

Contribution of Research

Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Scripted Curricula: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This pilot study explores pre-service teachers' perceptions of the required implementation of mandated, pre-designed instructional programs commonly implemented in PK-12 classrooms. Utilizing a mixed-methods survey design, the study gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from pre-service teachers at a four-year university in Texas. Participants reflected on how these curricular materials influenced their planning, instructional creativity, adaptability and differentiation. Findings indicate that while scripted curricula provide structure and serve as a resource for novice educators, participants expressed concerns regarding limitations. Three central themes emerged: constrained creativity, challenges adapting instruction to diverse learners, and a disconnect between planning and facilitation. Findings underscore the need for educator preparation programs to provide more robust training on flexible instructional use and differentiation. Given the small sample, these findings must be interpreted with caution; nonetheless, this preliminary investigation informs future research to expand the sample size, refine data collection instruments, and deepen our understanding of pre-service teachers' experiences with prescriptive instructional materials.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, scripted curriculum, teacher preparation, instructional adaptability, curriculum differentiation

Over the past couple of years, many school districts have required their PK-12 teachers to use scripted curriculum to teach students in lieu of lesson plans created by teachers.

Teachers in previous studies (Bomer & Maloch, 2018; Gellert, 2021; Smith & Peters, 2020; Zhang & Cowen, 2020) have expressed dissatisfaction with using scripted curriculum since they claim it limits their freedom to develop plans that fits the unique needs of students and scripted lessons take more time to teach versus unscripted lessons. Contrarily, in other studies (Commwyras, 2007; Dresser, 2012; Griffith, 2008) teachers have expressed the benefits of scripted curriculum being that it serves as a helpful resource for inexperienced teachers or teachers who have limited knowledge about a subject area or topic and need assistance with how to teach the content. The perceptions of certified teachers and pre-service teachers

about the use of scripted curriculum have been divided, with some supporting or being against using scripted materials.

Positionality

As researchers, we acknowledge that our backgrounds and experiences shape our perspectives on scripted curriculum and its implementation in PK-12 classrooms. Author 1 is a recent alumna of the educator preparation program and was engaged in clinical teaching during the development of this research and data collection process. Her firsthand experience as a pre-service teacher navigating the use of scripted curricula provides valuable insight into the realities faced by future educators. The manuscript was finalized after her graduation, allowing for

reflective distance from her role as a participant in the preparation program.

Author 2 is a professor who supports students in methods courses and with their edTPA portfolios, giving them direct guidance on lesson planning, instructional strategies, and reflective teaching practices. Her perspective is informed by her work in preparing pre-service teachers for the practical demands of the classroom, including navigating curricular mandates such as scripted instruction.

Author 3 is a professor specializing in assessment for diverse and contemporary classrooms, as well as curriculum and instructional design for all learners. His expertise in curriculum development and differentiation informs his perspective on how scripted curricula impact instructional flexibility, differentiation, and assessment practices in diverse educational settings.

While we recognize the potential benefits of scripted curricula, we also acknowledge our collective concern about its impact on teacher autonomy, instructional adaptability, and differentiation. Our initial assumptions may have influenced the framing of this study, and we have made efforts to approach data analysis with reflexivity and openness to diverse perspectives.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this pilot study is to gain an initial understanding of pre-service teachers' perceptions on the required use of scripted curriculum. Results from this exploratory study will be analyzed to see how pre-service teachers' perspectives may differ or be similar to the perspectives of certified classroom teachers on the topic. The study aims to provide preliminary insight into the effectiveness of scripted curriculum on preparing future educators while also identifying potential areas of concern

that may affect pre-service teachers' professional development and teaching practices. As a pilot study, this research is intended to test the feasibility of the study design and refine data collection methods, which is an essential step before conducting a larger-scale study (Eldridge et al., 2016; Kistin & Silverstein, 2015).

