



## Research paper

## The allure of simplicity: Scripted curricula and equity



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Scripted curricula appealed to teachers' belief in fairness but obscured diversity.
- Equity was perceived as the same standards and content for all learners.
- Equity as sameness dismisses structural barriers of poverty, disability and race.
- Concerned about loss of teacher autonomy, knowledge and expertise.

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## ABSTRACT

New York State offered schools scripted curricular modules to assist in meeting the Common Core State Standards. Reports of teacher concerns about rushed and rigid implementation led to qualitative in-depth interviews with general and special educators utilizing the EngageNY modules. While participants expressed appreciation for aspects of the modules, they articulated an alarming ideology that inequities (including disability and poverty) could be remedied by holding students to high standards. As scripted curricula gain popularity within and outside of the U.S. our findings suggest an urgency to interrogate simplified notions of equity and the resulting loss of teacher knowledge and expertise.

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## 1. Introduction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were created, in part, to move the United States towards a more consistent and rigorous national curriculum, a move that is echoed in countries around the world. England, for example, introduced a revised national curriculum with an ostensibly more rigorous focus on specific content knowledge in 2014 and the Australian Curriculum was adopted that same year partly as a backlash against outcomes-based education and the transdisciplinary and “future-focused” Queensland *New Basics* experiment that ran between 2000 and 2003 (Lingard & McGregor, 2014). By seeking to promote uniformly high expectations for all students, the CCSS in the U.S. were seen as a potential remedy to what has been referred to as “education by zip code” where a student’s exposure to a topic depends on where he or she

lives as students’ social backgrounds remain significantly correlated with their opportunities to cover content (Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014; Milner, 2013; Schmidt, Cogan, & McKnight, 2010–2011). In an effort to support the aim of equal access to curriculum content, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) offered curricular modules in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics for grades pre-kindergarten through 12 in order to assist schools and districts with the implementation of the Common Core. While there exists a generally international interest in more explicitly and coherently grounding the curriculum in academic knowledge, less attention has been paid to what these curricular shifts might mean for pedagogy as a means for the provision of more equitable access to content knowledge. The EngageNY modules represent an exception.<sup>1</sup> The modules, which

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, in South Africa, 12,000 teachers in close to 1000 underperforming schools have in the last decade been mandated to follow scripted lesson plans, which were introduced to them together with “just-in-time” training and “ongoing in-class coaching,” as part of the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy with an explicit focus on educational equity (Gauteng Department of Education, 2010).

consist of lesson plans, materials and assessments, are available free of charge through NYSED's EngageNY website. Implementation of the modules, which "can be adopted or adapted for local purposes" (New York State Education Department, n.d.), is voluntary, though teachers in some individual schools and districts have described being required by administrators to deliver them without deviation or differentiation. In addition, as teacher educators, we suddenly found our pre-service teacher candidates facing these new curricular modules in the field.

While there may be value in making standards and curriculum content more uniform, the notion of education by zip code ultimately captures but one of a multitude of inequities that currently characterize the American education system. Across several measures of educational access and success, there are wide disparities between students according to membership in what the U.S. Department of Education (2014) calls "underserved groups and communities." Significant inequalities are evident across measures of educational inputs including school funding (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Heuer & Stullich, 2011; Litvinov, 2015) and teacher quality and experience (Kumar & Waymack, 2014; Peske & Haycock, 2006). Students' experiences in school are also marked by unequal rates of placement in special education, suspension and discipline (Smith & Harper, 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014); even participation in youth sports favors White, middle and upper class students (Putnam, 2015). Likewise, educational outcomes including participation in Advanced Placement courses, SAT scores, and college attendance, remain stubbornly unequal along the lines of race, class and ability (Dynarski, 2014; Godsey, 2015; Reardon, 2013).

