Research Article

Flipping the Script: Transformational Teamwork for Communicating Equity

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Abstract

Online platforms are increasingly the main point of contact between schools and students, families, and the community. In this article, we present a framework, called *Flipping the Script*, that we developed while researching how students, teachers, and families were portrayed on school websites. Based on a systematic analysis of nearly 1,000 pages of school websites, we use concepts from institutional theory to identify implicit roles for different groups. We then provide concrete steps leaders can take to help align a vision for equitable schools with messages communicated online. The framework invites exploration within the school community that unearths what messages are being broadcast to students, families, and the wider community, and shows how to collaboratively develop new messaging, practices, and mindsets about roles.

Key Words

equity, organizational change, collaborative leadership, community engagement, mindsets, school websites

Introduction

Increasingly, online platforms—rather than the physical school sites—are the main point of contact between schools and students, families, and the community (DiMartino & Jessen, 2018; Jabbar, 2016; Lubienski, 2007). Websites are where important communications are posted for parents and students, milestones and achievements are celebrated, families and community members get key information about programs, and during COVID-19, where millions of students accessed their remote learning tools.

In this article, we show how school websites can be used to identify and disrupt damaging, deficit-based mindsets and practices in schools. We do this by presenting a framework, called *Flipping the Script*, that we developed while researching how students, teachers, and families were portrayed on school websites.

The purpose of our framework is to help leaders align their vision for equitable schools with the messages communicated through websites and social media. It invites exploration within the school community that unearths what messages are being broadcast to students, families, and the wider community online, and shows how to collaboratively develop new messaging, practices, and mindsets about roles.

The *Flipping the Script* framework was designed as part of a two-year study where we examined 13 high school websites from a mid-sized urban district in the western U.S (Allbright et al., 2021). Systematically analyzing nearly 1,000 pages of school websites, our team investigated what messages were being communicated about the roles of different groups, including educators, students, and parents. We call those messages about roles *scripts.*

What are scripts?

All organizations, including schools, communicate acceptable roles and behaviors for members, which we refer to as scripts (Jepperson, 1991). In any organization, scripts for its members are shaped by assumptions that are simply taken-for-granted (Cardinale, 2018; Scott, 2008). These assumptions inform the scripts that guide a person's behavior and identity in that organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Jepperson, 1991).

The concept of scripts emerges from neoinstitutional theory, a field of scholarship within organizational studies, that emphasizes the relationship between individual's cognition and culture (Scott, 2008). Research in this area suggests that human behavior is shaped by cognitive structures, which reinforce cultural patterns at the level of whole organizations or societies. Some of these cultural patterns are so well-established that they become institutions. Institutions are highly stable over time, are adopted almost automatically by people, and tend to resist changes.

For example, have you ever explained to a teacher or new administrator that a certain practice is 'just the way things are in this school'? Behaviors that are inconsistent with the school's script could appear inconceivable. What you were describing was most likely part of an institutional script that is informed by taken-for-granted assumptions about how teachers "act," "behave," or "teach" at a school, which are rarely questioned.

In one example of previous research, scholars described racialized scripts in a school where parents of color were assumed to be

either disruptive or disengaged (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). Schools struggled to engage racially minoritized parents because the script assigned to parents was deficit-based. To address this, researchers worked with the school to interrogate the script ascribed to parents of color, including questioning "taken-for-granted" assumptions about parents' value and expected behavior. By doing so, the school was able to confront deficit mindsets that created uneven parent engagement in their school, and instead they worked to dismantle inequitable structures.

Scripts for Students, Parents, and Teachers

Building on work in this area, our team analyzed 13 high school websites from a mid-sized urban district, selected to reflect a variety of schooling models (traditional, charter, semi-autonomous, and magnet schools), as well as differences in the demographics of students (Allbright et al., 2021). We examined 124 web pages over 903 print pages using critical discourse analysis (CDA; Wodak & Meyer, 2016b).

