushed me back into education and then quickly into administration as an assistant principal.



My second year of teaching was at a charter school in a rural area of west Michigan. The students' backgrounds varied economically and socially. They were great students, behavior wise, and arrived at school ready to work daily. One day, during class (I do not recall the lesson, but we must have been talking about the future and careers—maybe even hopes and dreams), an idea popped into my head. At that moment, I took a break with them. This particular classroom was a computer lab, but it had carpet. Try to imagine some students lying all sorts of ways on the floor, across chairs, or with their heads down on the computer tables, or spread out across the room. I played spa-like music and began to speak in a soft-tone, like the voice you'd hear on a self-help playlist or relaxation video:

Me: Close your eyes and take a deep breath; breathe in and out. Whatever you are worried about or has your focus, let it go and just concentrate on my voice. Think about yourself now. [pause] What is something that you embrace? [pause] What is something you would change?

The pauses were to give students time to reflect and think; it was a process I did not want to rush. I only wanted them to hear their thoughts and background music.

Me: Whatever it is that you embrace right now in your life, would you take it with you? What does that look like for you? Where are you in life in that space? What are you doing? Wherever you are, is it a place that makes you happy?

This exercise continued for about 15 minutes. Though this exercise at the time seemed impromptu, I realize now this what I did as a youth—reflecting on what I did and what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go, and what I wanted to see. Sitting in class, I would think about my future and visualize expectations for my life and all the things that I wanted to achieve. I thought about the possibilities. I was able to do so because I was exposed to adults in my life, at home, church, and social events who were educated too.

DEVELOPING CURIOUS MINDS

Everything I do is for students. The nature of my educational experiences has been a puzzle piece, slowly building the full picture of my professional life (Poetter, 2025). The learning, the doing, and the knowing have been fragments of all sorts that are still building my puzzle. Being able to take those pieces and make improvements along the way when I'm in the position to do more seems to be part of my purpose in life. Because my heart is for students, I want the teachers' hearts to be, too. I think teachers should take personal care in teaching in a way they would if the students were their own child(ren). As an assistant principal, I view my students as my children, or more realistically as my younger siblings or nieces and nephews. During my time at home, I spent four years with my children. My job was inside the home, and I valued it. We filled our days and challenged our curious minds together. Much of the engagement activities followed Montessori methods. We visited library baby programs, museums, parks, and the Cincinnati Zoo. Similarly, students need to have the same age-appropriate opportunities. I take that same kind of love and care into school with me, wanting the absolute best for my students. Since I care for my students and view them as family, I look for ways to offer experiences that could enhance their



lives. At my current school, students attend Girls in Aviation Day (GIA), which is an annual event used to inspire girls to explore the various careers relating to aviation and meet women in those careers, which are typically dominated by men. Additionally, I have delivered various career path experiences for students outside of the classroom, such as field trips, college tours, youth workshops, and expos to help them explore unimagined prospects. Students need to see themselves in positive experiences that lead toward a path of success, raising hope and motivation, so students can make informed decisions about their futures.

Exposure is the most important driving force of my work with students who are considered underrepresented, so I try to shine light on opportunities in and out of school so they can take advantage and fulfill untapped potential. With this, it is also important that I give students space to take advantage of what is offered, designed to advance their education and employment skills. This may support students to see themselves in advanced places, discover positive pathways of success, and raise hope and motivation in them to return to school with a renewed spirit for themselves and their futures. My goal is never to force students to attend college, as some may choose another avenue, but rather to learn what more is available in this world. I hold this mindset for all students, even those who already have access to opportunities.

One thread of the school is to encourage students, holding them to higher expectations. Students attempt to reach the level they are told they can achieve, and they need accountability to attain that level. Curiosity is another way students can take accountability. Humans are innately curious and that can sometimes get confused with “being nosy” (Ostroff, 2016, p. 21). In the case of the classroom, being curious is great. It is an ideal that brings knowledge to students because they are in search of answers. George Benard Shaw (as quoted in Ostroff, 2016) said, “What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not the knowledge in pursuit of the child” (p. 1).

One of the easiest ways to introduce students to future opportunities is in the classroom is through the equity framework of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020, 2023), which allows students to engage in the curriculum using what she calls pursuits. The five pursuits she outlines are identity, skill, intellect, criticality, and joy. Each of these pursuits is an element of an unscripted curriculum and allows all students to positively connect with the curriculum. To fully engage in the lesson, students ought to be able to relate the lesson to themselves (identity). Learners can express what they know about the surrounding world, their own personal know-how, to complete a task. This allows pupils to think about their connectivity to the world around them—including their immediate environment, which is school, and what they have to offer as citizens. Students should be able to find pleasure in learning because they view the information as valuable and useful. Joy can be found because teachers are using various modes of instruction, through engaging conversation and activities, to help students acquire knowledge (Olovson, 2025, p. 2).

Ostroff (2016) agrees that curiosity is critical to student success in school. Teachers have the power to “nurture” that curiosity (Ostroff, 2016, p. 7). School itself is an exploration. Students explore because they are curious. Aristotle claimed that the desire to know is among the deepest human urges. Whether that exploration is in the woods, an attic, back of a closet, or in the classroom, learning takes place. Especially in high school, all the courses are introductions to discover student interests that will carry them into their future careers. Cross-curricular instruction should be utilized by adding career explorations that make the teaching even better. Students need to know how a particular lesson (or unit) can be useful in their future, or someone’s future; students need to know the purpose of what is being taught; they need to understand the why and how. Why am I learning this? How will this help me in life? Answering those questions helps build engagement, which brings joy, the fifth pursuit mentioned above. It is what keeps a student awake



and keeps life in the classroom. After elementary school, some classrooms lose the spirit of zeal/zealousness. The way school has been done in the higher grades is often very rigid because the pleasure (joy) is not found in the classroom; even the color is gone. In an elementary classroom, color brings joy and happiness (Muhmmad, 2023, p. 57). If you were to compare an elementary classroom room to a high school classroom, the brighter colors would be found at the lower grade levels. My classrooms had spurts of bright color that popped against the serene décor and earthy vibes to bring a sense of calmness to the atmosphere. Within that environment, I helped students feel calm, so they could focus and feel free to learn.

Teachers who remain curious keep their students curious too (Ostroff, 2016, p. 21). Those who do “play a critical role in helping students transform their curiosity into inquiry” (Ostroff, 2016, p. 6), even if that curiosity is based off wondering what their students are thinking. Teachers can take that thinking and dive deeper into a lesson for students to explore and connect to the world, thus, increasing the takeaway that students can carry into in their future. Deeper dives don’t happen with scripted curriculums.

UPCYCLING EDUCATION

As a learner, the curriculum pushes me to challenge the current curriculum model and gain experience in each position I take. Scripted curriculums are stilted. Districts that do not maintain pace with the changing world deteriorate in enrollment, the quality of teachers, and funding. So many districts have used the phrase, 21st century learner. How can a student be a 21st century learner when the teacher is of the 19th century? Recycling the lesson is no good—that’s laziness. Upcycling the lesson is the way to go. Being curious is thinking outside the box. If the teacher wants to reuse a lesson, they should evaluate how it was delivered, how students responded, and if the expected outcome was achieved.

Though I did not major in biology, I remember learning about Punnett Squares the most. I like learning about genetic traits and how dominant and recessive traits form. The body takes various traits from the male and female and aligns them into four options, one of which manifests to what is seen on the body, such as hair texture and color. If my teacher had introduced professions that work with genetics, I may have found a place in the world, but the math made me run away. Teachers could assign a profession to a small group to research. Students could connect their learning collaboratively to the greater world (Ostroff, 2016, p. 42).

People need to “unimpose” (I made that word up), meaning take the away the barriers, so they can change. Teachers would probably enjoy teaching and maybe not experience burnout (politics of education notwithstanding) because students would have too much fun to misbehave out of boredom. It is time for the classroom and districts to shake it up. Thinking outside of the box can lead to innovation; completing an in-service or student teaching semester can really make or break that hopeful teacher. This open mindset of an unscripted curriculum followed me into the classroom. As a young teacher, I appreciated the teacher textbooks with varied teaching strategies, real-world connections, technology integrations, and life skill suggestions to get me started. But if I used those, it was only for suggestions. I believed there was more that could be done within the classroom—finding ways to connect students’ world to the lessons—without being beholden to the textbook.

During my first year at a southwest Michigan school, I was hired to teach business and English classes. This job was also my first public school teaching experience. Prior to that, I taught



at two charter schools. Being new to the school and district, I did not have prior knowledge of the English department as being unfriendly. Though I was one of the younger teachers in my department, I did not fit in with the other youthful teachers who had already been friends. It did not matter, though, since I tend to bond with those more seasoned than me, so I quickly made friends with Melissa and Nancy. They informed me of the difficulties that lay ahead within that English department, knowing I would be challenged as an “outsider.”

A particular assignment was shared across the department for the English 10 classes. In one of my English 10 sections, a Special Ed teacher would sit with her student every day to assist him. This particular teacher also happened to be friends with the department co-head and tattled to her that I did not follow the assignment as the department intended. I opted for a different route because I did not want to follow a scripted curriculum. I prefer looking for more engaging ways for students to show what they know, instead of always relying on a worksheet or traditional assessment (quiz or test). My chosen differentiation was not welcome. Both co-chairs of the English department requested a meeting with me. They met in my room during my prep. I had a feeling, thank you Holy Spirit, that it was not going to be a good one, so I was prepared to hold my tongue, and I recorded the meeting in the event I needed a reference. The meeting I recall was arduous, as it was disrespectful and demeaning to my intellect.

In the end, I was told to follow their “rules” so that all students were receiving the same content. I would like to pause here and state that students *did* receive the same content, but I chose to deliver the lesson in a more engaging way that would allow students to be curious and ask questions. I don’t know if the problem was really me not following their scripted curriculum or if my intellect caused them to feel threatened. At the end of the year, one of those co-chairs wrote me an email of apology, acknowledging that her treatment of me was undue and thanked me for my unreciprocated kindness. That experience taught me to stand firm in my convictions, challenge the typical, and do what is best for students’ learning. I took liberties in the name of educational freedom (Love, 2019), so my students could thrive in their education. Great strides can be found in the freedom of education if students are given space to be curious, ask questions, and dig deep into their learning.

I don’t feel impactful enough in my current assistant principal position to challenge the status quo, yet. To do that, I would have to be a leader in the curriculum department. If I were able to spend more time as an instructional leader, my challenges would begin at the central office level with the curriculum department. I would push the concept that children are our future. I would find ways to improve the curriculum and encourage teachers to adapt the curriculum with their own research, insight, and activities. I truly believe that adding career and outside world connections would strengthen students learning. Following this new direction would open the door for students to discover the world in a safe place before leaving the “educational nest.”

Educators in my district have completed the training with Dr. Gholdy Muhammad and her staff. We were given her books to read and then completed training sponsored by the state department of education. A small group of teacher leaders within my building have even presented on the 5 Pursuits throughout the school year but were only challenged to start with one pursuit; that seems fair since the concept was new to everyone. However, the learning for teachers could have been more impactful if a sample lesson had been given to the whole group, modeling how the 5 Pursuits should be used in the classroom and how it could look in various subjects, while including career exploration.

In my district, our secondary program is the shining star. Students can enroll in early college courses while still in high school (dual enrollment) during their 12th and 13th year of high



school. After that 13th year, those students would graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree. The early college courses are taught by professors from the local community college. Additionally, some students choose to attend the vocational academy for part of the day and learn a trade. My district also has an aviation program that leads to a pilot's license. If career exploration was added consistently across the high school curriculum, so many more students who don't have plans to attend a four-year university could graduate from high school certified in a trade. Students who did plan to attend a four-year university could have an easier time selecting their college major.

As an educator, it is my goal—and perhaps my mission—to help students. Everything I do is for them. If students have the space to explore their learning and think about how their dreams can become a reality, we must let them lead the way. This mindset is a pressure that I have placed upon myself: challenging the current curriculum model, trying to be inclusive in teaching and broad in the theory of being curious to expose students to opportunities that would benefit their future selves. I believe that children *are* our future; if we teach them well, they *can* lead the way.

NOTES

1. I recall singing this song in Mrs. Rebecca Stewart's music class at Sing Sing Elementary School. I'm uncertain if she was the author. It has stuck with me, and it is so true.

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AN ARGUMENT FOR PARTICIPATORY TEACHING PRACTICES

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Readers of this journal are likely no stranger to the effects of new national and university standards that are sweeping across higher education. These standards, while they vary across each institution, often include scripted models of understanding higher education as a business investment rather than as an institution that primarily provides a robust education for students (Pinar, 2019). These systems of standards and the business models of most higher education institutions have led both faculty and students to feel more isolated in their educational experiences. Tenure track reviews rarely support co-authorship or community-facing work and one in two students are likely to feel lonely on campus (Anderson, 2026). When faculty are only rewarded for individual work, there is less incentive to research and publish with other instructors or students, which then puts a great burden on educators to fulfill their research requirements alone. Similarly, when students are in classrooms that prioritize individual, banking model learning, they are less likely to experience more diverse perspectives and engage with material that gets them to think critically about their place in the world (Freire, 1968/2000). These two isolating experiences are only a fraction of the kinds of isolation that exist on a university campus, but they participate in a greater narrative of unhappiness with the state of higher education that is present across the nation today.

Education as a whole has been suffering, with primary education systems struggling under national testing and standards and higher education pushing up against individualized business-models of learning. So why even bring up a dreadful reality when the topic of this special edition is meant to imagine a future without the standards as we know them? I believe it is important to understand where we are today to envision where we could be and who we could become. Throughout this article, I return to my own early days of teaching through what Pinar (1994) would call a “regressive” movement of *currere* to show how my early understanding of teaching, students, and the classroom helped to shape my current understanding of education as a university instructor. From there, I move into analyzing that past moment with current research about our present education system and our experiences with the aftermath of scripted curriculum. Finally, I end the piece by looking towards a progressive understanding of higher education through a constantly reiterative process inspired by participatory action research (PAR) methods (Jason et al., 2004). Ultimately, I hope readers will feel empowered to connect with other educators and students to grow a reciprocal and collective understanding of our educational experiences.

MY FIRST (STUDENT) TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Despite training, very little prepares you for your student teaching placement. Though I do not remember the circumstances of how I was placed in the classroom where I would spend the next year, the fact remained that I was about a 45-minute drive away and had to be there by 7:00 a.m. every weekday. At 20 years old, the fall of my senior year was spent balancing my two majors, English and Secondary Education, and making trips to my teaching placement. While I slowly



adjusted to the early morning, I watched my mentor teacher, who taught Freshman and Sophomore English, and began connecting with my students.

I remember that about halfway through the fall, as I was preparing my EdTPA (teaching certification) portfolio for what I would teach in the Spring, I looked at the curriculum that we were teaching and asked my mentor teacher, “I mean ... these books are pretty old. Can I design a unit with a more recently published book?” She chuckled, looked me dead in the eye and said, “No. We have to teach the exact same books as every other class in our school and in our district. Otherwise, we might create a competitive environment where students want to be in one class but not others.” It wasn’t that I disliked the books that we were teaching. But as later experiences with teaching showed me, these books had been taught for decades. While they still hold great merit for readers, they are not as up-to-date with current issues and reflections of living life. My students needed a way to connect with their current realities and see depictions of their lives and cultures in the literature, but using those texts was out of the question for the district I was teaching in.

We had the same lineup as many standard English 9/10 classrooms: *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Julius Caesar*, among others. These were the same books I had read in high school and the same books that my mentor teacher had read in high school. While we were fortunate that we didn’t have a scripted textbook that we had to teach from, between the novels and plays we had to teach and sticking to the newly established Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teaching was definitely standardized. Every lesson I wanted to plan that would engage students, mentally, socially, and even physically, had to be deeply scrutinized through the lens of the CCSS rulebook. I had to tie everything back to a standard, lest my administrator audit a class and discover I wasn’t teaching to the standards.

Both the EdTPA and the CCSS required me to be incredibly explicit about the lesson plans that I wrote and submitted. I had been taught by my institution to follow the format and use precise language that would appeal to administrators and exam reviewers. This was the same model I used to create lesson plans for substitutes and my mentor teacher when I had to take sick leave. To give a taste of the kind of language that I used, here is an excerpt taken from one of my old lesson plans:

After engaging students with the learning target, instruct students to open to Chapter 1. Explain that the main character’s name is Scout Finch, for that information is not disclosed until later. Have the students turn to Supplemental 3, the Character Reference Guide, and take notes as they learn about main characters. As one reads aloud, stop on the assigned pages from Supplemental 4

The lesson plans themselves were informative, but critically lacking warmth, depth, and engagement with students. Reflecting back now, I am ashamed of the clinical way in which I wrote these lesson plans. Their design contributed to stilted teaching and less engagement from my students. I did not have the language for engaging the whole child, as I would later learn in my career.

While I prepared in the fall for which class I would use for my EdTPA portfolio (2nd period, 9th grade English), I knew that we would be teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the spring, as every other 9th grade English classroom in our district would. What I did not prepare for was what my mentor teacher said to me when starting my spring semester of student teaching, “I leave next week for Hawaii. I will be gone for two weeks. You’ve got this!”

I was devastated. Not only would I not have the guidance of my mentor, but the semester had just started, and I was to be in charge of teaching all but one class period (which was already



co-taught with a Special Education teacher). I do not begrudge my mentor for taking a vacation, but I do still take some umbrage with her timing at the start of my student teaching semester.

Most of my peers only taught their EdTPA class (usually one class period) until the last month or two of the semester, when their workload would gradually increase as we waited for certification results. I, in the company of a district substitute teacher (who was largely there to observe), was now in charge of teaching four class periods without pay. My exam classes that I would teach were not until after her vacation, so that meant that I spent every night doing rigorous lesson planning, grading, and preparing for my exams. What should have been a shared teaching load during my exams now rested fully on my shoulders. Starting in mid-February, I spent most of my 45-minute morning commutes crying from stress, fear, and frustration.

These heavy emotions were due to a number of contributing factors. My traditional support networks of friends and family were out of reach at the time, which only contributed to the growing sense of isolation I experienced. Without an accessible network of teachers to connect with and learn from during my student teaching, the workload felt insurmountable. I was frustrated, and I could see that my students were frustrated as well. Their frustrations stemmed from a lack of connection to the texts that we read, a growing number of restrictions on student behavior from the school itself, as well as the average discontentment that high school students tend to experience around their age. While I cared deeply for my students and wanted them to succeed, I didn't have the language, support, or knowledge to help them through their high school journeys, something that I was aware of and also frustrated with.

The long drives every morning did not prepare my mind to teach, nor did the drive home settle my mind from the day's long teaching events. Instead, every drive was a reminder that I felt unsupported, alone, unprepared, and, ultimately, unhappy. This growing sense of negativity only skyrocketed one Wednesday. Ironically our school district was celebrating "Character Counts!" day to encourage students to be kind and supportive people when our school district received a school shooting threat. Another high school, about four miles away, was in sudden lockdown over a threat issued by an anonymous student, which in turn put my own school in lockdown. My students knew before faculty did. I remember being in the library and having my students gasp, huddle over their phones, and look around with panic in their eyes.

We cowered in the corner of the library, unfortunately up against a large glass window, for about 40 minutes while we waited for the loudspeakers to give us more information. We were all fortunate that the threat remained a threat and never was acted upon. This moment reminded me of an incredibly painful truth of teaching. Despite your love of the career and your desire for students to succeed, no one is immune from devastation, fear, and terror. We cancelled school the next day but returned on Friday. The mood from my students was different. They were stressed and anxious, something I was unable to relieve or even address. After all, there was work to be done and books to be read.

On top of the mounting mental and emotional stress at work, I felt as if my hands were tied to make any serious impact with my students. A number of them would leave school and go to work to help support their families or go home to help care for their younger siblings. Other students struggled to connect with texts that, while incredibly important works of literature, often did not reflect their lived experiences, culturally, racially, or situationally. Following the CCSS, my students had to constantly complete worksheets and what I can now identify as "busy work" in order to show progress towards the standards. While I wanted to update the curriculum and provide more engaging activities for my students, the CCSS and the lack of a teacher network that would have otherwise expanded my repertoire left me stymied. I was creatively stuck due to the



CCSS, and I was unable to respond to my students' needs in a way that felt meaningful for their learning in my classroom.

I couldn't imagine a way out of the stress. I never managed to make connections with my fellow student teachers. We were friendly when in person, but I wasn't a part of their get-togethers and discussions about teaching. My roommate had moved out the semester before, and I was returning home every day to the toy-hauler trailer that I called home for two years, sad and alone. I was a senior, inches away from my certification and diploma, and mentally trying to prepare for this experience to be my everyday norm. Instead of the classroom rejuvenating my love for teaching, I began to feel resentful of the institutional boundaries that were caging me in. Every day was a reminder that I did not have a robust teacher network of support and that I was burnt out from trying to support my students.

Approximately two weeks after the lockdown incident, I drove one early morning as the sun was rising, crying and shaking, thinking about going to teach. It was in that moment of deep stress and unhappiness that a realization, a thought, a voice spoke to me and said, "You don't have to do this." I remember my hyperventilating instantly stopped, and I stared blankly out at the sun. "You don't have to do this. Not right now or not ever, if you want. Consider it."

I was baffled by the thought. I had spent the last three years preparing to be a high school teacher. My sister, my mother, my grandparents, and countless relatives were all teachers. Teaching was in my blood. But in that moment, my mind or God or some other cosmic presence extended something to me that I hadn't extended to myself in a long time. Grace.

I spent the next few weeks driving and considering the thought. It never felt like a real thought or a real possibility. When I went home for Spring Break, my parents were gone, so I spent the week baking, alone and thinking about this intrusive thought. My parents would be disappointed, my education gone to waste. I ran through every possible reason to continue with my teaching career and every consequence if I chose not to. Ultimately, when my parents returned home and everyone was preparing for bed, I approached them slowly. "I have something I need to tell you..."

I was honest, I cried, and I resolved myself to not apply for any teaching jobs that year and to go home and find work in my hometown. It was a brutal decision, one that my parents welcomed as they had noticed my unhappiness, and one that I had worked to accept. At the end of the semester, when I told my mentor teacher and my advisor, I endured a long lecture on, "You're making the biggest mistake of your life. You are losing opportunities. The field needs you." Two weeks later, I drove home, my diploma in the passenger seat, uncertain about my future but full of a peace that I hadn't felt in over a year.

RECKONING WITH STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

My student teaching experience and the struggle I had with standards and feeling isolated is not an uncommon experience. Many of the issues that negatively impact beginning teachers are tied to issues with scripted curricula. Arising out of a particular fear in the 1980s that the U.S. was behind in terms of national education in comparison to other countries (Newfield, 2018, for higher education specifically; Pinar, 2019, for U.S. education generally), standards, assessment, and accountability became the path forward for curriculum design in education (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020, p. 200). Scripted curriculum often takes the power away from individual schools or school districts in determining the best education practices for their students and instead outsources the



responsibility to corporations or national organizations to determine what kind of learning opportunities students should complete.

The idea of standards, assessment, and accountability as a priority in our education system means that schools, at all levels, are held “accountable” for so-called “student achievement.” On the surface, this sounds great. Schools should absolutely remain accountable for teaching their students equitably and responsibly. But the enforcement of that accountability has come through national standards and assessment tracking, meaning students taking more nationally-distributed tests on which they would need high scores for their schools to earn more funding. This type of assessment at a national or even a state level erases the nuance and unique situations of every individual school, let alone the students themselves. While national standards may appear on the surface to be equitable, they are often ensuring a quality of “sameness” that is not attuned to the lived realities of a given school district. This is evidenced in numerous research studies, including the study of the implementation of the scripted curriculum EngageNY in New York State by Timberlake et al. (2017), where their interviews with educators found that teaching to standards flattens curriculum to erase children’s background experiences. This ultimately results in tremendous gaps:

The silence around equity issues allowed users of the scripts to avoid having to consider the complexity of diversity and the many ways that instruction could be personalized in their classrooms. In fact, it encouraged teachers to view equity solely as sameness. (p. 49)

The turn towards national standards and assessments produced Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the No Child Left Behind act, and a growing overreach of bureaucrats in the making of educational policy without consulting teachers (Karp, 2013). As a result, K-12 schools and universities are placed in national competitions with each other, with whomever can get the highest test scores receiving the most funding and, thus, reinforcing the underlying assumptions in the system. The No Child Left Behind act enforced national testing of schools in order for them to earn government funding while the CCSS had schools “teaching the standard” rather than teaching the individual children they served.

The enforcement of standards, assessments, and accountability produced what we know today as scripted curricula. For K-12 teachers, it is easily recognizable as CCSS and boxed curriculum sets purchased from educational publishing titans like Pearson and McGraw Hill. At the university level, it shows up in assessment and accountability-based number games that universities use to justify programs and departments. I now teach in higher education, where I am seeing the ramifications of standards and accountability regimes not only reflected in higher education’s institutional practices but also in how my students come to understand their own education and learning experiences. My students struggle to identify what learning practices best suit their needs, as CCSS and scripted curriculum have guided their every move since kindergarten. This makes it difficult for students to fail upwards, assess their needs critically, and explore their passions through research. Additionally, because of the business models of higher education, students navigate college as individual consumers of a ready-made product, rather than as members of a learning community.

The arguments for scripted curriculum, standards, and test-based funding are similar across all education levels: scripts and standards focus on critical learning skills and student-centered teaching and raise expectations for everyone to the same level (Karp, 2013). Perhaps the most important reasoning in defense of scripted curriculum is that it creates a “democratic” view of



teaching designed to help every student succeed. However, this concept of scripted curriculum as democratic is a hoax, meant to lure in students, teachers, parents, and investors of all kinds. Raising the standards to be the same for every student is heedless of the unique cultural, racial, and socioeconomic situations that children grow up in and the ways they come to know the education system. As Bettina Love (2020) teaches in her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, the standards, assessments, and accountability programs of the current U.S. education system adversely affect students of color in communities all over the nation. Democratic, standards-based education is largely built for white, male, upper-middle class students and is meant to enforce a white, colonized, and problematic education system.