Participants

For this study, a convenience sampling was utilized. The participants for this study all identified as education majors at a four-year university in Texas. Communication was sent exclusively by professors with students enrolled in field experience or clinical teaching - courses for which participants would have access to scripted curriculum. Each professor was provided with a recruitment email script and a request to communicate with the potential participants. We were unable to track which professors followed up with their students. The site was selected as it was convenient for the researchers and due to the ease of access to the target population (Merriam, 2009). The focus of this pilot study was to identify perceived attitudes and perceptions of our pre-service teachers on the use of scripted materials. For this pilot study, the researchers were not given access to a listserv of all students currently enrolled in the educator preparation program, but were given access to a list of the faculty that instructed these students. The researchers prepared a recruitment email blurb that was distributed to each faculty member, who was asked to share with their respective classes. Twelve responses were received with 50% of these responses indicating that the pre-service teacher was provided with scripted materials. These six participants are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Program of Study	Placement	Content Area	School Setting	Grade Level
1	Early Childhood - 6th Grade (EC-6)	Clinical Teaching	All subjects, self-contained	Suburban	1st Grade
2	Special Education	Field Experience 2 (FE2)	Special Education	Urban	9th-12th Grade
3	EC-6	Clinical Teaching	All subjects, self-contained	Suburban	3rd Grade
4	EC-6	Clinical Teaching	All subjects, self-contained	Rural	Kinder
5	EC-6	Year-Long Residency (YLR)	All subjects, self-contained	Urban	Kinder

6	Middle Grades (MLGE)	Clinical Teaching	English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR)	Rural	5th Grade
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The majority of participants came from the EC-6 program, the department’s largest concentration. The two programs that are not represented in this pilot study are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) and Secondary Education (SEED). All six of the participants identified as female. The students were also asked to identify the platform or resource they were provided. These were - in no particular order - University of Florida Institute Phonics program, Unique Learning System, Summit K12, Eureka Math, Heggerty, and Amplify. No other demographic information was recorded. This study received IRB exempt-status.

Instrument

The study has IRB approval as a pilot study and all authors have CITI training for human subjects research. A mixed-methods survey design was utilized in this study. The survey included 32 questions and participants responded to Likert-scale questions allowing them to rate their experiences and perceptions related to scripted curriculum. The survey questions were presented as statements and participants rated their level of agreement with the statements about scripted curriculum. The statements were rated as follows: (1) strongly disagree; (2) disagree; (3) uncertain; (4) agree; (5) strongly agree. The Likert-scale contained five choices, an odd number of choices, to provide participants with the option to choose “neutral” if they were indecisive about a topic. The survey questions were organized into the following categories related to scripted curriculum: planning, creativity, differentiation, and instructional flexibility. Additionally, demographic questions were included to analyze trends across different subgroups of participants. These questions asked what program of study participants were enrolled in, what stage of the educator preparation program participants were in, whether their classroom contained any special features (such as Gifted and Talented or other programs), whether the school setting of participants is rural, urban, or suburban, and what grade level of students the participant works with. The data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify overall trends and correlations in preservice teacher perceptions. A list of sample survey items and open-ended questions has been included in Appendix A.

Procedure

In October of 2024, the survey was sent via email to instructors of college courses within the education department at university where the study was conducted. Instructors then notified and shared the survey to their students via email. The email included the purpose of the research and link to the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary. One reminder email was sent out before the survey stopped accepting submissions. The survey was open and accepted submissions for two months. The researchers began the data analysis after the survey period ended.

Data Analysis

Participants completed the survey in Google Forms. This raw data was later transferred from Google Forms to Google Sheets where it was analyzed then transferred into tables to show the data in a visual way. Due to the small sample size of this pilot study, descriptive statistics were not used. The below tables are showing the trends for the six participants in our sample and are not generalizable. However, plans to calculate mean are included in the research plan when we replicate with a larger sample size. The researchers then examined the open-ended responses, identifying codes through thorough discussion and comparison. By cross-referencing these qualitative insights with the quantitative findings, the research team engaged in an iterative process of analysis and deliberation (Barnett et. al, 2016), ultimately converging on three overarching themes that encapsulated the study’s key results.

Discussion

The purpose of this pilot study survey was to assess pre-service teachers’ thoughts on the use of scripted curriculum. The researchers had noticed in their clinical teaching cohorts that there was a drastic increase in the use of *required* scripted curriculum and they were interested in how the pre-service teachers perceived this requirement. The information gained from the limited sample size of this pilot study serves as a starting point for conversations at the departmental level. Although frequency tables are included below and provide a visual representation of participant responses, these numbers must be interpreted cautiously and cannot be assumed to reflect broader trends.

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) limitations on creativity and instructional adaptability, (2) challenges with differentiation for diverse learners, and (3) confusion between planning and preparation due to insufficient training. These themes are interrelated and provide insight into the nuanced perceptions of this small group of pre-service teachers regarding scripted curricula.