CDA is an approach to analyzing data that pays close attention to ideology and power (Wodak & Meyer, 2016a) by carefully deconstructing the language (or discourse) used in that data. It has been employed in education research to interrogate the ways that schools and districts have perpetuated inequities (Mullet, 2018), particularly by examining norms, policies, and organizational change efforts that failed to manifest meaningful changes in power relations within the organization (Rogers et al., 2016). By using a CDA approach coupled with institutional scripts, our team was able to rigorously and systematically deconstruct the ways that various groups were portrayed on school websites.

In our study, we examined scripts for students, teachers, and parents. Our team found a set of common scripts across all of the websites we analyzed, which we grouped into four categories to help us compare across schools. Across the thirteen sites, we found evidence for a common narrative. Websites suggested that prospective students had an issue or problem (e.g., personal hardship, lack of motivation, deficient cultural background). Schools then positioned themselves as a solution, using various supports or opportunities to transform students in some way (e.g., into college-ready graduates or workers). We further grouped this common framework into four distinct scripts, which we called the *savior*, *cultivation*, *assimilation*, and *marketplace* scripts (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Scripts In Research

	Student Script	Teacher Script	Parent Script
Savior Narratives	Students are victims of adversity and need help to overcome future hardship.	Educators are saviors who provide support to make students resilient and help them overcome adversity.	Parents have failed their children in some way and may continue to experience hardships that impede student success.
Cultivation Narratives	Students have potential, but it is unrecognized and untapped.	Educators cultivate students by providing structure and rules, high expectations and clear structures.	Parents need to support the school by reiterating expectations and holding their children to high standards.
Assimilation Narratives	Students lack cultural knowledge, values, and behavior. They can be successful by assimilating into a school norm.	Educators must instill cultural values and behaviors in students.	Parents also lack cultural and linguistic competence and need to be educated by the school as well.
Marketplace Narratives	Students are consumers of educational opportunities, and those who work hard and take advantage of opportunities are successful.	Educators provide a range of activities or programs that students must discover.	Parents must support their students in taking advantage of opportunities.

Other researchers have identified additional common scripts for students, parents, and teachers. Many scripts for students revolve around perceived deficits and what students are lacking (Golann, 2015; Sondel, 2015; Valencia. 2010). The same can be true for parents, where working class and racially minoritized parents are perceived as deficient in some way (Cooper, 2009; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). This can result in miscommunications and assumptions that parents are not willing or too busy to be involved (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). There are also scripts for teachers, who are still often confronted with assumptions about

motivation or experience that lead to limited autonomy in curriculum or discipline—while leadership opportunities in schools can be highly constrained (Lopez Kershen et al., 2018; Torres, 2014). Teachers of color in particular can also experience negative scripts regarding their own personal experiences, and are asked to take on the additional burden of managing racial equity initiatives (Kohli, 2018) and serving as experts on students of color (Mabokela & Madsen, 2007).

Our findings pointed to a set of potentially problematic assumptions that school marketing materials communicated to students, parents, and teachers. Websites we analyzed often used deficit-based language in reference to racially minoritized students and families, largely failing to acknowledge them as valuable resources for the school community or creators of knowledge for the school (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Your school or school system will likely have some common scripts found by researchers, and others that are unique. *Flipping the Script* can help unearth and transform these ideas that have become so embedded in an organization that they are unintentionally communicated through school materials. School and district leaders can begin to think through equity challenges by confronting those scripts using our framework. Yet scholars can also support this work through research-practice partnerships and can assist in refining and expanding our process to disrupt oppressive practices and advance a more just vision for schools.

Flipping the Script

We provide a five-step framework for educational leaders to examine scripts communicated by their school websites and social media messages:

1. **Collectively envision empowering scripts.**
   First, assemble your team. This might be a subcommittee of your equity team, a branch of the PTA, or a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee. We recommend that these teams include all voices, especially parents and students as they imagine what messages they want to convey. Consider the mission statement or other guiding ideas of your organization as you discuss the following questions:

   a. What is your vision for equity in your school/district?
   b. Whose scripts does that vision include?
   c. What are the roles of students, teachers, administrators, and staff?
   d. What is the role of parents and caregivers?
   e. Who is included in your vision, and who is left out?

2. **Build awareness and consensus.**
   Confronting potentially damaging communications and messages can be challenging and uncomfortable. It is also not something many have tried before.