When education and standards are designed for white, male, and upper-middle class students, marginalized students who have different access to societal resources and cultural capital cannot meet those standards. The system is designed so that marginalized students *cannot* meet those standards because they are not white, male, able-bodied, and socio-economically advantaged. Creating the same standards for every student means that the students who do not fit the mold and whose experiences are not represented in their learning turn inwards and “fall in line” with scripted practices in order to get out of education unscathed, diploma in hand. Dispassionate students and rigid systems of control lead teachers to be stymied, operating in systems of austerity and struggling to connect to their students, their colleagues, and ultimately to the love of teaching that drives a sense of fulfilling work in education.

Our education system, as democratic as it may be, is deeply broken, and the shards of its existence continue to harm students and communities. The answer is not to dismantle education, not at all. The answer is to demand better of our administrators, our politicians, and our community leaders in creating stronger educational communities that are rooted in belonging, learning, and connection instead of creating schools that treat students like customers to be cycled in and out for profit. Standards must change constantly and be subject to the unique situation of every school and district, something that the CCSS fails to recognize and universities fail to acknowledge. Constant change is costly, both in an economic sense and in a risk sense. As our schools behave more like businesses, cost and risk are two things to be avoided. But as educators, abolitionists, activists, and scholars, we know that “all that you touch, you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). We must embrace the truth of change for our communities to grow and heal from this damaged and broken system. Our education system has prioritized maintaining profit over building communities of care with our students and surrounding communities, risking the education and creativity of millions of students in the process. While it is a risk to foster change in a system that has been in place for decades, the cost of creating a society that doesn’t trust education and doesn’t value individualized learning is too great to ignore.

A GLIMPSE OF CHANGE

It has been nearly a decade since my student teaching experience. In that time, I have been a public librarian for both children and adults, and I have begun teaching at universities. Through rich and diverse experiences, I have been able to understand what harmed me most from my student teaching experience: a crippling sense of isolation and a frustration with the inability to help support my students. My roommate had moved out, my teaching cohort was out of touch, and my advisors and mentor teacher were often absent in more ways than one. My students were also isolated, struggling to move through an education system that erased their diverse experiences, and



ultimately disconnected from their learning in my classroom. I was no saint then, nor am I a saint in teaching now. There was so much more I could have done to support my students and myself as a teacher, but without a system that supported me along the way, every attempt at change felt hopeless.

The grace I had to have with myself about my decision to stop teaching had to do with the fact that I could not see a future that was different from the isolation that I felt during that year. If I applied to teaching jobs, I would move away from home, likely to a county or state that I was unfamiliar with and hope that I could make connections along the way. If I am honest, I wasn't ready for that kind of unknown future. But I have never regretted my decision to step away from teaching when I did. Doing so allowed me to learn what supportive work environments looked like and how necessary they were to my growth as a person and as an educator.

Now, nearly a decade later, I want to imagine and bring forth a future where we resist standards, assessment, and accountability systems in education. Moving beyond my previous experiences in K-12 education, my focus here is on university and higher education. College campuses are sites of and participants in great change in the U.S., including resisting the war with Vietnam and the war in Palestine, fostering the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, and fighting for free speech. Centering my future imaginings on higher education allows me to act immediately, while also impacting students who will go on to become teachers, administrators, and community members with vested interests in changing the education system for the better.

On college campuses, numerous degree programs across the nation are being cut, their funding reduced, and their faculty diminished. Often the reductions are in humanities programs, where anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) and harmful rhetoric against marginalized identities are ravaging departments and erasing majors, minors, and classes focused on identity-based instruction. These cuts occur both as a result of national, state, and university rulings that identity-based education and the enforcement of diversity, equity, and inclusion programming reflect a politics of exclusion and create narratives that discriminate against certain groups and ways of thinking. The argument is that universities need standards that create safe learning environments for all students, regardless of belief, religion, political background, or cultural upbringing. Echoing CCSS beliefs in raising expectations for all students, this argument sounds good on the surface, but in reality, it makes space for accountability regimes to control narratives, dismiss historical events, and erase steps made towards national equality. This results in faculty and students who are silenced due to fear of employment loss or legal trouble for teaching and researching what five years ago would have been understood as basic human rights. When faculty do not get to name issues of equality for their students, we continue to create the "equity as sameness" narrative that K-12 is experiencing, where students are unable to see themselves represented in research and education.

Standards, assessments, and accountability as they currently exist in higher education are one-way avenues of control. There is some higher entity—usually state politicians but occasionally individual boards of trustees—that enforce standards upon colleges and universities. Conversations around the creation and implementation of the standards typically take place behind closed doors and rarely include departments, instructors, or students. The standards are created without the input of those who will do the teaching or the students who are meant to learn from them. This top-down approach to enforcing educational standards is designed to fall apart and benefit only the universities with the most power (i.e., predominantly white, centuries-established schools), similar to the way that CCSS affects K-12 education.



I would like to take a moment to reaffirm the idea that keeping schools of any kind accountable for the education they are expected to provide for students is not an inherently cruel endeavor. However, the issue is that the standards that are being enforced are standards that treat education like a business. Ergo, because one pays tuition, they must receive a service of equal value. This further reinforces banking models of education (Freire, 1968/2000) that treat students like automatons that are meant to regurgitate the same information rather than to critically engage with learning and become self-motivated in their education. This is contrary to research that shows that students who see their experiences reflected in their education and engage in critical analysis of the world are more likely to achieve academically (Gay, 2000).

There is no single fix for this complex problem. Eradicating education standards entirely could be harmful and particularly detrimental if the school-as-profit model continues to be the norm. Eradicating standards will not immediately result in strengthened communities or a belief in public education. Instead, beginning to create communities who have an actual voice in the education system around them is a positive step forward. Students, teachers, and community members who can actually contribute ideas and changes to how education is structured have a high potential for improving belief about public education as something valuable and useful.

Currently, most universities behave with a top-down enforcement model, meaning that the Board of Trustees, administrators, and occasionally politicians are the ones to create standards for universities. The standards that they create tend to be profit-driven, rather than goals that are attuned to growing student learning, relationships with the local community, and the skills, experience, and knowledge of the instructors, faculty, and staff who maintain the university. Profit-driven models of education contribute towards the history of sameness that comes with standards and scripted education, discouraging diverse and radical change and research from faculty and students. Additionally, profit-driven models are often derived from other universities or actual businesses and are not aligned with the specific geographic, economic, ecological, or societal makeup of the unique area that they serve. The unique and diverse nature of each individual university is something to be utilized, not for profit but for furthering equality and growth in education.

IMAGINING A FUTURE BEYOND TOP-DOWN STANDARDS

Our education systems are already flush with individuals with diverse skills and experiences. Every student, educator, community member, and administrator has unique assets that may assist change in our current broken system. But in order for us to access these skills and experiences, we need to reprioritize and reevaluate the needs and resources the education system has access to. This act of reevaluation, if connected to the community that surrounds our education system, has the potential to enact great change and movement away from national standards and profit-driven models of education.

One way to reevaluate our current system is through participatory-action research (PAR) methods for conducting public research. This form of research requires that all participants (or audiences) be involved in the research process, from design to implementation to reflection. PAR methods are laborious and require immense amounts of time and coordination to pull off. PAR requires constant check-ins and reassessments of progress and goals. Coordinating between so many different entities (administration, departments, instructors, students, etc.) is a job in and of itself that requires education, community goal-setting, and a commitment to institutional change.



This kind of work requires time and labor, two precious assets that are often in limited supply. However, when participants are invested in great change and analyzing the ways that our education system could change to benefit all participants, rather than primarily those profiting from universities, there is great potential for creating a robust system of support, community, and lasting change.

I believe that utilizing PAR methods to analyze our education system as a network of participants is one way that we can begin to heal and grow beyond standards, assessments, and accountability regimes as well as business models of higher education. Instead of politicians and boards of trustees being the sole creators of standards, there would be a more democratic process, open to public comment and inclusive of representatives of all participants in higher education. This form of research would also be iterative, requiring constant change and fluctuation dependent on the situations and audiences involved. But, as Octavia Butler reminds us, “The only lasting truth is change” (p. 3). Iterative PAR methods would allow constant conversations and revision of what is working and not working for an individual school, with a special attunement towards the needs of both the instructors who facilitate learning and the students the education benefits. PAR methods also have a way of improving community relationships, leading to a stronger sense of belonging and reciprocity. These methods can even move to create more student-centered classrooms and curriculum that support students’ passions and interests while still equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need to graduate.

The importance of PAR or PAR-inspired practices lies in the iterative process of the research. When research is done in tandem between researcher and participant, it means that there are constant check-ins, re-evaluations, and changes made so that the research moves towards a mutually agreed upon goal. In higher education, PAR practices for determining course outcomes, department goals, and even university guidelines would mean that changes in needs and resources are frequently addressed and that all participants have a voice in those changes. A constant iterative process keeps outcomes and goals from becoming standardized in ways that are stagnant and harmful to those involved. All participants are in frequent conversation with each other, pushing against hierarchies of control, and working with and for students instead of asserting control over them, a move urged by Paulo Freire who also influenced PAR practices (Campos & Anderson, 2021, p. 45).

What PAR could look like in practice would vary from classroom to classroom or even across institutions. At an institutional level, it would mean creating democratic environments where Boards of Trustees are in constant conversation with faculty and students about what the needs of the university are. This would require administrators to actually value and uphold the needs of their faculty and students, something that can be tricky when universities are run as businesses trying to turn a profit, not educate the next generation. Within classrooms, it could result in implementing more choice in courses for students to pursue topics they are passionate about. PAR has already been successful in classrooms through community partnerships. Given that students are headed into communities for their careers, students have the potential to make an impact on their communities even as they are learning. These partnerships allow students to make immediate change in the community while also allowing community members and organizations a direct stake in the way that education shapes their communities.

In my own classroom, I work to implement PAR-inspired methods to trouble standardized systems across the university. This includes implementing “ungrading practices” that push against standardized grading assessments for evaluating students (Stommel, 2021). Instead, I work to evaluate a student’s current skillset and find ways to expand and grow their skills where they are



rather than standardizing every student to the same level of skill and experience. This means that I am constantly shifting my understanding of evaluation in tandem with my students to discover ways that they can grow, what their needs are, and how my teaching and curriculum can support them while still pushing them to engage with new and challenging material. Processes like this are hard to standardize and require constant revision, two things that push against my original beliefs and practices using scripted curriculum in my student teaching days.

Some of these ideas may seem similar to current practices or it may seem like they would not impact a standards-based accountability system. However, because the nation currently distrusts the value of higher education, building relationships with communities, with students, and within institutions to create a stronger sense of belonging and impact can help pave the way for making national change. A community that believes in the value of their local university provides opportunities for students and faculty to engage and make a direct impact while also strengthening a sense of belonging and stewardship towards that community. In turn, belief in the value of higher education grows, which means that people can feel empowered to raise their voice and advocate for their needs as an institution. Coupled with a sense of reciprocity and community, PAR methods would allow for constant, iterative change within the greater community that is invested in the value of higher education, the real lives of their students, and the faculty who teach them. Moreover, a turn towards community enforces collective learning and teaching, something that can change higher education for the better.

Again, I fully acknowledge this to be a lengthy and costly process. However, in practicing *currere* and envisioning a future that grows beyond our declining education system, this is the future I would like to participate in—one where instructor and student voices are not only heard but valued and necessary for research and change and where our education system ceases to be a business model that discourages difference and actively harms the majority of those involved to best benefit those at the top.

I became radical once I learned to give grace to myself and stop living in narratives of punishment and isolation. I *know* that my future as an educator is not one where I will be locked in my office conducting research on my own and teaching students who do not know their neighbors. I also know that the education system I seek to serve deserves more than sameness disguised as equity through accountability standards. My freshmen and sophomore students in 2018 deserved better and my college students deserve better from the education systems that we have developed and deliver today. So, as I look towards the future, I look towards the education of communities, of people who are involved in their learning journeys, and of systems that support diverse educational growth. I look forward to having lunch with other learners, my office door open, and the sun shining down on the campuses that I call home.

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THAT'S NOT MY JOB?

By Sydnie S. Singleton
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What is mentorship? Why does it matter? Who truly needs it? In higher education, mentorship is defined as the opportunity for students to build positive relationships with faculty and gain the knowledge and insight needed to navigate and overcome academic challenges (Redmond, 1990, as cited in Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007, p. 70). This approach is particularly vital for minority students facing unique issues in higher education, often revealing and addressing supports they may not have recognized they needed, such as being told they matter (Love, 2019, p. 2). Students of color are more likely to be subject to hostile environments in higher education due to race-based stressors (Griffith et al., 2019). To this end, mentorship is not just important for college students; it's critical.

"SHE'S MORE THAN A MENTOR"

For the past four years, I have worked as the campus-based coordinator for the college pipeline program, EdUCATE. EdUCATE is designed to matriculate students who want to be future educators. The purpose of the program is to not only address the national teacher shortage but also to find students who want to give back to their communities through education. EdUCATE aims to identify and cultivate future educators who inspire and encourage their students, potentially becoming the positive role models that they may have once lacked. Most of our students are from marginalized groups, are first-generation university students, and come from urban communities. All of our students want to make a change by positively disrupting the education system. Although I was hired to be the pipeline coordinator, most of my students would consider me to be their mentor. As a result, mentorship has become a large part of who I am and even more of who I want to continue to be. This is not because of what is being asked of me but because it is what I recognize that my students need the most. Over the past year, my eyes have been opened to the power of mentorship and why it's especially important for students of color as they navigate Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). As the pipeline coordinator, I provide support for each student in our program throughout their time in college. This consists of providing useful tips for their academic, social, and professional lives. As listed in my job description, my role consists of:

1. Being responsible for the design and program development, matriculation, near-peer mentoring of students, and overall support and navigation for the pipeline program,
2. Supporting the students in their college transitions, matriculation, and retention, and
3. Acting as the single point of contact for all activities of the program.

My role in higher education has expanded significantly over time. My students' perception of me, reflected by the phrase "She's more than a mentor" written on my office whiteboard, directly illustrates this evolution. This statement captures not only how I've come to view my work but, more importantly, how my students view me. For many of my students, my role has evolved to be not only a mentor but also a mother figure, a safe space, and even, at times, a friend. This is the



part of my role that is not listed in the job description. But it's also the part of my job that has become the most meaningful. With students who are more likely to face race-based stressors due to their identities, I make it a point to show up for them enthusiastically so that they don't have to face those stressors alone.



My journey to working in higher education began unknowingly as I pursued my master's degree. During this time, I was also hired to work as a graduate assistant for the EdUCATE program. I was given the task to meet one on one with the five students we had in our program. Four years later, we now serve 37 students on our campus, whom I meet with every week to direct them to the appropriate departments for support, hold weekly check-ins, provide homework support, and even sometimes lend a listening ear. Some may say that, within my role, I do a lot. I've also come to learn that some students may even argue that I don't do *enough*. It's funny. Even in those moments, I still find myself thinking, "If not me, then who?"

Each day, the expectation within my role does not change. But the way that I approach mentorship seems to grow by the day. Without mentorship, many students would be left to face their educational journeys in a way that may lead them to feel alone, unseen, or unheard. Pinar (2019) makes an argument that "teachers are not responsible for student learning; students are" (p. 128). I've come to learn that, although students choose the paths they want to take in life, teachers make a significant impact on their educational experiences and not only teachers but also all individuals who work directly with students. The relationship between mentors and their students is proven to have a positive impact on their overall student success (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). It is not uncommon for students of color to struggle with feeling a sense of belonging while at PWIs. In spaces where students are not predominantly represented, having a mentor is crucial, given that minority students who do not have role models may find succeeding in higher education difficult (Blackwell, 1989, and Patitu & Terrell, 1997, as cited in Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007).

I'm grateful to be in the position where I can meet my students with sincerity and care by embracing the moments that are both unexpected and unscripted yet essential. To me, that's what matters the most; these are the aspects that have become the most meaningful. I look forward to talking with students about the importance of professionalism and networking with faculty and staff while also appreciating the more difficult conversations about personal struggles or even being someone they can vent to or a shoulder to cry on. The depth of mentorship was something I hadn't considered before this role. Up until being hired for this position, I had navigated life without very many intentional mentors, especially during my collegiate years. Now that I am in this position, I aim to show up for my students—my mentees—in the best ways possible and to ensure that each of them knows their value and feels seen, especially after expected or unexpected shortcomings.

When I think about it, the scripted elements of working in higher education are not what motivate me to come into the office each morning. Each day, I'm expected to arrive on time, dress professionally, meet with students, send the necessary emails, and engage with prospective students for our program. Although this part of my role is manageable, the heart of my job stems from unexpected daily visits from my students. It's the unscripted aspects of my job that make me love what I do, and they are what I believe my students need the most. Today, this has even expanded to occasional and even more regular visits from students outside of the EdUCATE program. These are the students who may stop by the Thinkspace (where my office is located) and

become curious about where all of the commotion is coming from (my mentees tend to be exceptionally noisy). A few are even friends with some of my mentees and now make it a point to stop by just to say “What’s up” or seek advice. When scheduled check-ins organically shift into hour-long discussions about our lives and most embarrassing moments, my role feels more worthwhile. During my first year as a new hire, I was met with a variety of challenges that often left me between a rock and a hard place. Nonetheless, these challenges were ones that I decided to embrace and strategize ways to overcome, for me and own sake, of course, but especially for *them*.

I’m going to tell you a story about mentorship. The good, the struggles, and the boundaries. I’ll specifically be focusing on an encounter I had with one of my students that significantly impacted the way I now view the mentorship within my role and my approach with my students. There’s a saying that goes, “You can do 99 things for someone, and all they’ll remember is the one thing you didn’t do.” It wasn’t until I began doing this work that I began to think about this quote more often. How is mentorship truly defined? Where do the boundaries lie? There was this student; we’re going to call him Malik. Malik was a transfer student in our program. He was excited about being a teacher and even more excited about being at a new school—at least at first. He was thrilled to find out that he had a mentor assigned to him. But I believe Malik saw me more as a personal *assistant*. When Malik was having his way, he was a joy to be around. That was until he wasn’t. When he didn’t have his way, he would go from 0 to 100 in a matter of seconds. When he was irate, *everyone* had to know it. In these moments, he would be adamant about finding someone to blame. One day, he woke up and decided that it was going to be me.

NO ONE EVER SAID IT’D BE EASY

Malik was a dynamic student. He would show up early, actively participate in all of his classes, and would never hesitate to come to our meetings with several questions related to the education program and our campus. In the beginning, Malik would leave our meetings feeling confident in his ability to navigate the new space. He was enthused to become a future educator and wanted to make sure that he moved seamlessly into his desired profession. One day, Malik walked into our meeting with what felt like a gloomy cloud over him. He was having a hard time back home and was starting to feel like an outsider amongst his classmates.

“They’re always staring at me. I don’t even want to go in there anymore.”

Looking down at the clock, I realized that it was between the 11:40 class sessions, “Malik, are you in class right now?”

He looked up at me with a fake smile. “Yes, and that’s why I’m in here now. Can’t *you* take care of it?”

I was perplexed. What exactly did he want me to do? Surely, I could reach out to his professors about how he was feeling uncomfortable, but to me, that felt like overstepping. The last thing I ever wanted to do was speak *for* my students.

“I’m sorry to hear that your classmates are making you feel uncomfortable. I thi—”

“I didn’t say that. I’m not uncomfortable. I never told you I was uncomfortable. I’m just done with that class because those people are weird. Everyone here is weird! Why are you assuming I’m uncomfortable? You know. It’s fine. I don’t think you can help me.”

At this point, Malik wasn’t in the space to tolerate a response from me. He had made up his mind that I wasn’t going to tell him what he wanted to hear. Thinking back on it, this could



have partially been on me. I didn't intend to offend him. I'd just never dealt with any of my students walking out of a class before!



The following day, Malik returned to my office in what appeared to be a calm, cool, and collected manner.

"Hey, Malik, how are things going for you today?"

"They're good. I didn't come in here to talk about yesterday. I went back to class. It was fine. I'm not going to talk to my professor about it. She can't change the people in there."

"It's good to know that today is going better. I really hate to hear that yesterday went that way. As you said, we don't have to get into it much, but I do think it would help if you talked with your professor about why you left. You're a great student. I wouldn't want her to get the wrong impression."

Malik's face seemed to light up a bit. He fixed his posture in his seat and began to let out a small laugh. "You know, you're right! Let me email her right now!" He looked at me with a grin. "Also, I need transportation to go to field. It starts tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Wow, that came quickly. Have you engaged with your professor about this? There's a carpool system that you can likely utilize."

This was the beginning of what became a nearly impossible situation to diffuse. I wish I could say that it started and ended in my office that day, but it didn't. As I write this scenario, I'm now starting to see why Malik grew to be so frustrated with me. I was so focused on sticking to the script that I was overlooking the signals he was sending my way. If he didn't like how his classmates were treating him, why would he also want to be in their car? Who would want to ask a favor from someone whom you feel doesn't welcome or acknowledge your presence?

"Um. No one told me about that. Why didn't *you* tell me about that? Field starts tomorrow. If I don't have a ride, I just won't go."

His energy began to shift again. Malik began to repeatedly take big and loud sighs as he packed up his things. "You know, Sydnie, you didn't prepare me for this. Why didn't we talk about this? I've never done any of this before. Isn't this what you're supposed to do?"

For the first time in a long time, I didn't have anything to say. But then I suddenly had everything to say! I was frustrated. Sydnie, breathe. Don't take it personally. Pause. Slow down. He's upset. He's underprepared, and he's taking it out on you. Problem solved. Don't fuel the fire. *Fix it.*

"Why don't we draft a message together? In the meantime, we can look for alternative transportation options. I don't work with the field placement department; I would've mentioned all of this to you if that were the case. We're going to figure this out. You'll be at field tomorrow."

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was falling into what many become guilty of when helping others—making someone else's problem my own.

A week later, the issue resurfaced. Once again, Malik didn't have transportation for his field placement and came to me to figure it out for him. But this time I was prepared. I knew that his wish for me to figure out the solution would become a regular expectation. That was *not* my job?

"Malik, I learned that there's a transportation form for students to fill out for transportation arrangements. Did you see that in your email? Did you fill it out?"

Malik rolled his eyes. "No. Because you didn't send it to me."

"I understand that. But I wouldn't be the one who sent it to you. It would come from the field placement office."

"I didn't see an email." I watched as his frustration began to rise. "Isn't this *your* job? Weren't you a PK-5 major? This program is the worst. You don't even do what you're supposed to do!"

"Malik, I understand your frustration. But no, that is not my job. I'm not responsible for sending you information that comes from other departments. There's still time to complete the form."

"Yeah, I won't be meeting with you anymore. This program is horrible."

Malik walked out.

That was our last meeting.

Reflecting on the circumstances, I believe that Malik was having struggles beyond what he was disclosing to me. As a transfer student, he was familiar with a number of different campuses and what it felt like to be unsupported. He had also experienced support beyond what some might have defined as support. Malik spoke of this regularly by saying things like, "At my other school, they would've just done this for me," and "The school I came from would tell me things before I even had to inquire about them." His comments would feel targeted. I would take his comments personally. I know that I shouldn't have, but I did. I had never had a student like Malik. In my mind, we were offering him an immense amount of support—support that *I* didn't receive during my undergraduate years at Miami. I think it's safe to say that Malik struggled with how he defined mentorship and support. In his eyes, you were either with him or against him. And, if things weren't going his way, then you couldn't have had his best interests at heart. He believed that *I* didn't have his best interest at heart. I believe that he felt that I didn't think he mattered. That wasn't true. I carried this situation with me for a while. I talked about it every opportunity I had to get things off my chest. I tried to make sense of it all. It left me feeling as if I had failed, failed to meet him where he was, failed to help him understand the situation, failed to communicate my role, and failed by not letting it get to me. It took me some time to realize that his reactions were not reflective of me and how I did my job. The truth of the matter is that they were reflective of what far too many students have become accustomed to—that the system will *always* be against them.

This is the other side of mentorship that is difficult to make sense of. How can you convince someone who's been hurt that you really do care? How do you navigate when it's appropriate or necessary to say, "No," or when it's time to push for accountability instead of stepping in and searching for the magic eraser to make it all go away? Where do you draw the line? Considering how the situation ended with Malik, I still found myself pondering what I could have done differently and how I could have avoided the conflict that erupted so rapidly. The truth of the matter is that there is no perfect solution to avoid conflict. But how you respond to it makes all the difference. It was important for me not to lose sight of why my role still mattered—why mentorship still mattered. If anything, this situation was a prime example of why there is a great need for students to feel supported. And, furthermore, why it's absolutely critical for students of color to feel seen. In a society where the color of your skin marks you as disposable, the idea of mattering is essential (Love, 2019, p. 2). I want all of my students to feel empowered by all they can achieve and to know that, even in a society where there are many things against them, I never will be one of them. But, while doing that, it's also just as important for me not to lose myself in that process. It's okay to not be able to do or *fix* it all.

WHY MENTORSHIP MATTERS

Navigating what my role consists of outside of, alongside, what is expected of me has been a journey that I learn and grow from every day. From a classroom perspective, Vaughn et al. (2021) refers to this as “teacher adaptability” (p. 186), which is when a teacher uses knowledge of a student’s background to modify instruction so that their teaching methods are culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995, as cited in Vaughn et al., 2021). These modifications make room for teachers to meet students where they are by acknowledging where they come from. Considering that I’m not a teacher, this practice led me to think of another approach stemming from this practice that applies to my role as a mentor, “mentorship adaptability.” Mentorship adaptability is when a mentor is intentional about their engagement with their students and seeks knowledge about the backgrounds of their students to ensure that they feel both seen and heard while also making efforts to meet them where they are to enhance their success as collegiates. This approach would be similar to “teacher knowledge of students” in the way that mentors would make strides to connect with their students from a lens of genuine care (Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 187). Within higher education, there is a need for institutional efforts led by faculty and staff to support Black students (Griffith et al., 2019)—efforts to reduce race-related stressors and foster more inclusive campus environments.

