A World Culture of Schooling?

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Introductory chapter to

Is there one global culture of schooling, or many? Are school systems around the world diverging from their original European sources, or are they converging toward a single model?¹ This book opens a dialogue between two very different perspectives on schooling around the world. On the one hand, anthropologists and many scholars in comparative education emphasize national variation, not to mention variation from district to district and from classroom to classroom. From their point of view, the nearly 200 national school systems in the world today represent some 200 different and diverging cultures of schooling. On the other hand, sociology’s “institutionalists” or world culture theorists argue that not only has the model of modern mass education spread from a common source, but that schools around the world are becoming more similar over time.² According to world culture theory, rather than diverging, schools are converging toward a single global model.

This question matters to anthropologists because when we look at globalization—the movement of people, money and ideas across the entire world in unprecedented volume—we wonder whether it really means that the world is becoming more homogeneous. Are we creating a global culture (a “McWorld” for the cynical), or do people create new local cultures as rapidly as global imports hit them (Watson 1997)? Are we seeing increasing uniformity, or simply diversity organized in a new way (Hannerz 1996)? The domain of national school systems is one of the richest areas for exploring questions about globalization and, in particular, world culture theory. National
school systems offer an example par excellence of an institution that has spread in the last century across the globe.

Meanwhile, for educators concerned with immediate practical problems, the question of one global culture of schooling or many has critical practical implications: Are educational reformers better advised to lobby World Bank and UNESCO policy, or to work directly with teachers in a local school? Can local educators hope to change local schools to suit local needs, or are they bound by a global model that they may or may not see?

Global Schooling, Local Meanings

Many anthropologists and comparative educationists emphasize cultural differences among national school systems. We recognize, of course, that European and North American school systems developed in parallel and that schools in the rest of the world were introduced by Europe or North America through colonial processes. Schools introduced into new areas by different countries, for example, England versus France, have looked different from the beginning (Cummings 1999). Even if reformers, missionaries, or colonizers drew on some common sources when introducing schools, we have argued, schools inevitably come to reflect national culture (Spindler and Spindler 1987; Tobin, Wu, et al. 1989) and local people transform them to reflect local realities (for example, Flinn 1992).

In contrast, world culture theorists John Meyer, Francisco Ramirez, John Boli and their many colleagues argue not just that the idea of schooling spread from a common source, but that schools around the world are becoming more similar over time. The world culture approach is a grand sociological theory about modern nation-states. Its
theorists argue that a single global model of schooling has spread around the world as part of the diffusion of a more general cultural model of the modern nation-state, a model that also includes templates for organizing government, health systems, the military, and other institutions (Meyer et al. 1997a). According to world culture theory, the global model of mass education arose in Europe as part of a state-building process (Ramirez and Boli 1987; Soysal and Strang 1989), then, as new nations sprang up after World War II, the rest of the world adopted the model. However, importantly, for world culture theorists it is not as if a common European model or form spread around the world once and for all. Rather, countries have re-formed their school systems over the course of the 20th century in ways that make them more similar than they used to be. World culture theorists see “an increase in common educational principles, policies, and even practices among countries with varying national characteristics” (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000:173; see also Meyer and Ramirez 2000). Thus, for example, elementary curricula became somewhat more similar from the 1920 to the 1980s (Meyer, Kamens and Benavot 1992), and official national goals for education became somewhat more similar from 1955 to 1965 (Fiala and Lanford 1987; McNeely 1995). Rather than diverging, schools are converging toward a common model.

World culture theory makes an argument that anthropologists cannot ignore. Have human beings really created new human universals in the last 200 years? Can it be true that with a vastly larger population human beings nonetheless live in more similar societies than ever before? Alternatively, do the similarities in institutional forms and official ideologies paper over differences in everyday experience that matter a great deal more than the common framework? In practical terms, the question boils down to asking
where the action is. Does true school reform happen at the level of global and national policies, or does real change happen at the level of classrooms and schools?

To address these questions within the domain of schooling, we cannot simply look for similarities or differences in schooling across countries, for whether one recognizes similarities or differences depends on the level of abstraction of the analysis. At a general level, for example, teachers often use similar repertoires of lecture-recitation and seatwork yet, scrutinized in detail, they can be seen to use the same repertoires to produce very different kinds of lessons (Anderson-Levitt 2002a). However, since world culture theory argues that school cultures are converging, whereas much of the anthropological and comparative literature implies divergence, we can assess the strength of each perspective by examining the direction of changes in schooling over time. Although historians of education are better positioned than anthropologists to identify long-term divergence or long-term convergence, anthropologists do study processes over the period of months or years. We can report on what has happened to ideas over the period of months or years after they arrive from elsewhere. We can also report on whether diverse reform efforts are converging or diverging within specific sites.

