

# Mass Primary Education in the Nineteenth Century\*

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*In this paper we review the nineteenth-century origins of the contemporary approach to primary education provision. As we trace the spread of mass primary education in Europe as well as in other regions of the world we come to conclusion that this was a truly global phenomenon of a planetary-scale importance. Moreover, the expansion of the mass education contributed significantly to another global phenomenon – the emergence of nation-states.*

**Keywords:** *education, formal education, mass education, popular education, Prussia, Austria, education in Europe, education in the world.*

During the long 19<sup>th</sup> century (1789–1914, as defined by Hobsbawm) despite major historic and social differences almost every country of Western Europe introduced an innovative idea of mass education, which later evolved to a compulsory general education (Ramirez and Boli 1987: 2).

However, there are three main aspects which distinguish modern education systems from those existing 150 years ago, namely: centralization, secularization, and subsidization (Ansell and Lindvall 2013). Let us briefly describe them.

Centralization implies a distribution of power in the education sphere between national, regional, and local branches of government. 150 years ago all decisions in the sphere of education were made by the local legislative bodies. On the contrary, starting from the 1870s (in some cases even earlier) the national legislative bodies started to increase their influence on the primary education. There were two main patterns of education centralization: by liberal or democratic parties in the democratic countries or by authoritarian or dictatorial parties in the dictatorial countries.

Secularization means that the secular authorities started to gain control over and to manage the school systems. Hitherto the church had had a full control of the education system.

Subsidization implies that the states provide most of the funding that keeps schools running (Ansell and Lindvall 2013: 505–508).

Meanwhile, Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer specify the following three main institutional features of all the contemporary systems of mass education: 1) mass education is universal, standardized, and rationalized; 2) mass education sets the same goals and has similar organization forms all over the world; and 3) one of the key goals of mass education is to provide socialization for each individual, who is considered to be the main social unit (Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985: 147–149).

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\* This study has been supported by the Russian Science Foundation (Project No. 15-18-30063).

Andy Green mentions three main aspects of primary education reform: development of universal forms of education provision, rationalization of administrative and institutional structures, and development of state financing and control (Green 2013: 11).

### **A Historical Survey of the Evolution of Compulsory Primary Education in Western Europe**

**Prussia:** The first step to mass education was taken in 1763, when Frederick the Great issued a decree which made primary education obligatory for all Protestants living in rural areas. Some time later this decree was extended to several cities as well. Education became a priority in rural areas as it was crucial for the army: the Seven Years' War revealed a severe lack of literate officers. The decree implied the creation of a unified system of compulsory primary education (Melton 1988: 173–175).

School education lasted throughout the year; the school day was six hours long in winter, fall, and spring, and three hours long in summer. Half of the time was devoted to religious education and learning of catechism. Fines were imposed on those families who refused to send their children study at schools. Local parish was to help the indigent families pay for school education (Melton 1988: 175).

In the 1770s, the Prussian government started financing schools so that school teachers and directors could receive salaries which for the first time in the Prussian history made it possible for the students to study at schools for free. Yet, *de jure* free compulsory school education was introduced much later (Melton 1988: 179).

It was not only Frederick the Great who contributed to the Prussian education reform. In the first half of the nineteenth century the education system obtained several significant features: a special legislative institution was established to control the education system in the country (the Bureau of Education which was the part of Interior Ministry); special taxes were imposed to finance the education system, state education system was established, and certification was implemented for primary school teachers (Ramirez and Boli 1987: 4–5; Green 2013: 13).

After the decree of 1810 the education became secular with three-year education becoming compulsory. In 1826 education was compulsory already for everyone aged between 7 and 11. Every parish had their own primary schools, and all the teachers were to undergo certain training (Green 2013: 14).

**Austria:** Frederick the Great's practice inspired the Austrian government (with the help of Prussian experts) to issue a decree on compulsory primary education in 1774. In accordance with that law primary education became compulsory for all the children between 6 and 12 years old. School education took five days a week. It was forbidden to hire those who did not have school graduation certificate as apprentices or servants. Each town and each parish were obliged to have their own primary schools (Melton 1988: 212).

In 1769 Maria Teresia ordered Austrian local authorities to prepare an improvement plan for the primary education system. A special commission was created to achieve this goal. In 1773 this commission made several suggestions on standardization of courses, course books and teaching methods. It is important to mention that there was a big difference between rural and urban schools: rural schools could teach only reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion while urban schools had a wider range of courses to be taught at their disposal, including German, orthography, math, history, geography, *etc.* The main reasons for such diversification were, firstly, the apprehension not 'to overeducate' rural

population so that they would flow to the city in the search for a better life, and, secondly, the strife to educate experts in the cities (Melton 1988: 211).

**Denmark:** Denmark is considered to be the first country in the world that introduced a government-controlled system of compulsory mass education. The system of state schools started to evolve in 1721. However, a strong connection between the government and the education system was established in 1789, when the Great school commission started to work. In 1814 this commission made a report, which later became the basis of the Danish contemporary school education system. In 1842 basing on the Danish model the Swedish liberals introduced the School Reform Bill. In accordance with the Bill a state system of primary schools was established in the country (Ramirez and Boli 1987: 7).