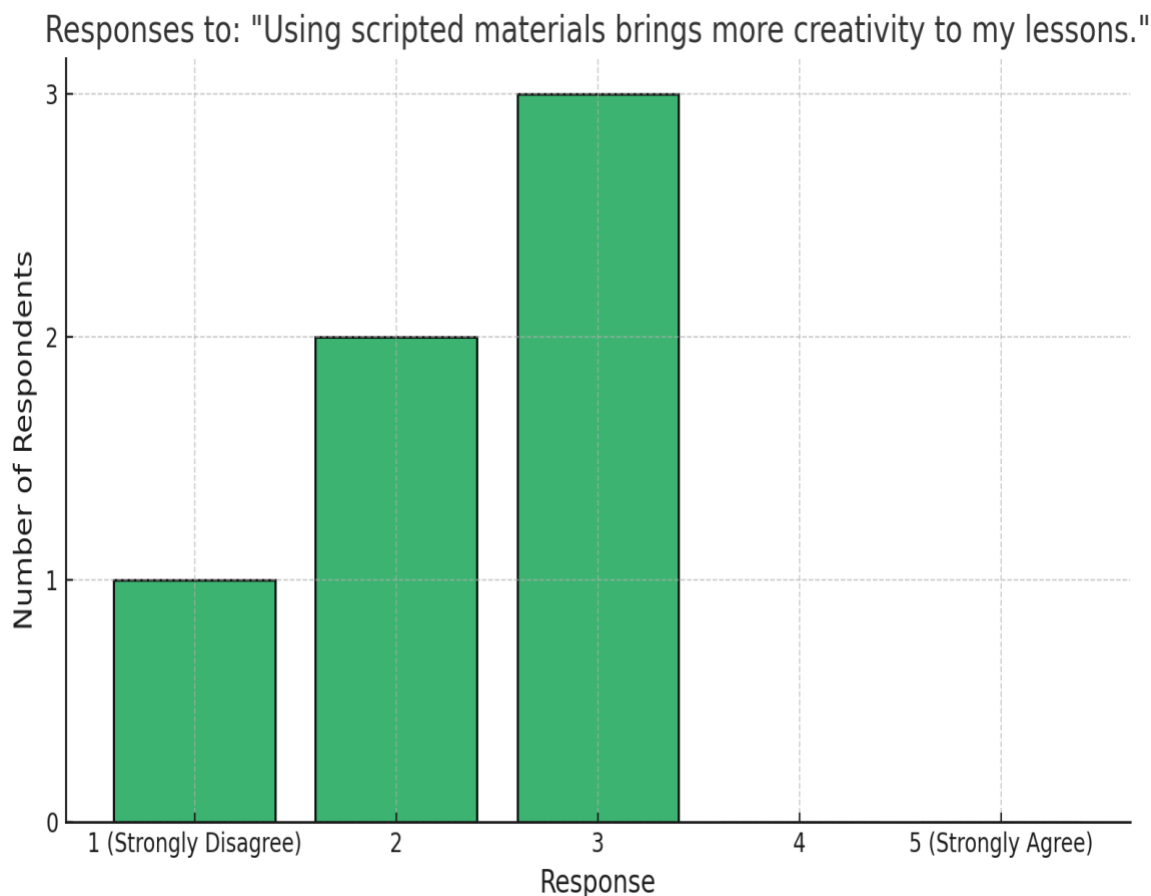
Structure as a Potential Limit to Teacher Adaptability and Creativity

The findings reveal overall consistent perceptions among participants regarding how scripted materials do not

bring more creativity to lessons and limits their ability to be creative in lesson delivery. Before continuing, the authors want to stress that the results are not meant to be generalizable but reflect the context of the study's small sample size and conditions. Likert scale responses reveal that scripted materials provide clear instructional guidance with the content needed to be taught but are perceived to limit participants' creativity in their lesson delivery. The qualitative responses highlighted that the teachers appreciate the structure of scripted materials as a starting point but express frustration with its lack of flexibility, which can stifle their creativity and personalization of lessons.

Table 2

Responses to: "Using scripted materials brings more creativity to my lessons."