With those goals in mind, this book brings together case studies—from Brazil to China and from the United States to South Africa—to scrutinize the questions raised by world culture theory. Our case studies use ethnographic and other qualitative methods to describe what is happening on the ground in particular schools and district offices and ministries of education in comparison with the reforms proposed by international agencies. We use the ethnographic details of everyday life to challenge world culture theory, showing for example, that inside local schools, inside ministries, or even among
global reformers like UNESCO and the World Bank, policy is much less homogenous than world-culture theory might imply. We show that teachers and other local actors sometimes resist and always transform the official models they are handed. We also note that world culture theorists grossly underestimate the importance of power, sometimes mistaking coercion for voluntary adoption. Nonetheless, we recognize that, by looking at the whole world at once, world culture theorists have noticed an important phenomenon that anthropologists of education miss when we focus on the local. The global view does reveal models that affect educators in local situations. Hence, this book embraces many insights from world culture theory, seeking to integrate them with what we know about lived cultures of schooling.

**Schooling’s Common Forms**

World culture theorists start from the assumption that nation-states are culturally constructed or “imagined” (Anderson 1991) rather than shaped by power struggles or economic conditions alone. Because the theorists focus on shared norms and ideas, they do not claim that the global model is necessarily the best way to run a nation—or its schools; what matters is that actors perceive it as the best or at least as the only acceptable way (Ramirez and Boli 1987:3). On this point, world culture theorists differ from modernists and functionalists, who tend to assume that school practices serve a society’s interests and that reform usually means progress. Because world culture theorists ignore the question of power, they also differ sharply from “world systems” theorists, who argue that a global agenda is promoted through economic pressure from the World Bank, USAID, Japan and other aid donors (Arnove 1999; Ginsburg et al. 1990; Samoff 1999). For world culture theorists, school cultures converge not because nations
give in to powerful donors but simply because nations voluntarily adopt what their decision-makers view as the modern way to run schooling. The mechanism of change is imitation, albeit an imitation that states feel is necessary because of the pressures of interstate competition (Boli and Ramirez 1992).

What shape does the hypothesized global model of schooling take? World culture theorists point to “isomorphism” or similarity across nations in a number of elements of the schooling system (Table 1). Some elements of the model refer to ideals stated in laws and official documents, such as the value of education as a universal right. Thus, national documents now tend to agree that education of the entire population serves the national interests (whereas in an earlier era rulers felt that it was dangerous to educate the masses). Virtually all countries now subscribe to anti-discrimination policies of education (McNeely 1995) and, besides making at least token efforts to provide schooling for ethnic minorities, have extended schooling to an increasing percentage of girls (Boli and Ramirez 1992). Nations increasingly tend to agree on two official educational goals, namely, to encourage economic development and to encourage national development (as opposed to preparing students for world citizenship, training them in political ideology, offering religious training, or other goals). A growing number of nations, although still a minority, also officially claim that education should develop the individual student as well as the nation (Fiala and Lanford 1987).
Table 1. Hypothesized Common Model

<table>
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<th>Hypothesized common model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideals</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>education as a universal human right</td>
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<td>belief that education can have real and positive effects</td>
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<td>goals of education: productivity/economic growth, national development (and for a growing minority, individual development)</td>
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<td><strong>Basic Structure</strong></td>
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<td>universal increase in female participation in schooling</td>
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<td>mass, compulsory education</td>
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<tr>
<td>national education ministries (centralized educational policy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>collection of educational statistics</td>
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<td><strong>Educational Institutions</strong></td>
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<td>“the principle of the classroom”: “egg-carton” schools with graded classes</td>
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<td>co-education rather than separate schooling by ethnicity, class, gender</td>
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<td><strong>Content and Instruction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>core elementary curriculum</td>
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<td>predominantly whole-class lecture-recitation with seatwork</td>
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Other elements of the proposed global model refer to institutional forms and practices rather than ideals. For example, every nation has instituted a mass primary schooling system in which gross enrollments are rising rapidly if they have not already reached 100 percent, and female participation is not just an ideal but a growing reality (UNDP 2000). A trend toward national laws making schooling compulsory began in the early 19th century for European nations and in the early to mid-20th century for the rest of the world (Ramirez and Ventresca 1992). Since 1910, most countries have established a central education authority—with the United States and Western European nations the last to join this particular bandwagon. One function of the central authority is to collect the sorts of educational statistics one can find in United Nations and World Bank reports (Ramirez and Ventresca 1992).

