

(Where and) Why Scripted Curriculum? Probing the Geographic Distribution and Rationale for Adoption of Scripted Curricula in Franklin County Schools

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Research Activities

Research Questions

As schools continue to be tightly tied to cycles of testing and accountability, scripted curricula (SC) have emerged as a route for schools to increase their achievement through the hyper alignment of instruction to the standards that will be tested at the end of the year. Literature suggests that these types of curriculum are disproportionately used in schools serving low-income and minority students, however these claims, while reasonable ones based on past policy incentives, lack empirical verification which makes it difficult to mount a compelling critique of what might be referred to as a ‘curricular segregation.’ Our project aimed to develop empirical understanding of where and how scripted curricula are used and the factors that contribute to their adoption. Our guiding research questions are listed below, but we were unable to adequately answer the first two questions, for reasons which will be explained in our summary of methodological procedures.

1. How does the usage of scripted curriculum relate to factors such as teacher retention rates, years of experience, and partnerships with alternative certification programs?
2. Does the adoption of SC cluster in particular geographic locations or within schools or district serving distinct demographics of students? If so, what trends emerge?
3. What rationale do school leaders provide for their adoption of scripted instructional materials?

Summary of Methodological Procedures

General note: The methodological difficulty in studying scripted curriculum is twofold: first, the term itself is very loosely defined, making it rather nebulous as to which curricula should be considered ‘scripted’ and which should be considered ‘not scripted.’ If one focuses solely on the presence of actual verbal scripts in the lessons, they would be overlooking many of these features of highly structured curricula that are viewed as objectionable by practitioners and scholars.

Thus, a major component of this project has been the attendant conceptual work that has required the skills of the philosophers of education on our team. The second methodological difficulty relates to the interview process. Although we desired to solicit information regarding school leaders' rationales for adopting scripted curriculum (or for not doing so, if they use an unscripted variant), the term 'scripted curriculum' has a very negative valence. Directly asking a participant why they have decided to adopt a scripted curriculum would likely result in defensive behavior that would not, overall, be helpful in clarifying their perspectives. As such, our approach during interviewing was necessarily indirect and prompted participants to reflect on their school/district's process of curriculum evaluation, selection, and implementation. If participants used the term 'scripted curriculum' of their own volition, we would follow up with further questions, but otherwise the term was not mentioned.

Procedures: Our research team sent out surveys to 250 principals of elementary and middle schools in Franklin County asking what curricula they use for English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, social studies, and science instruction. The survey also asked principals to identify one individual in their school, district, or charter network who is responsible for coordinating or making decisions related to curriculum evaluation, adoption, and implementation. The purpose of this question was to identify individuals whom we could reach out to for an in-depth interview to address the third research question listed above. Unfortunately, despite multiple prompts, only 22 principals responded, which was substantially less than we had hoped for. We expanded our survey dissemination to all elementary and middle school principals in Ohio, but still only received 31 more responses, for a total of 53 responses. Due to the small response size, we were unable to generate sufficient statistical power to perform the types of analysis that would have been necessary to answer our first two research questions, so the quantitative and GIS-mapping components of our project had to be dropped. This unfortunately meant that the skills sets of two of our team members (Chris Yaluma and Josh Peri) were no longer required.

The information that we received from the surveys was compiled, and we identified the most frequently used curricular products in each subject. We collected publicly-available samples of these curricula from publisher websites and analyzed the structure of lesson plans and supplemental materials in order to develop a clearer conceptual definition of scripted curriculum, so that we could analytically distinguish between districts using SC and those using non-scripted curricula.

Our project then entered into the interviewing phase. We sent recruitment emails to each of the individuals who had been identified by principals in our initial survey, but since the relatively few responses had left us with a small pool of participants to recruit from, we also compiled a database of curriculum professionals in every Ohio district in order to increase the likelihood we would be able to achieve our target number of participants. The titles of the individual we contacted varied according to district, since responsibilities are allocated and clustered in different ways, but the group that we contacted included Curriculum Directors, Directors of Curriculum and Instruction, Directors of Teaching and Learning, Curriculum Coordinators, Assistant Superintendents, Chief Academic Officers, and other variations on these titles. In total, we contacted 380 additional district personnel. The only downside of recruiting in this manner is that by focusing on districts, we were unable to capture the ways in which the charter school sector differs in relation to their perspectives on curriculum. The only charter representatives we

were able to interview were referred to us by school leaders who participated in the first interview.