Although the sample size is small, Table 2 shows that the number of students who disagreed that scripted materials bring creativity to their lessons equaled the number of students who were neutral about the topic. A response aligning with the views of participants who disagreed that scripted materials bring creativity to lessons, one pre-service teacher wrote, "When teachers are forced to use scripted curriculum it can limit their creativity to adapt

their lessons to meet their students' needs and not every student learns the same way so scripted curriculum may not be effective for certain students" (Participant 2) and another participant wrote, "I feel [scripted curriculum] makes it so anyone can read this to students... then we do not need teachers but readers" (Participant 5).

Participants who chose "neutral" as their response may have an indecisive view or equally agree and disagree

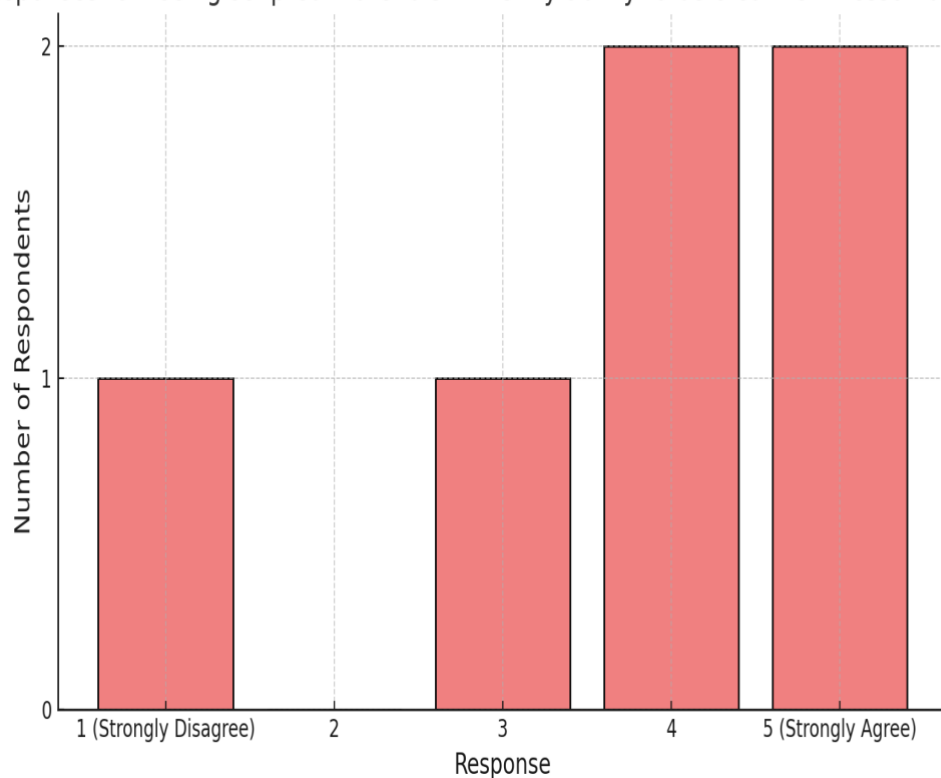
with the statement. This is reflected in the responses of Participant 2 and Participant 5 in addition to Participant 4 who may agree that scripted materials brings creativity to

their lessons since they stated “I see [scripted materials] as beneficial because with a scripted curriculum, I can focus my planning and creativity in other areas” (Participant 4).

Table 3

Responses to: “Using scripted materials limits my ability to be creative in lesson delivery”

Responses to: "Using scripted materials limits my ability to be creative in lesson delivery"



Both Table 2 and Table 3 show a trend that appears in the quantitative data and written responses which is that most participants believe that scripted materials do not bring creativity but instead limits creativity in their lesson delivery. This perception is consistent with the following responses: “I feel [scripted curriculum] makes it so anyone can read this to students... then we do not need teachers but readers” (Participant 5), “When teachers are forced to use scripted curriculum it can limit their creativity to adapt their lessons to meet their students' needs and not every student learns the same way so scripted curriculum may not be effective for certain students” (Participant 2), and “Only by using supplemental materials during instruction, can I tailor learning more to the students I have based on their annual goals” (Participant 3). The participant’s views who strongly disagreed that scripted materials limits their ability to be creative in the lesson delivery may be reflected in Participant 4’s response, “I see [scripted materials] as beneficial because with a scripted curriculum, I can focus my planning and creativity in other areas” (Participant 4).