### 1.1. Issues of access and equity

A consideration of this overwhelmingly complex picture of educational inequality might serve to temper expectations about the impact to be made solely by providing more equitable access to standards and curriculum content. As such, our investigation is situated inside a set of largely unanswered and under-researched questions that connect to the widespread adoption of modules and other pre-packaged materials designed to support efforts at meeting the CCSS. These questions include: What are the ways in which implementation of a national curriculum can address unequal access to content? Is equal access to content enough to promote equitable educational opportunities? What is the role of the teacher in implementing scripted curricula designed to help all students reach high academic standards? How will this prescribed, simplified solution impact the persistent, thorny problem of inequity in American schools? As scripted curricula are being implemented, how these materials support equitable access to challenging curriculum for all students and whether equity is impacted by these prescriptive instructional materials remain essential questions (Eisenbach, 2012; Kornhaber et al., 2014; Milner, 2013). Stosich (2016) notes that standards have generally been acceptable to educators because they provide a common target or expectation but do not mandate how teachers must meet the standards. When scripts are introduced however, teacher responses vary, with many expressing concern about the impact of scripts on children's learning and on teacher autonomy (Ainsworth, Ortlieb, Cheek, Pate, & Fetters, 2012; Eisenbach, 2012; Parks & Bridges-Rhoads, 2012). Over time however, fears about the impact of the scripts on pedagogy appear to be replaced by a belief in the power and expertise of the scripts. For example, a two-year ethnographic study of scripted math curriculum found decreased teacher innovation and creativity as well as a new definition of "good teaching". A teacher participant ruefully reflected that she was no longer creative but accepted the necessity of the scripted

methodology without deviation. Most concerning however, was how this teacher came to believe that the poor and minority children in her classroom "needed" such restrictive teaching (Parks & Bridges-Rhoads, 2012).

The widespread availability of these scripted modules and the claims of high standards as the remedy for educational inequities, suggests relevance for educators internationally as well as within the U.S. The EngageNY modules have reportedly been downloaded more than 45 million times and are in use far beyond the borders of New York State (Heitin, 2016).

### 1.2. Study purpose

The purpose of our research was to investigate teacher perceptions of the curricular modules on pedagogy, specifically, the impact of scripted materials on teaching a diverse student population. As teacher educators, we were curious about the dichotomy between the expressed intention of New York State policymakers and the reported reality of classroom teachers utilizing curriculum modules. The New York State Education Department describes the modules as resources and "optional curricular materials." The scripted lessons are suggested "guides" to enable teachers to visualize the delivery of equitable instruction across districts and NYSED reminds the public that "it is important to note that **the lessons are not scripts**" [emphasis in the original]. However, anecdotal reports of teachers being required to maintain strict fidelity to the scripts regardless of students' response to them suggested to us that the implementation was proceeding quite differently on the ground. We were drawn to ask questions not only about teacher experience but also about their impression of the relationship between the EngageNY curriculum modules and their ability to teach all students well. Our overall research question was (1) How do elementary teachers understand and experience the EngageNY modules? And more specifically, (2) Have the modules impacted teacher's pedagogy regarding students living in poverty, students from marginalized cultural backgrounds, and students who receive special education services?

The anecdotal reports by local teachers during graduate course discussions and conversations at professional development sessions led us to expect that the modules may be controversial. The dislike of the scripts that was being expressed informally provided our study rationale and we hoped to explore the nuanced relationships between scripted curriculum and teacher professionalism and expertise. What we found provides important and timely insights despite the descriptive nature of the research: what we thought was simple (teachers would resent scripted modules) was not, and what we expected to be complicated (ways in which teachers understood equity) was simplified.

#### 1.2.1. Interdisciplinary orientation

The researchers are colleagues from different theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds working in a teacher education program at a comprehensive state college in the USA. Despite our different disciplines (foundations of education, special education, urban education) we share a commitment to creating inclusive schools, practice universally designed, culturally relevant pedagogies, and interpret "equity" as a primary but complicated goal of education. Although equity is often used as the justification for policy and is almost always the stated goal of all sides when policy interpretations conflict, there are multiple definitions of the term (Stone, 2002). Our theoretical perspective on equity in schooling reflects an expansive form of educational equity, which requires compensatory action towards, for example, addressing health, social emotional and socioeconomic disparities in addition to the internal matters of schooling such as curriculum and materials

(Kornhaber et al., 2014; Larson, 2014).

Reflecting a range of specialties, our previous individual research explored access to knowledge and challenging curricular content as forms of educational inequity (Barrett, Burns Thomas, & Timberlake, *forthcoming*; Timberlake, 2014). In addition to curriculum, our shared orientation toward critical theory and social justice led to our interest in this inquiry of scripted curriculum and influenced our interpretation of the findings. Woelders and Abma (2015) assert that a critical theoretical lens highlights the social justice components within whatever particular practice is being studied. Specifically, our interdisciplinary critical lens foregrounded research that is alert to descriptors of students' strengths and deficits, teachers' professional knowledge, and teachers' autonomy as decision-makers.