**France:** The idea of primary education system appeared at the end of the eighteenth century and even had some impact on the laws of 1791 and 1833. However, those laws had never come into action. Napoleon Bonaparte paid major attention to the development of universities and lyceums, providing higher education while the mass primary education was beyond the primary concerns then. In 1816 every commune was obliged to maintain a primary school for boys. In 1833 the same obligation was extended to schools for girls. By the time of the Second French Empire France was prepared to spread education in terms of legislation and administrative resources. However, this idea was put into practice only after France had been defeated in the war by Prussia (1870–1871). By 1882 a system of free universal compulsory primary education was established together with a special Ministry (Chanet 2012: 118–122; Green 2013: 14–15).

**England:** The English system of primary education developed with delay in comparison with other countries of Western Europe (Wright 2012: 21; Green 2013: 16). During most of the nineteenth century the primary education was provided mainly by the church and mainly for the children of poor parishioners. It was not earlier than in the 1860s that the government started to participate in the development of the education sphere. In 1860 the government drew up a State Code of Rules related to the organization of primary schools. In 1862 the Code was adjusted. It regulated the range of school courses and established a national system of quality inspections, which checked the reading, writing and math skills of certain students. The financing for schools depended on the inspections results (Wright 2012: 22).

In 1870 the government adopted an education law which required every child aged above 5 and under 12 to be provided with a place at school. If the region lacked places at schools, the state built new schools, and the region was responsible for their maintenance. This issue was the most crucial in big industrial cities. It was the first major step in establishing a state system of schools (Wright 2012: 22).

In accordance with the Law on primary education adopted in 1880 it became obligatory for every child aged above 5 and under 10 to study at school. In 1891 primary education became free of charge. In 1893 the upper age limit was increased to 11, and to 12 in 1899. In 1895 the system of funding was changed and its size began to depend on the education quality in general and not on the knowledge of certain students (Wright 2012: 40; Stephens 1998: 79).

Finally, in accordance with the Law on education adopted in 1902 the government elaborated a system of subsidies which allowed local authorities to establish secondary schools. The students who graduated from primary schools could enter secondary school education on competitive basis (Wright 2012: 22).

**Europe:** It is crucial to mention that the spread of primary education by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was influenced not only by the year when the compulsory primary education had been introduced, but by the education policy conducted during the century as well (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The year when the compulsory primary education had been introduced and the proportion of children studying at schools

Country	Year of compulsory primary education introduction	Percentage of primary school students 1870 г., %
Prussia	1763	67
Denmark	1814	58
Greece	1834	20
Spain	1838	42
Sweden	1842	71
Portugal	1844	13
Norway	1848	61
Switzerland	1874	74
Italy	1877	29
Great Britain	1880	49
France	1882	75
Ireland	1892	38
Netherlands	1900	59
Luxembourg	1912	–
Belgium	1914	62
USA	–	72

*Source:* Soysal and Strang 1989: 278.

Thus, the spread of primary education in 1870 correlates very weakly with the year when compulsory primary education was introduced. France, Switzerland and the USA have the highest enrolments, although these countries had not established their national education systems by that time. However, they did have a lot of schools, supervised by the authorities of different level. Hence the spread of school education was rather wide. There is a major difference between the above mentioned countries, on the one hand, and Prussia along with Scandinavian countries, on the other hand, whose education systems were established by the governments themselves.

### **The Spread of Mass Primary Education in Other Regions of the World**

By 1900 North-American countries, Australia, New Zealand and some countries of Northern and Western Europe took the lead in spreading of school education. In the majority of Northern European countries the enrolment varied from 60 to 75 per cent (Benavot and Riddle 1988: 205–206). In other regions, especially in Asia (except for Japan), Middle East and North Africa the spread of school education was significantly more modest.

**Table 2.** Primary education enrolment among the school-aged, 1900 and 1935–1940, %

Region	In 1900, %	In 1935–1940, %
North America / Australia and New Zealand	86.0	79.1
Northern Europe	67.3	72.0
Southern Europe	37.5	50.8
Eastern Europe	28.6	48.2
South America	22.3	40.7
Central America	21.0	33.7
The Caribbean	41.5	59.0
Asia	13.7	30.6
Middle East and North Africa	11.1	22,5
Sub-Saharan Africa	14.9	19.6
World in general	32.9	40.8

Source: Benavot and Riddle 1988: 202.

However, as it often happens, the data presented in Table 2 disguises significant intraregional differences. In each region there is a country or two where already by 1900 the spread of primary education was comparable with that in several European countries.

Say, in South America we can analyze the data for Argentina and Chile. The primary enrolment in Argentina was relatively high already in 1870 (20.9 %<sup>1</sup>) and rose steadily, reaching 33.9 % in 1900 (in comparison with Greece, Italy, Bulgaria *etc.*) and 58.2 % in the period between 1935 and 1940 (comparable with Sweden, Belgium *etc.*). National education law in Argentina was adopted in 1884. In accordance with this law primary education became compulsory and was free of charge for students. Syllabuses, courses and teaching methods were unified and kept under complete state control throughout the country. Special national and regional councils were in charge of this control (Gvirtz, Beech and Oria 2008; Southwell 2013).

