

School Knowledge for the Masses

World Models and
National Primary
Curricular Categories
in the Twentieth
Century

John W. Meyer
David H. Kamens
Aaron Benavot



The Falmer Press

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**John W. Meyer,
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with
**Yun-Kyung Cha
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School Knowledge for the Masses

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Preface

I have long been an admirer of the work of John Meyer and his colleagues. His sociological work on schooling has, since I first read his work in the 1970s, established the need to focus on the broad macro-sociological terrain.

In this study of *School Knowledge for the Masses*, we see a patterning of school curricula emerging which as he argues 'had worldwide hegemony throughout the modern period'. Such curricula then, represent a world movement.

This world perspective on curriculum patterns provides an important counterpoint to the studies in curriculum history that have been undertaken over the past decade or so; as he notes 'the real point of our contribution is to emphasise how much the general world curricula frame shapes overall national outlines, and how much local forces are likely to be filtered through general world conceptions'. Curriculum, therefore, develops through an aggrandizing world rhetoric. But alongside this the local and national constructions which arise behind that rhetoric must be painstakingly studied within the circumstances of their own time and place.

Yet the uniformity of curriculum rhetoric worldwide, as discerned in this book, is deeply significant 'because the labels, at least, of mass curricula are so closely tied to great and standardized versions of social and educational progress, they tend to be patterned in quite consistent ways around the world'.

The great virtue of this work is that it examines and elucidates the underpinning rhetoric and assumptions of the modernist project. Our next challenge is to develop a postmodernist curriculum history of the new patterns that are currently being constructed.

Ivor F. Goodson
University of Ontario

22 January 1992

Authors' Preface

As researchers who have studied, over the years, many aspects of the social organization of modern educational systems, it has long been clear to us that empirical research on the curriculum itself has been neglected. This is especially true in the fields of the sociology of education — and in particular its American versions — and comparative education. British researchers have given more attention to the issue, but emphasizing the forces affecting curriculum in their particular national context. American researchers seemed more interested in such issues as the ‘hidden curriculum’ (or tacit content conveyed by the structure and methods of schooling itself) or in the tracking of students in different ‘curricula’ than in the basic manifest content at issue.

As an overall result, we have surprisingly few systematic analyses of the main content which modern mass educational systems — now worldwide in scope — are organized to convey to the world’s populations.

We wondered what could be done to collect longitudinal and comparative information on curricular structures, within the limits imposed by resource constraints (few funding agencies seemed interested) and the available data (which seemed limited and difficult to collect). As noted below, some funding possibilities arose, so we set out to see what could be done. We discovered that a great deal of information on national curricular policies and overall outlines could be obtained — and information covering long periods of time — from the efforts of researchers and educators over the past century. This book is the product of this effort. We describe the curricular categories defined for primary schools in official policies for many countries over long periods of time, and the relative emphasis placed on these categories. And we analyze the evolution of these categories over many decades, along with their variation across different types of countries.

Our data are perforce limited or superficial. We know whether a given country’s policies include a given curricular category or not, and how much emphasis is given on this category. We do not know what the category means in the country (for example, the syllabus, the materials, the instructional plan, or the test), we do not know how or whether the category is actually implemented in the schools, and we do not know if the category has different

meaning or implementation for children of differing class, ethnicity, or gender. But our data cover a much greater range of countries and time periods than other studies in the field, and permit an assessment of the range and spread of general curricular topics across countries over long periods of time.

In setting out, we were greatly assisted by two graduate students, who contributed much to the range of materials acquired, the analyses that were carried out, and ultimately the conclusions and reports. As time went on, they became research colleagues (and now independent researchers of substantial accomplishment). This is clearly indicated in the authorship of the various chapters in the book. The study owes a great deal to the ability, inventiveness, scholarship, and effort of Yun-Kyung Cha and Suk-Ying Wong.

The study was made possible by funding from several sources (none of which, of course, are responsible for the results and conclusions reported here). Principal funding — and the real original impetus for our study — came from a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF SES 8512561). Substantial funding over the years also came from Stanford University's Center for the Study of Families, Children and Youth. Specific parts of the analysis were supported by the University of Georgia Research Foundation; Stanford's Center for Research in International Studies; the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace; the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science; a Spencer Foundation Fellowship; and the World Bank. We are grateful for the support from these sources: the study would not have been possible without it.

