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Worldwide Educational Convergence
Through International Organizations:
Avenues for Research

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Abstract:

We argue for an examination of the role of the transnational organizational apparatus vis-a-vis nation-states in organizing national educational systems in accordance with world level educational ideologies, structures, and practices. We propose that more analytic attention be given international organizations as an institutionalizing force in examining educational convergence and change, and suggest four primary international organization activities as potentially fruitful avenues for research in this area: 1) the exchange of information, 2) charters and constitutions, 3) standard-setting instruments, and 4) technical and financial resources. Focusing on these activities, we present and discuss evidence of international organizations as world- level agencies influencing the incorporation and diffusion of educational ideologies and practices within and among nation-states.

An extraordinary expansion of educational systems has taken place throughout the world over the last century. This expansion has been characterized by a remarkable degree of convergence in both educational ideology and educational structure across all types of nation-states. This situation has led to questions about the nature of this universality and

uniformity and the way in which it has come about. Accordingly, there have been some compelling analyses that, while tracking this phenomenon, have indicated that it is grounded more in world-level ideological and organizational models and directives than in internally differentiated political, economic, and social factors (e.g., Ramirez and Boli 1987; Meyer et al. 1979). Yet, there still remain fundamental questions about the actual process by which these world-level directives are transmitted to the various nation-states, and about the way in which they become broadly institutionalized throughout international system . In other words, what are the major forces and mechanisms underlying educational convergence and change in the contemporary world? How do transnational influences come to bear on national educational systems? This area has been largely neglected in most comparative studies of education, leaving it a potentially fruitful area for scholarly investigation. Thus, in this paper, we propose an examination of the role of the transnational organizational apparatus vis-a-vis nation-states on organizing national educational systems in accordance with world educational ideologies, principles, and practices.

Our discussion revolves around the institutionalist world polity perspective, positing an increasingly integrated and interdependent transnational culture and social structure that affects nation-states as subunits (Thomas et al. 1987). The concept of the world polity was developed as an analytical frame for interpreting nation-state state structures, interrelations, and practices, based on an image of the world as a system of interdependent units (Meyer 1987). Related arguments depict the nation-state as embedded in an exogenous worldwide and rationalistic culture reflecting a set of models that define the nature, purpose, resources, and technologies of the "modern" educational system (cf. Green 1980; Meyer and Rowan 1983). The general proposition of this perspective is that the rise and institutionalization in the world polity of models of national education systems greatly affects the presence and change toward such models in individual nation-states (Thomas et al. 1987; Meyer 1994). Thus, we must consider the ways in which national education systems have been conditioned or affected by the international institutional context.

For example, even in the most basic practical terms, the institutional environment has fostered the exchange of information on national educational policies from the very beginning of the rise of the modern educational system. Originally, there was wide variation in approaches to education, with the exchange of information taking place in a relatively informal way (e.g., personal visits, tours, reports, etc.). However, as the world became an increasingly integrated system, individual nation-states within the system became subject to world- level ideological prescriptions and structural properties and influences. Indeed, this process is fundamental to the very notion of an international system, and to issues of globalization as currently discussed (Robertson 1992).

This consolidation of the system gave rise to a variety of international organizations through which the international flow of information has become increasingly regular and standardized. The principles, norms, rules, and procedures of the wider system are enshrined in these organizations, and they have become carriers of the culture of the world polity. In short, they reflect the more binding and universal influence of the global system and operate in a variety of ways to effect the institutionalization of world ideologies, structures, and practices at the nation-state level (McNeely, forthcoming).

While data from international organizations have often been employed in comparative education research, little analytic attention has been given the organizations themselves as forces for educational institutionalization and as mechanisms through which national education ideologies and structures are shaped. We develop this line of thought here, citing evidence and related research that suggest the important role of international organizations as world-level agencies influencing the incorporation and diffusion of educational ideologies and practices within and among nation-states, and arguing for further research into this issue. Our comments

here focus on international governmental organizations (e.g., the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), or those created by an agreement among governments, since formal authoritative policies are more frequently made and applied by governmental rather than nongovernmental organizations (Jacobson 1984). However, research is needed on all kinds of international organizations in this process, including nongovernmental for-profit (multinational and transnational corporations) and not-for-profit (e.g., the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) organizations.