We were fortunate enough to have 47 individuals respond who were willing to be interviewed, which was a higher response rate than we expected. The willingness of so many high level district personnel is likely in part attributable to the fact that GSIRI funding enabled us to offer a \$40 participant honorarium. It is also likely that, since most curriculum professionals had themselves been or were ongoing doctoral students who had gone through the process of interviewee recruitment, many felt an obligation to ‘pay it forward,’ so to speak. We scheduled interviews with all respondents even though this number was somewhat higher than we had initially planned for, and reallocated money we had planned to use for transcription toward additional gift cards. The interviewing occurred in November and December 2020 over Zoom, and included variations on the following questions:

Interview Guide

1. Let’s start by talking about the school you work for.
 - a. How would you characterize the mission of your school?
 - b. What kind of population does your school serve?
 - c. What are the racial demographics of the students?
 - d. What are the socioeconomic demographics of the students?
 - e. How many teachers does your school employ?
 - i. What are the racial demographics of your teachers?
 - ii. What are the age demographics of your teachers?
 - iii. What are the gender demographics of your teachers?
 - iv. Does your school employ any teachers who have come through alternative certification pathways?
 - v. Does your school employ any teachers who are unlicensed or who are on a long-term substitute license?
2. When did you first adopt [brand] curriculum?
 - a. What school year was this?
 - b. Was it adopted at the beginning of the year or midway through?
3. What was the curriculum that you used before?
4. Can you walk me through the process from beginning to end of how new curricula get adopted in X school?
 - a. Can you describe the situation that led you (or the person responsible) to begin considering moving to a new curriculum?
 - b. Are you (or the other person identified) typically responsible for making decisions about curriculum?
 - c. Who else was involved in the decision?
 - i. How were curriculum sales reps involved in the decision?
 - ii. How were teachers involved in the decision?
 - iii. What happens if teachers raise concerns about curriculum?
 - iv. How were parents involved in the decision?

- v. How were other leaders involved in the decision?
 - vi. How were board members involved in the decision?
 - vii. How were superintendents involved in the decision?
 - viii. Who exerts the most influence in decisions about curriculum adoption?
 - f. Do teachers participate in curriculum decision-making processes?
 - g. Has your school's identity as a district/charter impacted your decisions regarding curriculum?
 - h. Is there a mechanism that triggers a review of your curriculum?
 - i. How frequently does your school or district change curriculum?
5. Do you have any specific criteria for curriculum selection?
- a. What are your criteria?
 - b. Are there other criteria that you think might be important?
 - c. Do you take into account all criteria that you consider important?
 - i. If not, what criteria do you not consider?
 - ii. Why is this?
 - d. Do you look for recommendations or reviews?
 - i. If so, where?
6. What do you look for in a curriculum?
- a. What kind of content do you look for?
 - b. What kind of structure do you prefer?
 - i. Do you prefer more structured or less structured curricula?
 - c. To what extent do you believe instructions for teachers should be detailed or more general?
 - d. Do you prefer curricula that provide comprehensive classroom materials – lesson plans, class exercises, exit tickets (if applicable), homework, tests?
 - e. Do you look for certain elements with your particular student population in mind?
 - f. Do you look for certain elements with your particular teacher population in mind?
7. Do you consider economic factors when decide what curriculum to adopt?
- a. If yes, how so?
8. Who develops the curricula you use in your school?
- a. Do you have a relationship with curriculum publisher?
 - b. How did you make that contact?
 - c. Does the publisher offer any professional development for using the curriculum?
 - d. If yes, is it free or do you have to pay for it?
 - e. How did your relationship with the curriculum publisher influence your decision to adopt the curriculum?
 - f. Did you discuss this curriculum with a publisher representative?
 - i. How did they pitch you this curriculum?
9. I would like to inquire into the resources that the curriculum you use provides to teachers.
- a. Does it provide textbooks?
 - b. Does it provide lesson plans?
 - c. Does it provide student worksheets?
 - d. Does it provide homework?