Black students often feel unsupported at PWIs, and this substantially affects their journeys to success. This is largely due to race-related stressors that Black students are more likely to face compared to their White counterparts (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, and Harper et al., 2011, as cited in Griffith et al., 2019). In addition to facing these struggles, not having a safe space to retreat to makes these circumstances incredibly challenging, leaving students to struggle not only academically but also emotionally and socially. These “race-related stressors” (Griffith et al., 2019) can be the result of isolated and cumulative discriminatory experiences, which can be cognitively and emotionally taxing. In fact, there is inequitable treatment across the education system for students from non-dominant races and cultures. And, although this dilemma cannot be addressed solely by the curriculum (Timberlake et al., 2017), mentorship can be transformative. Strong mentorship can create environments where students feel valued in spaces where they aren’t represented as strongly (Morgan et al., 2020). Creating schools that are equitable, diverse, and socially just goes beyond K-12; higher education needs radical change as well, especially at PWIs, where Black students are subject to navigating racially hostile environments negatively impacting their persistence, academic motivation, matriculation, graduation, and sense of belonging (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013, Museus et al., 2018, and Smith et al., 2011, as cited in Allen, 2025).

My desire is for more individuals to understand that mentorship is a necessity, as it helps to alleviate what may feel like lonely struggles for Black students, especially, and helps them find success (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). It’s not explicitly expected for me to foster relationships with my students to help them find success, but to me, mentorship would be incomplete without this aspect. As I was hired to support our students as they matriculate and navigate college, being there for them emotionally has largely superseded their areas of need for support. This is why, despite how challenging it may be, intentional mentorship has never been optional but an absolute necessity.

As for Malik and me? Well, I learned from him that, in this work, there will be times where tensions rise in situations where even care won’t cut it. This is where I believe mentorship adaptability comes into play. No one ever said that mentorship would be easy. There’s no perfect



solution to avoid conflict, but I do believe that there's a way to balance these situations as they come about. Moving forward, I am more intentional in learning more about what my students have come from so that I can meet them where they are. This requires adaptability. Some approaches prove to be successful, and others fall short of meeting their expectations. I have come to terms with the reality that not all interactions will go as well as planned. I have also made the active decision to learn from each of those moments. It's all part of the journey, theirs and my own. One of the major parts of mentorship is going through the motions and doing what you can, when you can. I had done all that I felt I could do to support Malik, yet he still made the decision not to return to the program. Him feeling as though I had fallen short of my responsibilities was something out of my control. Being adaptable in this work includes admitting when situations become out of your control. I don't think Malik's final decision was a reflection on me or how well I do my job. But it was a reflection of what he presumed to be another system that had failed him. I've learned from that situation the importance of making room to hear my students out while putting my personal opinions to the side and also remaining mindful of the systems that are against them, the ones that are against *us*. Although I no longer work with Malik, I still wish him the absolute best. My desire to show up for students with authentic care hasn't changed, even knowing that they might not consider my approach to be *enough*. And, in those moments when I fail, as we all do at times, I strive to take that as another opportunity to grow. Because, in this work, growing from failure is a choice I've found to be worth taking, especially for the sake of being there for my students, the ones who make what I do most meaningful.

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A CURRERE APPROACH TO PERSONAL GROWTH AND LEARNING

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ALWAYS LEARNING

Teachers who position themselves as learners engage in a critical reorientation of professional identity—one that disrupts the traditional hierarchy of knowledge transmission and instead foregrounds reciprocity, inquiry, and reflexivity. Through this framing, teaching is not a static performance of expertise but an evolving practice shaped by ongoing encounters with students, colleagues, and contacts. Graduate-level scholarship has increasingly emphasized that such a stance requires systematic humility and acknowledgment that pedagogical knowledge is always partial, situated, and subject to revision. When educators adopt a learner's mindset, they become more attuned to the complexities of cognition, motivation, and social interaction that characterize authentic learning environments. This shift not only enhances instructional responsiveness but also models intellectual curiosity and adaptability—dispositions essential for learners navigating rapidly changing knowledge landscapes.

Central to this transformation is the teacher's capacity to critically engage with their own history as a student. Autobiographical reflection serves as a powerful analytic tool, enabling educators to dig into our prior experiences of schooling and examine how these experiences inform present beliefs and practices. Memories of assessment, authority, inclusion, or marginalization are not inert; they actively shape pedagogical decisions, often in implicit ways. By interrogating these internalized narratives, teachers can identify inherited assumptions about learning and power and consciously reconstruct their approaches to better align with equitable, student-centered principles. In this sense, learning from one's own educational past is not merely introspective but transformative, fostering a more deliberate and ethically grounded practice that bridges personal history with professional growth (Poetter, 2025).

RED—THAT'S THE COLOR I WANT TO BE

In first grade, I thought I was a great reader. My parents read to me each night, and I always got to choose the book. Usually, it was the Berenstain Bears or Dr. Seuss. Books made me feel smart. I would flip the pages and read along with my parents. I guess I should have thought more about how easy books were to read at home, but at school, everything took longer to sound out and understand. I would start a word, get frustrated, restart, restart again, then find my teacher looking at me expectantly. I would lose track of where I was and what I was reading, and I would have to restart another time. I loved repetitive tasks and repetitive language. Maybe that's why I loved poetry as a teen. Looking back, I realize I wasn't actually a great reader; what I was doing was memorizing and reciting the books that had been read to me a million times.

One day in class, Mrs. Miller assigned us to reading groups, which were color-coded; mine was orange. She would call over a group, read with us, then send us back to our desks with



questions to answer and a small follow-up activity. I was blissfully unaware that our groups were leveled-based on our reading abilities and that our teacher had been given a specific curriculum to follow. I clearly remember the day, however, when I saw the book Mrs. Miller was reading with the next group. I wanted to read that book, not the one I had been given in my orange group. I told her I wanted to read the book, and she said, “This book is for the kids who can read it.” I thought to myself, “I can read ... why can’t I try to read *that* book?” Mrs. Miller then told me I would need to pass the reading test at the end of the week in order to move up into the next group. I had never realized this was a “race.” I would have been much more motivated to do my best and grow had this knowledge been shared with me from the beginning.

Mrs. Miller was the sweetest teacher and saw that I wanted to do better. She had me complete the reading test for the red group that Friday. I passed, so she had me read the book aloud—the one I had been eyeing earlier in the week. I didn’t know how to sound out all of the words, and I stumbled, but instead of punishing me, she had me take the book home to practice over the weekend. I felt really stupid having asked to read at a higher level and embarrassed because I fumbled when reading aloud to my teacher. No child should be made to feel less intelligent, but I understand that, at the time, this was the curriculum that was available and being used widely throughout the U.S. Mrs. Miller was simply following the script assigned. She gave me the opportunity to move ahead and join the red group, but I wasn’t ready. I wanted to read a more interesting book, but ultimately, I wasn’t prepared for the grammar in the red group. I was happy that she let me experience the book, since I took an interest in it, which is what we want our students to feel when they pick up a book or story to read.

Now, looking back as an adult, I realize that making reading a “race” is not the route we want to take as educators. We should strive to have our students succeed at comprehension, fluency, and structural analysis of words. Using leveled curricula that rely heavily on a script limits the interest of the students, as well as the creative autonomy educators were taught to possess. Placing “learning” at the center of the curriculum instead of “understanding” enables the adoption of a scripted curriculum and focus on the reception of information rather than the delivery. As a result, scripted curricula often promote a culture of compliance rather than a culture of inquiry. Adaptation is the tool that transforms a standardized script into a responsive dialogue, which is where true understanding is forged. Unfortunately, my teacher did not adapt her script, but at least she let me attempt to read a book I was interested in.

LOOKING TO THE PAST

At its core, *currere* asks educators to examine their past experiences, imagine future possibilities, analyze present realities, and synthesize these insights into meaningful action. I have spent the last few months in my graduate curriculum studies class learning about what drives me as an educator and what improvements I can make in my students’ learning experiences. Looking into my past has caused me to reflect on the deeply ingrained, unconscious feelings and dispositions I developed as a pupil, which are exerting a continuing influence on my actions and reactions as an educator. The *currere* process positions teachers to use these lived experiences (Pinar, 2019) not as passive recipients of professional development, but as active intellectuals engaged in understanding their own practice. Learning to use our experiences as knowledge and the basis for instructional change is only now being taught in universities across the U.S. Research shows that human behavior and learning are grounded in processes where thinking and feelings



are closely connected (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Using what I know from my own educational history, along with educational theories, I feel I am more prepared to offer my students an adapted curriculum that keeps them engaged, even if this wasn't always the case.

GREEN—NEW AS DAY (ONE)

I had been hired two days before school began. Two days are not long enough to learn your job in any business, much less as a teacher in an elementary school. I started the year as a new hire from the HR department, which didn't make my new principal happy. Mrs. G was one of the most undignified, scapegoating, conniving humans I have ever had the pleasure to work for. She made my life a living hell. When I first met her, we were at our opening meeting, introductions and the like; she had the audacity to tell everyone that she was "happy to have everyone hired onto my team ... except Alicia. I didn't hire her. HR did." It was at this point that I knew she was not going to be helpful, much less pleasant towards me.

Later in the day, when I asked what materials I should grab from the storage room to get familiar with while I was in my teeny, tiny office, she walked me back to the office storage room. When I asked her what materials I should use, she literally just motioned to the room with a sweep of her hand, then walked back to her office. This room was the dumping ground for the entire building. It was huge and cold. It held materials from all grades and probably from the past 20 years on its floor-to-ceiling metal shelves. The room held all the school's current instructional materials, so I was tasked with looking through it all to find what was age-appropriate for my students on IEP's. I had never been an intervention specialist before, but I was up for the challenge because HR promised I would have help, training, and guidance. The amount of material was vast and overwhelming. What books are Tier One? What are intervention resources? I honestly had no idea. Do we have a copy for each student, or do I make copies for them? Do I use a scripted curriculum or just wing it and teach directly to the standards? I teared up a bit, I must admit. I had no idea where to start and no one to guide me.

After taking what felt like one of every teacher's manual upstairs, I went to find my lead special ed. teacher. Mrs. B was not much older than me, maybe a year or two, but she had been working in schools since she graduated. I was just returning from staying home for seven years. She sat down and tried to help me choose the right programs to use with each group and the lesson to start on that would cover the largest number of students' IEP goals. Mrs. B helped as much as she could, but she had her own room to get ready for the year, her own schedule to write, and her aides to instruct. I couldn't monopolize her time. She couldn't do more than offer advice that first day. I went to my tiny office and hid for the rest of the day, trying to make sense of my groups of students, how to create a schedule, and when to pull and push into which teacher's general education room.

After the year started and we had spent some time together doing the beginning-of-the-year activities, I learned more about my students and their abilities. I was feeling confident and ready to begin teaching—that was, until I was called into a meeting with the principal and the special education supervisor. The principal all but berated me for not using the correct programs with the correct students. I tried to defend myself. I tried to ask for help and guidance, but none was given. I wasn't there for help or guidance; I was there to be made a fool. I went back to my office feeling more defeated than ever. I called my husband and told him I wanted to quit. I couldn't handle the shame and embarrassment of not knowing what I was supposed to be doing. I know now that I



was intentionally being hazed; it wasn't the first time in this building or with this principal. Mrs. G didn't want me there, and she was doing everything in her power to make me leave, since she had no grounds to let me go.

I took the materials home and began to look through them. I needed to find a place to start with each group. I was thankful the teacher's guide was scripted. As a first-year teacher with seven groups in seven different places, I needed all the help I could get. Each program was focused on a different math or reading topic, which made it hard to create groups but gave me the opportunity to learn deeply about each topic. The scripted programs also gave me many options and strategies to review and fill in the gaps my students had. I was grateful to see the materials present the math in similar ways to the grade level they were originally taught but with a twist aimed at allowing older students to make the connections and grow. Boy, did they grow. My students were lauded in the building as having the highest growth on their math MAP tests that year—not that this helped me gain some acknowledgement and validation for a job well done from Mrs. G. She never once left me a note of support or recognition. Luckily, I had formed relationships with other teachers in the building who praised my students' gains.

I spent my entire first year deep in scripted programs for math and reading. I think that is what has helped me adapt to changing grade levels several times over the years. I learned to pick up a program, use it, modify it, and get results from my students. I learned more about how to fill gaps for my lowest students by using those methodical, scaffolded materials. I see that the programs we use in schools are not a one-size-fits-all solution, but they should be offered as a starting point and a guided list to use as Tier One instruction. As for Mrs. G, she was let go from the district two years later when they decided not to renew her contract.

LOOKING FORWARD

Issues of power and agency remain central to understanding how scripted curriculum shapes teaching practices. Powell et al. (2017) argue that highly structured curricula can limit teacher autonomy by positioning educators within constrained decision-making roles, thereby, reducing opportunities for professional judgment. Similarly, Golann (2021) demonstrates how scripting normalizes compliance-oriented teaching practices, shaping both teacher behavior and student engagement in ways that prioritize control over creativity. These dynamics highlight the tension between standardization and professional agency. While a scripted curriculum may promote consistency, it often does so at the expense of teacher autonomy and responsiveness.

Bridging this divide requires re-envisioning scripted materials as flexible guides rather than mandates, allowing teachers to exercise professional discretion and connect theoretical insights to the lived realities of their classrooms (Golann, 2021; Powell et al., 2017). Early on in my career, I was happy to read from a script and adopt a program. After finding my sense of autonomy and doing more research, I learned how to modify a scripted curriculum and adapt it to my students' interests. Current teacher education programs do not take into account the nature of current classrooms; they still have students create lesson plans and activities, which do not realistically align with our curriculum. Preservice teachers should be shown the research on adapting scripted curricula so they are prepared upon entering the field. Instead of strict adoption, schools can honor teacher expertise and build the trust necessary for professional judgment to flourish (Nikolaidis et al., 2024).



Educators also need to ask, “What can I learn from my past?” and “How can I use my experience as a learner to influence the children I teach?” Administrators need to provide opportunities within the building for educators to reflect and transform their personal beliefs into curricular experiences and share with other educators to create meaningful moments of intellectual understanding and curiosity. Education is an ever-changing field that requires teachers and administrators to share and reflect as they grow. It is our civic duty to provide the highest education available and produce an engaged learner. Our founders wanted the general population to vote and be educated enough to vote. They created our government to function for and by the public. It is our duty as educators to see that our students grow up to become thinkers and learn to question what they hear.

PINK—FILLED WITH HOPE

Looking back upon my early education experiences made me realize that my childhood was well-instructed and very creative. When I compare these happy memories to my current classroom, I can see some glaring differences. I, too, use a scripted curriculum and follow it more closely than I fear I should. My lessons are not always engaging or interesting. I genuinely enjoy having a set of materials to base my daily lessons on. They have the state standards, examples, and references on misconceptions. I know that preset pencil-and-paper lessons are not very creative or interesting, but they provide rigor and scaffolded problems. Many years of experience have led me to understand that no curriculum is the whole story. We as educators need to provide our students with differentiation, not a one-size-fits-all approach. I don’t want to teach the same way every day, droning on and on while my students tune me out. I want them engaged, challenged, and thinking creatively. This is my challenge moving forward: doing what is best for my students, not just blindly following the commands of the district or state.

Recently, I attended a professional development (PD) session regarding gifted thinking processes and questioning strategies. I went into this training thinking it was going to be another “talk at me session.” I had very low expectations and even lower desire to attend. I’m busy—every day. I have a million tasks to complete, meetings to schedule, and parents to call. There were three of us “older-grade teachers” at this session; the younger-grade teachers were attending the afternoon session. We sat down in the empty classroom next to mine, familiar with our presenter from the Educational Service Center (ESC)—a tall, slim man who dresses like a magician in black pants with white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, burgundy satin vest, and a burgundy bow tie. We knew him to be a bit eccentric, wicked smart, and knowledgeable about gifted services. With that said, I still didn’t want to take my time to learn another skill I “might” use. But I sat down to complete the first activity with my coworkers, ready to move on and be told where to find a few resources.

Instead, I found myself digging in, excited to discuss how kids stall and what may be holding them back when solving math word problems or equations. I was confronted with one of my own demons in math—open-middle problems. (There are multiple ways to approach and solve a problem, and students can choose their own path). The three of us worked together, quite well, I must say, giggling and trying to solve an open middle problem in as many ways as we could manage. Not knowing if my answer is correct or complete drives me crazy. The lack of control and self-doubt are enough to make me never want to solve a problem again. I grew up with serious self-doubt in math, so bringing it back up as an adult, in front of others, was frustrating. Luckily,



I wasn't the only one who was frustrated; we each expressed how disheartened we were, trying to prove we could solve a simple problem in front of each other. We learned that our presenter had been quietly guiding us, leading with questions, offering a question every once in a while. The feelings of embarrassment and frustration melted away and became feelings of confidence. We learned that we had to offer guidance and reassurance to our students, the same way our presenter offered us support. In the end, we prevailed, and our presenter lauded us with praise and candy.

We then spent the next hour discussing different ways students answer different types of questions, practicing open-ended questioning, and how to continue the conversation or shift towards a topic you want them to discuss. In math, we need to teach children that it's okay not always to have the correct answer and that getting something wrong isn't the end of the world but a place to begin a new adventure. We discussed book authors to pursue and potentially read together.

I learned more in two short hours about how to get children thinking and using information they already know than I learned in my entire undergrad program. It was the light I needed. I needed someone to show me a new path and a new way of thinking. My lessons have become monotonous, tedious, and rather boring. I know this, but I soldier on, using my curriculum, preparing for the testing season. I am not the teacher I want to be right now. I want to be exciting and engaging, but challenges appear, and sometimes steady and predictable are acceptable.

What is the nature of a teacher's educational journey? How do we become the educators we want to be? Scripted curriculum isn't inherently the problem—it's rigidity. Pinar's work suggests that education should center on subjective experience and intellectual engagement. Therefore, the solution is not abandoning scripted curriculum, but reclaiming teacher agency within it. I have become complacent. I've lost my sense of agency. We must continue to examine our understanding of our own practice and become engaged learners ourselves. Maintaining compliance will only lead to a lack of bridging theory to classroom reality. We need to encourage our coworkers and staff to examine their practices and reflect on their own pasts in order to understand their present. I've learned that the *currere* method can help facilitate conversations around a teacher's perceptions and biases. As Pinar emphasizes, *currere* and reconceptualization of curriculum emphasize operationalizing this idea by helping teachers redesign instruction in ways that foster authentic thinking and student voice.

GOLD—RICH WITH KNOWLEDGE

I am studying to be a school leader right now. If I walked into my own classroom, I would see students behaving, sitting around the room, and even working with a partner. Everyone is working, but are they truly engaged? Maybe some are. I want my teachers to offer their best. I know that takes many forms, and there are going to be hard days, but reflecting upon my own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher has made me realize that I need to show up and be my best each day; otherwise, the kids will just mimic my mediocre attitude towards learning. As an administrator, my responsibility will be to inspire and encourage my staff to teach to the best of their abilities each day. I would expect them to be engaging and creative, not to read from a script each day. The teachers should know their students and their different learning styles, which they can use to prepare lessons, modify the curriculum, and inspire.

In the future, I hope to offer a PD book club. PD is regarded as one of the worst parts of teaching, so why not make it fun and useful? Several great books are highly recommended by



members of our ESC and our leadership team. We could use these books to guide a discussion around questioning strategies, building lists of questions on chart paper or a shared Google doc. Modification of lessons we already use in our scripted curricula can help us reach our highest learners as well as stretch those in Tier One. Teachers who are willing to allow others to observe would be providing growth opportunities and valuable collaboration time afterwards to discuss positives and limitations and perhaps new ideas for expanding the curriculum and connecting with children.

As a leader, I want to encourage and guide our staff to develop a stronger professional agency. A subtle change can make a huge difference in the outcomes of our students. We can teach them to become thinkers, not merely doers. When we become self-aware and clarify our teaching beliefs, we directly influence our teaching practices and establish a sense of power and competency in our careers.

Learning together creates a sense of community and builds culture. Teachers who are engaged in learning from their past and applying their own knowledge will help shape the future. Forcing teachers to ignore their personal experiences and professional expertise in favor of a “pre-packaged” manual can narrow the curriculum and negatively affect teacher identity.

USING WHAT WE KNOW

Scripted curriculum occupies a contested space between “knowing” and “thinking” in contemporary classrooms. Drawing on Pinar’s emphasis on curriculum as an intellectual and reflective process, critics argue that rigid scripts risk reducing knowledge to memorization rather than fostering deep understanding. Scripted programs are often designed to ensure consistency, efficiency, and coverage of standards, which can support novice teachers and promote equitable access to core content. Indeed, Fitz and Nikolaidis (2019) note that proponents frame scripted curriculum as a mechanism for delivering uniform, high-quality instruction across diverse contexts. However, the standardization can blur the distinction between authentic knowledge construction and rote compliance, positioning teachers as implementers rather than as intellectual agents and students as passive recipients rather than as active thinkers (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2019; Pinar, 2019).

Strengths of scripted curriculum are, therefore, inseparable from its limitations. On one hand, it provides clear instructional pathways, reduces the planning burden, and can serve as a scaffold for teachers who are developing pedagogical expertise. Research by Vaughan et al. (2015) highlights that structured materials can support fidelity of instruction and alignment with standards when implemented with flexibility. On the other hand, scholars like Valdez (2021) emphasize that over-reliance on scripted curriculum constrains responsiveness to students’ cultural, cognitive, and contextual needs. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2019) further argue that the highly controlled nature of scripted curriculum limits both teacher autonomy and student intellectual participation, undermining democratic educational aims. In this sense, scripted curriculum can favor memorization and procedural compliance over critical thinking, inquiry, and meaning-making (Valdez, 2021; Vaughn et al., 2015). There has been ample study into the way educators teach; even with the aforementioned research, educators are still blindly reading from a script and losing their sense of autonomy. We see this leading to teacher burnout and attrition.

Areas for improvement lie in reimagining the scripted curriculum as a flexible tool rather than a prescriptive mandate. A more balanced approach would retain the organizational strengths



of scripting while restoring professional discretion, allowing teachers to adapt lessons in ways that promote higher-order thinking and authentic knowledge construction. Consistent with Pinar's (2019) vision of curriculum as lived experience, this shift requires positioning teachers as curriculum makers who interpret and modify scripts in response to the needs of their students. Ultimately, the influence of scripted curriculum on current teaching practices reflects a broader tension between efficiency and intellectual freedom—one that demands careful recalibration if schools are to cultivate not just knowledgeable students, but thoughtful and engaged learners.

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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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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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ASSEMBLY LINE EDUCATION SCRIPTED CURRICULUM, SILENT TEACHERS, AND THE AUTOMATION OF TEACHING

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WHY AM I HERE? A POSITIONALITY INTRODUCTION

Ten minutes before students were scheduled to arrive, I picked up the testing materials that were needed for the day, including the testing manual, extra pencils, and scrap paper. As I looked at the location and students that I would be working with, my blood began to boil. I knew none of these students, and none of these students knew me. “Familiar tester” was not a formal accommodation written into educational plans; however, it was an unspoken rule the district had tended to follow in previous testing scenarios. I was flustered and frustrated, and then I saw the location, breakout room one, RIC. The RIC stands for Research and Innovation Center, a space designed for students to engage in learning, collaboration, and structured academic work. This specific breakout room had three glass walls and was located at the front of the building, across from the school’s main entrance and office. They chose fishbowl for a testing location, I thought, and was correct. I was floored. The students for whom I was proctoring exams were identified students who had at least one accommodation in common: extended time.

This must be a mistake. How and why would anyone place a group of students who receive services, protected under the FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), be subjected to forced disclosure and put on display in a highly distracting environment? It was not a mistake, though. It was planned, and for some reason, according to the testing coordinator, “unable to be moved.” Directly across the hall, packages were dropped off, individuals signed in for meetings, district administrators came and went, and students eagerly arrived to start their late arrival day by waiting in the hallways, chatting, scrolling on their phones, and trying to figure out who was in “the tank.”

There was no privacy, no secure testing environment, and no calm teacher. In my three years of working as an Intervention Specialist in this district, I had never felt so defeated. I knew that all of my work to create more inclusive educational spaces and experiences was falling on an audience unwilling to listen. Once students had begun testing, I fired off an email to a professor I had worked with in both my undergraduate and graduate school coursework who had always been a role model of mine and had changed my life and career trajectory. She was an Intervention Specialist before becoming a professor and had taught for a handful of years in public schools before returning to higher education. I took every possible class I could with her. I admired her pedagogy and her approach to challenging the traditional education model for identified students. In my fiery email, I asked if she would be willing to talk with me about her experience leaving the classroom and moving into higher education. It had always been a dream of mine to work with pre-service higher education teachers because I thought that, rather than trying to change the system from within retroactively, why not catch them at the start? I hoped that maybe I could explore how I could reach more teachers and, therefore, more students if I left the K-12 classroom.



Serendipitously, our superintendent arrived at the high school roughly two hours after the testing debacle concluded. He arrived with the district's PR representative and the assistant superintendent with flowers, balloons, and an award: The Impact Award. I had won. I was the first recipient of the award for my work with students—advocating, creating meaningful curricular experiences, and developing accessible opportunities for students to engage with the larger school community that is traditionally segregated from their typical peers. Unbeknownst to me, plans had been underway to acknowledge my work within the school community, even as that same unwilling-to-change faculty and staff were the reason I was looking for an opportunity to leave.

The fiery email sent to my university colleague during testing brought about a phone conversation, a job interview, and a job offer within the next month and a half. And just like that, I left the K-12 sector as an Intervention Specialist and stepped into the world of Higher Education. I view my work and role as a faculty member with the utmost importance. In working with pre-service teachers, I have the opportunity to mentor, guide, and shape future educators in providing high-quality education for K-12 students. I have the ability to empower changemakers at the source and at the inception of their pedagogy. The spaces I currently occupy are those of a former K-12 classroom teacher (specifically an Intervention Specialist), a faculty member at a public Midwestern university, a mom, and a lifelong learner. These titles influence my work, views, and daily interactions with pre-service teachers, colleagues, and administrators, and shape a firm pedagogy: this work matters.