## 2. Method

Framing a policy “problem” is described by McLaughlin as “arguably the most important decision made” when conducting research such as ours because whatever is defined and accepted as the problem eliminates alternative conceptualizations and directs inquiry in a particular direction (2006, p. 210). Thus, we framed our study in order to better understand teacher experiences with a scripted curriculum rather than defining the problem a priori as “the modules.” We utilized qualitative methods to in order to elicit teachers' experience of implementing the EngageNY curricular modules. We conducted in-depth teacher interviews, analyzed selected mathematics and ELA modules, and conducted document reviews of informational notices about the CCSS disseminated for the public by New York State.

### 2.1. Participants

Twenty teachers known to the research team were invited via email to participate in interviews during the summer and fall of 2014 and ten responded with interest in participating in our investigation of teachers' experiences using the EngageNY modules. The final participants included eight general and two special education teachers from four school districts in central New York State. Two teachers were male and eight were female. Both special educators served students in grades 3–6 and the general educators included four primary (grades 1–2) and four upper elementary (grades 3–5) teachers. A range of teaching experience was represented among the interviewees: three teachers had less than five years' experience while three had more than 25 years. There were no teachers in their first or second year, and half of the participants had been teaching for more than 10 years. Finally, as mentioned earlier, New York State gave school districts latitude in choosing whether to adopt the modules “as is,” to allow teachers to adapt the modules as they saw fit, or to ignore them entirely. Five of our participants taught in districts that required fidelity to the modules as scripted and five taught in districts where they were given more flexibility in how they chose to implement them. Although this small sample size represents what might be termed a “convenience sample” given that all of the teachers were known to the researchers, it is nevertheless representative of many of the demographics of the region and reflects the dominant strategies for implementing the modules. Additionally, the researchers had prior access to school and individual teacher contact information, expediting the recruiting process.

### 2.2. Procedure

Seven interviews were conducted in-person and three by telephone using a semi-structured interview guide created by the

research team and approved by our Institutional Review Board. The interview guide contained general questions about teachers' goals for their students, their exposure to the CCSS, and the EngageNY modules and inequities they observe in their classrooms. Participants were asked specifically about how the modules impacted teaching students identified with disabilities or students who were living in poverty because the districts where we conducted the research had high percentages of students from these categories. In addition, the modules were implemented simultaneously with professional development on ‘teaching children in poverty’ in these districts, which drew increased teacher attention to particular groups of students. Although educational inequalities also remain deeply entrenched along racial lines in the United States, children of color do not comprise a significant proportion of the student population in any of the districts where our interviewees teach.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Our initial analysis, which is described elsewhere (Barrett et al., *forthcoming*), followed the process of data collection, coding and generating themes that marks qualitative research. We engaged in an informal process of thematic analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) where each member of the research team listened to the recordings of all interviews, wrote memos exploring initial impressions and ideas and then the team compared notes and generated possible themes and preliminary propositions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded. Patterns that emerged in the initial listening stage related to the ways in which teachers were being asked to implement the modules. One major finding related to the different experiences that teachers had relative to the degree to which they were encouraged to make professional decisions about the implementation of the modules. Where teachers were permitted to adapt the modules, making changes that allowed them to differentiate instruction according to their understanding of their students' needs, abilities and interests, they were largely positive about the use of a scripted curriculum. In districts where teachers were required to adopt the scripted curriculum without the possibility of alterations, teachers expressed concerns about the fast pacing and rushed implementation of the modules. Following that first round of analysis, we presented a paper at a national conference and then returned to the data, going participant by participant and deductively scrutinizing teachers' descriptions of the modules in relation to equity and to students who have historically been overlooked or have received less access to high quality curriculum and instruction in the United States. Returning to the data after presenting our initial analysis as well as frequent meetings, collegial discussions and memos lend trustworthiness to the interpretation.

Finally, intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2011) enabled our individual expertise in one area (disability, sociological foundations, urban and minority education) to merge into consensus as themes of equity became more and more clear. We utilized intuitive inquiry, in which the boundaries between research, practice and personal experience are more fluid than within traditional epistemologies, because “... the inclusion of appreciation, humility and wonder” are values “intrinsic to scientific inquiry” (Braud & Anderson, 1998 p. xxvii). We re-listened to interviews and allowed ourselves to be guided by the cross-disciplinary values situated in our common theoretical concerns for social justice and students on the margins.