- e. Does it provide classwork?
 - f. Does it provide tests?
 - g. Are there any other resources that the curriculum provides that I have not asked you about? If so, what?
10. Does the curriculum provide explicit lesson plans for teachers?
- a. How much freedom do teachers have in implementing curriculum?
 - b. Who is responsible for determining how teachers implement curriculum?
 - c. How much discretion are teachers afforded with regard to curriculum implementation?
 - i. Are teachers able to adapt curriculum?
 - ii. Are they expected to implement the purchased curriculum with fidelity?
 - iii. Are teachers required to report how they use the curriculum?
 - 1. If yes, is this reporting done on a regular basis?
 - d. Do teachers turn in lesson plans?
 - e. Do you find that your curriculum better enables to hold teachers accountable?
 - f. Does your curriculum make classroom processes easier?
 - g. Does your curriculum make teaching more efficient?
11. Are teachers allowed to make changes in the curriculum?
- a. If so, what types of changes?
12. Are there any benefits or downsides to having teachers use highly structured curriculum?
13. Are there any benefits to having teachers use unstructured curriculum?
14. Are there any downsides to having teachers use unstructured curriculum?
15. Are there any benefits to having teachers use highly-structured curriculum?
16. Are there any downsides to having teachers use highly-structured curriculum?
17. Are there any teachers on your staff who you feel need a highly-structured curriculum in order to be successful?
- a. Does your school hire teachers who are active participants in any kind of alternative certification program?
 - b. How do you perceive the needs of these teachers?
18. To what extent do teachers tend to engage in direct instruction when implementing this curriculum?
- a. What are the merits of this kind of instruction?
 - b. What are the drawbacks of this kind of instruction?
19. How has state testing influenced your decisions regarding curriculum adoption and implementation?
- a. Are there any groups of students within your school whose achievement you are especially trying to support by adopting your curriculum?
 - i. How has the curriculum you use helped you support these students?

The interviews were semi-structured, so the conversations often did not include all questions and the interviewer often supplemented with questions tailored to the unique context of the district and the information volunteered by the participant.

Additional GSIRI funds were used to have 9 interviews professionally transcribed, while the rest of the interviews are in the process of being transcribed by the team (with the help of Zoom auto-transcription).

Analysis Plan

The disruption that has accompanied Covid has necessarily delayed our data collection and processing. While interviews were initially scheduled to take place during the spring semester of 2020, they all took place in December of 2020 as schools were scrambling to make adjustments following the lockdown. This pushed back all parts of the data analysis, including the transcription which is still under way—partly because of the diversion of funds from transcriptions to interviewee gift cards. Interview transcription will continue through the summer. Following transcription, the team will develop a code book that covers important thematic elements. Interviews then will be independently coded then cross-checked by three different members of the team in order to determine validity of the coding schema between coders. During the course of analysis, researchers will produce memos on developing themes that will be shared and developed upon by other team members.

Overview of Findings

All findings at this time are tentative and keep changing as more interviews are transcribed. Nonetheless, the information shared by our participants has been illuminating and has certainly challenged many of the research team's preconceptions regarding scripted curriculum in very intriguing ways. Here are some general trends that have been gleaned from the interview texts:

- The extant literature on scripted curriculum seems to be incorrect in saying that scripted and/or highly structured curriculum are predominantly used in schools and districts serving low-income and minority student populations. Most districts use curricula that have scripted elements, though the degree of structure varies widely. Even districts (and CMOs) that make their own curricula might include scripted components (including scripts, pacing guides, and the like), which indicates that this trend is not solely a function of the tendencies of curriculum producers to manufacture more scripted materials. Interestingly the 53 surveys completed corroborate this finding by indicating that scripted curricula are used at comparable rates in high, middle, and low income schools (of course, this finding is not generalizable but indicates the need for further research).
- According to our participants, younger grades tend to use more structured (and scripted) curricula. One factor could be that students receive more foundational knowledge in elementary school (phonics, etc.). Another might be that the teachers in elementary school are generalists and so are not considered to be subject-matter 'experts' in any of the areas they teach, yet they have to prepare more lessons than a single-subject teacher.
- Curriculum directors seem to believe that teachers often prefer the more scripted programs because they're easier to teach from. Especially when they teach a lot of subjects and there is a greater burden with teaching multiple courses. This goes against the literature which suggests that teachers find these curricula to be oppressive and deprofessionalizing. The positionality of our participants is definitely something that will

impact their perspective and opens the question of whether the teachers in participants' schools would espouse the same opinions that their administration attributes to them.

- Participants expressed a desire for collective decision-making in the adoption of curriculum. In their view, teachers need to buy-in into the curriculum in order to feel motivated to make good use of it, and so they need to feel they had a say or were the ones responsible for the decision. The scope of the decision is narrowed by the curriculum directors who want to direct teachers to make what coordinators consider to be a good, or at least acceptable, choice of material.
- Participants express a need for higher structure in regard to their curriculum, but also a desire to professionalize teachers so they can attend to specific needs of students in ways that standard curricula are not always able to. Teachers have to be able to fill in gaps. In some cases, certain things are talked about as non-negotiable in terms of fidelity to the curriculum (particularly phonics and other fundamentals), but others are left to individual teachers. They express a need for balance between structure and autonomy.