I, too, am a statistic. I left the K-12 sector of public education prior to a decade of service. I left after seven years but not due to burnout, failure, or my students. In my first years in higher education, pre-service teachers would specifically ask me why I left the classroom. They are always surprised to hear my positive demeanor; I did not leave jaded, nor did I leave out of spite. I remain in education to teach future teachers. I found power and privilege in an avenue to support teachers, equip them with the skills to navigate and support K-12 students in diverse working environments, and support their development of a sustainable pedagogy, hopefully decreasing their desire to leave the profession, a work in progress to this day.

The following curricular fragments (Poetter, 2025) are presented as interconnected pieces to illustrate the impacts and consequences of public school districts' implementation of scripted curriculum, which can contribute to high rates of teacher attrition. The selected pieces incorporate aspects of the *currere* method (Pinar, 1994), including regressive, analytical, and progressive fragments that depict the automation of teaching and the intersection of corporate business interests working toward capitalistic control of education as factors contributing to teacher turnover.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT: STUDENT-TEACHING: CRAFT OR CONTROLLED?

In the fall of 2024, I agreed to supervise three pre-service teachers during their student-teaching experience. All three were Dual Licensure students, pre-service teachers who are working to simultaneously obtain both a Pk-5 general education and a special education license. Two of them were placed together in a co-taught 1st-grade classroom, with one beginning in the role of an Intervention Specialist and the other as the general education teacher. Halfway through the semester, their roles switched to meet the state requirements for a split student-teaching placement, a uniquely beneficial experience for both K-12 students and my pre-service teachers alike. I conducted six observations that semester, three for each teacher. Both teachers planned their first two observations during their reading block in a first-grade classroom. The room had a rocking

chair for story reading and whole group instruction, flexible seating, a wide array of updated classroom technology, and a diverse student population. At first glance, it appeared contemporary and aimed at meeting the needs of all students.

I have a rule that my pre-service teachers submit their lesson plans to me by 7pm the night before the observation so that I can read them, take notes on key points to look for, and afterward, discuss the plans and their implementation, with reflective questions. When I checked my email the night before the first observation, I felt cheated. Not in the sense that I wrote eight-plus-page lesson plans during my student teaching experience and for the EdTPA, but both teachers had submitted the same lesson plan, for different roles, one that they did not create. It was not a case of academic integrity; it was a district-initiated scripted curriculum. A list of to-dos and checking of the boxes, the same routine, day in and day out, no personal touches, no ownership, simply following the plan that they did not create.

During the lessons, I felt a rush back to when I was a student. I was bored—bored watching the lesson, bored sitting for 40 minutes, bored as the same lessons and activities played out over and over across 4 observations, with the additions of a few consonants and vowels. If I struggled to sit through and dreaded the observations (not based on the quality of the teacher candidate, but the less-than-desirable activities where my pre-service teachers went through the motions) how did the students feel? My preservice teachers asked the questions, provided the prompts, and did not deviate. It was not carefully crafted and designed; it was pre-planned, articulated, and laid out for them. Wash, rinse, and repeat. Read, follow, and do. Students will figure it out along the way, or they will fail without the tools and without deviation from the prescribed curriculum.

The lack of creativity and the running through the motions make schools feel dull, leaving students defeated and deflated. Running through the motions and checking off the boxes on the list are not the phrases that should come to mind when thinking about instruction and education. After the lesson, pre-service teachers and their host teachers complete the CFAST (Candidate Preservice Assessment of Student Teaching) rubric. Each participant noted areas in which they felt insufficient in providing a score because the pre-service teachers were provided with materials, scripts, structure, organization, and objectives to strictly follow. None of the preparation was completed by the pre-service teachers, their host teachers, or grade-level teams. How can I rate a student on simply following the instructions they have been given? Their scores were not representative of their instruction but of following an organized sequence of events carefully crafted to target instructional sequences, buzzwords, and processes. Instruction did not incorporate Specially Designed Instruction, as outlined in students' IEPs, nor did it capitalize on the unique opportunity to utilize two eager and creative pre-service teachers to support the needs of all students. There was no co-teaching plan, merely a pre-planned, out-of-the-can, whole-class script. Monkey see, monkey do.

AUTOMATION OF EDUCATION

Teacher thinking encompasses the active cognitive processes that support teaching, particularly reflection and metacognition. Through these processes, teachers continually interpret classroom behaviors to gauge student understanding and adapt their instructional practices (Griffith, 2008; Vaughn et al., 2021). School districts are increasingly utilizing prescribed and scripted curricula in their classrooms; often, programs are implemented verbatim, reducing the cognitive tasks and the demand for professional expertise of classroom teachers. The use of

scripted programs can erode decision-making authority, professional competence, effectiveness, and confidence, contributing to the deskilling of teachers (Powell et al., 2017) and, in doing so, reducing the skill set needed to provide instruction.

Scripted programs position teaching as a process that requires little subject knowledge or pedagogical judgment, effectively automating instructional practices. When implemented with strict fidelity, such programs prioritize compliance over professional judgment, creating conditions in which thoughtful, creative, and experienced teaching is devalued, and the role of the teacher is reduced to delivering predetermined content (Powell et al., 2017), thus, resembling a system of mass production.

Following a prescribed lesson or set of lessons does not take professional expertise, subject knowledge, or pedagogy. Scripted curriculum is increasingly automating teaching by having teachers follow step-by-step directions mechanically, mirroring the logic of assembly-line work and diminishing the creativity and intellectual engagement that once characterized curriculum design and robust teaching. When teachers can be easily replaced by another person performing the same scripted tasks, they are no longer positioned as professionals capable of critical thought but rather as interchangeable parts within a larger instructional machine, carrying out isolated steps in the delivery of instruction (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Powell et al., 2017).

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT: CAPITALISM, CONSONANTS, AND CONTROL

Institutions of higher education are also not without blame in perpetuating poor educational practices. As institutions begin to face, and crumble under, external financial and political pressures, education is affected. In the name of cross-curricular work, business models, strategies, and mindsets can span colleges and seep into studies, with students unaware of the consequences of these covert messages. Specifically, when the business and education worlds intersect, young teachers are caught in the crossfire, unsure where to turn: profit or progress.

At my university, the newly renovated and highly regarded College of Business has developed a video series for students in the College of Education. The business school is world-renowned and highly competitive, so who would not want to partner with them, especially for the sake of interdisciplinary learning? The video series positions students from each of the Colleges as similarly minded individuals seeking to meet a need. The video compares the qualities of entrepreneurs and educators, noting that both are creative thinkers and problem solvers. However, the true message of the series quickly emerges: If or when a career in education fails, you can use your experience to create a business, a product, or curricular materials to profit from. The two subsequent videos highlight examples of two former public school teachers who have created curricular businesses, marketing educational products to classroom teachers. Although not intrinsically wrong—at least in terms of the notion that teachers should be incorporated into policy, curricular, and decision-making arenas—the video series’s messaging implies that education students are not pursuing a successful and substantial career as they begin their educational journey. It offers a backup option, a way out, and the prospect of failure before their careers have even begun, with an option to monetize said failure.

The continued push toward for-profit curricular materials, which frames education as a business, detracts from prioritizing equitable, meaningful, and accessible instruction for all students at the forefront of an educator’s work. This framing of cross-collegiate work is one-sided and runs counter to the message that the many programs in the College of Education strive to

embody. If the videos were meant for cross-curricular and interdisciplinary work and collaboration, where is the series for business students? The series drives students down a one-way street, merely providing examples of top-down, bureaucratically-led learning opportunities guided by the principles that “business is best” and that competition leads to innovation and improvement. The video provides a stark reminder of the capitalistic and neo-liberal ideologies that are entrenched in our society, even in the very place in which democracy should provide opportunities for all children.

Social justice, equity, and inclusion are foundational pillars of many teacher preparation programs. In contrast, the increasing authority of entrepreneurs and influencers, substantiated by a degree and title, in educational decision-making often amplifies the voices of those with limited classroom experience. The authority reinforces a consumer-oriented view of schooling, in which marketable solutions are prioritized over experienced teachers, creating conditions in which profit-driven interests can undermine efforts to advance equitable and inclusive outcomes for students. Moreover, former educators are profiting from the system they originally aimed to serve. Teachers and for-profit educational companies are continuing the cycle of prioritizing capitalistic interests over the quality and intended purpose of education. These influencers, small businesses, and large corporations reinforce the idea that schools are consumers and, rather than utilizing and positioning experience, expertise, and education to guide policy and practice, ultimately harm students in the name of profit.

CORPORATIONS AND CURRICULUM

Entrepreneurs, predominantly young, white, contemporary, business-minded individuals, began pushing market-based educational reforms in the late 20th century, focusing on accountability, choice, and competition (Golann, 2021). Using accountability through high-stakes standardized testing, politicians are purporting that the results of these assessments demonstrate a need for change, specifically following a business-like model that replaces educational institutions with corporations (Pinar, 2019). Berlinger and Glass (2014) reported that Robert Murdoch named public education as the next billion-dollar sector, eagerly anticipating transformation. Naming the public education sector as ripe for the picking insinuates failure. It justifies the false narrative that it needs saving (Berliner & Glass, 2014) while also shifting the focus of education and learning to the development of students’ future employment (Pinar, 2019).

Even with the documented social and environmental consequences of profit-maximizing practices, political leaders consistently present business as a model for educational reform (Pinar, 2019). The push for innovation under the guise of entrepreneurship strips practicing teachers of professional authority and expertise by framing their work as failing to meet expectations, thereby, re-establishing the corporation as the professional authority (Pinar, 2019; Powell et al., 2017). Politicians, economically motivated, claim that teachers are “unable” to meet the demands of current educational practices, thus reform can be mitigated and, through the market, increase revenue, benefiting the economy while stripping teachers of their professional autonomy (Powell et al., 2017). The problematic nature lies in the misguided faith in corporations; according to Powell et al. (2017), “Even more problematic, trusting the corporation to solve what are in reality complex socioeconomic problems can result in the colonization of teachers and an erosion of their professional autonomy” (p. 114). When teachers lose their status as professionals, they are replaced by for-profit goods, and students lose meaningful access to educational experiences



crafted with classroom expertise. In providing an “opportunity” for preservice teachers, an out, or off-ramp, is also being created. Teacher candidates are increasingly aware of high levels of teacher attrition. Setting low expectations and dangling the dollar signs in front of eager and impressionable young adults hoping to enter the field with the idea of a quick, easy, and profitable exit for when their career eventually fizzles out—that is by using the degree to profit off the system you once intended to immerse yourself in—does not sit right with me.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT: THE CROSSROADS FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS

In working with pre-service teachers, serving as a student teaching supervisor, teaching methods courses, and observing classrooms during early field observations, I have found that they do not see theory in practice; they see scripts in practice. Pre-service teachers see direct contradictions to what they are learning in the college classroom. In what may be intended as exemplars and high-quality practices in play, they see district adaptations of the new and next curricula package to boost test scores and the state report card.

In a class of sophomores and juniors, situated in a semester of methods courses for early elementary pre-service teachers, I was covering instructional adaptations for students and discussing academic freedom and autonomy as a classroom teacher. Abruptly, one of these pre-service teachers spoke up and confidently stated, “We do not have academic freedom as teachers.” It stopped me in my tracks. When asked to comment further, she stated that, in each field experience she engaged in that semester, all lessons in her third-grade classroom followed scripted curricula, and that the teachers were expected to implement them with absolute fidelity. Others in the class shared similar sentiments about their experiences in the field, specifically their inability to practice and teach intentionally prepared lessons due to the tight, prescribed nature of their host classrooms. After lengthy discussions about their experiences and frustrations in the local school districts, they began to identify environmental factors they could control in their future classrooms. Flexible seating, accessible materials such as text-to-speech assistive technology, brain breaks, and showcasing student work were just a few, but the haunting comment still lingered. As the we were packing up at the end of class, I overheard one pre-service teacher say to another, “If this is the norm, when and how will I practice?”

MODELING? I DO, WE DO, YOU DON’T

Pre-service teachers are entering a system in which they are not required to use the skill sets that they are carefully crafting in university settings. Teacher candidates are being exposed to examples of curriculum that teachers are not creating and that often are predesigned to optimize a one-size-fits-all population, asking students to disregard the practices and theories applied in their educator preparation programs (Holt, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2021). As scripted curricula continue to be implemented in K-12 classrooms, preservice teachers will have fewer models and examples of high-quality instructional methods and practices to observe. Not only does the prescribed curriculum affect current K-12 students, but preservice students are also, in turn, becoming products of those curricular decisions. Rather than developing creative, hands-on, and engaging lessons, their field experiences are reduced to observational work due to high demands, structure, and adherence to prepackaged instruction, and teacher candidates become passive in their learning



(Poplin, 1988). Teachers who are not actively developing and practicing their repertoire of instructional techniques will under-develop their professional expertise. Given the lack of high-quality instructional models for students to observe and for preparing students to implement the prescribed curriculum with fidelity, teacher preparation programs are further contributing to a future need for educational reform (Gallagher, 2005).

If the current cycle continues, early and preservice teachers will have engaged only within the system in a tightly controlled, top-down approach that provides a narrow, limited view of educational practices. The longer and further down the explicit and scripted instructional road education travels, the greater the need for current and veteran teachers alike to reorient their future instructional practices to meet student need (Vaughn et al., 2020). The negative implications of a scripted curriculum will affect future generations, as teachers continue to lose autonomy and become mere byproducts of the system.

WE DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION: A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

As the bell rings to begin the day, students walk single file into the classroom. They have no backpacks—per school safety policy—only laptops and blank faces. Thirty desks are arranged in rows, all facing the same direction, for whole group instruction with a single digital whiteboard. Students are dressed in uniforms: navy bottoms, plain white or gray button-up tops, white socks, and tennis shoes. No jewelry, hair beads, or accessories are allowed.

As my student teacher nervously turns on the board, I can't help but notice the lack of decorations in the room. Bright fluorescent lights flicker overhead, a small city school district mascot in the corner that has been stitched and patched, and an old Chromebook charging station plastered with faded school logos create the "classroom environment." The space lacks books, color, representations of student artwork, and a sense of community; vague inspirational posters cover all but one plain brick in the wall.

Students take their seats; the principal's live message appears on the board; the camera is on to capture the recitation of the school mission statement and ensure compliance. Students and staff comply; the class receives the daily check; students sit back down and power on their computers. The camera remains on during instructional activities in the classroom. Powered by a prominent large tech company, analysts observe, critique, and document adherence to curricular materials. Reports are shared with district administrators and hold significant value in teacher evaluations. Teachers proctor materials through online learning platforms in unison, aligned with literacy and math standards. Employability skills are also included in the platform. Yearly math and reading scores group students into school and career tracks. Students receiving scores in the 75th-100th percentile engage in STEM and medical, policy, and legal training; those in the 50th-75th percentile are grouped into clerical, business administrative, teaching, and managerial roles; and those in the 25th-50th percentile engage in trade-based activities. Students who score at or below the 25th percentile twice in an academic year are moved out of the local educational agency and placed in a working educational placement. The working placement focuses on factory and assembly-line positions, beginning with on-the-job training and pre-employment skills in middle school.

Students are highly encouraged to progress through the curriculum at a significant pace. As grades are constructed, the amount of material covered is factored into the score, referred to as a productivity score. Work completion is valued equally with accuracy in task completion as

students work through modules. Once a month, a science and social studies lesson is incorporated into the platform. Daily curriculum, lessons, and instructional explanations must be followed. Students are provided with one lunch break, three bathroom breaks, and one computer-charging break during which they read a pre-selected text, aligned with literacy and math standards. For any movement outside the classroom, students must walk in a single-file line, boys on the left and girls on the right. Artificial Intelligence is used to track, sort, and construct student work and responses to daily tasks and assessments. Classroom teachers are allowed to submit professional feedback for consideration, but it is rarely accepted and implemented.

The district's mission statement reads, "Our commitment is to provide an engaging learning environment that empowers all students to develop the knowledge, skills, and character needed to succeed in the world." The mission's hidden message is rooted in preparing the masses for low-autonomy, procedure-based work. Robotic, pre-constructed, and factory-like instruction turning out workers and unengaged citizens is of utmost importance.

The mission statement concludes, and students take their seats. My student teacher reviews the day's schedule, including work times, bathroom and lunch breaks, and student productivity goals. Before students embark on their first literacy task of the day, they follow along with a whole-class read-aloud of the student news program. Upon completion of the whole class reading, students submit responses to fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, and open-ended opinion questions to track the development of national pride and patriotism.

Based on the Department of Labor's student teaching requirements, my student teacher earns passing scores on her lesson. She complied, followed prescribed routines, and implemented the curriculum crafted by the curriculum company (CC). She fell in line, had no thought control, and earned a clear mark from CC for her implementation of the curriculum that day. I submit my rubric score to the university, CC, and the Department of Labor, even though it counts for only 10% of the final assessment.

I'm increasingly feeling defeated. Is my work not strong enough? Can I prepare novice teachers to engage and be fierce advocates for change against a system built to suppress the democratic purpose of education and schools? Is education powerful enough to challenge the patriarchy on its own? Teachers are only one piece of the puzzle. Does our inclusive education reach need to be further? Yes. The north star does not end in the classroom; it includes collaborative policy, legal, and advocacy work. The success of public schools and the development of engaged, independent, and thoughtful citizens rely on the intended democratic values of education. Rather than forming mass-produced, working-class citizens who lack critical thought, professionals collaborate across domains to identify and produce democratically minded candidates.

CONTROL AND TEACHER ATTRITION

Pinar (2019) defines the purpose of education as far more than academic achievement or workforce preparation, arguing that:

The point of the curriculum and pedagogy is to become a person, a citizen, a human subject engaged ethically with intelligence and erudition in the problems and pleasures of his or her life, problems and pleasures inevitably intertwined with the problems and pleasures of everyone else. (p. 125)

In contrast, given the impacts of corporate involvement in education, Noguera (2003) argues that education is no longer the goal; rather, custody, control, and compliance take priority.

Strict adherence to subject matter serves as a means of limiting students' intellectual freedom, thereby, capping their ability to develop into citizens capable of critical thinking and critique (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020).

Furthermore, scripted curriculum removes individuality in teaching, provides avenues for increased efficiency in surveillance to ensure adherence to implementation, reduces the need for decision making, and can provide cost-saving measures in professional development (Au, 2011; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). When schools are centered around evaluative and curricular staff deemed experts, teachers are relieved of their cognitive responsibilities, and teaching is reduced to the implementation of materials (Giroux, 1988). Highly scripted instructional programs can have significant psychological effects on teachers, sometimes becoming the deciding factor in whether they choose to remain in a profession that undermines their expertise and professional knowledge, leaving them frustrated and humiliated by corporate-driven control (Powell et al., 2017).

Teachers are at a crossroads in their implementation of scripted curriculum; they can acquiesce, contest, or resist. Forms of resistance to the control include refusal to implement the curriculum; however, the more common form of active resistance is leaving the school, district, or field altogether (Griffith, 2008; Powell et al., 2017). The Landscape Analysis of the Teaching Profession conducted by Grossman et al. (2025) identified patterns in teacher attrition and retention rates, including teaching as a local profession, working conditions, pathways to teaching positions, and social and political factors, such as scrutiny and fear-mongering. The landscape analysis provides an overview of the current state of the teaching profession in the United States by integrating research, policy reviews, and stakeholder insights. It identifies major challenges and outlines promising opportunities for strengthening the profession through targeted investments and reforms. Ingersoll (2003) reported high levels of attrition; specifically, half of teachers across the nation left within the first five years of their careers. Additionally, Grossman et al. (2025) reported that for the 2017-2018 school year, the majority of K-12 teachers had one year of experience. As teachers lose respect, their autonomy, and ability to make decisions based on their professional expertise, they are leaving the field, leaving those without the qualifications and experience with the great responsibility of shaping the next generation. This is the playbook designed to move teaching away from a highly regarded and valuable profession toward automation, efficiency, profit, and corporate control.

SO WHAT?

Change is not inherently bad; however, it is something we see frequently in the education field. Unfortunately, in many ways, we also see a lack of change, and I cannot help but feel angry and resentful of the system at large. With decades of research, why, as professionals and experts in our fields, are we subject to the policy and outside workings of the capitalist companies that view education as a money-making scheme rather than a public good? I am disgusted and disappointed that the field of education continues to engage for-profit curriculum companies rather than educational professionals. Rather than working alongside career educators, decision makers prioritize profit over problem-solving and packaged programs over professional practice.

I question whether my one-year-old son's educational experience will be similar to what I currently see in practice. However, I have faith and believe in the power of the public school

district. Even in the current state of political animosity, I believe there are change-makers in my classes, in the field, and in society at large. A highly structured curriculum is a part of the problem, but it does not operate in isolation. It is a product of the problem. Addressing the needs and flaws of the current educational system is multifaceted; in working with pre-service teachers, there is both the power and a strong need to preserve the art and craft of teaching. Educator preparation programs need to continue striving to provide opportunities, models, and examples of quality instructional practices to equip these new teachers for the current and future educational landscapes they may encounter and actively need to change. The system needs educators who see value, purpose, and meaning in their work. Education cannot be reduced to compliance and efficiency; it depends on teachers who are empowered to think critically, teach creatively, and cultivate humanity within their classrooms.

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THE STUDENT IN THE SHADOW OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

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It was a Wednesday afternoon, and I was in a 3rd grade classroom watching the last student head out the door. I had recently taken a role as a school administrator, and I was still trying to understand the flow of the school day. The teacher was walking around the room, picking up jackets and pencils and all the little things students drop on the floor throughout the day. As I walked towards the door, the teacher called out to me. She had been teaching at the school for many years, so I was a little confused by how nervous she seemed as she approached. She explained that the teachers were planning to make recommendations for the next year's class lists. She said there had been strict guidance in the past on how students should be grouped, and she wanted to know what my expectations were. I asked a few questions, which she graciously answered, and then I suggested that the class lists be created based on what was best for the students. The teacher looked at me for a long time, and I started to feel that maybe I had misunderstood the situation or what the teacher was asking, but then she replied, "No one has ever said that we should do it that way before."

Among the varied and contentious debates in education, it is easy to lose sight of the student. The widespread use of scripted curriculum, designed to provide a uniform, structured learning experience for all students, deprives teachers of their opportunity to apply their professional knowledge and experience to deliver the best instruction to their students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). Classroom practices that fail to see students as unique individuals have a significant impact on student self-image, social-emotional health, relationships, and academic performance and may lead to the unnecessary identification of learning disabilities or mental health diagnoses. This article employs the *currere* method to center the student experience within the greater conversation surrounding scripted curriculum.

The *currere* method employs a self-reflective process to help one develop a greater understanding of one's place and perspective in time (Pinar, 2019). Pinar suggests that past experiences frame the future one imagines and that by reflecting on both the past and the future, one can understand the present. Rejecting the belief that learning primarily occurs through presenting a list of objectives and measuring the outcomes, *currere* sees the path to learning as a personal, complicated journey of experiences and interactions with others. By synthesizing my educational experiences from student to administrator, I will use the *currere* method to illustrate how scripted curriculum is not student-centered and reveal the real-world consequences of ignoring students' needs.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 1: SIGNS OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM IN THE CLASSROOM

The school year had been challenging. Every day, I was reminded that teachers can be very different, with distinct priorities, approaches, and habits. Over the years, I had worked with many teachers to guide curriculum decisions and empower them in their classrooms. I had developed a comprehensive understanding of the school's educational goals and priorities. I knew what curriculum was used in each grade, why it was chosen, and how teachers had approached it over

the years. I worked with teachers to accommodate students, reflect and adjust their classroom plans, and make decisions that made sense for their students and led to growth in their classrooms. But this year the make-up of the team had changed, which meant learning to adjust to different teaching styles, priorities, and habits. I was discovering that a new culture had developed—one that was much more rigid than I expected—and that creating change would be challenging.

Midway through the second quarter, a math teacher asked me to join a conference with parents who were very concerned for their child. I was trying to build a relationship with the teacher, so when I was asked to join the meeting, I was very willing. The student had failed math the first semester and was on track to fail the third quarter.

I met with the teacher ahead of the parent meeting to learn more about the class and why the teacher felt the student was struggling. The teacher explained that students had homework every day, which they received credit for completing but that she did not check or grade. The students also took quizzes and tests, which equated to 80% of their grade. This student had a high homework grade but seemed to be failing all quizzes and tests. I asked the teacher whether she knew why the student was failing the assessments or if she could identify gaps in his math skills. She said she really did not know. I suggested that the curriculum may include alternative practice pages to reinforce the critical skills, but she responded that he needed to learn to keep up with the class. I asked whether the student could receive credit for making corrections on tests, providing him with an opportunity to understand where he had made errors. The teacher explained that she did not believe that was something that was typically allowed.

We discussed that the student had ADHD, and the teacher felt he struggled to stay focused in class. She seemed to be familiar with various accommodations and modifications that could be effective, so I was confused about why the student had failed the first and second quarters, was continuing to fail, and why the teacher had no insight. When I suggested working with the student at the small table to better understand why he was struggling and give him targeted support, the teacher indicated she would consider it.

We met with the parents in the principal's office. The mother expressed concern about their child's math grades. The father explained that one of their parents had been very unwell for some months making it difficult for the family to keep up with regular life activities but that they did work with their son every evening, trying to help him understand and complete his math homework. The mother said it was challenging because they struggled to understand the math concepts, which made it difficult for the parents to explain them to him. Their son had been working with a tutor but was still failing his math quizzes. The mother explained that their son had also been seeing a counselor to help him with anxiety and that they had worked with their doctor to adjust their son's medication in hopes that it would help. The parents felt at a loss for what to do next.

The teacher had been quietly listening to their concerns. I tried to draw her into the conversation, suggesting that she may work with the student at the small table if the mother felt her son would be comfortable with that. The mother said yes, she was open to any suggestions. She asked the teacher if that was something the teacher typically did for struggling students. The teacher responded slowly, "No, we don't really do any small group work in this class." There was a brief silence at the table. The father explained that their son felt the class moved quickly, and he had trouble keeping up. The teacher replied, "I can't slow down the curriculum for one student" but did not offer any suggestions for helping the student in her class or at home.

