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District Adoption of Scripted Curriculum

Descriptive Context

Scripted curriculums have become a growing trend among the nation's schools. One of the federal government's main elementary and secondary education programs is Title I, which allocates money for compensatory education to school districts based on child poverty (Gordon, 2002). Scripted curriculum materials are instructional materials that have been commercially prepared and require the teacher to read from a script while delivering the lesson. According to Coles (2002), scripted materials reflect a focus on the explicit, direct, systematic skills instruction and are touted as a method to boost sagging standardized test scores and narrow the achievement gap between children growing up in poverty and those who are more affluent.

 If a school district chooses to accept schoolwide Title I funding, they are tied in to abiding by the federal governments rules concerning the allocation of the money. Currently, Title I regulations specify that "all participating schools must use program funds to implement a comprehensive school reform program that employs proven methods and strategies based on scientifically based research" (Comprehensive School Reform Program, n.d., p.2). In essence, these regulations prescribe the use of scripted curriculum materials because these are the only ones that qualify as being scientifically based. Schools that do not receive Title I funds (i.e., those located, in general, in more affluent areas) are free to spend their district's funds on the curriculum of their choice (Ede, 2006).

Much debate has taken place pertaining to the productivity of the scripted curriculum of teacher efficacy as it affects student achievement.

Differing Perspectives

<u>Proponents</u>

Proponents of the scripted curriculum claim that curriculum standards provide teachers with a common sequence of targets at which to aim instruction. In many school districts that have once had a loosely organized curriculum, standards now offer to students, teachers, and principals a consistent and structured map. By specifying which knowledge and skills students must demonstrate, standards imply the instructional practices that teachers should employ (Cohen, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Rowan, 1996). Proponents further claim that if the attainment of standards is assessed through criterion-referenced tests, teachers and administrators will receive timely and specific feedback on student performance and thus on their own instructional effectiveness.

Moreover, by providing uniform expectations for the performance of all students, standards can equalize content and instruction and thereby close the achievement gap for schools serving students from minority and low-income backgrounds.

Proponents see the scripted curriculum as especially beneficial for new teachers. This script guides new teachers and serves as a foundation that assists in assuring that students are effectively taught their learning objectives. It is suggested that if the scripts are used as intended, they can provide teachers the ability to pay attention to their students and not the curriculum design.

Opponents

Those who oppose the use of a scripted curriculum say that they are an ineffective method of raising achievement scores and challenge a teacher's instructional self-efficacy. These curriculums are a costly solution for school districts that are having difficulty raising their students' academic achievement (Moustafa & Land, 2002).

For teachers, creating a lesson plan that will excite, inform, and engage students that utilizes individual pedagogical expertise necessary to teach such a lesson, has now been stripped away and replaced with a day-by-day scripted guide that does not require any specialized knowledge. There is little time for individualized differentiated instruction or re-teaching as needed. Even if the students achieve a level of academic success, efficacy is not enhanced when success is achieved through extensive external assistance, relatively late in leaning, or on an easy or unimportant task (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk, & Hoy, 1998). Opponents of the scripted curriculum claim that the scripted curriculum is written and delivered to a student not knowing what each child's foundation of knowledge is. As educators, we know that each child comes to us with a vast array of academic abilities and life experiences. The scripted curriculum does not always provide lessons that build upon current levels of knowledge. Ede (2006) states:

> "The diverse ethnic and cultural makeup of today's classrooms makes it unlikely that one single curriculum will meet the needs and interests of all students. Curriculum must be flexible so that teachers are able to construct lessons that will be of high interest to their unique group of students, and actively engage them in creating knowledge. Reading aloud scripted lessons that have been created for a generic group is unlikely to accomplish this goal."

The push for mandated curricula has escalated. Some even argue that it is most essential for beginning teachers. But data suggest that such mandates do not necessarily result in substantive teacher learning, thoughtful instruction, or best classroom practices (Goodnough, 2001; Moats, 2000).

Snapshots of Research

Teacher Efficacy

Buese and Valli conducted research to examine the impact of the changing roles that teachers have had to convert to due to the federal, state, and local policies have mandated. Due to high-stakes standardized testing, scripted curriculums have been implemented in a majority of low-income schools. The reason for the study was to observe teacher job satisfaction as demands of high-stakes testing has caused their job descriptions to change. The researchers used 150 fourth and fifth grade teachers from 25 schools over a 4 year time period (2001-2005). Qualitative research was the methodology which included observations of teacher instruction, individual teacher interviews, and focus group interviews were conducted to gather data. Results show that the teachers felt overwhelmed when attempting to desegregate the data and differentiate instructions and caused the teachers to question their effectiveness in the classroom. Their instructional efficacy was challenged and their ability to work with students as individuals was reduced due to less amount of time in the school day because of demands of the need for instructional time. The author also concluded by stating that more research needs to be conducted on the relationships among external policies, workplace cultures, and teacher roles.