## 3. Findings

Our findings produced a paradox by revealing both an unexpected complication and a significant simplification of issues related to scripted curricula and equity. Teacher participants were

largely positive about the EngageNY modules, complicating the dominant (and critical) view of scripted curricula, both among the research team and in teacher education communities more generally. However, our results also point towards a disturbing simplification of concepts related to equity and teachers' understanding of the impact of equal access to rigorous curriculum on students who often occupy marginalized positions in the American education system.

### 3.1. *Complicating the scripts*

Our initial analysis pointed to the idea that teachers who were able to be more flexible in implementing the EngageNY modules were more satisfied with the use of scripted curriculum. Remillard and Reinke (2012) argue that, in order to be effective, curricular materials such as EngageNY modules need to be created with the teachers' role and power to enact the curriculum in mind. Teachers in our study who had the power to enact curriculum in a flexible manner, making adjustments as needed for pacing and differentiation, mainly valued the ways that the modules guided instruction. A positive view of the modules was not unanimous, for example, Julie described them as "taking all the fun and joy out of teaching" and leading her to "feel like a robot." Still, a critical view of the scripts was articulated far less frequently than the positive, and only two of the ten participants expressed reservations about the modules.

The strengths of the curricular modules, according to teacher participants, included the ways that the scripts provided a structure for implementing the CCSS, which some teachers perceived as ambiguous, and the ways that teachers believed the scripted lesson plans provided a window into good practices. Sally, a second grade teacher, expressed a common theme when she said that the scripted lesson plans "changed the framework of my teaching ... because, anything I teach, I can see how does this fit in, what am I moving students forward with." Teachers frequently used the words "structure" and "anchor" to explain the modules' appeal. Patty, a fourth grade teacher, described the modules as "very well-structured and well thought out" while Ronnie, a fifth grade teacher said "they anchor what used to be 'loosey goosey' instruction." Lauren and Abby, the two special educators who participated in interviews, were remarkably similar in describing the modules as difficult for children but "good for them" nevertheless. Abby taught in a district that allowed teachers discretion in adapting the modules while Lauren's district required strict fidelity to the script; still, both saw the structure and rigor of the modules as positive. Abby, the teacher with more latitude for differentiation, was even more enthusiastic and said the scripted modules were a "relief" from poor classroom instruction that she perceived as commonplace before the implementation of the modules in her school.

An expressed appreciation for the rigor and structure provided by the EngageNY modules is not problematic in itself. Few would argue that teachers should be seeking *less* rigor or structure in a curriculum and it was very clear that our participants were committed to student learning. Most participants believed that the modules would support students' academic progress despite the ways in which teachers separated or isolated the modules from the overall context of their classroom, the learners in that classroom, and their own identities as teachers.

### 3.2. *Un-complicating equity*

Although both the CCSS and the EngageNY modules have the stated intention of increasing equity, a second notable finding has to do with the way that the scripted modules appeared to promote a particular interpretation of equity among teachers. Equity focused

on the equal distribution of access to curriculum and content coverage but generally neglected the wide range of factors that can impact student learning and achievement even when they receive the same access to content. Teacher responses varied only slightly to our questions: What are the inequities that you see in your classroom? And What issues complicate your reaching [your] goals? Equity was consistently described by our participants as meaning that students were held to the same (ostensibly high) standards and were provided access to the same content. The modules themselves make no reference to complex issues of equity; there are no footnotes or notations in the lesson scripts where teachers receive cues that children's background, culture, or prior knowledge could impact the responses expected of them. 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.