There is certainly much more to unpack here, and the team will continue to do so over the summer and into the coming school year.

Dissemination

- The team presented an overview of methodology and findings at the 2021 EHE Research Forum
- A conceptual paper analyzing the term 'scripted curriculum' is in the final stages of drafting and will be submitted for publication to a generalist education or specialized curriculum journal within the next couple of weeks.
- A proposal to present the aforementioned conceptual paper at the Midwestern Education Research Association's 2021 annual meeting has been submitted.
- Two or more papers on empirical findings will be submitted next month to the American Education Research Association to be considered for presentation at the 2022 annual meeting.
- The development of empirical papers will continue through the 2021–2022 academic year.

Reflection

Well, it's been a bit of a bumpy ride, but nonetheless very rewarding. The experience of building a research project from the ground up was certainly a challenge, and our team spent a lot of time trying to troubleshoot issues that emerged as a result of faulty assumptions or incomplete planning—most of this occurred around misguided assumptions around the ease of retrieval of principals' contact information and the magnitude of response we would get to our initial survey. The quantitative and GIS portions of the project were more or less premised on the assumptions that we would be able to acquire almost all the emails of principals in Franklin County (and later Ohio) and that we would receive a response rate that would be higher than 10 percent (perhaps, we hoped, even double or triple that rate) as a result of the monetary incentive we offered to survey respondents. Both of these assumptions proved misguided as we were unable to find more than 15% of principals' emails online and as the response rate remained close to 10% (perhaps

because the incentive was not big enough in terms of the number and value of gift cards people would be entering the lottery for). Interestingly, the inverse happened with interviews which, given their time intensive nature, we underestimated how many participants we would recruit. While we expected a 5% recruitment rate at most (especially given the 10% response rate to surveys which are less time intensive), 10% of those asked agreed to be interviewed. This made it so we had to interview three times as many people than we initially expected and forced us to reallocate funds from transcription to gift cards.

As a result of all this, we realized that it is relatively easy to work with extant data, but much more challenging to create a data set from scratch, or so we learned. If not for the Coronavirus closures and the limited time we had to wrap up our project (as per the requirements of GSIRI), we might have managed to finesse a solution that could salvage the quantitative components of the project, but (regrettably) we decided to drop these components and focus on the qualitative aspects of the project which proved to be much more elaborate and time consuming than anticipated. It's unfortunate, because the information we hoped to gain from the quantitative analyses seems very key in understanding the usage of scripted curriculum. Perhaps our difficulty in attaining this survey information is precisely the reason that this kind of empirical work has not been conducted or published by other researchers. Regardless, it seems like a worthwhile endeavor to revisit in the future.

Adding to this difficulty were unforeseen developments. Specifically, two out of three of our qualitative researchers started working full time (one started working as a teacher in the summer of 2020 as a result of Covid shortages in online teachers, the other as a policy intern during the spring semester of 2021). This led to two of the remaining three members doing most of the interviewing and one of the three doing most of the transcribing to date. Unforeseen circumstances have therefore significantly delayed our timeline. This has brought to our attention the need to build into our future research projects additional time to account for such unforeseen circumstances.

In terms of our interdisciplinary engagement in the qualitative portion of the project, it has been productively challenging to navigate the different angles and vocabularies that members of our team use to discuss the object of our inquiry. Our qualitative team is composed of specialists in philosophy of education, educational policy, and STEM teaching and learning, and each of us tend to look at problems in very different ways. We don't know if we've really excelled at reconciling our disciplinary differences but have discussed plans to write papers that orient our findings toward different audiences (theoreticians, ethicists, policymakers and school/district administrators, and teachers, respectively) in which we will alternate leadership in the framing of our empirical findings and conceptual musings. Our perspective on curriculum and the attendant issues has definitely been enriched by our engagement together, and it has been especially valuable to have thought partners during the university closure.

Recommendations

- Offer professional development on project management, since for many it is their first time taking on a large-scale and extended project with a team.

- Customize the length of the grant period to the project (for our team, the year-long extension as a result of Covid was a god-send, since our project was perhaps overly ambitious).
- Assign each team a GSIRI ‘mentor,’ which would essentially be a point person from the GSIRI admin team who would periodically meet with the team to discuss challenges and hold the team accountable for staying on track with their timeline and help the team make necessary adjustments should this be necessary. Our team found this very challenging to do, since GSIRI was a side-project, and everyone was simultaneously focusing on classes, candidacy, full-time jobs, and/or dissertation-related research.