Also, note that we do not mean to imply that no variation exists among national education systems. Rather, we begin with a body of work that reveals that, despite this variation, there are broad and general ideologies, practices, and structures that frame and operate across these systems. Our purpose here is primarily to present an overview of this situation, along with supporting evidence, and to delineate specific areas for further inquiry. Our central problem is to determine ways in which world-level educational accounts are transmitted to the national level. Given its emphasis on evolving world cultural rules and structural properties as a crucial factor in the origin and development of modern educational systems, we find the institutionalist world polity perspective particularly appropriate for addressing this issue. Depicting national educational systems as operating within a transnational cultural environment, this approach is based on a conception of the world as a system of interdependent units and draws attention to the effect of similar forces operating on all countries in the system. Thus, the argument is that both the educational policies and school organizational forms existing in a nation-state typically respond to the cultural and organizational imperatives, models, and forces of the international system (Ramirez and Boli 1987), and that compliance with these common imperatives is an important source of legitimacy and other resources, not only for individual schools and educational systems, but for nation-states themselves (Thomas et al. 1987).

This argument has found empirical support in several studies of education, such as those of Fiala and Lanford (1987) and Cha (1987).[1] Fiala and Lanford found increasing uniformity in national educational policies, reflecting world-level development ideologies and standards, and provide support for the notion that these ideologies and standards have played a role in the worldwide expansion of education. Likewise, Cha's examination of the historical development of primary school curriculum during the early period of educational history revealed that curricular structures tend to become increasingly homogeneous, relatively independent of national internal structural characteristics. Studies such as these demonstrate the increasing isomorphism of educational ideologies and practices, and indicate the responsiveness of national education systems to the wider cultural environment.

But how does this come about? How are world educational ideologies, policies, and practices transmitted to the subunits of the system? In other words, what are the intervening or mediating mechanisms between the wider institutional environment and the observed convergent practices in national educational systems? We suggest that a certain amount of causal efficacy might be found in international organizations.

International Organizational Influence

The world has changed dramatically in the last century, and international organizations have helped to promote and manage many of the changes that have come about. International organizations, as actors in the interstate system and part of the world organizational apparatus, are based on and guided by world cultural claims. An important part of their function is to facilitate the symbolic and actual establishment of those claims throughout the world. To that extent, they can be conceived of as state regulatory enterprises (Claude 1984), framing the efforts of states to enhance their interests by collaborating in acceptance of restraint and responsibility, and in the development of means enabling them to survive in the interstate system. Thus, we

argue that participation in international organizations, which is itself often used as an indicator of integration into the wider world system, may lead to the active incorporation by nation-states of educational ideologies and practices with worldwide connotations.

International organizations have played an important role in the spread of a standardized theory of development, and the worldwide definition of education as a critical means to development and the expansion of education have taken place under the aegis of international organization. The basic issue for research, then, is how, in specific and practical terms, do they influence national educational systems. In short, international organizations may influence national systems through a number of normative and rule- creating activities (Jacobson 1984). In particular, we identify four specific areas that can be practically explored in terms of the relevance of international organizations for world educational convergence: 1) the exchange of information, 2) their charters and constitutions, 3) standard-setting instruments, and 4) technical and financial resources. Each of these areas represent possible avenues for research on the global development and convergence of educational ideologies and practices.

Exchange of Information

The collection and dissemination of information is one of the most important of international organization functions, and is a way in which international organizations mobilize ideologies and practices -- i.e., by asking for and promoting particular types and forms of ideas and information. This function operates as a means of establishing internationally accepted definitions and standards, since "organizations may autonomously feed the process of change by the information and ideas they are able to mobilize" (Haas 1983, p. 57). Via their publications, through the provision of "expert consultants," and by sponsoring various types of conferences, meetings, and workshops, international organizations act as a major forum for the transnational exchange of ideas and information.