When teachers were asked to identify inequities in their classes and to name issues that impact opportunities for all children to achieve, they were most likely to name issues that are stereotypically associated with families who are living in poverty, including a lack of background knowledge, an inability to persevere in the face of challenges and a lack of interest in global ideas as not applicable to their world. Teachers separated the impact of these challenges from the use of the modules. As Lorraine explained, "... what has an impact when kids come from poverty doesn't have anything to do with the math modules. It's how you handle your classroom and these children themselves ..." When queried directly about inequities outside of the classroom, Malcolm, a second grade teacher, expressed the same thread that ran through most of the interviews: "I don't think background has anything to do with it [academic achievement] and I think kids who struggled will still struggle [with modules]." The ways in which many teachers separated the needs of students who receive special education services and of those who experience the negative impacts of poverty from the potentially positive impact of a scripted curriculum and high standards is notable. While they espoused the benefits of a universal and challenging curriculum, none of the teachers expressed confidence that the modules would have any impact on issues related with persistent educational inequity. Perhaps Patty summarized it best when she stated, I didn't think this [CCSS] was about addressing the achievement gap, I thought it was about pushing all kids forward. Maybe that was the way they were going to address it was to push everybody to the same standards. We are going to raise the expectations for everyone. We are going to make it more rigorous. I don't think they were addressing inequities at all.

Lorraine, one of the more experienced teachers in the study, also indicated that she did not see how the modules could increase equity, "unless it is about holding everyone to the same [high] level." This definition of equity as high standards was echoed by Sally, who said, "I'm working on making sure I'm mentally ready to hold my expectations high regardless of what I see the students coming in with, still pushing them as much as I possibly can."

### 3.3. *Sameness and the illusion of equity*

As teachers identified higher standards for all as equity, their perception of issues that have been traditionally related to a *lack* of equity – such as race, poverty, and disability – was notable. Poverty and disability were mentioned as equivalent obstacles to high achievement and to meeting high expectations. As Lauren explained, "students with an IEP [individualized education program] or students without an IEP – being a district of poverty dealing with lower reading levels – I think we're just finding a lot of the same things." Although "having an IEP" in the U.S. requires a

process of testing, developing objectives, designing specialized instruction, and creating accommodations and modifications, Lauren did not attribute much significance to the power of the IEP in promoting academic achievement. She appeared to see similarities in children based on their response to instruction. This initially suggested a progressive perception of equity that looked beyond disability and diagnostic-prescriptive assessments that identify students' weaknesses. However, as Lauren continued, she described a vision of equity as high expectations and revealed a perception that merely holding children to the standards would result in equity not found through the special education process. Although children's struggles with achievement were not attributed to a categorical label, the roots of their struggles were still seen as being located within the child. Thus, it was up to the child to overcome these struggles in the absence of any meaningful talk of barriers to student success as being related to curriculum, resources, materials, or structural issues outside the classroom. As with a majority of the classroom teachers we interviewed, the special educators articulated a hierarchical view of student achievement by using words like *below* and *low* and described the students receiving special education services as needing to "catch up". The lack of differentiation special educators perceived within the scripts was seemingly outweighed by their belief in the benefit of high expectations.

All teachers expressed care and concern for their students; this care was embodied in the prevalent and powerful belief that historical and structural disadvantages related to disability, class and to a lesser extent, race, can be remedied with high expectations for all students. Neither the general nor the special educators considered students unable to learn or questioned their readiness for challenging content; they consistently used the language of high expectations when they spoke of teaching and learning. Abby noted, a lot of times, when you have kids with really intensive needs, the temptation is to just "dumb everything down" or even not dare to introduce something that seems so complex but they will just rise. They will rise to the expectations that we set for them.

The belief that all children can achieve is important and the value of holding high expectations is not in question, but the major question that emerges through Abby's assertion has to do with the manner in which the children are expected to rise to high expectations. Reflected in this view of equity as sameness is a seriously simplistic view of the nature of teaching and learning and the structural barriers associated with poverty, disability and race. The majority of teachers in our study did not address the need for differentiated access to high level content and curriculum standards. Perhaps because differentiation is so central to their view of teaching and learning, they did not feel the need to be explicit here. This seems unlikely, though, because of the sheer amount of work that would be required to provide differentiated access while using the EngageNY modules. Lorraine, the most experienced teacher in our study, with 30 years in the classroom, said that she was unable to differentiate at first because, We weren't sure of timing - how far we'd get so we marched on and didn't differentiate. I didn't differentiate as much as I could have because I wasn't sure how this was supposed to happen. But now I know how to play catch up with those kids that need it. Now I know they didn't get that but they'll get it again here or they didn't get that and they really need that skill so I need to sit with this group or those materials didn't work but I can use something else.