Balancing Standardization with Student Needs

Tables 4, 5, and 6 reveal mixed perceptions among participants regarding the effectiveness of scripted curriculum, particularly in its ability to support differentiation and adaptability in diverse classroom settings. These findings reflect the specific experiences and perspectives of the study participants and are not intended to be generalized to all educational contexts. Likert scale responses highlighted varying opinions, with some participants finding scripted materials helpful as a guide, while others viewed them as overly restrictive, limiting their ability to tailor instruction to meet the unique needs of their students. The subtheme of differentiation emerged prominently in the qualitative responses, as participants frequently noted the challenges of modifying scripted materials to address students’ varied learning needs. For instance, Participant 6 emphasized that the allotted teaching times in scripted curricula often reflect “a perfect world scenario” and fail to realistically account for the additional

time needed to support English as a Second Language (ESL) learners or provide accommodations.

Table 4
Responses to: “I find it challenging to adapt scripted materials to meet the diverse needs of my students”

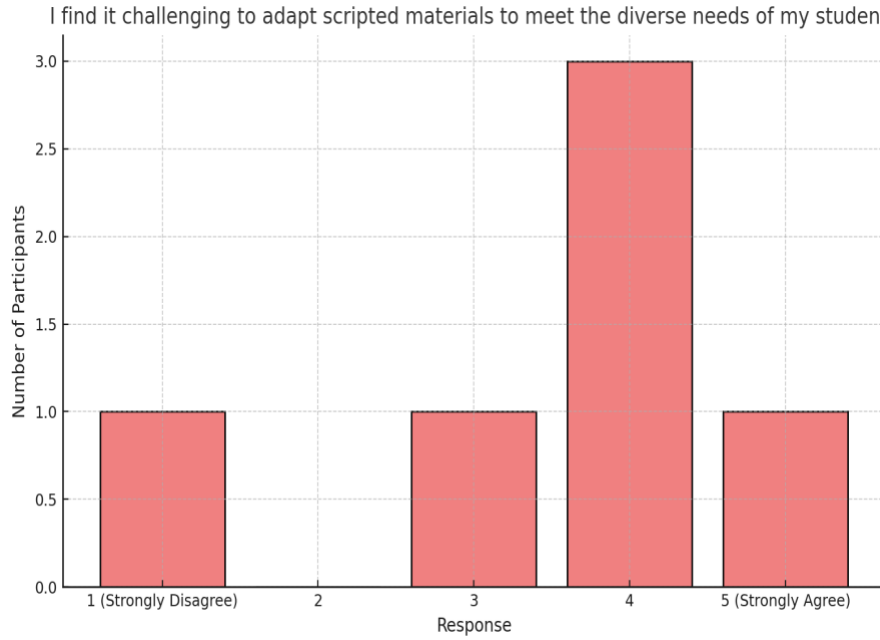


Table 5
Responses to: “The scripted curriculum meets the needs of my emergent bilingual/multilingual learners”