Indeed, there is abundant evidence supporting this claim from as early as the nineteenth century. We can argue that the structure of national educational systems, at least in most western countries at that time, was influenced by various international organizational factors. For example, reports on the 1889 Educational Congress and Exhibition in Paris reveal that detailed information on each country's educational system was periodically exchanged through various types of educational conferences (USBE 1893). Not only the "appropriate" structure of various types and levels of educational systems, but also the content of school curricula and the relative weight of major subjects were discussed and recommended by resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the Congress. We can see the possible influence of this in the results of Cha's (1987) aforementioned study. However, this is far from conclusive and, to date, little systematic empirical work has addressed this issue from any perspective; further investigation is needed to determine explicit links and causal relationships.

Charters and Constitutions

The charters and constitutions of international organizations also provide a possible area of investigation for explaining, at least in part, the uniformity in national educational systems. These documents are statements of the basic standards and norms underlying the structure and function of international organizations, and typically contain professions of adherence to global principles, norms, and procedures. Acceptance and signing of the constitutional instrument are an indispensable condition for membership in most international organizations, making it mandatory, at least formally, for the accepting state to carry out the obligations laid down in the document. An organization's charter or constitution is actually an international treaty, and its provisions are, in theory, legally binding. Thus, a member state must formally adhere to the basic

values and standards of the wider system as expressed through that instrument.

For example, the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), signed in November 1945, explicitly declares that the wide diffusion of culture and the education of humanity constitute "a sacred duty which all nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern." Joining the organization obligates the member state to the pursuit of these goals. Also, the mandate contained in the constitution of UNESCO allows it to formulate norms, draft conventions, and collect information, and, in general, to provide guidance for the development of national educational systems. The question for research is the actual effect on national educational systems of acceptance of the constitutional instrument, from the establishment of ideology to the direction and implementation of policy. Furthermore, even if constitutional compliance is viewed as only a formality, it may become highly significant in terms of mobilizing and promoting the adoption of global ideologies (McNeely, forthcoming).

Standard-Setting Instruments

The decisions of international organizations and nation-state compliance with them may also be a fruitful avenue for research. Indeed, the conventions, resolutions, declarations, and recommendations of international organizations are typically referred to as "standard- setting instruments," and are a prominent normative activity of international organizations. Though they may not be legally binding, these decisions may be both inspirational and educational. As is implied in the term "standard-setting instruments," they are intended to set standards of operation and ideology and to have a broad impact on policymaking in nation-states.

An example of this can be found in the 1948 adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of the key ideas expressed in the Universal Declaration is the notion that everyone has the right to education; i.e., it expresses the world value of education. Though not legally binding, it has arguably wielded a powerful influence. Indeed, evidence of this lies in the fact that the provisions of the Declaration have even been incorporated in their original wording into the constitutions of many new nations (Naumann and Huefner 1983).

One possible way to begin exploring whether international organization decisions affect what states do and how they do it can be translated into a determination of educational ideology by examining formal expressions of educational aims and philosophies in national constitutions, legislation, and policies (cf. Fiala and Lanford 1987; McNeely forthcoming; Boli and Meyer 1987). For example, in an earlier study (McNeely and Cha 1987), we took a first step in examining the responsiveness of nation-states to the exogenous influence of international organizations by analyzing the national reports submitted to the International Conference on Education (ICE) held in Geneva in 1984, sponsored by UNESCO and its affiliated organization, the International Bureau of Education. Questionnaires and guidelines for report preparation had been given to the national participants prior to the conference, requesting information on national action taken with regard to recommendations that had been adopted in previous conferences.[2] Of those participants explicitly responding to the question of whether any relevant policy or measure had been adopted in light of the ICE recommendations, approximately ninety percent had taken some relevant action specifically in response to the recommendations and, sometimes, in addition to already existing relevant policies or measures. Although this was only an exploratory, cursory analysis and was limited only to those countries specifically reporting their formal policy behavior as regards the ICE decisions, it does suggest that individual countries may be keenly responsive to the wider cultural and organizational environment as expressed through international organizations, and indicates the need for further research on the matter.