Lorraine articulated an increasing confidence with the pace required by the modules and her ability to support students but still described fidelity to the modules as her primary focus and the children who must catch up as the problem she now feels she can solve. Julie, one of the newer teachers we interviewed, described to her principal the efforts she made to differentiate in an ELA lesson, I'm not following the script for this lesson. I have to take a couple

steps back. I said that they are not ready, they don't fully understand main idea and gist, so I said that I was going to show them pictures from the book from four main scenes and they were going to work in groups to record what they notice and wonder about the book. And he said, "OK, that sounds good." I said it's not following the module, I'm using the book and the main idea but I am teaching it with pictures.

Julie's approach to the modules is to deconstruct the lessons and provide supportive scaffolding and structure for students to achieve the objectives and goals. Her case is a strong example that differentiation does not lead to lower expectations or to a deficit view of students. In this instance, she was providing students with support to meet the high standards of the modules. To fully investigate the factors that would explain why Lorraine and Julie approached their teaching so differently is beyond the scope of our study. They serve to illustrate the ways that teachers saw the modules as supporting or thwarting their professionalism.

#### 4. Discussion

In their study of teachers' experiences with detracking and inclusion, [Abu el-Haj and Rubin \(2009\)](#) found that policy directives were insufficient in changing teacher practice around the issues and often encouraged simplistic understandings of complex problems of practice. Similarly, we have found that a scripted curriculum did not support teachers to widen their scope as they focused on children as the source of problems in achievement without wrestling with the necessarily complicated view of equitable conditions in schools that is required to support students with diffuse and multi-faceted needs. While the introduction of a scripted curriculum seems to appeal to teachers' beliefs in fairness and equal inputs as keys to equity, it obscures the importance of compensatory measures and the equalizing of opportunities and assets. As others have argued ([Kornhaber et al., 2014](#); [Ladson-Billings, 2006](#); [Milner, 2013](#)), equal inputs in the form of scripted curricula will not be enough to overcome decades of inequity and provide each student with what they need to be successful in school.

##### 4.1. *The allure of simplicity*

Although unequal access to challenging content and curricula is an element of the inequitable conditions that students face in school, it is one small part of the much more complicated puzzle of equity. The notion that equal access to curriculum will create equal experiences in schools or equal outcomes for all students is problematic, both in the ways that it encourages educators to ignore other, less easily addressed or measured inequitable conditions in schools and because this attitude creates conditions in which to insist on the complicated nature of equity and equitable treatment in schools can be misinterpreted as the adoption of a deficit perspective. Gaining access to the general education curriculum has been a significant milestone for students with disabilities and we recognize the importance of some measure of 'sameness' ([Malow-Iroff, Benhar, & Martin, 2008](#); [Timberlake, 2014](#)). However, because the teachers in our study, and other teachers across New York and the rest of the country, are increasingly being required to adopt curricular modules with aggressive pacing and little differentiation, they receive the message that sameness equals equity, and that simply exposing all students to challenging content will produce equal results.

##### 4.2. *Sameness as the tip of the iceberg*

As noted earlier, although we come from different disciplines within teacher education, as co-authors we have similar

perceptions of educational equity. Our interpretation of teacher responses to the EngageNY scripted curricular modules has been informed by Anderson's intuitive inquiry (2011). In this process, the researcher strives not to eliminate subjectivity but to use it; intuitive inquiry suggests something more than identifying patterns in the data and encourages researchers to use their prior knowledge to seek possibilities and reveal hidden ideas. The original topic may become “the tip of an iceberg” of a call for larger social change (Anderson, 2011). The image of something larger hidden under the surface resonated as we began to realize that the issues we described around implementation of the modules (Barrett et al., forthcoming) represented the visible portion of a larger issue that was initially more difficult to see in its entirety. Despite differences in implementation strategies and resultant experiences it became clear that, even across districts, teachers' perceptions of equity were remarkably similar. If the inequity the scripted modules were seeking to address was simply lack of access to challenging curriculum, then the modules appear to have increased this form of equity. For the most part, teachers expressed faith in the power of curriculum to address inequities in school, stressing that the CCSS and modules would allow all students to be held to the same set of high standards. However, because we define equity differently, as requiring equity of opportunity and an expansive understanding of students as learners and individuals, we argue that this situation where the materials and implementation encouraged teachers to (1) operate with a definition of equity as “sameness” and (2) see scripted curricula as supporting equity, is concerning and must be addressed. Hidden beneath the perception of equity as sameness was an ideology that convinced teachers to offer little defense of their autonomy and professionalism as they were replaced by the scripted curriculum.