At the level of the local educational institution, the entire world seems to subscribe to “the principle of the classroom” (Meyer and Ramirez 2000:125). This form of organization contrasts with the one-room schoolhouse, with monitorial schools (Vincent 1980), with one-on-one apprenticeships, and with the many other ways in which peoples have organized formal education in other times and other places (Henry 1976). The “principle of the classroom” means that we tend to find “egg-carton” schools, in which children are clustered into a number of graded classrooms, usually with one teacher per classroom. (In small schools, however, a teacher may face more than one distinct grade in the same classroom.) There is a tendency toward age grading, although on a continent like Africa where school participation rates are relatively low, one may still find an age range of several years within one grade. In general, there is a movement away from separate schooling by ethnicity, social class, or gender (Meyer and Ramirez
Indeed, in this volume Diane Brook Napier describes how South Africa is moving away from one of the last schools separated by “race.” Co-education seems to be another common if not universal feature of elementary schools. Even in countries where female seclusion is important, such as Pakistan, separate girls’ schools have apparently not been common (Herz, Subbarao, Habib and Raney 1991:29), although in a few countries there may be some movement back toward single-sex schools (Morrell 2000).

One surprising element of a proposed global model is a common core within elementary curricula around the world. World culture theorists have identified a pattern in official statements of elementary curricula, although secondary curricula are not as uniform (Kamens, Meyer, and Benavot 1996). The official core elementary curriculum in virtually every country consists of language arts, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, aesthetic education and physical education; the first three subjects were already virtually universal before World War II, aesthetic and physical education became virtually universal after the war, and natural sciences became universal in the 1970s-1980s (Meyer, Kamens and Benavot 1992). On the other hand, not all nations include religious or moral education, vocational or practical education, and hygiene, although many do. Moreover, one can predict the relatively importance of the core subjects while acknowledging occasional but diminishing regional variation: about 33 percent of school time allocated to language arts, 18 percent to math, and 5-10 percent for each of the other core subjects (Meyer, Kamens and Benavot 1992). The global elementary curricula tends not to focus on, say, learning local geographic features, learning about food and clothing, learning about death, learning to think, or on other content noticed by anthropologists in the formal education systems of smaller-scale societies (Henry 1976). World-culture
theorists also believe they see more specific trends, such as a shift from the study of
history and geography to U.S.-style “social studies,” a movement toward more emphasis
on the world as opposed to the nation in civics education, and the incorporation of
formerly elite and controversial topics in mathematics and science into mass education
(Meyer and Ramirez 2000).

World culture theorists have rarely described what actually happens inside the
classroom. However, Gerald LeTendre and his colleagues propose to extend world
culture theory (or “institutional isomorphism,” as they call it), to teaching practice and
teacher beliefs (LeTendre, Baker, Akiba, Goesling and Wiseman 2001). Drawing on their
own analysis of data from the Third International Math-Science Study (TIMSS) and from
the cross-national study conducted by Lorin Anderson and colleagues (Anderson 1987;
Anderson, Ryan and Shapiro 1989), they argue that teachers around the world tend most
often to use whole-class lecture-recitation and student seatwork.

**Supporting Evidence from Ethnographic and Comparative Studies**

Anthropologists, historians, and comparative educationists know very well how schools
vary on the ground. Nonetheless, if we stick to a high level of abstraction, we might agree
with most of the items in Table 1. For example, we have witnessed egg-carton schools
with face-front classrooms and lecture-recitation; only in the more affluent schools in the
most affluent countries do we tend to find counter-models within which children, for
example, work clustered at tables or spending time in learning centers.

In fact, anthropologists might even hypothesize additional “isomorphisms,” such
as an official ban on corporal punishment in many if not all countries. (As in world
culture theory’s discussion of the official curriculum, we recognize that practice may
vary dramatically from official policy.) We might also note transnational parallels in specific subject matter pedagogy. For example, in the realm of methods for literacy instruction, teachers everywhere teach reading and writing together, not sequentially as in the past (Chartier and Hébrard 1989), and despite forceful debates between phonics and reading-for-meaning proponents, teachers tend to use a mixed method that combines both (Anderson-Levitt 2000).