As I sat next to the parents, I could feel their response. They seemed to deflate right before me, looking tired and defeated. I felt the weight of the rigid expectations and the parents'



powerlessness and defeat. I felt heartbroken for them and frustrated to the point of tears. I could not force the teacher to change her pacing or classroom practices. I knew there were many options for helping the student, and in the past, I would have insisted on them. However, this year, I seemed to be facing a powerful culture of high, rigid expectations, a culture that did not allow for flexibility or student-centered approaches. I was left with a suffocating sense of the gap between this uncompromising approach and everything I believed was important about education and teaching students.

REFLECTION

As a special education administrator, I interact daily with parents and students who are struggling to navigate school programs and expectations. These meetings often make me wonder what makes teachers respond so inflexibly to students. Do teacher beliefs and ideals drive this inflexibility? Is it a result of a school culture and administrator directives? Having gained a deeper understanding of scripted curriculum, I now ask myself, is it an inevitable result of the design and structure of the chosen school curriculum programs?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A classroom curriculum can be defined as the lessons and content knowledge shared with students throughout a year (Poetter, 2027). Who decides what content is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught has been and continues to be a matter of much debate between educators, policymakers, and parents (Pinar et al., 2006). The role of the teacher as an expert in pedagogy, or the practice of presenting knowledge in the classroom, was only acknowledged in the last 35 years. Prior to that, teachers were primarily seen as the disciplinarians in the classroom, presenting information created by experts and keeping students on task. Shulman (1987) alludes to the complex and multidimensional role of teachers, emphasizing the importance of a teacher's ability to "transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students" (p. 15). Teachers are expected not only to take an active role in developing the curriculum they will use in the classroom, but also to differentiate the curriculum to meet the abilities and needs of their students. Dewey, the great educational reformer, "insisted that the child's experience must form the basis of the curriculum" (Pinar et al., 2006, p. 105).

Tracking the path to the widespread use of scripted curriculum is something like watching a snowball roll downhill, picking up more snow and growing broader with every rotation. Following the National Reading Panel (NRP) report, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2000 (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Rigell et al., 2022). NCLB mandated the use of scientifically based reading instruction methods to improve reading performance. Standardized testing mandates followed, leading to the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). With each development, greater pressure was placed on states to adopt scripted curriculum programs through federal funding incentives and school performance expectations. Publishers, in return, began creating scripted programs that provided research-based, explicit scripts for teachers to follow and promised educational gains for all students (Gallagher, 2005; Rigell et al., 2022). The momentum towards student-centered, teacher-driven instruction was effectively stalled.

I remember first becoming aware of the concept of scripted curriculum when my oldest son was in 4th grade. He hated reading class and kept failing spelling tests despite studying with me every evening. It was some years before I entered education, but I was an avid reader, and I knew his feelings about reading did not make sense, and his spelling grades did not match how hard he worked. By late in the first semester, he was becoming frustrated and defeated, so I met with the teacher to ask for help. I learned that in reading class the teacher read one book at a time, and all the students had to follow along. They were not allowed to read ahead, and the books did not sound like anything my son would be interested in. When I asked about his spelling grade, her response was to assure me that it would be fine; students did not really need to be able to spell, as they would have spellcheck in the future.

At first glance, the parent meetings I described may not seem directly linked to scripted curriculum, but they in fact illustrate its pervasive influence. The teacher's insistence on maintaining the curriculum's pace was not merely a personal preference but a manifestation of a system that prioritizes adherence to program schedules over authentic student learning. Similarly, in my son's case, the teacher's lack of curiosity or concern about his reading and spelling challenges reflected a culture in which compliance with the script outweighs responsiveness to individual needs. As Poetter (personal communication, February 26, 2026) observed, "Rigidity on policy and always hearing 'that wouldn't be fair to others' is almost always a sign that equity isn't valued."

Scripted curriculum programs are based on the theory that there is a scientifically validated method for teaching content and that, if this method is employed for every student, learning will occur (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017). These programs provide explicit scripts for teachers to follow, breaking each lesson into a series of steps, and leaving nothing for the teacher or student to do but follow each step to its learning objective (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). Pitched as the answer for low-income and poor-performing districts, scripted curriculum programs claim to provide the instruction necessary for all students to reach the high standards set by the CCSS and standardized testing requirements. Proponents go one step further, suggesting that trained teachers are not necessarily needed, as anyone can follow scripted programs (Powell et al., 2017).

Gone are the days when teachers knew their students, understood their community, and created lessons that connected with students' experiences and identities (Rigell et al., 2022). State and district leaders increasingly defer to unknown curriculum experts, preventing local classroom teachers from weaving their students' experiences into their curriculum. As Poetter (2027) directly states, scripted curricula created by those outside the community "cannot address the particular, cultural norms of students in a community" (p. 214). Forcing teachers to follow a curriculum framed by the predominantly white perspective perpetuates the racist, colonialist messages that have been rooted in our country since its founding (Rigell et al., 2022; Valdez, 2020; Vaughn et al., 2021). Promoted as a means of creating equity by providing the same education to all students, these programs prevent teachers from facilitating any relevant cultural connections between the content and students' lives (Mahzoon-Hagheghi & Bruun, 2023; Wyatt, 2014). Wyatt (2014) is clear that "these programs are deliberately designed to be context-blind and treat all students in the same way, regardless of their background" (p. 452). Learning, however, does not occur in a vacuum but "is constructed when the individual seeks to reconcile the disjuncture between his or her current interpretations of the world with a discordant new experience" (Gallagher, 2005, p.148). If students' experiences, cultural identities, interests, and talents are not relevant to the



classroom curriculum, the teaching will not lead to the deep connections and student engagement needed for understanding.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 2: A STUDENT'S DAY (IN THE FUTURE?)

I always try to get to school early, but sometimes it's hard. Maybe I just don't want to go, so I drag my feet. Sometimes I don't have my homework done, so then I really move slowly. It's not that I don't want to do my homework; it's just that some of it is hard to understand, and I don't have anyone to help me.

Today, I'm three minutes early, so I'll probably make it to class on time. The line to get into school isn't too long, and after I scan my face for the attendance office, I rush to my first period class. At least I don't have to carry a backpack anymore. All of my work is on the small computer the school assigned me, and no one carries a backpack just for their little computer.

The computer-only program is new since my brother and sister were here. It's not that they didn't have computers. I guess they had these carts full of them in their classrooms. They used them for typing papers or learning how to research but not for every assignment or test. School was different for them. They used to do projects in their classes with posterboards and boxes and all kinds of craft supplies. My brother says they could even choose what kind of project they wanted to do. We don't do projects anymore, well, unless they're computer projects. Sometimes we do those.

As I walk into my reading class, I feel tired already. It's not that I don't like reading; I've read all of the Penderwick books, and I can't wait for the next one. But in my reading class, we don't have any books like that, and reading on a computer makes my eyes tired. I guess there used to be books, shelves and shelves of them in the library. The old reading teacher had the best reading nook in her classroom, with big cushions and fancy bean bag chairs. She had so many books to choose from, all sorted in different ways. My sister says she used to help sort them after school, which was one of her favorite things to do. Her teacher would make hot chocolate when it was cold outside and read to the class while everyone warmed up. It sounds wonderful. But we have a different reading teacher now, and the books aren't there anymore. I guess they were moved for more desks or something. Or maybe they thought we just didn't need them anymore. Even the library is now a "media center" with monitors and places to charge your computers instead of books.

Before we start the reading lesson, we always have to finish a bell ringer worksheet. Some days the paper will have 10 sentences with punctuation we have to correct; other days we'll have to write a paragraph about something we read the night before. I think the teacher makes us do them so we sit down and get busy as soon as we get into class, but I don't know. Today, we have to write our spelling words three times and then fill in the sentence blanks with the right vocabulary words. I already know our spelling words, but some kids don't, and anyway, you're not allowed to skip this part. Last year, my teacher gave me different spelling words, words that I didn't already know. Sometimes they were really hard, but my teacher taught me how to take them apart into pieces I could spell. This year, my teacher says we all have to learn the words listed in her teacher's book; she says we have to master them.

After the bell ringer, our teacher always assigns us a reading passage. It just pops up in our To-Do list. I guess there's a computer program that tells the teacher which story each of us should read. Sometimes she'll try to change someone's story, but her computer program doesn't seem to



like that, so maybe that's why she doesn't try very often. Anyway, our passage is never a complete story. You don't really know what happened before it or what will happen in the end. It's just a middle. Like *The Empire Strikes Back*. Just the middle of the story. That's my least favorite *Star Wars* movie.

Our teacher explained that we need to look for the story arc in today's passage. I think that's hard without the whole story, but our teacher says we should be able to do it with just the reading we have. That's what her teacher's book says. I think I'm a pretty good reader, but sometimes I feel like I'm not very smart. I just can't figure out the parts of today's story. It really feels like something important is missing. We never read any stories like *Star Wars* or *The Penderwicks*. It seems like it might be easier to do the reading work if the stories were interesting. Maybe if we could read the whole story in a book, it would be more interesting, and I could do a better job on my assignments.

Math class is next, and that always makes my stomach hurt. My mom says it's probably because it's right before lunch, but I think it's because math can be hard. She says my dad uses math every day, and you can do all kinds of interesting things when you understand it. But we don't do interesting things in math class, so I'm not sure about using it when I grow up. Sometimes we have to solve word problems about cars and long drives or how big the pool is in someone's backyard. I don't know anyone who has a pool in their backyard, but it seems like it would be cool. I guess being able to calculate how big one is might be helpful someday. That's what my teacher says, anyway.

My teacher always walks us through math problems at the beginning of class. She'll explain what we need to do to solve the problem, then ask us what she just said. It's weird how teachers do that. Yesterday, she said, "Area is length times width. What is area?" and we had to say, "length times width." Our teacher uses these hand signals so we all know what to repeat. And I guess if we repeat it enough times, it will get stuck in our brains, and we'll be able to figure out all kinds of math problems. I don't know. It doesn't seem to work that way for me. And the class moves really fast. I think it would be easier if it could slow down a little. Sometimes I just need to think for a minute, but I'm always afraid I'm going to miss something important. Maybe that's why my stomach hurts.

My teacher says we have to keep moving because if we slow down, we won't learn everything we need to know by the end of the year. But I'm not sure I'm learning everything anyway. I think if I could write the math problems on paper to work them out, it might be a little easier. My brother says he used to do that. But we don't use paper anymore, and my teacher says I need to be able to solve them on my computer. She says it has all the tools I need already built in.

My friend Matt has a really hard time understanding it. Sometimes he'll raise his hand to ask a question, but my teacher just flips through the book on her computer and gives an answer that doesn't seem to help, so most of the time he doesn't even ask anymore. He agrees with me that everything moves really fast. I think he could really use some paper, too, and someone to explain it a little differently. I think he could get it then.

REFLECTION

I wrote this fragment of a school day from a student's perspective as a progressive narrative only to realize it may be a present reality. The described instruction sounds boring and stressful

from the student's perspective, but it would qualify as "research-based" and adequate. If a student like Matt is struggling to follow this type of math instruction, does that mean he may have a math disability? Multi-Tiered Systems of Support programs prevalent in many schools are designed to eliminate special education qualifications that are unnecessary or unwarranted. However, the question may remain: Is the widespread use of scripted curriculum creating "the learning problems we seek to eliminate" (Gallagher, 2005, p. 146)?

CHILDREN OR ROBOTS?

The most insidious part of the scripted curriculum movement is the assumption that all students learn in the same way. Echoing critiques from disability studies scholars, this belief in a uniform standard erases the value of uniqueness and difference (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017). The high standards that underpin scripted curriculum place the entire burden of academic success on the student and pathologize those who do not fit the standardized mold (Gallagher, 2005; Timberlake et al., 2017). Teachers themselves are coming to believe that, if they follow the script, every student will meet the standard. Outdated beliefs that differentiation lowers expectations or "dumbs down" the instruction have resurfaced, proving that scripted curricula do not lead to equity for all students (Timberlake et al., 2017). In fact, a scripted curriculum, by its very nature, creates a systematic barrier that prevents teachers from using student-centered approaches in the classroom. Because the instruction must follow a strict, uniform script, low-achieving students, who may require a different approach or need to be engaged in the learning, are referred to special education to catch up or be "fixed" (Gallagher, 2005; Timberlake et al., 2017).

The year I co-taught 5th-grade ELA, I was paired with the building's literacy coach and one of those really gifted teachers. She taught reading three days of the week, and I taught writing the other two days. That year, I learned what school could really be like for students. Her student-centered approach, creativity, and enthusiasm spilled over into my writing lessons, and I learned that I could be creative and that my students would continue to grow in their writing. We used the ELA program as a scaffold, but the classroom curriculum we developed was much more engaging. By paying attention to each student and learning about their lives and interests, we were able to expose them to books that resonated with them and individualize our instruction so that all students could share and grow in their perspectives and experiences. That did not mean all students were expected to learn and show their learning in the same way but in a way that was right for them. That year, we made fairy floss and pancakes in the classroom, read a picture book at the beginning of every class, created a Thanksgiving parade video with the students, and ended the year with a wiffle ball game, hot dogs and all. Our students learned to trust us and be brave enough to work hard and try new things. They made great gains in reading and writing by the end of the year and headed into the summer with such hope for their next year of school.

Student needs and growth should be the north star for all school-based decisions. Teaching should be student-centered and begin with knowing students and their needs. Lessons should be relevant to the students in the classroom and allow them to take an active role in their learning as thinkers and doers, not just memorizers. All students should be represented and honored in the curriculum and should be led to think deeply and critically about the world and their role in it. As Poetter (2024) states, "education should reflect these life processes in order to prepare students for using/developing the processes to address life's challenges and to build their own knowledge" (p.



11). Ultimately, what we know as adults and educators should inform what students learn, but it should not be the only thing students learn (Berman, 1968). Students must have ownership of their learning, something that scripts simply cannot provide.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Approaching academic writing through examples of my own experience by following the *currere* method was a foreign concept for me. Asking myself, “what has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience” (Pinar, 1994, p. 20), required me to intentionally reflect on what I know and how I have come to know it, a task that felt like working a muscle I had left sedentary for too long. More than just reflecting, though, the *currere* method expected me to respect my knowledge and past experiences as valuable. In fact, Poetter (2025) suggests,

anyone interested in teaching and curriculum, in educating and learning as a learner and with other learners, at becoming better at it, figuring it out, making a contribution to the lives and progress of others, needs to start with the self. (p. 18)

He suggests that, by examining our lives and learning experiences, we can identify what truly drives us, and that this realization can guide us towards the future impacts we can have on the world.

My natural tendency to see others as the experts and disregard my own knowledge mirrors the experience of many teachers today who have been stripped of all autonomy and professional trust by being required to follow a teaching script designed by an unknown expert. The shift that must occur in education is one in which teachers are given permission to respect their knowledge and experiences, are expected to reflect on the nature of their learning and their knowledge of how students learn, and approach teaching as experts. This is the only way forward for the students who are our future. Equity requires much more than providing the same content in the same manner (Love, 2019). It requires teachers to create an environment in which all students are celebrated for their differences, their uniqueness, their pasts, and their futures, and in which instruction is differentiated to meet the needs of all students (Love, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021).

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THE SCRIPTED SCIENTIST

A CURRERE ANALYSIS OF SCIENCE EDUCATION AND THE CRISIS OF APPLICATION IN MALAWI

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This paper explores how a legacy of scripted learning has shaped science education in Malawi, creating a persistent divide between knowledge performance and meaningful application. Using the method of *currere* as defined by Pinar (1975), the study examines how historical, cultural, and systemic factors have produced a form of education that values memorization, control, and measurable outcomes over curiosity, creativity, and community connection.

To ground this analysis in lived and imagined experience, the paper begins with a series of curriculum fragments. These fragments drawn from my own past, an imagined future, and a moment of present reflection are provided first so that the reader can encounter the scenes directly. Following these fragments, the paper moves through different themes. The fragments are interpreted analytically and synthetically, demonstrating how Malawian science education has evolved from colonial mnemonic practices to imagined technological precision and how we might disrupt this trajectory. Ultimately, this paper argues that the future of science education in Malawi depends on moving beyond performance toward purposeful understanding.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT: THE RHYME OF THE FIRST TWENTY ELEMENTS OF THE PERIODIC TABLE

The year was 2008, and I was far from the familiar streets of my hometown, Blantyre. I was a student at a boarding school in a district called Nkhatabay, which was located about 298 miles away from home. At that time, being that far away felt like being in a different country. The school was a place of strict rules and heavy expectations. I remember the chemistry laboratory specifically. It was a large, cold room that always smelled of sulfur and old wooden desks. On one hot afternoon, the sun was streaming through the high windows, and I sat on a stool, staring at a large, faded chart that Mr. Mwale had unrolled over the chalkboard. It was the Periodic Table of Elements. Mr. Mwale stood at the front of the room. He held a long wooden pointer and tapped it against the first few boxes. He explained what the elements were then he started to chant. He had a mnemonic, a rhyme designed to help us memorize the first twenty elements in order.

My first impression was an urge to laugh. The way the words sounded when they were mashed together into a rhyme was funny. “Hiii-He-Li-Ber-B-C-N-O-Flu-Ne,” he chanted in a flat, mechanical voice. I felt a giggle starting in my chest. However, as he moved his pointer further down the chart, the laughter died away. I looked at the long rows of boxes and the strange letters, and I felt a sudden, heavy wave of fear. It was completely overwhelming. My heart started to beat fast, and my hands felt cold against the desk. For a moment, I truly felt like I could not do it. I felt like a wall had been built in front of me that I would never be able to climb. I also asked myself

why they kept making things this hard. I looked at the table and thought to myself, *Maybe I will do it eventually.*

That evening, I went back to the hostel. There were some senior girls chatting near the common area. I walked over to them because I knew they had already finished this part of the curriculum. I was holding my notebook tightly, feeling desperate.

“Have you already learned the mnemonic for the periodic table?” I asked one of them.

She nodded and smiled. “Yes, we learned it last term.”

“How did you do it?” I asked. “It just sounds like noise to me.”

“It’s not noise,” she said simply. “It’s a rhythm. You just have to say it over and over until you don’t have to think anymore. Just follow the beat.”

She spent a few minutes reciting it with me, keeping a simple beat by tapping on a wooden chair. Hearing it from someone else made it feel a little more doable. The sharp fear I felt in the classroom began to turn into dull pressure. I went to bed that night and whispered the sounds to myself until I fell asleep. I wasn’t thinking about atoms or science; I was just trying to master the script. The next morning, the air in the classroom felt thick. Mr. Mwale stood at the front with his list of names. The room was perfectly silent. He started calling students to stand up and recite the first twenty elements. “Chirwa!” he called out. A girl stood up and started the chant. I sat at my desk, my fingers tangled together under the wood. *Please, not me*, I prayed silently. *Please do not call my name today*. My heart hammered against my ribs every time he looked down at his list. I watched my classmates stand up one by one. Some stumbled and were told to sit down and study harder. Others finished the rhyme perfectly. I kept my eyes on my desk, praying that I would remain invisible.

Then, he called my name. I stood up slowly. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I started the chant. The sounds I had practiced in the hostel came out of my mouth in a steady stream. I didn’t stop to think about what the letters meant. I just moved through the rhyme exactly as I had been taught. When I reached the twentieth element, I stopped. Mr. Mwale nodded, marked his book, and moved to the next name. I sat down, feeling a rush of relief. I felt proud that I had succeeded, but it was a strange kind of pride. I had repeated the script, but the table was still just a mystery to me.

A month later, school closed for the holidays, and I made the long journey back to Blantyre. The first thing I told my older sister, Sarah, and my brother, John, was about the periodic table. They too had learnt it the same way. For the rest of the holidays, they helped me master it. We would sit together and recite the first twenty elements as fast as we could, turning it into a game. Because of them, the mnemonic became a permanent part of my mind. It was no longer a scary wall; it was just a static piece of information that lived in my brain. It was just *there*, like a piece of furniture I had stopped noticing. Since 2008, I have used that same memorized version of the table in every exam I ever took. I would walk into the hall and immediately write the first twenty elements on the back of the question paper so I wouldn’t forget them. Later, when I became a chemistry teacher myself, I found myself standing in front of my own students. I held a pointer. I looked at the same chart. And I used the same technique.

I have always used the mnemonic as something static and unchangeable. I never had the time to look at the table any other way. Now, I find myself asking a difficult question. Did this kind of learning suppress my curiosity? By focusing so much on the script and the proper place of the elements, did I lose the chance to think critically about science itself? I have carried this rhyme for years, and only now am I wondering if there was another way to learn.

PROGRESSIVE FRAGMENT: THE SILENT CLASSROOM

The year is 2058. I am standing in a classroom in Blantyre. The room is bright, quiet, and very modern. There are no desks, no chalkboards, and no posters on the walls. Everything is white and smooth. Thirty girls sit in comfortable chairs arranged in a half circle. Each student is wearing digital learning glasses that show information directly in front of their eyes. I am not called a teacher anymore. My title is “Learning Supervisor.” My job is to make sure the system runs smoothly. A soft sound fills the room. It is a steady rhythm. Then a recorded voice begins: Hydrogen. Helium. Lithium. Beryllium. The girls repeat the words together. The system controls speed and timing. The elements appear in front of their eyes as they speak. Carbon. Nitrogen. Oxygen. No one hesitates. No one asks questions. No one laughs. After seven minutes, the lesson is complete. A screen on the wall shows the results: Memory Rate: 100%. The system has worked perfectly.

I should feel proud. Instead, I feel uncomfortable. I remember being a student in 2008, sitting in a cold chemistry classroom, repeating a rhyme to memorize the first twenty elements. I did not understand what they meant. I just wanted to pass. This new classroom is more advanced. It is faster and more efficient. But something feels missing. The girls in front of me are from rural areas. Their families farm near rivers and lakes. In recent years, large mining companies have started extracting minerals from their regions. These minerals are used for energy and technology in other parts of the world. These girls are being trained to work in those industries. They know the elements perfectly. But do they understand what those elements mean for their own land?

The lesson ends and the girls remove their glasses. I look at the control panel beside me. There is a button that allows me to pause the program and teach freely. We are told not to use it unless the system breaks. The system has not broken. But I feel that something else has. I press the button. The room becomes very quiet. The girls look at me with surprise.

“Please take off your glasses,” I say gently. They do. I walk to the center of the room and take out a small jar of soil from the Shire River. “Carbon,” I say, holding up the soil. “Where is it?”

“In the periodic table,” one girl answers quickly.

“Yes,” I say. “But it is also here. In this soil. In your crops. In the food your families grow.” They are listening closely now.

“Oxygen,” I continue. “Where is it?”

“In the air.”

“And in your lungs,” I say.

“Iron?”

“In the ground.”

“And in the tools your parents use. In your blood.” The room feels different now. The girls are not just repeating. They are thinking.

I ask them, “Who benefits when minerals are taken from your land? Who decides how they are used? What responsibility do we have when we study science?” The screen behind me begins to flash a warning. It shows that we are no longer following the official lesson plan. For a moment, I am afraid. I could turn the system back on. I could return to the script. Instead, I turn the screen off.

As I stand there, I realize that the system is not only around me; it is also inside me. For years, I believed efficiency meant success. I believed that, if students could perform perfectly, then I had done my job well. In many ways, I helped build this kind of classroom by valuing smooth

lessons and measurable results over questioning and connection. I am not outside this system. I have benefited from it. Pausing the program is not just an act of teaching differently; it is an act of confronting my own comfort with control. There may be consequences for this deviation, but there are also consequences if I remain silent.

I tell them about my own experience memorizing the elements without understanding them. I explain how I later became a teacher and repeated the same method without questioning it. “I do not want you to only memorize,” I say. “I want you to understand. I want you to ask questions. I want science to connect to your life.”

One girl raises her hand. “So, what should we do differently?” she asks.

“We begin by asking why,” I say. “We learn the elements, yes. But we also ask how they affect our communities. We ask how to protect our land. We ask how knowledge can serve us, not just others.”

Now the classroom feels alive. It is no longer perfectly controlled, but it feels real. I understand what is at stake. If education becomes only about perfect memory and efficiency, we may create students who can repeat everything but question nothing. The alternative is not disorder. The alternative is connection. It is allowing space for questions. It is remembering that education is not only about getting the right answer but about understanding why it matters.

In this small moment, I am no longer just supervising a system. I am choosing to teach.

STANDING BETWEEN THE SCRIPT AND THE QUESTION

I am sitting at my desk late in the evening, the room quiet except for the soft hum of my laptop and the faint rustle of papers. My two fragments lie open before me: one a memory of the past, the other a possible future. Between them sits the present moment, the space where I begin to interpret my educational journey.

As I reread the imagined classroom of 2058, the scene sharpens. The walls are stark white. Students sit still, their eyes fixed forward through digital glasses that flicker with information. A large display at the front reads: *Memory Rate: 100%*. The room is silent, not the silence of reflection but of completion. Every response is immediate. Every answer is correct. The lesson flows without interruption.

And yet, within that perfection, something feels absent.

What becomes clear is that this future is not entirely imagined; it is an extension of a script I have already lived.

SCRIPTED LEARNING AS A CULTURE OF CONTROL

The script that governs the 2058 classroom has deep historical roots. Science education in Malawi has long been shaped by structures that prioritize order, predictability, and measurable outcomes over curiosity and interpretation. As Kafka (2019) notes, educational systems often function to reproduce inequality by maintaining control rather than fostering critical engagement. Within this context, the mnemonic script emerges as more than a teaching strategy, it becomes a cultural pattern that defines what counts as knowledge and how learning should occur.

In my own classroom experience—the rhythmic chant of the periodic table, the teacher’s pointer tapping in steady time, our voices rising together, hesitant at first, then synchronized—the rhythm

mattered more than the meaning. To fall out of sync was to risk being wrong, to be exposed, to disrupt the flow of the lesson. In that moment, learning was not an individual process of understanding but a collective act of coordination. The goal was alignment, not inquiry.