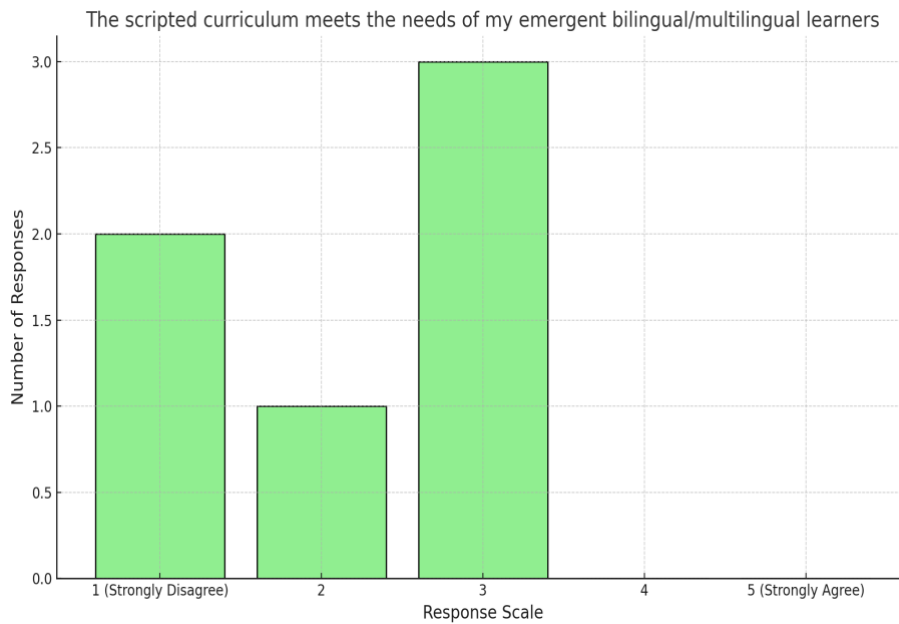
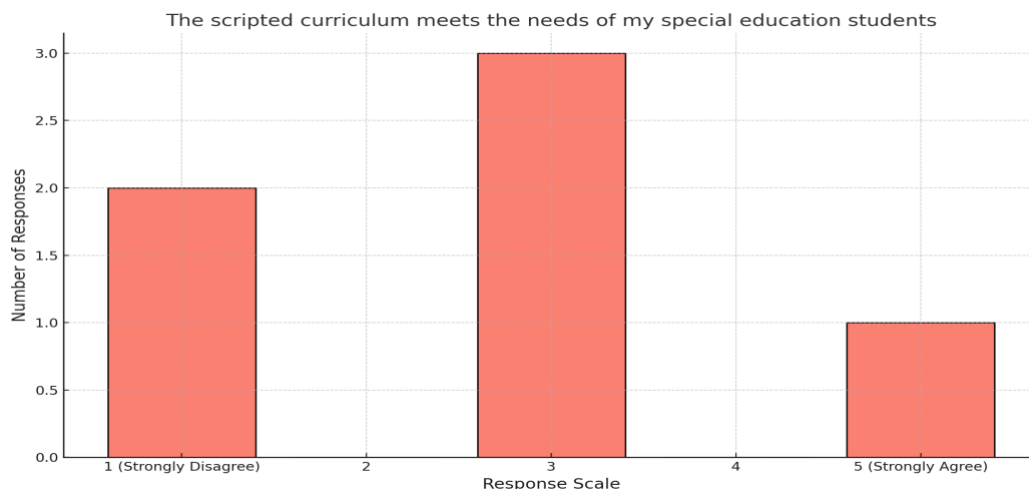


Table 6
Responses to: “The scripted curriculum meets the needs of my special education students”



The subtheme of adaptability was also evident in Table 4, as participants expressed concerns about the rigidity of the curriculum and the difficulty of effectively implementing it. Participant 4 shared frustration with the lack of transparency in the curriculum’s design, stating, “I see it as not helpful when I do not understand why the curriculum is planned a certain way and I have to adapt it to be beneficial for my students.” Similarly, Participant 3 described how the format of scripted materials can create confusion for both teachers and students, noting that it “fails to break down the concepts in an understandable way.” Collectively, these findings highlight the need for scripted curricula to provide greater flexibility and clearer guidance, enabling educators to adapt the materials to

diverse classroom contexts and better support differentiation in instruction.

The Difference between Well-Planned and Well-Prepared

The final theme that emerged from the data was student discrepancies regarding planning versus preparation. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited sample size, the results of the theme should not be interpreted as widely applicable to broader populations. According to the survey, a traditional bell-shaped curve is seen in how students perceived their planning with the support of scripted curriculum in Table 7.

Table 7

Responses to: “The scripted curriculum allows me to effectively plan lessons.”:

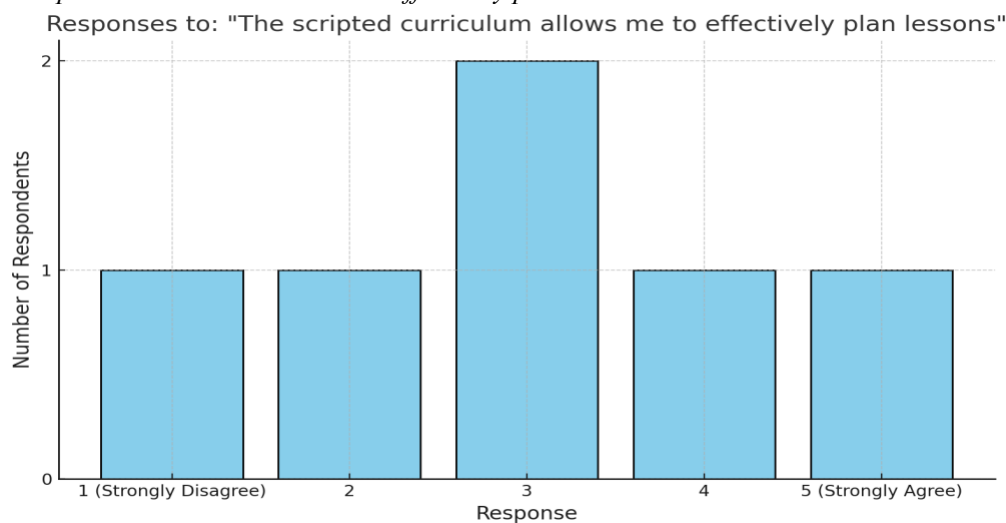
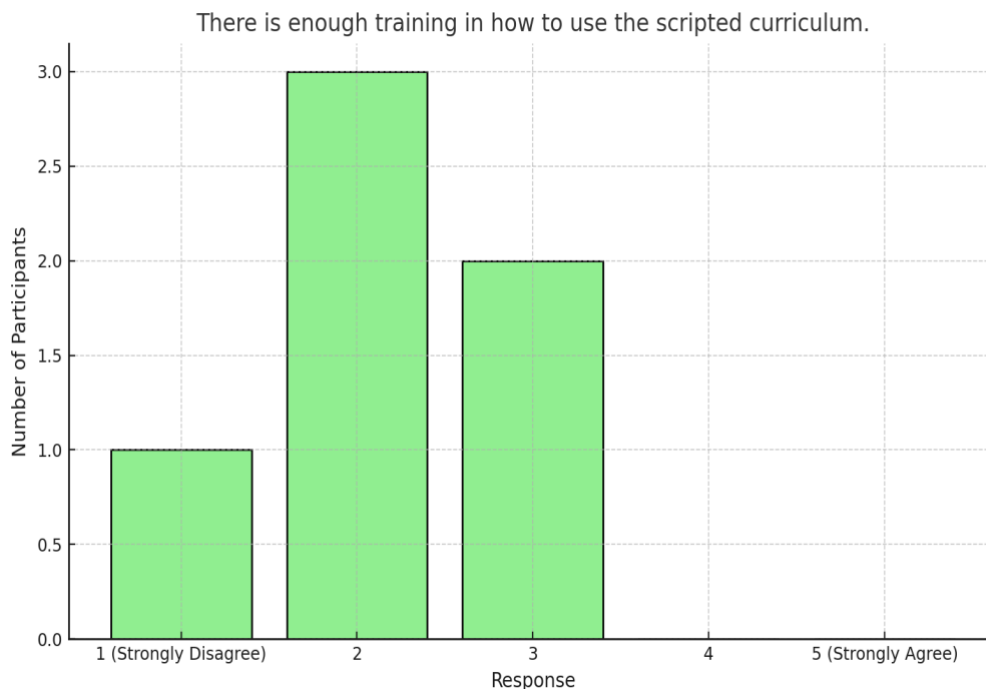


Table 8

Responses to: “There is enough training in how to use the scripted material.”



These results are supported by responses from the participants themselves. One pre-service teacher wrote, “[scripted curriculum] was helpful because I felt I had nowhere to start. But, it’s very limiting and unrealistic in the delivery process” (Participant 6). Another stated, “I feel that scripted curriculum provides a baseline of information teachers can use as a resource to supplement their lesson plans and provide extra support for students but I wish I knew how to use it. The teachers in the math department received training, but the reading interventionists never did, so we missed out on a lot of great features, I think” (Participant 2).

Recommendations for Pre-Service Education Preparation Programs

One of the glaring needs is the need to integrate training on scripted curricula usage into existing coursework. This means that pre-service teachers need support with practical strategies for adapting scripts for the diverse classroom needs they will find. This could include workshops during field semesters or even simulations in pre-field or content-specific courses that help students balance fidelity to the scripted curriculum with a responsiveness to their students’ needs.

An additional recommendation would be to focus on providing support for pre-service teachers to focus on differentiation and adaptability. EPPs should include methods for modifying scripts to accommodate students with special needs, emergent bilingual learners, and those in varied cultural or socioeconomic contexts. This

modification in coursework would teach pre-service teachers how to differentiate instruction effectively within the constraints of scripted curricula.