As the research progressed, we benefited from the advice and suggestions of many colleagues. Foremost, we received continuing help over the years from Francisco Ramirez and other colleagues in Stanford's Comparative Education Seminar: among them John Boli, Ron Jepperson, Molly Lee, Connie McNeely, Weishun Mao, Phyllis Riddle, Yasemin Soysal and Marc Ventresca. We also received valuable comments from Ivor Goodson at a number of points during our research and in the preparation of this book. Finally, early versions of the studies here were presented in meetings and seminars of the American Sociological Association, the American Educational Research Association, the University of Chicago, the World Bank, the World Congress of Comparative Education, the Comparative and International Education Society, the United States Department of Education and the University of Stockholm's Institute of International Education. In the course of these discussions, we received valuable comments from many colleagues, including David Baker, Ingemar Fagerlind, Hidenori Fujita, Torsten Husen, Marlaine Lockheed, David Stevenson and others. None of these colleagues, of course, is responsible for the work presented here: indeed, a number of them would take exception to some conclusions and certainly some inferences in our work.

Assistance in some coding and analysis work was provided by Erik Wilke, and for invaluable help in manuscript preparation, we thank Minnie Pasin.

Several chapters here have been revised from previously published papers. We thank the American Sociological Association for permission to republish: 'Knowledge for the masses: World models and national curricula, 1920–86', *American Sociological Review*, 56, 1, 1991, pp. 85–100 (revised and extended in chapter 4); 'Effect of the global system on language instruction, 1850–1986', *Sociology of Education*, 64, 1, 1991, pp. 19–32 (adapted as chapter 7); and 'The evolution of social science instruction, 1900–86', *Sociology of Education*, 64, 1, 1991, pp. 33–47 (adapted as chapter 9). We thank the University of Chicago (which reserves all rights) for permission to republish 'Elite knowledge for the masses: The origins and spread of mathematics and science education in national curricula', *American Journal of Education*, 99, 2, 1991, pp. 137–80 (adapted as chapter 8). And we thank the Pergamon Press for permission to republish 'Values education in the curriculum: Some comparative empirical data' from Cummings, W., Gopinathan, S. and Tomoda, Y. (Eds) (1988) *The Revival of Values Education in Asia and the West*, Oxford, Pergamon, pp. 11–28 (revised as chapter 10).

Finally, our study obviously relies on secondary data. As our references indicate, we are greatly indebted to the researchers (and international agencies) who have assembled the cross-national data sets that are vital to such studies as this one. We are especially indebted to the educational researchers, scholars, and administrators who over the past century have taken an interest in comparative materials, and devoted great efforts to their assembly: our basic curricular data depend almost entirely on their labors.

John W. Meyer, David H. Kamens and Aaron Benavot
Stanford, California, July 1991

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Chapter 1

Introduction

John W. Meyer

The formal schooling of young citizens is now an ubiquitous feature of the world community of nations. In quantitative terms, enrollments in mass education systems have expanded enormously in recent decades, so that upwards of 90 per cent of the world's children are enrolled in primary or post-primary schools for some part of their lives. By and large, national school systems are compulsory, of substantial duration, and defined and prescribed by central governmental authorities. Mass schooling, almost everywhere, is clearly intended to be the dominant means of the intergenerational transmission of culture.

It becomes of great interest, then, to inquire into the nature of the culture being transmitted. If the rise of huge new systems of mass education amounts to considerable change in cultural content, as seems obvious, tracking the official content of schooling is an important way to describe the main elements of what are really emergent mass cultures of the world. There has been attention to some aspects of mass culture worldwide — television programs like *Dallas*, rock music for the young or the consumption of objects like jeans and cola. We need to give comparable attention to national educational systems that provide central cultural materials for such a large proportion of the world's children.

The findings and arguments in this book develop a general perspective that adds a dimension to much social scientific thinking about such issues. Most analyses of educational systems and their curricular content stress the causal role of specific national (or local) needs and interests as determinants: approved school subjects are thought to reflect particular social histories, the requirements and problems they pose, and the entrenched powers and interests they embody. These perspectives have added much useful research to the field.