This is how the script operates, not only through content, but through structure. It organizes bodies, voices, time, and thought. Students learn when to speak, how to respond, and what counts as a correct contribution. Over time, this structure becomes internalized, shaping not only academic behavior but also one's sense of what it means to learn. Golann (2021) demonstrates how such highly regulated environments train students into compliance, rewarding those who follow the script and marginalizing those who deviate from it. Similarly, Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argue that tightly scripted curricula constrain democratic possibilities by limiting opportunities for dialogue, interpretation, and intellectual risk-taking. Within this framework, error is not treated as part of learning but as a failure to perform correctly. As a result, students may become increasingly cautious, prioritizing accuracy over exploration. The classroom becomes a space where knowledge is stabilized rather than questioned and where authority remains largely unchallenged. This aligns with broader critiques of scripted curricula that suggest that their emphasis on control and standardization can diminish both student agency and teacher autonomy (Powell et al., 2017).

Through *currere*, Pinar (1975) invites a return to these lived moments, not simply to recall them but to reinterpret their significance. In reflecting on my own experience, I begin to see how deeply these structures shaped my understanding of education. Learning became something to perform correctly, something to deliver on demand, rather than something to explore, question, or connect to my own life. The script did not just organize the lesson; it shaped my relationship to knowledge itself. In this sense, the culture of control extends beyond the classroom. It becomes a way of thinking, a way of engaging with authority, and a way of positioning oneself within systems of knowledge. The imagined classroom of 2058, with its seamless efficiency and perfect outcomes, is not a departure from this culture but its logical continuation.

EFFICIENCY WITHOUT MEANING

The rhythm of the chant evolves into the precision of the digital system. What begins as memorized sequence in the past becomes automated accuracy in the imagined future. In both cases, efficiency defines success. Learning is measured by speed, correctness, and completion, whether through the synchronized recitation of elements or the real-time display of perfect scores. Although the tools have changed, the underlying logic remains the same: knowledge is valued for how quickly and accurately it can be reproduced.

In the 2058 classroom, this logic reaches its most refined form. The system operates without friction. There are no pauses, no deviations, no visible uncertainty. Students respond instantly, their answers generated with seamless precision. The silence in the room is striking, not the silence of reflection or deep engagement but the silence that comes when struggle has been engineered out of the learning process. Everything works exactly as intended. But that is precisely the problem.

When learning is stripped of hesitation, error, and questioning, it also loses the conditions that make understanding possible. Struggle, in many ways, is not a failure of learning but a necessary part of it. It is through uncertainty that learners make connections, test ideas, and develop deeper comprehension. In its absence, knowledge becomes surface-level accurate but remains unexamined. The appeal of scripted systems lies in their simplicity and reliability. As Timberlake

et al. (2017) note, such systems are often embraced because they offer consistency, clarity, and the promise of equitable outcomes. They reduce variability and provide clear benchmarks for success. However, this same emphasis on standardization can narrow the scope of learning, limiting opportunities for interpretation, creativity, and critical engagement.

Vaughn et al. (2022) argue that meaningful learning depends on adaptability, on the capacity of both teachers and students to respond to context, ask questions, and deviate from predetermined pathways when necessary. Efficiency, in this sense, can become a constraint rather than a strength. When the goal of education shifts toward flawless execution, there is little room left for exploration or meaning-making. This tension is evident in the contrast between performance and understanding. In the 2058 classroom, students achieve perfect outcomes, yet the teacher senses an absence that cannot be quantified. Knowledge is present. It is accurate, complete, and efficiently delivered, but it remains disconnected from interpretation and lived experience. The system produces results but not necessarily insight.

In this way, efficiency begins to overshadow purpose. The script is followed with precision, but it is not questioned. Learning becomes an end in itself rather than a means of engaging the world. What is lost is not knowledge, but depth, the ability to connect, to apply, and to understand why that knowledge matters. The result is a classroom where everything appears successful on the surface, yet something essential is missing. The students know the answers, but they are not invited to ask questions.

THE CRISIS OF RELEVANCE AND APPLICATION

The absence of meaning becomes most visible in the growing distance between knowledge and life. In both the past classroom and the imagined future, science is presented as something abstract detached from the environments students inhabit and the realities they navigate daily. Knowledge is encountered as content to be mastered rather than as a tool for understanding the world.

This is why the moment of interruption matters.

When the teacher pauses the lesson in the 2058 classroom and lifts the jar of soil, the shift is immediate. The rhythm of the lesson breaks. The controlled silence of the room changes in quality, no longer signaling completion but opening a space of attention. For the first time, something unscripted enters the classroom. Holding the jar, the teacher says, “Carbon ... it is also here. In this soil. In your crops.” The statement is simple, but its impact is profound.

In that moment, knowledge is no longer confined to the screen or the script. It becomes tangible. The abstract language of chemistry is reconnected to land, labor, and sustenance. What was previously memorized as part of a sequence is now situated within lived experience. The gesture does not add new content; rather, it transforms the meaning of what is already known. This brief interruption reveals the depth of what has been missing. The system has been designed for accuracy and efficiency, but not for relevance. It produces correct answers yet leaves little room for students to see how those answers matter beyond the classroom. The jar of soil exposes this gap; it brings into focus the difference between knowing *about* something and understanding it in relation to one’s world.

The need for this reconnection is not accidental. It reflects a longer historical trajectory in which science education was shaped by colonial priorities that emphasized classification, measurement, and control over relational and contextual understanding (Kafka, 2019). Within this

framework, knowledge was often presented as universal and detached, rather than situated and lived. As a result, local knowledge systems and everyday experiences were marginalized or excluded altogether. Even contemporary efforts to reform education can reproduce this disconnect when local realities are not meaningfully integrated into the curriculum. Sayed and Soudien (2005) argue that structural changes, such as decentralization, do not automatically lead to greater relevance if the underlying assumptions about knowledge remain unchanged. When curriculum continues to prioritize standardized content over contextual application, students are left navigating a divide between what they learn in school and what they experience in their communities.

This divide has practical consequences. Students may be able to recite scientific principles with precision yet struggle to apply them to issues such as agriculture, environmental sustainability, or resource management, areas that are directly connected to their lives. Knowledge, in this sense, becomes inert: it exists, but it does not act. The script, therefore, does more than limit understanding, it creates distance. It separates learners from their environment, from their communities, and from the potential of knowledge to serve as a tool for interpretation and transformation. The classroom becomes a space where knowledge is encountered but not fully lived. It is precisely this distance that the moment of pause begins to disrupt. By reintroducing the material world into the lesson, the teacher opens the possibility of reconnecting knowledge to life. And in doing so, the fragment reveals not only the limitations of the script but also the conditions under which meaningful learning can begin.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE FROM EDUCATOR TO SUPERVISOR

In the 2058 classroom, the script becomes more dominant, and the role of the teacher begins to shift in subtle but significant ways. In the earlier classroom, the teacher is still visibly present, conducting the rhythm of recitation, setting the pace, and directing student responses. Authority is exercised through voice, gesture, and timing. The teacher controls the flow of the lesson and remains engaged in its delivery. In the imagined future, however, this role is reduced. The teacher is no longer the source or interpreter of knowledge but a monitor of its execution. The title of the teacher then changes to “learning supervisor,” signaling a shift. Their primary role is not to teach in the traditional sense but to ensure that the system functions efficiently. The rhythm is no longer conducted by the teacher but by the technology. The script runs itself.

This transformation reflects broader patterns identified in research on scripted curricula. Powell et al. (2017) notes that such systems can significantly reduce teacher autonomy, positioning educators as implementers of externally designed content rather than active decision-makers. Teaching becomes procedural, guided by predetermined steps, pacing guides, and expected outcomes. The space for improvisation, interpretation, and responsiveness is narrowed, if not removed entirely. As a result, the relational dimension of teaching begins to erode. The teacher is less attuned to the nuances of student understanding and more focused on maintaining alignment with the script. Questions that fall outside the planned sequence become disruptions rather than opportunities. In this way, the teacher's role shifts from engaging learners to managing performance.

This shift also has implications for how knowledge itself is understood. When teachers are positioned as deliverers of fixed content, the curriculum appears stable and unquestionable. The possibility of interpreting, adapting, or challenging knowledge is diminished. Over time, both

teachers and students may come to accept the script as authoritative rather than as something that can be examined or reimagined.

And yet again, the moment of pause complicates this role.

Love (2020) reminds us that educational systems often normalize control in ways that go unquestioned. The act of pausing disrupts that normalization and creates a moment where the inevitability of the script is called into question, even if only briefly. At the same time, this moment reflects a redefinition of leadership. Khalifa (2020) argues that leadership in education involves more than maintaining order; it requires the ability to recognize when dominant practices fail to serve students meaningfully. The pause demonstrates this kind of awareness. It is not about rejecting structure altogether but about exercising judgment within it, knowing when to step outside prescribed boundaries in order to restore purpose to the learning process.

What distinguishes this moment from earlier patterns in the classroom is that it is not driven by efficiency or control but by intentionality. The teacher is no longer acting as a function of the system but as an agent within it. This distinction is subtle yet crucial. It suggests that even within highly regulated environments there remains space, however limited, for professional and ethical decision-making. The pause, then, is not only a break in instruction; it is a reassertion of agency. It shifts the role of the teacher from one who delivers knowledge to one who interprets its significance in context. In doing so, it opens the possibility for a different kind of educational experience, one grounded not in perfect execution but in thoughtful engagement.

Rather than offering a complete solution, the pause reveals a direction. It suggests that transformation in education does not always begin with large-scale reform but with moments of critical awareness, moments where educators choose to see beyond the script and act accordingly.

STANDING BETWEEN TWO POSSIBILITIES

Standing between my past classroom and the imagined classroom of the future, I begin to see a pattern that stretches across time. The script, the rhythm, and the silence persist, even as the tools change. What appears as progress often reproduces the same underlying logic.

Yet within this continuity lies possibility.

As Pinar (2019) suggests, curriculum is not fixed but lived; it is shaped through experience, reflection, and interpretation. My fragments are not separate stories but connected moments that reveal both the limits of scripted learning and the openings within it. The pause becomes the central thread that ties these moments together. It is the point at which the script is interrupted, the silence is broken, and the rhythm is disrupted. It is where knowledge reconnects with life.

The question, then, is not whether education will have structure but what that structure allows. Will it demand repetition or invite understanding?

The moment a teacher chooses to pause, to step outside the script and reconnect learning to the world, is the moment education begins to change.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the history and future of Malawian science education reveals that the most critical challenge is not the delivery of content but the silencing of curiosity. Whether through a mnemonic rhyme in 2008 or a digital headset in 2058, the reliance on a script creates a wall

between the student and the world. To move forward, the Malawian system must embrace adaptive teaching and leadership that values meaningful understanding over perfect repetition (Vaughn et al., 2022). By embracing the symbolic pause, we can ensure that science education is no longer just a mystery to be memorized but is a powerful tool for students to use to understand, protect, and shape the future of their own land. The moment a teacher chooses to pause is the moment curiosity is reclaimed and real education begins.

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MY HIDDEN CURRICULUM

A NAVY BRAT'S RHYTHM OF LIFE

By Joycelyn Senter
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I am the daughter of a Navy veteran, yet I never quite adopted the rigid regimentation of military life. While I understand that time is valuable, I've learned to be forgiving with beginnings and endings; my friends have helped me loosen my requirement for punctuality, teaching me that life often takes you off-course for a reason. I can appreciate the look of a uniform just not on me. I've never been one for the "uniform" of trendy, seasonal looks; instead, my style leans toward the classic, always with a signature hint of something memorable. I don't know if being a Scorpio has anything to do with my resistance to being told what to do, but following orders never comes without an internal struggle. I am not a person who follows a prescribed script but someone who must learn through experience. Balancing this tension between external orders (outside script) and internal autonomy (true authenticity) has been part of my journey, while I also delicately balance "staying in the boat while I rock the boat." I think my hidden curriculum and life rhythm started at seven years old, oceans away from the United States.

I vividly remember flying, what seemed like days, overseas to move to the Philippines because my father received orders to report to the U.S. Naval Base at Subic Bay. With a new baby brother, my mother had to navigate on her own with two small children to another country to reunite with my father. Where did my mother learn the strength to stay so calm while taking a long journey for which she had no manual of directions? Needless to say, we arrived safely and were so glad to see our uniformed man there to welcome us at the end of that long journey.

For two years, I lived a very privileged lifestyle as an officer's child. I vacationed in Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Thailand, just to name a few exotic destinations. I was immersed in different cultures and learned more than I ever could by reading a textbook. I was experiencing diversity and inclusivity. These global experiences provided a form of cultural capital that could not be reproduced within a "scripted move" (Golann, 2021). My early exposure to global diversity taught me that interaction and authenticity are found in the transitions between environments, not just within them.

I'm grateful that I was able to experience one of the perks of being a Navy brat. Fast forward two years and my father received orders to report stateside to Naval Base San Diego. I had to leave all of my friends to come back home to the United States. I believe moving at an early age and having to "start all over again" by making new friends, going to a new school, and living in a different community was the beginning of me normalizing, changing, and pivoting quickly. As a child, I got used to starting all over again when we got new orders to move. It became our rhythm of life. Those experiences taught me how to be adaptable, but they also planted the seed of my resistance toward living by a script written by someone else.

I have to laugh and shake my head that my Navy brat rhythm of life showed up in my teaching career. Change is deeply rooted in my DNA. In 12 years of teaching, I taught in four different districts and four different grade levels. The static nature of a single building's culture (or grade level) did not fuel my soul. I instinctively felt the urge to pivot, even when things were going well. During a transition between grade levels and buildings, I became friends with a new

colleague, and early on in our friendship, she mentioned enrolling in a master's program. I already had a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction, but I didn't see any harm in broadening my educational world. Little did we know we were forming our own PLC (professional learning community) power duo committed to evolving every few years.

At that time, *No Child Left Behind* was an industry mantra that I took quite literally; I refused to be left behind while my peers advanced, so I enrolled, with my new friend, to work on a Master's in Educational Administration. I never aspired to be a principal. I had watched my mother's career path as a principal in an urban-suburban district, and I was certain I didn't want to follow exactly in her footsteps. Enrolling in that program wasn't just about a degree; it was about honoring that pivotal pull towards something else. This instinctive desire for change prevented me from becoming static. When I finished the administration degree, the next thing to do was explore the administration pathway and put the new degree to use. Another change was on the horizon. I inadvertently began training as a "tempered radical" (Alston, 2005). While the Navy taught me the art of adaptability, I have reclaimed the agency behind it. I reject the "order" to move or stay still. I embody the discipline to move, the openness to explore, and the spirit to question and reflect.

URBAN OMERTÀS AND UNDERGROUND INTERVIEWS: THE ART OF BREAKING THE SCRIPT

I jokingly refer to my first administration mentor as The Godmother in likeness of The Godfather portrayed in mafioso plots. She was an urban high school principal who had influential power within the district. She gave me a chance at my first administrative position, but soon, I learned she was scripting a future for me as her successor. Even though her endorsement was a high compliment, I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in a high school role since I had only taught elementary students. I also felt conflicted about being the lead character of a dictated script someone else was creating. I knew I wasn't ready to become a principal anytime soon, so I stayed under her tutelage to learn and grow, preparing myself for the next position. I knew I needed to stay prepared for the next move so that my career was defined by my choices, not my circumstances. I considered myself a loyal assistant principal. I made sure I assisted her in the goals and visions she wanted to accomplish to help her continue to shine as a respected leader. Even though I trusted my mentor, after three years I realized that following her "script" for my career would mean the slow death of my adventurous spirit. I also had no clear timeline for her exit, leaving me uncertain of when I would finally be positioned to apply for the principalship.

The Godmother had an unspoken expectation of absolute loyalty. Anyone who worked in the building was expected to protect the school "family" and never signal to the outside world that things weren't perfect. I broke the code of omertà the moment I began the quiet ritual of window-shopping for other roles, searching for anything that sparked my interest. By imagining a life without The Godmother, I was committing professional treason. Curiosity is the ultimate posture for an authentic life, because a single choice can launch you onto an entirely new path. There is never a good time to leave a school when you have made connections with students, teachers, and families, but the process of making future career decisions was instinctual and not based on what others wanted me to do. I created a short wish list of districts that were vastly different from my current, urban district. I started randomly applying to districts and didn't tell my mentor. I kept this secret in a "vault" because I knew that the day she found out I was not 100% on her team she had the influence to change the trajectory of my career. I began to wonder how I could out of the "mafia" with little damage to my professional reputation, what I would say to The Godmother, and

how she would take it. These were the questions that haunted me as I worked alongside her during this process.

One spring afternoon, I received a call that threatened my code of silence. It was one of the districts from my underground wish list.

“This is Mindy from M High School. Is this a good time to talk?”

“Oh! Hi, Mindy. Since this is a good time for you, I can make it a good time for me!”

“I’m calling today because I wanted to offer you the assistant principal position here at M High School...”

With that one call, the countdown to my suburban escape began. I had a choice to make. The delicate challenge was figuring out how to defect from The Godmother’s script without detonating my career. The suburban district leadership chose me over all other applicants. I was someone they wanted on their team to support students who were vastly different from the students I currently served. Time was not on my side, and I made my decision. I decided to live by choice and not be manipulated to live a career that someone else wanted to write for me. I realized that growth often requires discomfort, so I finally ripped off the band-aid and had that conversation, the one I had been losing sleep over for weeks. I approached The Godmother with radical candor (Scott, 2017), knowing that truth is kinder than vague comfort and walked out of her office immediately excommunicated. Just as I had predicted, during my final days, The Godmother’s silent treatment signaled that I no longer existed in her world.

During my transition out of the urban setting into the suburban district, I had to accept that I could never live up to The Godmother’s expectations. Her behavior manifested in unprofessional ways, altering my respect instantly. Her reaction forced me to look at leadership through a lens of emotional intelligence or, more accurately, the lack thereof revealing the weight of her own “unpacked baggage.” Every human, teacher or student, in a school has their own story, and every story we seek to understand is an opportunity to gain empathy beyond our own life experiences. Armed with that empathy, I realized that designing a path different from The Godmother’s script would allow me space to grow authentically into an administrator who could lead without fear of retaliation. This job offer gave me butterflies that weren’t just nerves but indicators of what excited me; they were butterflies of possibilities. This move would take me out of the urban background I had been used to, and the truth is, I might actually like it there. This transition from urban to suburban life was about far more than a new zip code. It was a conscious choice to live by design, refusing to let anyone else write the script for my career.

TEMPERED RADICAL: WAS I A BLACK PANTHER IN ANOTHER LIFETIME?

I felt an immediate spark of “good vibes” from my new principal, who I came to think of as The Convener. The gentle butterflies fluttering in my stomach weren’t just nerves, they were indicators of alignment. I knew that, as a Black woman in leadership, I had to truly know my craft to stay ahead. To prepare for a future as a principal or superintendent, I needed to diversify my profile. I made the choice to leave the urban setting to see what other environments offered, ensuring I could lead anywhere, for any student. Beneath the joy sat a grounded sense of pride. I wasn’t just another candidate; I was selected specifically to support these students. I had been given an assignment.

Starting my career in the suburbs revealed an unexpected alignment: Black and Brown suburban students needed me. As Bettina Love (2019) reminds us, wanting to do more than survive

is an act of resistance. The rebel in me was resisting the scripted career. By choosing my own path, I wasn't just changing districts; I was modeling for my Black and Brown students that they, too, can find confidence in their own humanity. Sometimes, being "the only" provides the space to figure out who you truly are. I needed to hold space for them to model how to successfully navigate their environment with joy while protecting their potential from being derailed by others who saw them as "intimidating" or "problems" rather than as humans still in the learning process. I wanted to model the kind of "Black joy" Bettina Love (2019) describes by being unapologetically confident in being a human, seeing identity not as a barrier, but as a great strength. I knowingly accepted the responsibility to ensure that my Black and Brown students didn't make the careless mistakes that might otherwise amplify the whispers of stereotypes from staff bias. I understood that, being a Black woman in educational leadership, I held two separate identities; my identity creates a unique intersectionality experience.

According to Alston (2005), Black women must navigate the dual pressures of sexism and racism in society. In a "scripted" workplace, an educated Black woman can even be perceived as an existential threat. Not knowing that I was a tempered radical, in training, I found myself questioning the way in which things were traditionally done. My new suburban colleagues were surprised that their traditional ways of doing things were oppressive for all students, not just students of color. As Alston (2005) suggests, a tempered radical might find themselves rocking the boat (educational setting) while staying in the boat. While working in an urban setting, I was constantly on alert to make sure I identified and eliminated barriers for children of color to graduate. When I first entered into the suburban space, I identified a need to revise the grading policy regarding student suspensions. Previously, suspended students were unable to make up missed work, potentially impacting their academic progress. I advocated for a policy change that allowed any student to submit work assigned both before and after their suspension for credit. I didn't realize that speaking up about being the person issuing a "double punishment" was going to cause a major ripple effect within the new setting. This "rocking the boat while staying in the boat" (Alston, 2005) sparked a broader conversation about grading practices, leading to a review and revision of the district-wide grading scale. I found that the suburban space needed my perspective to dismantle traditional barriers that had gone unquestioned previously. I was able to see a systemic problem harming students. Thinking differently from the norm of the status quo led me to question inequitable practices. The move from an urban setting to a suburban setting allowed me to offer a different perspective on how a policy was harming students and to provide an improved system for all students. The benefit of my influence in a suburban space multiplied the impact of protecting more students.

This is one example of how I was learning to lead by modeling a high standard. Leading in this new space felt different. I was a "double jeopardy" leader (Alston, 2005; Curtis, 2017): a Black woman sharing ideas that contradicted the traditional way of doing business. I knew that "rocking the boat" (Alston, 2005) was risky, as these structures were originally built through a white male lens. Curtis (2017) describes the invisibility Black women often face when their expertise is ignored by those who refuse to take guidance from someone who doesn't look like them. However, in this suburban district, I finally felt seen. I saw an opportunity to leverage my identity to empower all students, grow in a community that prioritized listening with curiosity and honoring diverse perspectives.

The Convener led a predominately white staff that was struggling to connect with a diverse student body. I was the missing piece in her vision to help the team see the kaleidoscope of diverse student backgrounds; my cultural capital was coming in clutch. As the first Black female



administrator at the school, I helped bridge the gap between their traditions and the increasingly diverse reality. They didn't know I was also there to grow my perspective. That team was the best administrative team I've ever known, and I believe it was because we were all growing together. Most of all, I'm grateful I took the risk to rebel against the "scripted life" of staying in one safe lane for an entire career. I'm so glad the butterflies led me into my purposeful position.

URNS OUT, THE GRASS WASN'T GREENER: A BOOMERANG REFLECTION

Fast forward four years: The Convener's promotion to a superintendency broke up the team. On a whim, I applied for a principal position and was surprised to be offered my choice of roles in a neighboring urban-suburban district. I was content as an assistant principal, but I knew that staying comfortable leads to stagnation. When I was offered the principalship, I accepted not out of a long-held ambition but to answer my own internal wondering. Could I lead a building on my own terms?

I truly believe you are placed in situations to learn and grow from them. No one tells you about the weight of the principalship, but I learned that your "why" cannot have ego attached to the mission. I led a high-performing, Hall of Fame, elementary school only to realize that the role would never be fully on my terms. As I was wrestling with the heavy weight of the principalship, a Saturday morning mimosa brunch conversation released the burden and offered a new perspective. Oddly enough, the connections I made in the suburban district redirected my career path when I met my mentee. A former teacher I had supervised, now a principal herself, suggested I meet an aspiring teacher leader to share my perspective of being a Black female administrator who had worked in multiple settings. A new mentee entered my life, and she helped me realize I was climbing the wrong ladder. The unfiltered conversation pointed me back toward the assistant principal role when I was drowning in the "script" of the principalship.

A monthly staff meeting started with a long silent pause with me standing in front of my staff. I was at peace, and it was time. "I have made a decision. I am walking away from the principalship next school year." Tears started welling up in my eyes as I talked to my staff. I knew I had to explain what the tears were about, since they were looking at me in disbelief that I would not be there next school year. "I'm sorry. These tears are not because I'm sad. These tears are because I'm finally able to speak my truth to you." I was finally able to breathe. "A weight has been lifted now that I can release the secret I've been holding onto." I felt lighter as I talked to them about my decision-making process. "I've been having conversations with my family, and I've made a decision that I can't do this anymore. They support my decision. It has nothing to do with you; it's all about me. I just can't do it anymore. This job just doesn't bring me joy."

Faced with the choice of remaining a tempered radical (Alston, 2005) or succumbing to life as an obedient middle manager, I unlocked a calm spirit of clarity. The reality was that I was tired. I was tired of trying to live up to unspoken, uncommunicated expectations of supervisors. I was tired of being seen as a difficult person for always asking questions about decisions that weren't student-centered. I was tired of working in an institution that didn't have systems in place to solve problems. I was tired of trying to figure out the best way to get things done without support. I was tired of coming up with solutions and being told no. I was tired of speaking up to protect my teachers from burnout when my kids needed them at 100%. I was "rocking the boat" and drowning at the same time. I didn't believe in the "why," and I could no longer sell the story to my staff. My family was my lifeline and gave me permission to get out of the boat and do what



made me happy. It took seven years and a conversation with a new mentee to finally realize that I didn't like the role of a principal as much as I loved being an assistant principal. During our conversation, she noticed a lot of advice I was sharing could help lead an elementary building in her district. Her district was my former district.

The butterflies returned when I interviewed for the assistant principal position in my former district. During the interview process, there were three rotations of panels asking questions about curriculum, instructional strategies, discipline philosophy, and leadership style versus managerial decision making. Every rotation, there were 2–3 people with whom I had established relationships in my previous role in the district who were there to greet me with open arms. I had to remind the interview team to stay focused on the questions, and if they wanted to add a couple of extra points on my scoring rubric, I wouldn't mind. Every interview rotation felt like I was having a conversation about education with colleagues who were able to see how I had grown during my absence.