   Therefore, we recommend teams spend some time analyzing outside sources to learn about harmful scripts before taking on those in their own schools. For example, consider articles in *Educational Leadership* like Dugan's (2021) piece on 'equity traps and tropes', books like *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit* Thinking (2010) by Richard Valencia, other tools like Bensimon's (2016) *Equity Scorecard*, or key theories like Critical Race Theory (Solórzano,

1997) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Our reference list also has many articles and books to review.

As your team builds awareness of these issues, reflect on the following:

a. What do outside sources or experts say about common pitfalls in building equitable schools?
b. What are some common assumptions or stereotypes about students, teachers, and parents?
c. Who was responsible for confronting harmful messages in the work you read?

3. **Analyze your own website or social media.** As a team, start by looking at a school or district website home page. Try to be expansive and examine how students, teachers, administrators, and parents are portrayed. You might also look at town hall recordings, board meeting minutes, and social media posts for more information. Discuss what you found with the team. In our research, for example, we identified a common set of assumptions about students, teachers, and parents summarized in Figure 1 in this article.

As you examine your website, some key questions to discuss are:

a. What is expected of each group? What is not expected?
b. How do school leaders come across?
c. What is your sense of the school culture?
d. What assumptions are made about each group?
e. Are there common depictions by race, gender, ability, or language?
f. Who is included? Who is not included?

The goal of this process is to understand the differences between your vision and the real messages stakeholders are receiving, but at this stage we simply ask your team to reach some degree of consensus about what is being communicated by the website you chose.

4. **Compare findings to your vision.** Now, return to the vision you brainstormed in Step 1. With your team, begin to reflect on the differences and similarities between your vision and what was communicated by the website or social media page you chose. Some questions to consider are:

a. Putting the scripts for students, parents, and teachers in particular side-by-side, how did your findings compare to your original vision?
b. For what groups was there agreement about how much the vision and website aligned? Where were the main areas of disagreement?

The purpose of this step is to identify areas of alignment and gaps in terms of the scripts in your school or system and your vision for equity. Pay particular attention to areas where there was disagreement in the team about how closely the vision and the messages from

the website aligned. While teams may agree that there is more work to be

done with certain groups, disagreement in this area typically indicates that there are groups of individuals whose experiences are typically underrepresented in conversations about equity—and often signals a point of conflict in school systems.

5. **Identify change strategies.** The change process begins by working with the team to develop strategies to revise the school website you chose to analyze and bring it into alignment with the vision you developed. After revising the website, consider how you can change practices within the organization to reflect the vision you described. We know this part of step five is particularly daunting and is typically an ongoing process. However, it is important at this point to develop an action plan that includes concrete steps that can be taken to help bring the vision for equity into greater alignment with practices in your organization.

The goal of this process is not to find closure for an issue. In fact, it is intended to be the *beginning* of a conversation about practices within a school or school system that is inclusive of groups that do not often have a seat at the table.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

After the data collection period for this study had concluded, the district began undertaking a process similar to the one described above. Taking place at the district level, the superintendent brought in an outside consultant to work with their leadership team to align internal district communications, long-term plans, and public-facing documents (including their website) with their equity vision. While this process is ongoing, it successfully brought in a large number of previously silent stakeholders to discuss how to implement their new equity-focused change strategy.

It also revealed a number of disagreements between the district's stated goals and practices at the school level. In this regard, a process like *Flipping the Script* holds promise to not only improve representation in and engagement with school district websites, but also to begin addressing deep-rooted inequities revealed in those documents.

The steps described here are necessary to ensure that leadership visions result in equitable learning environments, but they require an important and often difficult commitment to examining our own biases.

Throughout this process, we should be asking critical questions about our own roles in maintaining a system of damaging assumptions about particular students, teachers, and parents.

While we presented a framework for leading others through an analysis of school websites, throughout the process we hope readers can consider the following questions that challenge their own mindsets and behaviors.

1. What scripts do we hold about ourselves in our own professional roles?
2. What allows for damaging scripts about students, teachers, or families to persist?
3. What has gotten in the way of changing assumptions, mindsets, or scripts in the past?

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