Tschannen-Moran, Wolfolk, and Hoy employed two studies of efficacy to research how a teacher's instructional efficacy affects job satisfaction and student academic achievement. First, they use the RAND organizations study which examined the success of various reading programs and interventions and how teacher's efficacy played into student successes. This research was based on Rotter's social learning theory. Research methods used were qualitative and summed scores on two questions that were asked of teachers and charted. The second study was based on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory. This second study included a more extensive and reliable measure of teacher efficacy was created by Gibson and Dembo. This was also a qualitative study based on teacher interviews and analyses of previous studies. They used the 2 strands of the RAND study as well as looking at Bandura's social cognitive theory, self-efficacy and outcome efficacy. Scores were placed on a scale with two factors, *personal teaching efficacy* (PTE) and *general teaching efficacy* (GTE). The RAND study showed that positive teacher efficacy was strongly related to variations in reading achievement among minorities and a teachers sense of efficacy had a strong positive effect not only on student performance but on the percentage of project goals achieved, on the amount of teacher change, and on the continued use of project methods and materials after the project ended. Gibson and Dembo's study reported that teachers with a high PTE and GTE were more likely to persist with low achieving students, have a higher level of commitment to student achievement, teach in a small group setting, willingness to try a variety of instructional methods, and a desire to find a better way of teaching. These teachers have higher levels of organizations, planning, and enthusiasm for teaching. Researchers suggest that more research be conducted to better understand the factors that facilitate or inhibit the development of efficacy beliefs among teachers across stages of their career.

Valencia, Place, Martin, and Grossman conducted a study in 2006 to learn how beginning elementary teachers understood and used curriculum materials for teaching reading, and how, in turn, these materials shaped teachers' instruction. Researchers followed 3 elementary teachers who worked in markedly different school situations and were provided a variety of curriculum materials, ranging from scripted reading programs to supplemental materials without teaching guides. Data were gathered through classroom observations, interviews, and curriculum artifacts over the teachers' first 3 years on the job. Researcher analysis suggested that curriculum materials interacted with teachers' knowledge of reading and reading instruction, and with the contexts in which they worked. As a result, curriculum materials both fostered and inhibited teachers' on-the-job learning. Researchers found that the 2 teachers with weak knowledge or more restrictive materials and environments learned the least and were least able to adapt instruction to meet the needs of their students. The 2 teachers with stronger knowledge, access to multiple materials, and support for decision making regarding materials and instructional strategies learned the most and were most able to adapt instruction. Furthermore, early experiences with specific curriculum materials had effects 2 years later on these teachers' instructional practices

Educational Achievement

In 1999, the National reading Panel (NRP) reviewed 100,000 case studies of how children learn to read. They soon narrowed the research as they established criteria which limited the studies to those relating to instructional material that the panel decided represented areas of good reading instruction and further narrowed to include "scientifically"; that is using only quantitative data. When the narrowing was completed, the 100,000 initial studies had been trimmed down to 307 studies. 52 studies looked at phonemic awareness, 38 in phonics, 14 in reading fluency, and 203 studies related to comprehension instruction. After examining the 307 studies, the National Reading Panel concluded that the most effective course of reading instruction included explicit and systemic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics (Metcalf, 2002)-that is, the scripted curriculum.

According to Greenlee and Bruner (2001), a study comparing the standardized test scores of Title1 elementary students using Success For All to the scores of students comparable Title 1 schools using a different reading program found that, over a three-year period, students in non-SFA schools experienced an average gain of 17 percent in the reading proficiency section, compared to an average gain of 8.5 percent in the reading proficiency of students in schools using the SFA reading curriculum.