LEGACY BUILDING

I took charge of my career script when I walked away from the principalship. I made a personal decision to reclaim my spirit by refusing to stay in a position that didn't allow me to show up authentically, and I realized I don't want to lead just anywhere. I was fortunate enough to boomerang back “home” as someone who isn't just filling a slot but acting as a multiplier for the entire leadership team. My experience as a former principal allows me to anticipate the principal's needs by showing up as a strategic partner; conversations with the principal can be confidential strategy sessions or a safe space to vent and be vulnerable. My interactions with fellow APs naturally become peer-coaching opportunities and mentoring partnerships. My experience as a former principal has given me the ability to mentor new teachers as whole persons not just as professionals. I can feel the burnout vibe before it affects the building culture, and I quickly dedicate time to intervene with check-ins, encouragement, and support. I am a seasoned thought-partner for instructional coaches, offering advice on navigating the politics of coaching influence and tricky curriculum hurdles. Beyond the daily tasks, I bring a composed perspective on crisis management and a deep understanding that no administrative decision is too difficult when you are student-centered.

My ability to stay calm without a script is an inherited trait. At seven years old, I watched my mother navigate a journey overseas, and decades later, I found my way through a professional struggle where I felt I was drowning in a script. I learned early on that true leadership isn't about following a guide; it's about the internal strength to navigate the unknown. I am a more courageous administrator because I have removed the fear of what lies ahead.

The hidden script of educational leadership is that you become an “at-will” employee once you crossover to an administration role. Many leaders follow a script of playing it safe to survive professionally. In a large district, the traditional path is to move horizontally, changing roles or schools, while staying under the same umbrella. I chose to create my script through strategic diversification as an act of professional self-preservation. After I started my administration journey, my path required navigating The Godmother's influence and figuring out a way to truly own my career script. I felt that I had to leave the district. Diversifying my resume across different systems ensured that my voice was my own. I didn't just leave a district; I got out of the “mafia.”



By collecting the tools of curriculum expertise, the experience of the principalship, and the credentials of the superintendency, I built an adaptive script that allowed for fluidity rather than fear. I leveraged my “cultural capital” to move where I was valued. My journey challenges the status quo by proving that leadership shouldn’t be a climb up a narrow ladder but a pursuit toward authenticity. I often joke that I’m “from the future” because I’ve seen how the story ends when you follow the wrong script. The way forward for others is this: don’t just build a career; build a repertoire that grants you the freedom to stay human. Never let your ego be a part of your “why.” There is no room for ego in the work we do for children; the moment your ego shadow creeps into your presence, reflection is the only way to pivot back to what matters.

Navigating these different roles has transformed my work from a job I do into a calling I live. My rebellion turned my career from a ladder I was climbing into a home I was searching for. Finding my way back “home” was a necessary part of finding myself. Through my experiences in urban and suburban settings, I’ve developed a sharper vision for what schools must offer families and a clearer understanding of how systems can operate.

When asked if I enjoy my work, given how much the role of an administrator demands of me, I resoundingly admit I am glad I chose an impactful career path. I’m also grateful I found a home to help others. Even though I am eligible to retire next year, I am constantly reminded of the authentic impact I create here. So, I’m opting to stay a little while longer. I’m still chasing butterflies, but now I’m purposefully curating a chapter where my experience serves as an investment, like a light left on in the window for those coming home behind me.

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CRUSHING THE CANNED CYBERSECURITY COURSE

HOW TODAY'S SCRIPTED CURRICULUM COULD INFLUENCE

TOMORROW'S INCIDENT RESPONSE

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In this paper, I argue that scripted curricula yield very different outcomes than unscripted ones. That claim is not merely a matter of pedagogical style, but a question about the kinds of habits students develop when they are taught to move through learning environments that privilege compliance, repetition, and predefined outcomes over inquiry, interpretation, and collaborative meaning-making. This argument is framed around my own experiences as a student and as an educator teaching cybersecurity online at a public university. I argue that, in fields where ambiguity is unavoidable, those habits do matter. They may shape not only how students learn but also how they later respond when their responses to experiences in the real world exceed the reach of the script.

Cybersecurity is a profession often described through frameworks, standards, best practices, playbooks, and checklists. These tools are valuable as they offer structure, shared language, and a means of coordinating response. Yet cybersecurity is also a domain defined by incomplete information, rapidly shifting conditions, and problems that do not always announce themselves in familiar ways. A zero-day exploit, by its very definition, emerges before documentation, before standardization, before the polished language of the certification blueprint. If educational experiences train students primarily to recognize and repeat pre-modeled patterns, then the professional consequences of that training deserve closer scrutiny.

The literature on scripted curriculum provides a strong foundation for that scrutiny. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argue that scripted curriculum is both a technical intervention and a democratic problem, because it narrows the intellectual agency of teachers and students. Timberlake et al. (2017) show how the appeal of scripted curricula often rests in simplicity and promises of equity but that such simplicity flattens learners' differences and reduces responsiveness. Powell et al. (2017) show that teachers working inside scripted programs often experience significant tensions around power and agency. In response, Vaughn et al. (2022) argue for adaptive teaching as a challenge to rigid curricular scripts, while Valdez (2020) illustrates how inquiry can interrupt the closures that scripted approaches impose. Across these works, a common theme emerges: scripts may produce efficiency, consistency, and measurable outcomes, but they also risk constraining the very forms of judgment and dialogue that complex learning requires.

That concern becomes sharper when illuminated by *currere*. Pinar (2019) and Pinar et al. (2006) invite us to understand curriculum not merely as a sequence of objectives and materials but as lived experience. Poetter (2024) describes curriculum fragments as a means of tracing life processes and educational experience through pivotal moments. The question is not simply what curriculum contains but what it *does* to the person moving through it. Through a series of regressive and progressive fragments, I explore how educational conditioning can preclude alternate realities. Beginning with learning scripted behavior in first grade, diverting momentarily to a non-scripted nightmare in the gifted and talented program, and back to the script in an undergraduate business applications course, and finally projecting forward into cybersecurity



teaching and incident response, I argue that scripted curricula can normalize a relationship to knowledge in which students learn to search for permission, procedure, and pre-validation before acting. By contrast, unscripted learning experiences can cultivate a greater tolerance for ambiguity, shared inquiry, and adaptive judgment.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT ONE: A PEDAGOGY OF FEAR

I was incredibly happy to begin school. My brother, who was almost two years older, got on the big yellow bus every morning to go to school, and I wanted desperately to go, too. I was already four years old when he started, but I would cry every day because I wanted to ride that bus and enter that world. School, from a distance, looked magical. It looked important. It looked like belonging. Eighty acres of woods is great fun if there is someone to play with but lonely when you are on your own. I was finally able to start first grade the very next year.

On the first day of school, Mrs. Johnson had been paged over the intercom and asked to come to the office. She told us to sit quietly and left. After a few minutes, the silence was overtaken by whispering, and the girl behind me said something that I had not heard. I turned around. Just then, Mrs. Johnson walked in. She called out several names, including mine, as she pulled a giant board from her desk. It was dark red, shiny wood with dozens of holes and a carved handle. As she held it, she casually mentioned that she “often lifted kids off the floor with this paddle,” but she was going to “take it easy on us this time.” I do not remember whether it really hurt, but I remember the fear it instilled.

Poetter’s (2024) understanding of curriculum fragments helps illuminate why such a moment remains educationally significant 50 years later. The fragment is not important because it summarizes an entire schooling history, but because it condenses a relation to authority, uncertainty, and self-presentation that can echo across later experiences (Poetter, 2024). Pinar’s (2019) *currere* asks us to return to such moments, not for nostalgia, but to understand how educational experience is *lived and carried forward*. In my case, the first-grade fragment marks an early conditioning toward caution. Seen through the lens of the literature on scripted curriculum, this early moment also reveals how behavior and curriculum are intertwined. Golann’s (2021) analysis of scripting in a no-excuses charter school shows how educational environments can train not just academic performance but bodily comportment, speech, and acceptable forms of participation. The student is not simply learning content; the student is learning how to inhabit a script (Golann, 2021). My first-grade experience was not a formal, scripted curriculum in the contemporary, packaged sense, but it functioned similarly in terms of habit formation. It taught me to associate learning with surveillance, correction, and preemption of error. Looking back, I can see that the incident did more than frighten me. It taught me a relationship to authority that remained surprisingly durable. It was a curricular lesson about risk.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT TWO: WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?

After this very bumpy start, I quickly acclimated to the task at hand. I got good at following the script. Head down, do the work, and don’t ever talk to anyone. I loved school and learning. Unlike Dr. Poetter, I even loved SRA (Poetter, 2026). My parents were part of a strict religious sect that didn’t approve of watching TV, so no matter how boring others might have perceived the



content, I read everything I could get my hands on. In second grade, I somehow scored in the 97th percentile on a test that asked me to determine that “A is to B as B is to C.” I didn’t know that at the time because my parents didn’t share it with me to keep me humble.

The unfortunate result of this “A is to C” situation was that I was sent to the gifted-and-talented program. Six or seven of us were marched down to the library with, as I recall, a large box of crap—rubber bands, straws, pipe cleaners, paper, etc.—and no further instructions. Crap was my favorite word until I left home, rejected the strict religious sect, and allowed myself to say “shit” on such occasions. The principal’s son, Stephen, had been anointed to lead the group in her absence by Ms. Shackelford, the gifted-and-talented teacher who moved among the county’s elementary schools. I wanted to ace this task like I had everything else up to this point, but there wasn’t anyone to tell me what to do. This should have been an opportunity for me to create something that showcased my individual creativity, but I didn’t have a frame of reference for self-direction at school, and Stephen was no help. The possibilities of what I could have done during this time were obscured by my fear of not producing the correct answer. For someone who had so completely mastered following the script, this was devastating. I hated this time every week. The longer this went on, the more I hated school. I ended up becoming depressed and even regressing to bedwetting. Luckily, the torture only lasted for a quarter before my grades dropped just enough for me to escape this ambiguous hellhole. I happily returned to the regular classroom and once again thrived by mastering the script. I loved school once again. How could I have been so unprepared for this experience? Because the concept of real learning was alien to me, even after a year and a half of successfully navigating school.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT THREE: PUNCTUAL PERFECTION

Years later, as an undergraduate at Eastern Kentucky University, I found myself in a Computer Information Systems course in the business school. The class covered basic business applications, including WordPerfect, Lotus 1-2-3, and R-base. If you are younger, think Word, Excel, and Access. The course was practical, workforce-oriented, and clearly designed around procedural mastery. By then, I had developed the habit of sitting in the front row. Part of that came from learning in the third grade that I was nearsighted. If I squinted and held my eyelid just right, what was on the board would pop into focus. I had asked teachers if I could sit in the front, and no one questioned it. Even after getting glasses so that I could pass my driver’s test, front-row seating remained a habit. Plus, sitting in the front row usually got me brownie points, which I loved.

On the first day of this class, though, I decided to sit in the back. I think I might have wanted to feel like I was doing something slightly rebellious, “living on the edge” as a college freshman. The classroom was set up with rows of computers all facing the front. The professor sat at a workstation in the middle row facing the back of the room. She brought out a small monochromatic projector panel, set it atop an overhead projector, and aimed it at the front wall. The amber text on the black background was barely visible in the fluorescent light of the brightly lit classroom in the Bert T. Combs building. Almost immediately, I was rethinking my decision to sit in the back.

We had also been told that we would need to keep the same seat the entire semester, and here I was writing my name in the tiny block the professor would use to take attendance for the rest of the term. Two cute girls scurried in at the last second and took the remaining seats in the back row. I could feel my face getting red, my default behavior in that era of my life when

confronted with members of the opposite gender, especially if they were attractive. I busied myself by staring intently at the syllabus as the professor discussed the assignments and projects due that semester. We were lectured on the importance of being on time with all assignments and ensuring that we did everything exactly as listed. Failure to do so, we were told, would result in significant penalties. We were being prepared for the workforce, and we needed to get used to “punctual perfection.” Her phrase.

That phrase has stayed with me: punctual perfection. It captured the ethos of the course. There was a proper way to proceed, and the goal was to replicate it efficiently and accurately. The professor pointed us to Chapter 1 in a three-inch-thick spiral-bound textbook with brightly colored tabs marking the different applications. She began working through Section 1-1. The first program we would learn was WordPerfect. This was before the “What You See Is What You Get” interface design became standard. We began by opening the code window at the bottom of the screen using ALT+F3. Text was typed in the top pane, and when you wanted to make a formatting change like italicizing a word, you would issue a specific keystroke from memory, such as CTRL+F8, type the word, then press the right arrow to move the cursor on the right side of the italics operator in the bottom screen. There was little indication on the top screen that anything had changed. At the bottom, in the Reveal Codes window, you could see the codes listed in brackets, one before and one after the text. I found this totally intuitive, but many people did not, including one of the cute girls sitting next to me. She had accidentally pressed the right arrow key before starting to type, so the codes were showing up in the bottom window, but she wasn’t seeing the expected change in the top window. The professor obviously needed to get through the whole chapter, so we were moving through the material very quickly. The girl next to me was starting to get upset.

She was really cute. So, I took a deep breath and pointed to the left arrow key on her keyboard, but by then she was too confused to understand the cryptic gesture. She slid her keyboard over to me. I clicked the left arrow, quickly typed the required word, then typed the next sentence, adding bold, underline, or whatever was needed to get her caught up with the professor. I pointed to the codes in the bottom window along with the text, both in front of and behind the words. Then I looked up. The professor had stopped talking and was looking at me. She did not look angry, but I saw that she noticed. Crap. I had felt so cool helping the cute girl, but now I was having a flashback to the first day of first grade with Mrs. Johnson. I put my head down and caught back up with the document we were creating as the professor made her way to the back of the room. I am not sure if my face was even redder now than when the girls first sat down, but I was still having difficulty breathing. I was surprised when she leaned over and said something like, “Thank you for helping. Feel free to do that if it doesn’t result in you getting behind.” I remember the relief washing over me.

That moment matters because it reveals two things at once. First, the course was efficient—the goals were clear and the procedures could be modeled and repeated. In many institutional settings, that clarity is synonymous with quality. The assignment could be assessed. The pace could be managed. The outcomes could be verified. Second, it exposes the narrowing effect of such clarity when it becomes totalizing. The student who fell behind became a problem for the script’s pacing. My brief act of helping her interrupted the smooth flow of the predefined progress. It was a human response to confusion inside a system organized to move forward regardless. The professor’s response made room for that, but the course’s overall logic still leaned toward coverage, synchronization, and correct replication.

The literature helps clarify the significance of this moment. As previously noted, Timberlake et al. (2017) point out that the allure of scripted curriculum lies in its simplicity and



predictability. Powell et al., though, show how teachers working within scripted programs often experience tensions between fidelity to program design and responsiveness to real learners (Powell et al., 2017). In the WordPerfect classroom, that tension surfaced in miniature. The script wanted coverage. The situation needed responsiveness. My professor's response briefly privileged the latter, but the course itself was still governed by the former.

CURRERE, LIVED EXPERIENCE, AND THE PROBLEM OF COVERAGE

Curriculum theory asks questions that standardization often tries to quiet. Pinar (2019) resists the reduction of curriculum to delivery mechanisms and objective sequences. Pinar et al. (2006) frame curriculum as a contested conversation, shaped by historical and contemporary discourses rather than neutral technical design. Poetter (2024) similarly treats curriculum as something lived, narrated, and fragmented across time. This theoretical orientation challenges the assumption that a course can be evaluated solely by whether its parts are aligned, efficient, and replicable. From this perspective, the problem with canned curriculum is not that it is boring. The problem is that it often construes learning as coverage rather than experience. It privileges what can be standardized over what can be transformed. The learner becomes a recipient of the sequence rather than a participant in meaning. This is where scripted curriculum intersects with larger political and ethical concerns. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argue that scripted curriculum undermines democratic education by reducing the interpretive and deliberative roles of teachers and students. Love (2020) pushes this further by suggesting that education must aim at freedom rather than mere survival within managed systems. If students are habituated to perform within pre-authored scripts, then they may become proficient at sanctioned participation while remaining underprepared for situations that require critique, imagination, or collective reinterpretation.

This concern resonates with debates over online course design. "Master" courses can support consistency and quality, but they can also erode instructor agency and narrow the lived texture of a course if they are treated as immutable products. Nehrbass et al. (2022) show that faculty often value flexibility within structure, a phrase that captures the tension well. The question is not whether the curriculum should have structure but whether the structure leaves room for educational life. Huun and Hughes (2014) and Grincewicz and Simunich (2021) suggest that templates and master courses can support engagement when designed thoughtfully. That possibility should not be dismissed. Yet Moon (2019) and Lieberman (2019) remind us that, when design becomes too centralized and transactional, courses can begin to feel detached from the communities that inhabit them.

Cybersecurity education, particularly when taught online, sits squarely inside this tension. It is a field with strong incentives toward standardization: workforce alignment, certifications, scalable labs, competency matrices, and employer expectations. That does not make standardization wrong. It does make it powerful. And power demands scrutiny.

SCRIPTED CURRICULUM IN CYBERSECURITY EDUCATION

Cybersecurity courses are especially vulnerable to over-scripting because the field lends itself to modularization. A course can be broken neatly into reconnaissance, scanning, phishing, malware analysis, incident response, SIEM, threat intelligence, firewall rules, ACLs, VLANs,



policy frameworks, and compliance mapping. Each segment can be paired with a lab, each lab with a rubric, and each rubric with screenshots or command outputs that verify correctness. This is manageable. It scales. It aligns beautifully with certifications and program assessment.

But it also risks teaching students that every authentic problem looks like a lab. In such environments, students may come to see tools as answers rather than instruments, frameworks as recipes rather than lenses, and uncertainty as evidence that something has gone wrong in the course design. The classroom becomes a place where ambiguity is systematically removed, enabling students to demonstrate clear mastery. Yet cybersecurity work, particularly at the levels of policy, systems thinking, and incident response, often requires students to dwell in ambiguity rather than escape it. The appeal of canned curriculum is understandable. Faculty members are busy. Institutions want consistency. Students often say they prefer clarity. I understand that preference deeply. As the earlier fragments suggest, I have often loved efficiency, and I have taught courses from this position myself. Structured courses can reduce anxiety, help novice learners orient themselves, and make online education more navigable. The problem is not the structure itself. The problem is when the structure leaves no room for genuine thought.

Mulcahy and Irwin (2008) warn that a standardized curriculum can obstruct critical pedagogy. Serrano et al. (2018) argue for authenticity in learning and assessment that cannot be reduced to prepackaged performance. Young (2018) goes so far as to suggest that subversion may be necessary when canned curriculum overwhelms educational life. These arguments matter in cybersecurity because the field often celebrates the lone expert who knows the answer. That myth pairs too easily with scripted pedagogy: the expert writes the course, the student follows it, and the correct outputs prove competence. What gets lost is the social and interpretive character of actual cybersecurity practice.

PROGRESSIVE FRAGMENT ONE: THE PLAYBOOK

The alert arrived at 2:17 a.m., not as a siren, or flashing red banners, but as a quiet anomaly—an outbound connection pattern that did not match anything in the rulebook. No known signature. No known exploit. Just an odd behavior. By 7:45 a.m., the Security Operations Center (SOC) was full. Twenty-four analysts sat at identical desks, monitors glowing with dashboards they knew intimately. They had trained for this room. They had passed certifications that promised they were ready for this room. Their screens displayed alerts, packet captures, and incident response checklists. Everything looked familiar. And yet, no one spoke. Evan was the first to break the silence. “Which playbook applies?” he asked, his voice careful. Maya scrolled through the incident classification flowchart projected on the wall. “It doesn’t map,” she said. “There’s no known exploit chain. No malware family. No Indicator of Compromise we can validate.” Across the room, someone laughed nervously. “That’s not possible,” another analyst said. “Everything maps. It must.” They had been taught that. If not explicitly, then implicitly. Their education had been thorough, structured, and efficient. Every lab had a goal. Every exercise had a correct answer. They memorized frameworks, mastered tools, and executed response plans flawlessly, so long as the problem matched the example. This problem did not.

The attacker moved slowly. By midmorning, the anomaly had spread laterally, not through privilege escalation or credential theft, but through something subtler: trust relationships embedded deep within automated workflows. The attack did not exploit a vulnerability so much as it relied on the assumption that internal systems behaved predictably because they always had.

“Is this a misconfiguration?” someone asked. “Run the standard triage,” said the incident lead, already flipping through the laminated response binder. “Step one: identify known indicators.” “There aren’t any,” Maya said again. The binder did not have a page for “there aren’t any.” They escalated to containment anyway, isolating endpoints based on thresholds defined in training. Systems went offline. Critical services followed. Business units began calling. “What are you seeing?” a director asked over the conference bridge. “We’re still classifying the incident,” the lead replied. “How bad is it?” A pause. Then, “We’re not sure.”

In the classroom, uncertainty had been implicitly framed as failure. Students were rewarded for reproducing procedures rather than questioning them. Success meant following instructions exactly. Deviations, even thoughtful ones, were marked incorrect. Frameworks had been presented as recipes rather than lenses. When asked why a control worked, the answer was usually, “Because that’s best practice.” Now, in the SOC, those habits surfaced like muscle memory. “Let’s wait for vendor guidance,” someone suggested. “Or a signature update.” “Or a threat intel bulletin.” They waited. The attacker did not. By early afternoon, the breach was undeniable. Data exfiltration patterns emerged, small, encrypted, deliberately indistinct. The analysts watched it happen in real time, graphs inching upward, alarms chiming softly. “Should we block the traffic?” Evan asked. “Based on what justification?” the lead replied. No one answered. Blocking it might disrupt operations costing millions of dollars. Not blocking it allowed the unknown to continue. The playbook required evidence. Evidence required known categories. Known categories did not exist. Leadership joined the call. “Why hasn’t this been contained?” someone asked, not angrily, but with confusion. “We’re following protocol,” the lead said. The silence that followed was heavier this time.

At 4:03 p.m., the system failed on its own. Automated processes began rejecting each other’s outputs. Integrity checks failed. Logging pipelines choked. The SOC dashboards flickered, then froze. The attacker had not destroyed the system. They had simply revealed how interdependent and unquestioned it was. The room filled with sound: chairs scraping, keyboards clattering, voices overlapping. “What do we do now?” For the first time that day, no one reached for the binder. Maya stood. “We stop treating this like a checklist problem,” she said, surprising herself as much as the room. “This isn’t malware. It’s not ransomware. It’s not anything we were shown. It’s abusing how our systems assume trust.” The lead looked at her. “What’s your recommendation?” Maya hesitated. There was no rubric for this. No guarantee of partial credit. “We model the system,” she said. “Not the attack. The system. We trace how trust moves. Where automation hands off without verification. We break those chains, manually if we must.” Evan nodded slowly. “That’s not in the playbook.” “No,” Maya said. “But it’s in the system architecture.” They began sketching on the whiteboard: arrows, assumptions, dependencies. Not steps, but relationships. Not answers, but questions. What trusts what? Why? What happens if it doesn’t? The work was slow. Messy. Uncomfortable. It worked. The breach was contained by evening, not through a signature or patch, but by deliberately interrupting automated trust paths. Systems were rebuilt. Data loss was assessed. The zero-day was eventually named, documented, and taught, flattened into a diagram that fit neatly onto a slide.

Weeks later, the incident was added to the curriculum. A new lab appeared. A new checklist. A new answer. But the story the analysts remembered was not the exploit. It was the moment when the scripts stopped working, and no one had shown them how to think without them.

This fragment is not an argument against playbooks. Playbooks matter. Cybersecurity without procedures would be irresponsible. The point is different: the habit of looking first for the authorized script may become dangerous when the situation is unprecedented. If education has

taught students that uncertainty signals failure rather than the beginning of inquiry, then the moment of the zero-day becomes not only a technical crisis, but a pedagogical reckoning.

PROGRESSIVE FRAGMENT TWO: BUILDING MEANING TOGETHER

A group of students who take an unscripted cybersecurity course. The final exam is not a multiple-choice test, nor even a narrowly prescribed lab. Students are tasked with writing a comprehensive security policy for a regional healthcare organization and then translating it into technical enforcement in a real network. They must design VLAN segmentation for clinical systems, craft ACLs to protect patient data, implement firewall rules that reflect least privilege principles, and justify every line of configuration in policy language. The final exam is individual but not isolated work. By design, the Slack workspace remains open. Channels pulse with names: #policy-questions, #vlan-logic, #acl-debug, #firewall-strategy, #infrastructure-help. The structure mirrors the course itself. Policy and implementation are not separate worlds; they are recursive, entangled, and always informing one another. At 8:02 a.m. on the day the exam opens, a message appears: “Does anyone else struggle with how specific to make the acceptable use section? I don’t want it to be vague, but I also don’t want to write a novel.” Within seconds, replies begin: “I framed mine around risk categories. High, medium, low. Then the technical controls reference those.” “That helped me, too. Remember when we talked about alignment between policy language and enforcement?” A snippet follows—three short paragraphs defining role-based access for nursing staff, tied to a VLAN labeled VLAN20-CLINICAL.

The conversation is not about copying. It is about remembering—remembering that policy is not decoration, remembering that VLAN segmentation is not simply an exercise in configuration mode, remembering that writing “Clinical devices shall not access administrative financial systems” must translate into an ACL that denies traffic between 10.20.0.0/24 and 10.50.0.0/24. The Slack stream continues. “I’m trying to block inter-VLAN traffic except for DNS and HTTPS. My ACL keeps breaking everything.” “Post your logic, not the whole config.” A pause, then a cryptic display of code. “Check your DNS line. DNS is usually UDP 53.” “And you deny statement placement matters.” No one hands over a finished answer. Instead, they offer questions, nudges, and reminders. The architecture reflects weeks of conversation about trust boundaries and data classification.