In Chile the spread of primary education was a little lower than in Argentina: 18.7 % in 1870, 21.7 % in 1900 and 47.5 % in 1935–1940. Nevertheless, this is still close to some Eastern European and Southern European countries. We would like to point out that Chile was the first country in South America to establish a state education system in 1842 (Schieffelbein and Farrell 1980: 160). During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this system was rapidly developing. A system of teachers' training was established, curricula and the range of courses were standardized in accordance with state requirements, various textbooks and course books were published and distributed among all the regions and provinces (Soifer 2009).

In 1900 the literacy level in Argentina (51–52 %) and Chile (43–44 %) among residents aged above 10 was also rather comparable with that of South European countries. High literacy level was also present in Uruguay (54 %) and Cuba (38 %) (Astorga, Berges, and Fitzgerald 2006: 766; Mariscal and Sokoloff 2000: 172; Newland 1994: 452).

Japan is the most remarkable country in the nineteenth-century Asia in terms of distribution of primary education. Japan made a 'great leap' in the period between 1870 and 1940, rising its primary education enrolment from 19.7 % in 1870 to 49.3 % by 1900, and further-

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter the enrolment data is provided from Benavot, Riddle 1988: 205–207.

more to 60.5 % by 1935–1940. The Meiji government acknowledged that an effective adoption of western technologies was impossible without developing a relevant education system. In 1872 a school system decree was issued. In accordance with the latter each child was obliged to complete an eight-year education. However, it was a challenge to bring the law into action. In 1886 the Decree on primary schools divided all the schools into two groups: ordinary schools with four-year compulsory education and schools of a higher level with two-four-year additional education for those who graduated from ordinary schools. In 1907 the duration of compulsory education period was prolonged to six years (Godo and Hayami 2002: 963; see for details Duke 2009; Lincicome 1995).

Although less known than the case of Japan Thailand also enjoyed a considerable period of successful spreading of primary education. In 1890 the primary education enrolment amounted to 0.5 %. However, it grew significantly in 50 years, rising to 7.1 % by 1920, tripling by 1930, and further doubling by 1935–1940, reaching by this period the value of 52.6 %. There was similar dynamics in Taiwan, especially after the Japanese Occupation, when primary education enrolment rose from 2 % in 1900 to 26.1 % in 1930 and 52.8 in 1935–1940.

Sub-Saharan Africa also had its leader – the Republic of South Africa, where the primary education enrolment rose from 24.7 % in 1870 to 43.5 % in 1940.

We would also like to emphasize that in many developing countries the values of primary education enrolment rose significantly during the period from 1870 to 1940 as well: from 1.9 % to 12.3 % in India; from 7.6 % in 1900 to 24.9 % in 1935–1940 in Egypt; from 1.6 % in 1890 to 26.7 % between 1935 and 1940 in Venezuela; from 9.5 % in 1890 to 30.9 % between 1935 and 1940 in Peru. Thus, the evolving of mass primary education was a significant global process.

### **Aims and Results of Establishment of Compulsory Primary Education Systems**

As it has already been mentioned above, for Frederick the Great the role of primary education was closely connected with the military needs. Literate officers and soldiers could increase the capability of the army (Melton 1988: 173–175). Those countries who followed the Prussian practice also took this idea into account. In particular, after the defeat in Franco-Prussian War France made a decision to establish a national system of compulsory primary education.

Education systems considerably contributed to the formation of national identity. Thus, the Prussian ‘state attempted to use mass schooling to create a more unified national citizenry and thereby consolidate state power both within the nation and relative to other national states’ (Ramirez and Boli 1987: 5). In this case the key goal for education was to unite the country and make students view themselves as national citizens in the first place and only then as residents of certain administrative units (Ramirez and Boli 1987: 4–5).

Therefore, the extension of states' power onto the sphere of mass education was crucial for the formation of nations (Ansell and Lindvall 2013: 506). Indeed, mass education helps people become true members of a society and citizens of a nation-state. It makes citizens loyal to the state and obliges them to contribute to large-scale national campaigns such as wars, tax deductions, and voting. Mass education makes people become devoted to a common system of aims and symbols and helps them behave appropriately in various situations (Ramirez and Boli 1987: 3; Boli, Ramirez and Meyer 1985: 159).

Finally, by the end of the nineteenth century mass education became a factor influencing economic growth, which was the reason for implementing this system in England after this system had already proved to be effective in Germany, England's main rival (Wright 2012: 22).

We would like to conclude the paper with Andy Green's words:

The formation of national education systems in early nineteenth-century Europe marks the beginning of modern schooling in western capitalist societies. With the coming of the school system, education became a universal and national concern, embracing all individuals and having effects on all classes in society. Learning became irreversibly equated with formal, systematic schooling, and schooling itself became a fundamental feature of the state. The national education system thus represented a watershed in the development of learning. It signaled not only the advent of mass education and the spread of popular literacy but also the origins of 'state schooling' – the system which has come to predominate in the educational development of all modern societies in the twentieth century (Green 2013: 11).

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