In this volume, we add to the research tradition the idea that mass education and the curricula of mass schooling (particularly primary schooling) are a distinctive project or vision. The overall structure of this vision — organized around great conceptions of the nation-state as moving toward progress

and justice — is entrenched on a worldwide basis. Both the nation-state model, and the particular professions that define and justify the nature and content of mass education within this model, have had worldwide hegemony throughout the modern period.

Thus we add, to ideas that mass education and its curricula reflect particular local and national interests and requirements, the additional argument that they reflect worldwide forces too. And we add the further argument that the local interests and requirements pursuing and defining mass education tend to be filtered through such wider world cultural forces. As a consequence, the general outlines of mass education and its curriculum often show surprising degrees of homogeneity around the world.

Our data focus on the general curricular outlines obtaining in national systems of mass education — mainly at the primary level — throughout this century. And in such general outlines, we often find much more homogeneity and standardization among the curricula prescribed by nation-states than might have been expected in terms of other lines of theorizing standing alone. Because the labels, at least, of mass curricula are so closely tied to great and standardized worldwide visions of social and educational progress, they tend to be patterned in quite consistent ways around the world. The ‘functional theories’ that are employed in so much social science research (including prominently their critical versions) turn out in this instance to be powerful and homogenizing as ideologies and policies. Ironically, for this reason they are less applicable as technical analyses than might have been supposed.

The studies in this book bring very new types of information about the general educational topics emphasized around the world. Our objective is not simply to develop an innovative theoretical account, but to present descriptive information relevant to a variety of basic educational issues and theoretically grounded questions. Since so little comparative information on national school curricula exists in the literature, basic descriptive evidence is, in this context, useful.

What types of basic issues are explored in this book? Consider the following examples: How common is it, in the world’s primary education systems, to give predominant emphasis to national, as opposed to local or to worldwide languages? Has the inclination to do so increased in recent decades, and is it lowering with an ‘end of nationalism’ and the Cold War? Similarly, how widespread are the curricular categories of mathematics and science? When did these elements gain prominence in official school curricula? Given the current rationalistic emphasis on economic and scientific progress, has interest in these subjects increased? How about history, geography, civics and social studies: has the extension of the nation-state model around the world, with its emphasis on tight links between persons in society and political centers in states, affected curricular emphases on these categories? And with the construction of more rationalistic and secularized approaches to social life, have nations attached less emphasis to religious instruction or moral education in the curriculum?

Other questions are addressed, questions pertaining to theoretical issues: how much do variations around the world in political, economic, and social structure, affect curricular emphases? Do developed societies employ more ‘modern’ curricular strategies, or do developing ones move into the same mold? How much impact do historical differences in national culture or politics, or in colonial traditions, have on the outlines of school curricula? Our data permit us to discuss such historical effects on curricular outlines — more detailed comparative case studies are required to show effects on specific content and on actual implementation (for example, Goodson, 1988; Travers and Westbury, 1989).

Background

The studies and analyses reported in this book are developed from a common base of data describing official national primary educational curricula for many countries since about 1920 (and, in a few instances, even earlier). This data base permits analysis of the main school curricular categories emphasized in a wide range of national systems, and how these vary across time and country. We can trace, for instance, the rise of the category of science in European primary schools, and the spread of this category around the world — or the rise of an integrated topic called ‘social studies’, with the concomitant decline in history and geography — or variations in emphasis on language, mathematics or religion.

We set out, as a research group, to work on these issues in a theoretically eclectic way. Our own previous research had emphasized the impact of wider world forces on the educational systems of modern nation-states (for example, enrollment expansion, the passage of compulsory attendance legislation, or the decline of occupationally linked forms of schooling), and this background provided some of the motivation for this study. But it became clear that so little systematic data collection and analysis had been done that basic descriptive and analytic questions had not really been addressed. The most useful role for us, it seemed, was to try to pull together such basic materials as we could. Our larger aspirations were to make general descriptions of prescribed school topics, as well as to explore a wide range of general explanatory ideas.

Our work began in the context of received wisdom in the curricular field that widespread cross-national and historical data were simply unavailable. We had been led to think that it would not be possible to assemble information on more than a few countries — especially over a substantial time frame. As we proceeded, it became clear that this view was shortsighted. The international educational community has been sharing information on national syllabuses and curricular outlines since the nineteenth century, at conferences, in compendia, in reports of national and international bureaucratic agencies, and in the work of individual scholars. This is itself an indication of the international character of educational — and in particular curricular —