Finally, we recommend a re-emphasis on critical reflection and creativity. We need to encourage our pre-service teachers to critically reflect on the role of scripted curricula in their teaching. Specifically, we could focus on introducing reflective journals, case studies, or group discussions that help pre-service teachers analyze the benefits and limitations of scripted materials. Emphasizing creative lesson planning strategies that use scripted curricula as a foundation while integrating unique and student-centered teaching practices is critical for student success.

Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study highlight the nuanced perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the required implementation of scripted curriculum in PK-12 classrooms. While participants acknowledged the benefits of scripted curricula, such as providing structure and serving as a valuable resource for novice educators, they also expressed significant concerns about its limitations. Chief among these were the perceived restrictions on creativity, difficulties in adapting scripts to meet the diverse needs of students, and insufficient training on how to effectively implement these programs.

As this study serves as a preliminary exploration, it lays the groundwork for future research aimed at deepening our understanding of how scripted curricula impact pre-

service teacher development and teaching practices. Ultimately, addressing these concerns will better prepare pre-service teachers to meet the demands of diverse classrooms and promote more effective teaching practices.

Moving Forward

Building on the insights and recognizing the limitations from our pilot study, the next phase of our research will engage a much larger and more diverse group of participants from all certification areas within our educator preparation programs. By expanding our participant pool, we hope to gather data that allows for more meaningful statistical analysis and thoughtful subgroup comparisons. This is especially important as high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) remain a top priority in English language arts & reading and mathematics, while their role in social studies and sciences is still evolving.

To ensure our survey captures the nuances of these areas, we will revise the instrument to include targeted subscales that reflect the key themes we have identified so far. We will also refine our open-ended questions to encourage participants to share deeper insights about the specific instructional challenges and supports they encounter. Through these methodological improvements, we aim to generate findings that are not only more robust and generalizable, but also more closely aligned with the real experiences and needs of our educators.

Limitations

A major limitation of this pilot study was the sample size. This significantly constrained the scope of quantitative analysis. Due to this study serving as a pilot, the researchers were not provided with full access to the participant pool and had to rely on faculty members

disseminating this information. This led to a significant reduction in the amount of data analysis and the usefulness of descriptive statistics when the researchers engaged in the quantitative data review. The small sample size also restricts subgroup analyses, such as exploring perceptions across certification areas or grade levels, which may yield meaningful differences in a larger study.

The researchers also believe that a refinement of the open-ended questions is needed. For the pilot study, the researchers attempted to keep the survey instrument as short as possible with the hope of increasing student engagement. The open-ended question asked pre-service teachers if they felt that the use of scripted curriculums affected their growth as a future educator. Moving forward, a few targeted open-ended questions will replace this one, asking about lesson planning versus facilitation, training, supporting student needs, teacher creativity, and if the use of scripted curriculum allows teachers more time to dedicate to other tasks. The researchers would also consider adding a focus group to the research study in order to solicit more robust responses.

An additional limitation is that the researchers themselves do not have experience with scripted curriculums. All three, the two faculty members and the honors research student, had an initial bias against the use of scripted curricula due to the researcher's perception that appropriate differentiation would not be addressed and that knowledge of students would not inform teacher practice. While the researchers did not engage directly with participants, they believe that this is a real limitation in the data analysis portion of the study.

Finally, while the survey instrument was briefly described, we recognize that the lack of full item disclosure may limit the study's transparency and replicability. To address this, we have added a sample of these questions in Appendix A. This addition aims to provide clearer insight into the constructs that were measured.

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Appendix A

Perceptions of Scripted Curriculum

Instructions: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements, using the scale provided:

11. The scripted curriculum allows me to effectively plan lessons.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Strongly Agree

12. Using scripted materials limits my ability to be creative in lesson delivery.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Strongly Agree

13. Using scripted materials brings more creativity to my lessons.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Strongly Agree

14. Scripted curriculum provides me with clear instructional guidance

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Strongly Agree

Open-Ended Reflections

32. I have used curriculum marketed as (Please mark ALL that apply): *

NOTE: Please select the response that either represents how the curriculum is perceived/what it's called at YOUR location OR how you best interpret the curriculum that you are provided.

Check all that apply.

- Structured Curriculum Guides
- Prescriptive Curriculum
- Standardized Instructional Material
- High Quality Instructional Materials
- Curriculum-in-a-Box
- Mandated Curriculum
- Other: _____

33. In your own words, how do you feel the use of scripted curriculum affects your growth as a future educator? *

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