Technical and Financial Resources

International organizations may also promote conformity to world ideologies and practices through the provision of various types of resources. An obvious motivation for state compliance to international organization requirements is the reward of financial assistance. Nation-states are incorporated into the global system partly through their dependence on other nation-states for funding. This funding is often administered through international organizations, and the conditionality of funding is linked with the adoption of certain ideas and policies (Lewin et al. 1982); countries must conform to a certain extent to the general guidelines of the organizations in order to receive funding. In other words, reward motivates compliance. Thus, international organization rules, policies, and procedures can operate to drive institutionalization.

In addition, international organizations provide resources for educational development not only through funding, but also through their provision of "development experts" who are thoroughly imbued with the world ideology of education and "whose advice and proposals reflect the felt imperative of a developed educational system for every country" (Ramirez and Boli 1987, p. 157). For example, UNESCO "advises member countries, not only on specific issues, but also on a whole range of the formulation and implementation of education policy" and "provides a forum for the exchange of experiences and innovations among experts from member states and a channel for dissemination of ideas to high-level decisionmakers" (World Bank 1980, p. 74). The activities of the organization work in the direction of achieving consensus among nation-states, urging them to accept rules and implement standards determined by the organization. To this extent, UNESCO's education programs have played key roles in international interaction and communication and in setting educational policy within nation-states (World Bank 1980).

This argument is supported by a study by Lewin, Little, and Colclough (1982) examining twenty-nine national education plans for 1966 to 1985 in sixteen African, Asian, and Latin American countries. These plans were found to uniformly express the major role of education in the development process and to emphasize the role of education in labor force development, social equality, and nation-building -- all of which are consistent with "world cultural values" represented in UNESCO and World Bank education policies. Moreover, UNESCO, along with the World Bank (the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), typically assisted or was consulted in the drafting of these plans, suggesting another causal link between international organizations and the development of national education plans based on world accounts.

Gordon (1982) also notes that the activities of international organizations have had the effect of providing international codes of state conduct, and points out significant shifts in the education policies of developing countries in light of new emphases in education support programs by UNESCO, the International Labor Organization, and the World Health Organization. This has occurred to the extent that "in all countries, educations means...a leading out into the emergent culture of a world that...is becoming a single community" (Gordon 1982, p. 98).

In general, while the presentation of a request for assistance or aid is the exclusive responsibility of a state, project identification, preparation, and appraisal are all carried out by the relevant international organizations (Aggarwal 1971). As agents for collaboration, international organizations have fixed procedures for operations and decisionmaking, and states utilizing international organizations to achieve certain goals must take these procedures into account. These features present rich and interesting research possibilities. Along with exposure to information through international organizations, they may work to influence state educational policies so that they converge and become more isomorphic, in keeping with global developments and characteristics.

Conclusion

All in all, we can argue that international organizations can set and impose similar perceptions of reality, interests, policies, and structures through various means, such as the setting of agendas based on their constitutions and charters, standard-setting instruments such as recommendations and conventions, organizational operations, the collection and exchange of information, and the provision of resources. Though by no means an exhaustive list, these activities, which range from the practical to the symbolic, represent possible avenues for research by which we can begin to explore the role of international organizations in the worldwide convergence of educational systems, and for explaining how world-level ideologies and practices are transmitted to and come to be adopted by individual nation-states.

There is a somewhat universal perception of education as crucial to development and progress in the modern world, and we argue that international organizations have played an important role in establishing this perception throughout the world. As expressed in their constitutions and charters, international organizations are concerned with the formulation and construction of norms and values, relating the nation-state to the wider system both legally and functionally. They support "in very tangible ways, not only the state system as an organizational structure, but also its substantive purposes" (Meyer 1987, p. 56). International organizations are tangible representations of the wider cultural environment, and participation in them may provide a plausible explanation as to why strikingly similar national educational systems have been increasingly established across nation-states. States interact with and through international organizations to realize national interests, but in the process, they achieve outcomes in keeping with the standards of the wider world system.