**Common Reforms**

Besides noting these commonalities in the basic forms of schooling, world culture theorists point to what seem to be the same reforms taking place in different countries (Table 2). To begin, they point out that mass schooling systems continue to expand, noting the movement toward mass secondary education in many countries and even the suggestion of movement toward mass university education (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000; Meyer and Ramirez 2000). They see long term trends toward more nation-level control of schooling, calls for decentralization notwithstanding (Meyer and Ramirez 2000). Citing their own work in Namibia, Meyer and Ramirez see a movement toward “the nominally professionalized and somewhat autonomous teacher” (2000:126), as evidenced by the demand for higher credentials for teachers and a decline in specialized teacher training institutions. (They note a decline in other kinds of specialized vocational education as well; Meyer and Ramirez 2000.) Venturing to comment on what happens inside classrooms, they hypothesize an increasing interest in learner-centered pedagogy (McEneaney and Meyer 2000), active learning (Meyer and Ramirez 2000), and small cooperative learning groups (Ramirez 1998). World culture theorists also point to an increased concern with making the content of instruction relevant and meaningful to
learners, with a resulting increase in the use of local languages in the classroom
(McEneaney and Meyer 2000; Meyer and Ramirez 2000).

Table 2. Transnational Reforms and Reform Debates

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expansion of schooling</th>
<th>but also</th>
<th>Standardization</th>
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<tr>
<td>movement toward mass secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td>educational standards, standardized testing, quality assurance, performance-based</td>
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<tr>
<td>movement toward mass university education</td>
<td></td>
<td>management, local accountability</td>
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<td>expansion of early childhood education</td>
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<tr>
<th>Decentralization</th>
<th>but also</th>
<th>Standardization</th>
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<tr>
<td>decentralization of services, site-based management</td>
<td></td>
<td>educational standards, standardized testing, quality assurance, performance-based management, local accountability</td>
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<td>school choice market or “liberal” reforms</td>
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<tr>
<th>Teacher autonomy</th>
<th>but also</th>
<th>Control of teachers</th>
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<tr>
<td>teacher professionalism &amp; autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td>de-professionalization, detailed national curricula, mandated textbooks, scripted lessons</td>
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<th>Student-centered instruction</th>
<th>but also</th>
<th>Content-centered instruction</th>
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<tr>
<td>learner-centered pedagogy, “participation,” democracy in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td>content-based reforms, e.g., Core Knowledge; standards movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>“active learning,” “hands-on” learning, projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>small cooperative learning groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>relevance of content to child’s experience, emphasis on child’s “interest”</td>
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<tr>
<td>increased use of local languages</td>
<td>increased teaching in world languages, esp. English</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>reading for meaning</td>
<td>focus on skills in reading instruction</td>
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Case study research, including many chapters in this book, provides additional evidence that the reforms world culture theorists point to are indeed happening—or at least called for—in a number of different countries. We can even add to the list of hypothesized transnational reforms in Table 2. For example, we know that mass schooling is extending its reach not only to secondary and university students, but also to children below the age of six, as Christina, Mehran and Mir (1999) illustrate for the Middle East. However, some of our additions to the list will challenge the notion of a uniform and coherent set of reforms.

**Standardization But Also Decentralization**

Our research confirms the claim of world culture theorists that there are movements toward increasing national control and standardization in many countries. Some countries are seeing standardized testing appear for the first time or spread to younger grades; for instance, France began nation-wide testing of third and sixth graders in 1989. Assessment has come to preoccupy universities in the United States and elementary schools in Namibia, as Ramirez notes (1998). In this volume, Susan Jungck points to a movement toward educational standards, standardized testing, and external quality assurance in Thailand. She also notes pressure toward performance-based management and local accountability to the Ministry of Education. Thomas Hatch and Meredith Honig in this volume describe the movement toward greater accountability to national standards in the United States. Meanwhile, Huhua Ouyang, also in this volume, points out that standardization is a longstanding practice in China.
However, we have also witnessed reforms in a number of countries that seem to contradict the trends identified by world culture theorists. Therefore, I have divided Table 2 into two columns to represent these contradictions or tensions. To begin, whereas world culture theorists dismiss reformers’ calls for decentralization, arguing that “experiments with decentralization need to be placed in historical perspective and are not likely to result in a permanent and thorough de-nationalizing of education” (Meyer and Ramirez 2000:125), we have witnessed decentralizing reforms that seem to be having real impact in some nations. For example, while Jungck’s study mentions centralization in Thailand, it also describes a movement toward decentralization and site-based management. Brook Napier comments on the devolution of authority and decentralization that has accompanied South Africa’s Outcomes-Based Education reform. There is also movement toward decentralization in France (Alexander 2000) and in Argentina (Dussell 2000).