Jerome Levitt, Executive Director Office of Program Evaluation for the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, followed 44 Title I schools using SFA, in conjunction with other services and additional funding, over a three-year period. The study concluded that this initiative, Operation Safety Net, did not raise the performance of these lowest-performing schools to the level of the other Title I schools over this period; it did not even reduce the gap. After three years, 13 SFA schools received an "F" on the state test, while the rest received a "D". Steven Urdegar, Principal Evaluator of the School Improvement Zone

Final Report for Miami-Dade County Public schools, also found that SFA offered no advantage over the district's other programs and that students with limited proficiency in English who attended SFA schools made smaller gains in English-language proficiency than those in comparison schools. The district is rapidly dropping SFA, which is being used this year in no more than five schools.

Issue in Practice

Ideally, a curriculum should be flexible and able to meet the needs of all learners. This includes, but is not limited to, offering opportunities for teachers to re-teach lessons as necessary and build upon a student's current foundation of knowledge. Scripted curriculums are seen as lacking this element as all students are taught from the same script and assume that all students have the same foundation to learn from. The scripted curriculum has been referred to as a "one size fits all" fix to close the achievement gap that stifles a teacher's creativity and ability to teach and differentiate instruction for all students.

The degree to which a curriculum is scripted varies and may be altered to fit the needs of the students. Most alterations to the curriculum are done by the curriculum department of the school district with little changes allowable by campus instructors. This lack of input from the classroom teachers is where riff lies. Teachers feel that while they are being held responsible for their student's academic progress and assessment outcomes, their hands are tied as far as being able to offer the tools that the students need to learn their educational objectives. Though many teachers feel that their creativity is being stifled by the scripted curriculum, it may be that the level of creativity needs to be heightened to find a way to make the scripted curriculum work for their students while maintaining compliance with the district's curricular expectations.

Recommendations from Implications of Research and Best Practice

The use of a scripted curriculum can be implemented without sacrificing the teacher's instructional self-efficacy and enhance student scores at the same time if the curriculum is successfully introduced and implemented.

1. **Form a committee**. It is not unusual for school district to form a curriculum selection committee that consists of district administration, campus administration, teachers, and other staff members. It is the committee member's job to meet with curriculum representatives, compare and contrast materials, and select the curriculum that best suits the needs of the students and teachers as well as meets the district objectives. By incorporating the appropriate stakeholders into the selection process, many voices of representation may be heard thus creating sense of unity when selecting a curriculum for implementation.

2. **Choosing the best curriculum.** There is a large variety of "research-based" curriculums that differ in the amount of scripting that is present. The district that is selecting their curriculum should be aware of the student's educational needs and their teacher strengths and weaknesses. The curriculum that is chosen by the committee should be flexible enough to change with the shifting needs of the district and one that is compatible with current instructional materials. The committee should also thoroughly review the research of the curriculum to support any of the company's claims of student achievement that is targeted to specific populations and closing the achievement gap.

3. **Provide on-going staff development.** With the implementation of a new scripted curriculum, there will inevitably be many questions from the teachers pertaining to the use of the materials, content clarification, and the general need for instructional support. Once the curriculum has been introduced and utilized, the district and campus administration should provide on-going staff development that encourages staff members increased knowledge of working with the scripted curriculum. Offering this type of continual support will allow teachers to feel that they are not left to "fend for themselves" and interpret the curriculum as they wish, but understand that the scripted curriculum provides educational benefits if it is embraced by the teachers and students alike.

4. **Explain the needs for a scripted curriculum.** Change is often ill received when it comes without warning and with little to no explanation. The district should be prepared to inform campus staff of what change is being made, why it is being made, and how this change will directly impact their classroom and student achievement. Quantitative data to support the curricular change will also be a strong support when it come to teacher "buy in" of the new curriculum.

Summary

The "research-based", or scripted curriculum, is becoming a national trend as the number of Title I schools are being identified. By taking the appropriate steps to prepare and support staff members, the curriculum can be implemented successfully. Promoting student's academic achievements without stripping teachers of their self-efficacy or dignity is of the utmost importance and can be accomplished successfully with proper planning on behalf of the district and campus administration. Use of the scripted curriculum comes with pros and cons, as every curriculum does, but it is within the teacher's realm of expertise to assure that the delivery of this curriculum is effective for each and every child.

The scripted curriculum can be beneficial to student achievement if the correct curriculum is chosen. There are a variety of factors to consider when reviewing and selecting the appropriate curriculum to fit the needs of the district. Change is sometimes difficult, and preparing teachers ahead of time will allow for a gradual and cautious mind set toward implementing the curriculum. When teachers are not expected to develop

their own curriculum, they can begin to focus on accommodating students' learning styles and differentiating instruction as much as possible for all learners.

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