Moreover, international organizations represent a truly systemic force that can be examined in terms of comparative educational influence. While we have drawn examples from only a few international organizations, particularly UNESCO and the World Bank, given their general familiarity and recognition in the field of education, a multitude of international organizations have goals and activities that can be explored in terms of both explicit and implicit influence on education in various countries. For example, in addition to UNESCO and the World Bank, several other specialized agencies within the United Nations system itself contribute directly to formal education initiatives, e.g, the United Nations itself, the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization, the International Development Association, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, among others. In addition, there is a dense network of consultative relationships among all kinds of international organizations (Jacobson 1984), ranging in type, function, and goals, that we might also consider in examining issues of educational convergence.

As we have indicated, the research areas suggested here represent a first step in investigating various aspects of global convergence and change in education, and will help us to better understand some of the underlying dynamics and forces surrounding this issue and to explore some of its broader implications. For example, most of the empirical illustrations and supporting evidence that we have discussed refer to formal educational principles and policies. This necessarily points to a second step, providing a framework in which to address issues of implementation. The problem of formal policy goals being loosely coupled or decoupled from practical implementation and impact is a problem of determining the depth of institutionalization (Weick 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1983), and is a problem for research into the degree of influence of international organizations on national education practices and structures, beyond formal policies.

Also, we have endeavored to employ relatively "neutral" language while calling for more research in this area, without making any a priori evaluative claims about the effects of these world polity influences. However, it is our position that, by doing this kind of research, one can then use it as a basis for further assessing and evaluating outcomes. Indeed, this type of research offers opportunities for investigating variations in the expansion of education on the basis of

national compliance or noncompliance, conformance or resistance, with international organization norms and procedures, and will hopefully add to the understanding of the actual process of educational institutionalization and of change in the modern interstate system. It can provide a framework for both questioning and accounting for educational convergence throughout the world, especially in light of political, economic, and cultural differences among countries and in their interrelations. As such, this kind of research can have important implications for questions of power and dominance in educational ideology and structure, and in the world system in general.

The discussion we have presented here provides a contextual description of the relationship between international organizations and the institutionalization of world educational standards, and we have tried to demonstrate that international organizations, as an integral part of the world organizational apparatus, may act to influence the distribution of educational values and practices within the system.[3] As such, they warrant scholarly attention and research to further determine and specify their role in the formulation and diffusion of world educational ideology and practice, along both explicit and implicit dimensions.

Whether or not they play the central directing role, we would argue that international organizations most certainly have been an important catalyst in spreading world cultural themes and accounts, and research conceptualizing them as institutionalizing mechanisms can provide important insights in the area of comparative education. As pointed out by Jacobson (1984, p. 357), "through their informational activities they have gathered data essential to identifying problems, and they have insured that information about techniques to meet these problems would be transmitted rapidly throughout the global political system. They have set goals, which they have encouraged governments to meet, and they have provided assistance to governments." Developments in education "have been in accord with the professed aims of international organizations; consequently it seems fair to give them a share of the credit for what has happened."

Notes

1. Also, see studies and related references in Meyer and Hannan (1979); Huefner et al. (1984); and Thomas et al. (1987). Green (1980) depicts a similar process across education systems in U.S. states.
2. ICE Recommendation No. 69 (1975): the changing role of the teacher and its influence on preparation for the profession and on in- service training; No. 71 (1977): the problem of information at the national and international levels which is posed by the improvement of education systems; No. 72 (1979): the improvement of the organization and management of education systems as a means of raising efficiency in order to extend the right to education; No. 73 (1981): the interaction between education and productive work.
3. Of course, this is not only a one-way, top-down process. While that has been our focus here, international organization policy also responds to the demands and interests of member states and other actors. In fact, it is interesting to note that international organizations are dependent on the state structures and practices that they, in turn, seek to influence, providing us another interesting avenue for research.

Abbreviations

- ICE: International Conference on Education
- UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
- USBE: United States Bureau of Education
- World Bank: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)

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