Along the same lines, we have witnessed the neoliberal movement towards “choice” and the “marketization” of schooling, which implies decentralization, as a powerful force in many countries. In this volume, Amy Stambach describes a modest local movement toward “choice” in Tanzania, Hatch and Honig describe four schools of choice in the United States, and Lisa Rosen analyzes the movement toward the “marketization” of education in one U.S. community. Significantly, Lesley Bartlett, also in this volume, points out that the neoliberal pressure to offer parents’ choice originates in Brazil from the World Bank, one of the international organizations to which world culture theorists attribute the convergence of world educational policy (Meyer and Ramirez 2000). Many other researchers have also demonstrated the impact of neoliberal reforms, including Bartlett and her colleagues for the United States (2002); Agnès van
Zanten and Stephen Ball for France and Britain (2000; see also van Zanten 2001); Benjamin Levin for New Zealand, Canada, the United States (Minnesota) and, again, England (2001); María Rosa Neuman and her colleagues for Argentina (Neuman et al. 1997).

**Teacher Autonomy But Also Control of Teachers**

Likewise, some of our studies provide evidence for teacher professionalism and autonomy as a transnational reform movement. In this volume, *Bayero Diallo and I* document reformers promoting increased teacher autonomy in the Republic of Guinea. *Jungck*’s study documents increased freedom of Thai teachers to shape the curriculum, and *Kalanit Segal-Levit*’s chapter suggests the real power of teachers to effect change in Israel. *Ouyang* illustrates foreign teachers importing the notion of teacher autonomy to China, and *Rosen* shows how discourse on teacher autonomy gets used in a debate about mathematics reform. Namibia has also experimented with greater teacher autonomy (Zeichner and Dahlström 1999).

Yet, *Diallo and I* also document a strong counter-movement in Guinea for the scripting of classroom lessons. Whereas Meyer and Ramirez argue that “attempts to de-skill teaching are replaced by standardized models of professionalized teacher training requiring higher and higher levels of certification” (2000:126), we would argue that attempts to de-skill teaching *co-exist* with professionalized teacher training, and that the first place to witness this contradiction is inside the United States (Cochran-Smith and Fries 2001). The United States has spawned both the Holmes Report (1986) and a recommendation by the American Federation of Teachers for highly scripted reading methods (Gursky 1998). For a view of de-skilling transnationally, see Fischman (2001).
Meanwhile, Stambach and Rosen remind us that another curb on teacher autonomy is parental pressure, which decentralization reforms tend to encourage.

**Student-Centered But Also Content-Centered Instruction**

Again, in the domain of classroom instruction, we have indeed witnessed reforms couched in the rhetoric of learner-centered pedagogy, student participation, or democracy in the classroom. In this volume, Ouyang shows how the Communicative Method for English language instruction aligns with a student-centered and “discovery” approach. Diallo and I likewise note the learner-centered philosophy aligned with the push for broad teacher autonomy in Guinea, and Brook Napier mentions that the notion of learner-centered pedagogy influenced South African reforms. Elsewhere, Richard Tabulawa (1998) describes a movement for participatory, learner-centered pedagogy in Botswana, and I have described the value placed on student participation in France and the United States (Anderson-Levitt 2002b). Reformers sometimes associate student-centered teaching with work in small groups or with “hands-on” learning and small heterogeneous cooperative learning groups, as described in Namibia by Ramirez (1998). The quest to make learning relevant and meaningful for the learners is likewise present in an increased emphasis on comprehension within the mixed method of reading instruction (Anderson-Levitt 2000), and in increased use of local languages in school, as in Mali.

But again, ethnographers have also witnessed not just widespread use of content-centered or didactic methods (Baker 1997; Kumar 1990), which you might dismiss as “old-fashioned,” but also “back to basics” reform movements that emphasize the transmission of a fixed curriculum rather than student inquiry. By Hatch and Honig describe two schools emphasizing teacher-led instruction and “the three R’s”; in fact,
teachers at one school note that the entire district seems to be imitating their traditional curriculum. For example, E. D. Hirsch’s “Core Knowledge” program had diffused to 1020 U.S. schools by May of 2001, and the Junior Great Books program to 9500 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 2001). And, of course, the “standards movement” that is part of a new centralization in the United States and the National Curriculum in England also work at counter-current to reforms in which students drive the curriculum. As for the movement toward instruction in local languages, we have also witnessed a movement toward instruction in world languages, especially English, like the one Stambach documents in Tanzania and the one Reed-Danahay describes, amazingly, in a French school in this volume (see also Cha 1992). In the United States, a movement to increase instruction in phonics skills counters the movement towards increased emphasis on comprehension (for example, Pressley 1998).