Progressive curriculum work is not about efficiency alone, but about engagement with complexity. It resists the banking model of education, where knowledge is deposited and withdrawn (Freire, 1968/2017). Instead, it invites students into uncertainty, into the unfinishedness of thought. That uncertainty is visible. The Slack messages bring together multiple voices weaving through policy citations, Cisco syntax, firewall logic, and ethical reflection. Students reference NIST principles. They debate whether “deny ip any any log” should be the final line in their ACLs. They share short code fragments, careful not to cross into wholesale duplication but generous in conceptual clarity. “Remember that order matters.” “Test from the source VLAN.” “Use show access-lists to verify hit counts.” In these exchanges, technical fluency becomes inseparable from relational accountability. Students are not merely implementing VLANs and ACLs; they are protecting a network on which lives depend. They are enacting the belief that security is not an individual heroic act but a collective responsibility.

Earlier in the semester, many of them approached networking as a series of isolated commands to memorize. Configure. Save. Repeat. But through sustained dialogue in Slack threads



that stretched late into the evening, they began to see infrastructure as narrative. A firewall rule tells a story about trust. An ACL encodes a value judgment. A VLAN boundary reflects an ethical claim about data separation. By the final exam, that narrative thinking has become habitual.

Near the end of the day, a message appears in **#policy-questions**: “Anyone else feeling like this is hard but also kind of amazing?” “Yes.” “I’ve never had a final where I actually felt like I was building something real.” “Same. It’s stressful, but it feels authentic.” Authenticity. That word lingers. The configurations must work. The policies must align with technical enforcement. The grading rubric is detailed and demanding. But the rigor is distributed. Knowledge circulates horizontally, not just vertically, from instructor to student. Slack does not replace thinking. It amplifies it. The instructor watches, occasionally interjecting with clarifying responses, but mostly witnessing collective problem-solving unfold. What emerges is not a perfect network, nor a flawless policy document. What emerges is a community capable of thinking together.

As students complete their topologies, the messages slow. Students upload screenshots of successful pings blocked between unauthorized VLANs. They share brief affirmations. “Good luck, everyone.” “Whatever happens, we learned a lot.” After submission, the channels remain. Not silent, but reflective. “I realized I understand ACL logic way more than I thought.” “I used to be scared of firewall rules.” “I still am,” someone replies, “but less now.”

REFLECTION AS BRIDGE: FROM PRECISION AND CONTROL TOWARD DIALOGUE AND INQUIRY

I am sitting at my desk late in the evening, the house quiet except for the clicking of my mechanical keyboard, rereading the fragments I have written so far. The documents are open on the screen. I scroll slowly. Reading them together, I begin to see them less as isolated scenes and more as parts of a longer educational journey that continues to shape my understanding of curriculum, teaching, and leadership. As I consider how these experiences continue to influence my educational journey, I find myself increasingly skeptical of curriculum models that treat knowledge as something to be delivered in fixed, linear sequences. Reflecting on these fragments considering Pinar’s question, “What is the nature of your educational experience?” I see that my own journey has moved between two curricular worlds: one shaped by clarity, efficiency, and predictability and another shaped by uncertainty, dialogue, and shared inquiry. Scripted curricula offer structure and measurable outcomes. I understand their appeal. I love efficiency. Yet I have also seen how rigid structures can narrow learner agency, discouraging the exploration and collaboration that complex problems require. My shift away from scripted approaches emerged directly from growing disillusionment with the outcomes of integrating canned curricula into our program. In my role as program director for Cybersecurity, Networking, and Platform Engineering (that’s a mouthful), I have developed more than a dozen courses, though as a program director, I can only teach three of them each semester. Canned curriculum provides a consistent floor across sections, but in most respects, the results are underwhelming. Students who complete our introductory courses *are* prepared for multiple-choice certification exams; however, without additional experience, many struggle to complete the comprehensive final projects. Struggling here suggests students might struggle in real-life scenarios, so I understand the need for a different possibility.

The Slack-based cybersecurity course represents this different possibility. Students are still working within a curriculum, and expectations remain rigorous, but the learning environment



invites uncertainty rather than suppressing it. Students are not simply carrying out commands; they are wrestling with their meaning. Rather than memorizing procedures, they are constructing understanding together. The implications for cybersecurity education are significant. A field defined by rapidly changing threats cannot rely exclusively on pedagogies that teach students to wait for recognition before acting. Certifications, frameworks, playbooks, and standardized labs all have their place. However, if they become the dominant shape of the learning environment, they may produce graduates who are proficient at following scripts but who may encounter difficulty when the scripts fail. Scripted curricula and unscripted learning experiences do not simply organize content differently; they cultivate different dispositions toward knowledge, authority, uncertainty, and action. Through the regressive fragments, I have shown how early conditioning toward compliance can make ambiguity feel risky and deviation feel suspect. Through the progressive fragments, I have argued that those dispositions can carry forward into professional life.

To “crush” the canned cybersecurity course is not to reject standards, rigor, or structure. It is to reject the assumption that the best preparation for complexity is the removal of complexity from learning. Students need opportunities to wrestle with the unfinished, the ambiguous, and the relational. They need to connect policy and practice, test assumptions, collaborate under conditions of uncertainty, and build meaning together. If we continue to teach cybersecurity as though every future incident already has a page in the binder, we may help create professionals who search too long for the correct playbook while the breach unfolds. If, however, we design courses around central problems and collective inquiry, we may cultivate something more valuable: responders who know how to think, not only when the answer is known, but more importantly, when it is not.

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OFF SCRIPT

HUMAN CAPITAL, SCRIPTED CURRICULUM, AND LEADERSHIP AT THE EDGE OF CONTROL

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In contemporary educational systems, scripted curriculum has emerged as a dominant mechanism for ensuring consistency, accountability, and alignment with institutional and external demands (Au, 2007; Timberlake et al., 2017). Within higher education, these logics increasingly intersect with human capital strategies, where faculty are conceptualized not only as educators but as organizational assets whose performance can be optimized, measured, and aligned with strategic goals. These approaches promise efficiency and equity; they also risk reducing teaching and learning to procedural enactments.

I sit with this tension. As a senior human capital leader in higher education, I participate in designing systems that shape faculty work, recruitment, evaluation, development, and performance expectations. At the same time, I remain a product of educational experiences deeply structured by discipline, predictability, and compliance. These dual positionalities—architect and subject—form the basis of this inquiry. How do leaders make sense of and navigate scripted curriculum as both a strategic tool and a lived constraint?

To explore this question, rather than presenting a linear argument, I assemble a *currere*-oriented set of curriculum fragments depicting the past, present, and imagined future that reveal how scripting operates across time, space, and identity. These fragments are not illustrative; they are constitutive. They function as sites of meaning-making through which broader theoretical and organizational questions emerge.

Human capital theory positions individuals as assets whose skills, knowledge, and abilities contribute to organizational performance. In educational contexts, this perspective has increasingly informed policies related to teacher effectiveness, accountability, and curriculum standardization (Au, 2007). Scripted curricula, in particular, are often justified as mechanisms for reducing variability and ensuring consistent instructional quality (Golann, 2021; Vaughn et al., 2022). However, scholars have critiqued these approaches for constraining teacher agency and undermining democratic and relational dimensions of education (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Powell et al., 2017). From a leadership perspective, this raises critical questions: How do institutional strategies shape professional identity? What is gained through standardization, and what is lost?

While growing up, my house woke before the sun. At 0500 my father flipped on the hallway light. Three knocks. Always three. “Up.” Not loud. Not angry. Final.

We were in World War II-era military housing. The floor was cold when my feet touched it. I folded my sheets tight, corners tucked, hospital style, pulling the fabric smooth until it looked like it hadn’t been slept in. If a wrinkle showed, he would press his palm flat against it and say, “Again.”

The kitchen smelled like coffee and starch. My mother ironed shirts at the counter while a small black and white TV muttered the weather. We ate without talking. Toast. Eggs. Plates set down quietly. Chairs pushed in straight.

There was a schedule taped to the refrigerator: wake, dress, breakfast, school, homework, chores, lights out. Each line in block letters. Each box checked with a pen. My name written at the top like a heading. After school, backpacks on the hook. No television. Homework at the table. “Show your work,” he said, tapping the paper. If I finished early, I copied vocabulary words or practiced handwriting. The pencil pressed hard enough to leave grooves in the next page.

At night, we were required to read for 30 minutes before lights out—only classics. After reading, I lay in bed listening for the hallway light, even though it wouldn’t come until morning. My chest felt tight, like I’d forgotten something important. Sometimes, I rehearsed the next day in my head, math worksheet, spelling quiz, dishes, laundry, so I wouldn’t miss a step.

When the alarm rang, I was already awake.

I was six.

I decided on a military academy when I was in the 4th grade. It felt obvious. If everything already ran like this, lines, rules, inspection, then I might as well choose the place that did it best. The brochure showed cadets in crisp uniforms standing at attention, faces forward, medals catching the sun. Brick buildings. Flags. Order.

“You sure?” “Yes, sir.” He nodded once. Approval landed like a stamp.

From then on, it became the plan. Push-ups before breakfast. Running laps at the track. Timed. “Again,” he said if I slowed. My lungs burned in the cold air. Gravel snapped under my shoes. I counted breaths to keep going. Applications. Physicals. Hair cut shorter than I liked. Everything narrowed toward one date circled in red—to one moment in time—Reporting Day.

The bus dropped us at the gate just after dawn, August heat already rising off the pavement. Parents stood clustered with duffel bags and cardboard boxes. People talked too loudly, laughing the way they do when they’re nervous. A cadet with a shaved head and mirrored sunglasses shouted, “Form two lines! Families left, Cadets right!” The word Cadets sounded heavier than my name.

The line moved. A clipboard. A tag pinned to my chest. My last name in thick marker. I could hear boots striking concrete somewhere, steady and sharp. Inside the building the air was cold and chemical. Fluorescent lights humming. Thick white walls. “Dump your bags on the table. Everything out. Everything.” Clothes, socks, photos, the small stuffed dog I’d packed without thinking. A cadet held it up between two fingers. “You won’t need this.” He dropped it into a bin without looking at me. My face went hot. I swallowed. “Next station!”

Haircut. Buzz. Long dark hair sliding down the cape and onto the floor. I watched strands gather around my shoes. Uniform issue. “Size?” “Stand straight.” “Arms out.” Fabric stiff against my skin. The name tape sewn on before I even wore it. By afternoon we stood in a square outside, sun overhead, sweat sliding down my back. “Eyes forward!” someone barked. My neck ached from holding still. A girl next to me whispered, “Is it always like this?” “Silence in the ranks!” We stared ahead.

Commands came one after another. Left face. Right face. About face. March. Halt. Repeat. If someone missed a beat, we all started over. “Again!” Boots scraped in unison. Dust lifted. My throat tasted like metal. Dinner in the mess hall. Trays clattering, voices clipped. “Sit.” “Eat.” We had seven minutes. I shoveled food in, barely tasting it. My hands shook.

That night, the beds were lined up perfectly, blankets folded the same way I’d done at home. Corners tight. Hospital style. “Lights out!” a voice called. I lay on my back listening to the

silence. My scalp prickled where the hair was gone. My muscles buzzed, like they were still marching. I thought about the stuffed dog in the bin. The way the cadet didn't look at me. I wasn't allowed to read. My chest felt the same tightness as it had years before, waiting for the hallway light. Darkness dropped all at once.

Tomorrow's schedule was taped to my locker: 0500 reveille. Formation. Drill. Classes. Drill. Study. Lights out. Each line already decided. I closed my eyes and pictured the morning: the shout, the rush, the straight lines. I tried to memorize it so I wouldn't get anything wrong. Sleep came slowly, like stepping into cold water.

It was not called curriculum.
But time was organized.
Behavior corrected.
Outcomes anticipated.

A totalizing structure without naming itself as such.

Later, I will learn and understand that curriculum is not only what is written but what is lived (Pinar, 2006), what presses into the body until it feels like instinct. My early experiences were a totalizing structure, one in which time, behavior, and expectations were tightly controlled. My home functioned as a curriculum. Objectives were implicit but clear: discipline, efficiency, compliance. Assessment was constant. Deviation was corrected.

What is striking is not only the rigidity of the structure but its internalization. I learned to anticipate expectations, to minimize error, to perform competence on demand. This learning mirrors what Au (2007) describes in high-stakes educational environments, where control over curriculum translates into control over behavior. The result is a form of embodied compliance, one that extends beyond schooling into identity.

The academy intensified this scripting. Again! Scripting is collective. Individual variance becomes a liability for the group. Efficiency is achieved through uniformity. This experience reflects what Golann (2021) identifies in "no-excuses" schooling models, where strict behavioral and instructional scripts produce measurable outcomes while constraining autonomy. Meanwhile, within this system, there is success. Achievement. Recognition. This complicates critique. Scripted environments do not simply oppress; they also produce competence. They reward alignment. They shape individuals who can function effectively within structured systems.

I did not choose structure.
I was shaped toward it.
And later –
I would call that preference.
Competence.
Leadership.

It informs how I interpret organizational effectiveness and leadership.

I contemplate my future. An email arrives at 5:12 a.m., the subject reads Human Capital Optimization Review – 8:00 a.m. Mandatory Sync. I am the Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer, but the dashboard calls me something else now: Strategic Talent Asset Lead

(Level IV). Titles have been streamlined to align with an Institutional Productivity Grid after the University partnered with a global firm to implement a Comprehensive Scripted Curriculum Model.

The campus is quiet, but not silent. Screens hum. Hallway monitors flicker with live metrics: Faculty Output Efficiency, Student Retention Predictive Index, Instructional Alignment Scores. Green is good. Yellow signals deviation. Red means intervention. I swipe my badge. The wall greets me. “Good morning, Jessica. Yesterday’s faculty micro-credential completion rate: 94.3%. Two deviations in the College of Liberal Arts. Recommended action script available.”

Curriculum is no longer designed; it is choreographed. Every syllabus has been integrated into the algorithm. Faculty receive instructional scripts through their wearable devices: objectives, prompts, examples, timing cues. Even “spontaneous discussion” moments are pre-structured to ensure that measurable competencies are met within timed increments. I remember when curriculum conversations used to be messy, human, argumentative. Now they unfold in dashboards.

I sit in the glass-walled Strategy Hub. The agenda is simple: align human capital inputs with curricular outputs. A slide appears, titled Projected Risk: Faculty Autonomy Variance increasing by 3.7%. The Provost looks to me. “Jessica, we need tighter recruitment filters. Our last cohort of hires shows elevated improvisational tendencies.” In the past, I would have called that creativity. Now it is risk. A hologram representative from our global firm flickers. “Script adherence correlates with a 12% increase in student credential attainment. Human capital variability must be reduced to maintain competitive positioning.” I glance at the scores on the screen. I know these people. I recruited them. I convinced them that this institution valued transformative leadership, culturally responsive practice, distributed authority. I told them they would shape the curriculum. Now the curriculum shapes them.

Later, I visit a seminar. The Professor stands at the front of the room. Her contact lens projects the day’s instructional prompts. A timer glows in her peripheral vision. “Ask students to reflect on ethical implications of AI in leadership. Allow 90 seconds per student. Redirect conversation if deviation exceeds 15% from competency objective.” A student raises her hand. “What if leadership isn’t about optimization? What if it’s about care?” The timer flashes yellow. The Professor hesitates. She looks at me and then back at the student. “Let’s stay with that,” she says, turning off the lens feed. Red alert. My watch vibrates. Deviation detected. I do nothing.

The room shifts. Students lean forward. Their voices overlap. The conversation spills into uncertainty about power, about labor, about who benefits from efficiency. I feel exhilaration and dread. Because what is at stake is not merely compliance. It is funding. The University’s bond rating is tied to performance metrics. Donors demand predictive returns. State appropriations depend on workforce placement statistics generated by the very scripts that constrain this moment. My role, my contribution, has been to ensure alignment. I have refined recruitment pipelines to privilege adaptability to systems. I redesigned performance evaluations to weight script fidelity. I implemented professional development modules titled, “Optimizing Instructional Consistency.” Watching the professor step outside the choreography, I sense the cost of my competence.

That evening, I open the Human Capital Strategy Portal from home. A policy draft waits for my approval: Faculty Standardization Phase II. It proposes biometric monitoring during instruction to ensure affective neutrality and pacing precision. I imagine the future. Students graduate with impeccable transcripts, every competency achieved, every learning outcome documented. Employers praise their consistency. They are efficient, adaptable, and measurable.

But no one remembers a class that changed them. No one describes a professor who lingered. No one recalls a conversation that derailed the schedule but altered a life.

A fragile alternative, I convene a different meeting. Not in the Strategy Hub, but in a circle. Faculty, students, trustees. No holograms. No dashboards. I bring data but as one voice among many. I propose a shift from optimization to cultivation. Human capital becomes human capacity. Metrics remain, but they are not masters. Scripts become guides, not mandates. Recruitment values improvisation alongside alignment. Professional development centers reflective inquiry, not compliance training. The algorithm still runs in the background, but it does not interrupt. Performance reviews include a new category: Relational Impact. The bond rating agencies question me. Donors express concern. There is risk. But faculty retention stabilizes, not because the teachers are monitored, but because they feel seen. Students report not only job placement but purpose. This alternative is messier. Outcomes fluctuate. Conversations run long. It feels slower. It feels human.

What am I contributing? In one aspect, I am the architect of elegant constraint. In another, I am the disruptor who reintroduces uncertainty. What is at stake? Not merely efficiency or reputation, but the very meaning of education. The system pings. Decision required. I close the portal without responding. Tomorrow, the dashboards will still glow. The scripts will still download. The choreography will continue. Again. But somewhere inside the system, a 15-minute unscripted conversation is now logged as an anomaly—a splinter. This is not entirely imagined. It extends what is already here. Just ... further ... until scripting becomes total.

Curriculum no longer being designed but instead choreographed, faculty receiving scripts through wearables—this future is not purely fictional. It extrapolates from existing trends: data analytics, performance metrics, and algorithmic decision-making. In this extrapolation, scripting becomes total. It integrates curriculum, faculty behavior, and institutional strategy.

Faculty Output Efficiency.
Instructional Alignment Scores.
Autonomy Variance.

The language is precise.
Clean.

It is called human capital.
But it does not sound human.

In this system, variability is risk. Creativity becomes improvisational tendency. Recruitment, evaluation, and professional growth and development are aligned to minimize deviation. This reflects a managerial logic where consistency is equated with quality. Still, a moment of disruption occurs. A professor turns off the feed. I understand what scripted systems cannot fully contain: relationality, curiosity, unpredictability. It also exposes the cost of optimization; no one remembers a class that changed them. This critique aligns with Love's (2020) argument that education must extend beyond survival and efficiency toward liberation and meaning. It also resonates with Fitz and Nikolaidis's (2020) democratic critique, which positions scripted curriculum as limiting participatory and transformative possibilities. From a leadership perspective, the future raises a central tension: optimization produces measurable outcomes but may erode the very conditions that make education meaningful.

Now—
the present.

In the classroom. The room is warm. Radiator heat clicks, a dull metallic rhythm. Someone cracked a window despite the cold. Papers rustle. Laptops glow. Coffee smells burnt. We are discussing curriculum theory, but the conversation drifts toward schooling as lived experience, not policy, not frameworks: memory. I have my thoughts in front of me, the past on the left, the future on the right, like bookends of the present. The pages feel heavier than they should.

The professor asks, “What is the nature of your educational experience?” I answer internally, physically. My spine straightens. Feet plant. Shoulders square. Structured. Predictable. Evaluative. Scripted. The word lands with recognition, not discovery. My history reads less like family story and more like curricular design. Objectives defined. Time enforced. Assessment constant. Deviation corrected. Compliance mistaken for success. My father was not trying to produce a curriculum, but he did. A total one. Hidden, domestic, absolute.

And I excelled in it. That is the part that unsettles me most, not the severity, not the fear, but the efficiency. I learned to anticipate expectations, to minimize error, to perform competence on demand. Teachers praised me as disciplined, focused, mature. I finished early. I followed directions. I never disrupted the pacing of the lesson. I was “on task.” Again.

The radiator clicks. A student laughs unrelated to the discussion, and the sound feels transgressive. I realize how the idea of schooling as controlled space has settled into my nervous system. The professor asks how this impacts our educational journey. I look toward my anticipated future. I wrote it as speculative fiction, but it reads less like fantasy and more like extrapolation. I have seen that world, in strategic plans, accreditation demands, funding formulas, predictive analytics dashboards, workload models. None of them call themselves scripts. All of them function as such.

Meanwhile, I translate priorities into hiring profiles, evaluation criteria, development programs. I shape who will write syllabi and under what constraints. That realization sits in my chest with weight. The professor says something about curriculum as a lived relation between teacher, student, and subject. What I have witnessed complicates that relational vision. Teachers become implementers rather than intellectuals. Students become recipients rather than participants. Variance becomes failure. Nonetheless, these systems promise equity through consistency, quality through standardization, accountability through visibility. They are designed to protect against the unpredictability of human teaching. But unpredictability is precisely where learning lives.

A classmate tells of a teacher who abandoned a lesson plan to discuss a poem that spoke to her grief. The room softens. Heads nod. I feel something loosen in my chest, followed almost immediately by anxiety, as if unscripted moments require justification. This is the condition of my educational journey—tension between two internalized logics. One insists that structure produces safety, achievement, and legitimacy. The other recognizes that over-structure suffocates meaning.

The pedagogies attached to my experiences have trained me to be an efficient learner but not a free one. I know how to decode expectations and produce responses. What takes effort is risk: asking questions that derail the trajectory, admit uncertainty, and tolerate ambiguity. Even in a doctoral seminar designed for inquiry, I cherish the rubric. The irony is that this very sensitivity makes me effective in leadership roles. I anticipate institutional pressures and align people with strategic goals. I translate human complexity into administratively legible categories.

In human capital language, this is competence.

In curriculum language—
it may also be complicity.

I think of the future scenario's unscripted classroom moment—the professor turning off the feed. I imagined myself as observer, maybe even ally. Sitting here, I am less certain. Would I intervene? Would I protect the system that sustains the institution or the relational space that sustains education? The question feels diagnostic. My educational experience has been formed by powerful structures that rewarded compliance and punished deviation, moving me into positions where I help design those very structures. It is also one of gradually encountering moments that resist scripting, that bare education as encounter rather than execution. My journey has made me both architect and critic of systems that standardize learning. It has given me tools to navigate institutions while simultaneously raising doubts about what those tools cost. It has delayed, but not extinguished, my capacity for curiosity. Most importantly, it has made me aware that curriculum is not only what is written in guides or delivered in classrooms. It is what shapes bodies, emotions, expectations, and identities over time. The hidden curriculum of obedience can be as powerful as any syllabus.

Class ends. Chairs scrape. Screens close. I remain seated. My two pieces lie side by side. The past explains how scripting became normal. The future warns what happens if it becomes absolute. The present is where interpretation occurs, where I decide to reproduce those patterns or interrupt them. In the hall, students talk—animated, unsynchronized, alive. No timer regulates the conversation. No objective is posted. No one is worried about alignment. I notice that my shoulders have dropped. My steps are not perfectly measured. I am not rehearsing the next task.

Education is not simply what prepared me to function efficiently within systems. It is also what allows me to question those systems, to imagine alternatives, to tolerate messiness without interpreting it as failure. If the past is discipline and the future is optimization, then this moment, walking down a noisy hallway with papers in my arms and uncertainty in my mind, is something else entirely. Possibility.

My past and future have converged. Scripted curriculum is no longer abstract; it is embodied and enacted. The realization is unsettling. The duality of competence versus complicity defines my leadership position. I translate institutional priorities into systems that shape faculty work. I design structures that align behavior with strategy. These actions are valued within organizational contexts. They are indicators of effectiveness. Yet, they also contribute to the standardization of academic work. I find two competing logics: structure as safety and legitimacy and structure as constraint and loss of meaning. These logics are not easily reconciled. They coexist. They shape decision-making.

Leadership is said to be distributed (Spillane, 2006).

Stretched across people.
Across situations.

But here, distribution does not feel like agency.

It feels like diffusion of responsibility.

Control, embedded everywhere—
so no one has to name it.

In this context, scripting redistributes authority, not by empowering individuals, but by embedding control within structures.

Transformational leadership asks for vision.
For inspiration.
For movement. (Leithwood & Sun, 2012)

But scripts leave little room for either.

What happens to transformation
when deviation is flagged as risk?

The insight is not resolution but recognition: leadership operates within constraints that are both enabling and limiting.

The moment seeks reconstruction. What might it mean to lead differently within these constraints? The possibility offers a tentative alternative—the shift I propose from optimization to cultivation, where human capital becomes human capacity, reframes faculty not as assets to be optimized but as individuals to be developed. It does not reject structure entirely. Instead, it repositions scripts as guides rather than mandates. This aligns with Vaughn et al.'s (2022) calls for adaptive teaching, where educators respond dynamically to context. It also reflects a more relational understanding of leadership, where meaning-making is central.

This approach to human capital leadership forces me to lead with awareness of my own complicity and confront how I lead. Balancing alignment and autonomy forces me to recognize the need for consistency while preserving space for professional judgment. Redefining metrics requires me to incorporate relational and qualitative dimensions of teaching. Centering reflective practice compels me to use different methods to interrogate assumptions and decisions. Valuing variability challenges me to understand difference as a source of innovation rather than risk. These four approaches are not without challenges. Institutional pressures, funding, accountability, and competition continue to demand measurable outcomes. Leaders must navigate these realities while resisting totalizing control. The goal is not to eliminate tension but to work within it.

Leadership decisions are shaped by personal histories, institutional logics, and imagined futures. Scripted curriculum operates across scales. It is not confined to classrooms; it extends into homes, organizations, and systems. It shapes behavior, identity, and expectations. Human capital strategies both enable and constrain. They provide structure and alignment but may limit agency and creativity. Reflective practice is essential for leadership, examining how leaders participate in and potentially disrupt these systems.

Scripted curriculum, viewed through a human capital lens, is both a strategic tool and a lived constraint. It offers efficiency, consistency, and alignment. It also risks reducing education to performance and compliance. Effective leadership in this context requires not only technical competence but reflective awareness.



There is no final decision.

No clean resolution
where structure gives way to freedom
or freedom replaces structure.

Only this—

a series of moments.

A professor turning off a lens.
A student asking a question that does not fit.
A leader choosing not to intervene.

The tension returns to me.

Again.

And again.

The script is still there.

But so am I.

And I do not have to follow it
all the way through.

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