In addition, while the CCSS and EngageNY modules may work to address unequal access to curriculum standards and content as the visible tip of the iceberg mentioned above, the unacknowledged definition of “normal” and the intensification of barriers that have traditionally prevented some students from gaining meaningful access to the curriculum remains hidden below the surface. While recent research on curricular access has focused on universal design to make curriculum more flexible, varied and interactive, the scripted modules essentially strengthen what was already determined to be ineffective for many learners (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014; Nelson, 2014). Hidden beneath the high expectations of curricular sameness is the unintended consequence of expecting all children to participate in the same lessons in the same way at the same pace. Children struggling to sit for long periods of time, to keep up with pacing and experiencing failure with the repetitive structures (such as rapid daily math quizzes) can be expected when “rigor” is defined as sameness. Instead of expecting the curriculum to conform to the learners, as Gallagher (2005) explained, in enacting scripted curriculum “we create the learning problems we later seek to eliminate ...” (p. 146).

## 5. Conclusion

As McLaughlin (2006) argued, when we accept a definition of the policy problem, we are directed toward particular kinds of policy solutions. We realized during our investigation that the problem of equity was defined by policymakers and accepted by teachers as a problem of low-expectations and uneven content coverage, and thus, curricular modules represented a logical solution. Given this logic and the seeming acceptance of the pedagogical value of the scripts, there are two main implications of our findings. The first is the need to add specific directions and supports to the EngageNY or other scripted modules that focus on the social context. The second implication for teachers and teacher educators

is the importance of addressing the paradoxes of sameness and high expectations.

### 5.1. Implications

The first implication is practical-adding scaffolds that help teachers to differentiate. Ainsworth et al. (2012) used the words “robotic” and “oppressive” to describe the scripted instruction (p. 87) and Parks & Bridges-Rhoads found a recurring emphasis on “the recitation of rote information” (2012, p. 320). Combining these findings with our participants' descriptions of following the scripts, one implication is to simply make the scripts more equity-conscious. Teachers repeatedly referred to the ability of the modules to help students achieve high standards, and echoed the generalizations in the CCSS policy materials that equal exposure to content (in isolation of any other factors) would help students learn and achieve. If the scripts continue to be adopted and used as the data suggests, immediate improvement in the content of the scripts could increase equity.

The second implication is for increased professional conversation and action toward equity. Our purpose is to stimulate a deeper conversation not just about equity, but about the ideology that gave rise to the EngageNY modules and that remains under the surface - including the premise that teachers cannot provide “rigor” without a script. While we do not minimize the importance of equalizing access to standards and curriculum content, meaningful curricular access must not occur in isolation; equity also requires other important features of teaching, such as creating a welcoming and inclusive classroom community and building relationships with students. The reliance on scripted curriculum appeared to discourage teachers and schools from engaging in inquiry about equity that relies on teacher knowledge, expertise and relationships with students.

As widespread use of the EngageNY curricular materials increases, the urgency of interrogating the adoption increases as well. Equal access to content is not sufficient to promote equitable education for all and we call for additional research from a critical perspective that values high expectations for all students but foregrounds interrogation of taken for granted, simplified notions of sameness.

Although we initially conceptualized our research problem as teacher professionalism in the context of scripted curriculum and remain concerned by this issue, our findings illuminated deeper concerns about equity, sameness and student differences. In an argument that echoes larger national conversations about equity and fairness, Ladson-Billings (2006) states that American schools face an “education debt” that we owe to students, which must be repaid before substantive conversations about closing achievement gaps can occur. Paying close attention to the inequitable treatment that students who live in poverty, students from non-dominant races and cultures, and students with disabilities have received in schools would highlight the elements of the education debt that cannot be addressed through curricular access alone. This small-scale study points to the need for further research and policy development that recognizes and appreciates the magnitude of the policy problem of equity. Simplicity is desirable in the right circumstances; a simple direct approach can help organize and respond to a multitude of problems. However, educating the diversity of all students to high academic standards has not been amenable to simple direct solutions. Challenging the allure of simplicity within teacher education programs, professional development for teachers, and the policies guiding a nation's schools may seem daunting, but we should accept nothing less when addressing this key to achieving equitable, diverse and socially just schools.

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