In summary, like world culture theorists, ethnographers in this volume and elsewhere have noted reforms that seemed to move many countries in the same direction. However, ethnographers have also witnessed other transnational reforms that moved at crosstraffic currents to the first set of reforms. Does the evidence point to a single global model or to something else?

**One Inconsistent Model or Competing Models?**

Given the inconsistencies among reforms in Table 2, one must ask whether they really do represent different parts of a single model or whether they represent different models in competition. Now, world culture theory does not demand that the global model it posits be coherent. Indeed, Meyer and his colleagues refer to “the rampant inconsistencies and conflicts within world culture” (Meyer et al. 1997:172), and Martha Finnemore points out
deep tensions, notably, between markets and bureaucracies as organizing principles (Finnemore 1996:341). Thus, one way to think of the apparent contradictions in Table 2 is simply to dismiss them as reflections of the inevitable fuzziness and inconsistency in any human enterprise.

Anthropologists George and Louise Spindler offer a more satisfying way to think about contradictions within a culture. When analyzing their own diverse nation, the United States, they suggested that “we may express our commonalities as clearly in the framework of conflict as we do within the framework of cooperation” (1990:1). What people in the United States hold in common, suggest the Spindlers, is a shared way of talking about differences as well as agreements. They call this shared way of talking a cultural dialogue, by which they mean “culturally phrased expressions of meaning referent to pivotal concerns … phrased as ‘value orientations’ but … express[ing] oppositions as well as agreements” (1990:1, emphasis in original). For example, people in the United States keep talking about the value of individualism but also the value of community; they seem both to attribute success to hard work and to hold a cynical belief that success requires stepping on other people (1990). In the Spindlers’ view, what makes a culture is not necessarily shared values but simply an agreement to disagree about specific opposed values. Their notion of cultural dialogue allows for conflict and contradiction within a group and even inside individual members of the group (1990:1-2).

Where our case studies provide examples of contradictions within the same national reform effort, then, we might explain it by saying that the reformers are carrying on a national cultural dialogue and hence applying a single, if inconsistent, model. Thus, Susan Jungck points out that a single reform project in Thailand incorporates
inconsistent themes. In fact, she cites Hallak (2000) to argue that decentralization necessarily invites calls for centralization. In the United States, too, as Hatch and Honig show, the government seeks simultaneously to encourage decentralization and local control while imposing tighter national standards and insisting on accountability. The messiness of these conflicts within nations or even within the very same reformers, then, does not challenge world culture theory.

Now, what are we to make of inconsistencies between nations? First, Jaekyung Lee (2001) suggests that sometimes there may be no true inconsistency at all: if and when nations start out from opposite positions, then national reforms may move in the opposite direction and yet converge toward a middle ground. Thus a U.S. system that tightens national standards and a Japanese system that deregulates schools might end up more similar than they began.

In a second scenario, if we assume a highly dynamic global model, we might explain some inconsistencies by arguing that one nation has “fallen behind” the other. For example, whole-class lecture-recitation may be the standard model of instruction in most countries (Anderson, Ryan, et al. 1989; LeTendre, Baker, et al. 2001), but small group instruction is encouraged in many countries and actually takes place pretty regularly in elementary classrooms in the United States (Ramirez 1998; Antil, Jenkins, and Wayne 1998). A country with largely whole-class instruction like France would, by this account, be less “modern” than the United States—and I’ve actually heard teachers in France make that claim (Anderson-Levitt 2002b). Indeed, common practices, such as whole-class lecture-recitation and use of the blackboard, were once promoted as the modern way to teach, but now new ideals have replaced them (Anderson-Levitt 2002b; Vincent 1980).
Countries vary, according to this explanation, because when the global model of schooling changes, the latest version of the model, the “next wave,” does not reach all parts of the globe at the same time. If we accept this notion of cultural lag, we can still accept the idea of a world culture of schooling, albeit one that keeps changing. However, the image of a dynamic global model offers no reason to expect that national school systems will become more similar over time or that reforms will converge; if the model keeps changing, we can expect that some countries will always be “behind.”

It becomes even more difficult to argue for a single global model when a country supposedly in the vanguard starts to move “back” to an “older” institutional form. For example, consider the movement for greater teacher professionalism and autonomy noted above in Guinea, Namibia, Thailand and elsewhere. What are we to make of movements “back” to scripted teaching within two important source of this reform, the United States (Goodnough 2001) and England (Judge 1992), as Diallo and I discuss in this volume? The recent movement in the United States “back” to a more “traditional” emphasis on phonics offers another example. It moves counter to a trend toward increasing emphasis on reading for meaning not only in United States from the 1980s to mid-1990s (Stahl 1999), but also in France since the 1970s (Anderson-Levitt 2002b), and in Guinea since about 1990 (Anderson-Levitt 2000). Is the United States simply making some kind of correction, as Lee might suggest, so that all of these countries will eventually converge on about the same proportion of phonics to reading for meaning? Will countries eventually converge on some balance between scripted teaching and professional autonomy? It seems more likely that we witnessing a swing of the “pendulum” back and
forth over the decades between phonics and reading for meaning, and between scripted and autonomous teachers.

We might interpret the global swing of the pendulum as evidence of a cultural dialogue, in the Spindlers’ sense, taking place not within a nation but within the world educational community. (In the case of some of the tensions identified by, “cultural debate” might be a better term than “cultural dialogue.”) In that case, the hypothesized world culture of schooling takes the form of a transnational cultural debate rather than a consensual model. However, if countries share nothing but a cultural debate, there is no reason to expect worldwide convergence in school reform. We might as well expect a continued swinging of the pendulum and countries regularly out of synch with each other.

If we kept stretching the notion of a world culture of schooling then, we might stretch it far enough to incorporate many of the contradictions we’ve documented—at a price. Our broadened world culture of schooling experiences regular waves of change and incorporates cultural debates in which the pendulum swings back and forth. It offers no promise, then, of convergence toward a more coherent model.

However, some of our case studies offer evidence that does not fit the notion of a single world model no matter how broadly stretched.

*Actors in Competition*

The notion of a cultural dialogue or a cultural debate implies a conflict within—within a nation, within a global community, even within an individual. However, in many cases the debate takes place not within a group but rather between opposing groups of actors who are promoting competing reforms. For example, educational specialists within World Bank do not necessarily promote the same reform ideas as UNESCO agents
(Nagel and Snyder 1989). In Guinea, USAID does not give the same advice as France’s international development agency (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001). Lesley Bartlett shows how the model of education promoted by the World Bank, the IMF and USAID competed in Brazil with another international model promoted by another transnational actor, the Catholic Church. Rosen gives a vivid portrait of opposing camps in the California “math wars.”

Both Bartlett and Rosen see the conflicts they describe as local realizations of “enduring struggles,” a concept borrowed from Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave (2001). Whereas the notion of a “cultural dialogue” or a “cultural debate” refers to conflict within, the idea of an “enduring struggle” implies conflict between. Moreover, whereas people engaged in “cultural dialogue” agree, by definition, over the terms of their conflict, people engaged in an “enduring struggle” may be fighting over the very definition of reality, about what the fight is (Holland and Lave 2001:22). At minimum, both Bartlett and Rosen imply that the conflicts they study represent not mere inconsistencies or debates within a global model, but rather the manifestation of conflicting models at the global level.

**Building the State Is Not Always the Agenda**

Bartlett’s case also raises a question about another of world culture theory’s tenets, the claim that the global model of schooling is about creating citizens of the nation-state (McEneaney and Meyer 2000; Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997). In Bartlett’s case, reforms promoted by the Catholic Church and by Freire’s movement hardly aim at state building. Kalanit Segal-Levit’s case of grassroots reform in Israel suggests multiple agents of reform with multiple agendas, some of which contribute to state building and some of
which do not. Deborah Reed-Danahay gives us a third case. Her chapter illustrates two situations in which the transnational agent stimulating reform, the European Union, acts to build Europeans or even world citizens, side-stepping national ministries in the process.\textsuperscript{vi}

\textit{Gaps between the Model or Models and Actual Behavior}

Not surprisingly, our case studies and many others point to huge gaps between a model (or models) and actual practice on the ground. One reason is that actors at various levels in importing nations sometimes resist a reform. At the level of top decision-makers, Jungck in this volume shows us the Thai Ministry of Education deliberately turning away from the global model in favor of “local wisdom” (although, admittedly, Thai reformers have to adapt “local wisdom” to the exigencies of global curriculum forms and the world economy).\textsuperscript{vii} Local actors, too, may resist or give lip service only. Ouyang demonstrates the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which students at China’s vanguard institution for new methods of foreign language teaching resisted the “Communicative Method” brought in by foreign professors, despite the students’ purported role as future champions of the new method. Diallo and I provide another case of teachers and inspectors resisting the opportunity for greater professional autonomy extended by reformers in Guinea.

Finally, as anthropologists are delighted to illustrate, even when educators accept imported models they may transform the innovations so extensively that they create something new from them. Global imports get “creolized” (Hannerz 1987; Hannerz 1992) or “indigenized” (Robbins 2001). Brook Napier shows us how provincial governments transform imported reforms, sub-provincial training programs transform
them again, and local schools yet again. Ouyang illustrates the emergence of a Chinese ideal for English language instruction that merges the best of Western and traditional methods. Stambach shows in this volume how school “choice” in a missionary-run school in Tanzania became, due to the U.S. educators’ modifications and to re-interpretations by parents, something different from “choice” in the United States.

Granted, world culture theorists expect to see “loose coupling between policies and practices and practices out of sync with local realities” (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000:183). They usually mean their theory to address only the official model, not its implementation, although they sometimes look to actual behavior as evidence, as when they cite school enrollments and female participation rates. In any case, it is legitimate to ask what exactly is spreading around the world if the same words, such as “teacher autonomy” or “choice” or “student participation” (Anderson-Levitt 2002b) or “decentralization” (Bray 1999) mean different things in different places. A model diffused in name only does not have the same significance as a model that actually affects behavior all over the world.

**World Culture Theory and Anthropology**

The cases we present here make it clear that world culture theorists cannot afford to ignore what happens on the ground in particular ministries of education, provincial centers, and local classrooms. First, our examples raise the possibility that local actors find multiple, competing models out there in the larger world. Second, we are not convinced that local actors borrow models freely; hints of resistance by ministries of education suggest otherwise, and even where ministries import willingly, teachers often experience reforms as imposed from above. Third, our cases show that enacted policy
differs from official policy and that this difference matters. Researchers cannot delude themselves that they are looking at the same model just because educators use a common vocabulary, while reformers cannot blithely assume that innovations will or can or should be implemented unchanged (Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan 2002; Jacob 1999; Jennings 1996).

Do we see evidence that schooling is converging toward a single model? We report here some examples of the same kind of reform talk heard in very different locations: South Africa, Thailand, the United States, Guinea. However, we note that reform talk is often part of a debate rather than a homogeneous model. We also show that educators on the ground transform the meanings of the common talk or, as noted, resist it entirely. Moreover, we have provided examples of alternative sources of ideas (the left-leaning wing of the Catholic Church, the European Union, Soviet immigrants) diffusing alternative kinds of reforms. From our vantage points, we do not see a world becoming more homogeneous with time.

Nonetheless, anthropologists must recognize the importance of insights from world culture theory. First, the theory offers a plausible explanation of the very phenomenon anthropologists in this volume are studying, the presence of modern schools around the world. Second, although there may be several rather than one transnational model, world culture theory has nonetheless identified a striking set of “isomorphisms.” None of us can ignore that ministries of education, school inspectors, and teachers, students and parents import, play with, or react against a set of reforms that are traded back and forth across countries. Third, though elements of transnational forms and reforms mean different things in different local settings, they are far from meaningless
The common educational discourse and taken-for-granted features of school structure tend to set limits on our ordinary thinking about schooling. Researchers who focus only on the local or who see only cross-national differences are missing the iceberg under the surface. Reformers who don’t see the global model beneath local differences are tinkering only with the surface.

If we take seriously both local variability and world culture theory, we recognize that each perspective on its own misses something crucial. It follows that we cannot simply shift the focus from the transnational to the local as we please. We must view schooling from both perspectives simultaneously, as Stambach argues in this volume.

A complete theory of schooling and of school reform would begin by acknowledging that there is a common set of models of modern schooling—or a common set of cultural debates about schooling. Contemporary mass schooling is an institution with (not completely homogeneous) roots in Europe. It spread to the rest of the world, as world culture theorists argue, as part of the enterprise of constructing modern-looking nation states in the transnational system. At a very general level, schooling manifests a set of common forms as identified in Table 1 above. Although there seem to be some competing transnational models, such as Freire’s, very few really qualify as competition at this level of the general form.

At the same time, as many of the case studies in this volume show, administrators, teachers, and students create within the roughly common structure very different lived experiences (Anderson-Levitt 2002a). This happens in part because there are different actors at different levels with different agendas. In addition, there are inevitably gaps between model and practice. The enacted curriculum in any school in the world can
contrast sharply with the official curriculum. Teachers or even entire nations play with
the common classroom repertoire, to “indigenize” the structure or tone of classroom life
in ways that make it either a caricature of schooling (Fuller 1991; Watson-Gegeio and
Gegeo 1992;) or a better place for local children (Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Flinn 1992.

In many ways, differences in lived experiences matter more than the common
structure. Nevertheless, ultimately, the fact of the common structure matters. It puts a
frame around ordinarily thinkable ways of doing school. It follows that there are three
kinds of reform movements. Some reforms, such as the extension of schooling to all
children or the press for efficiency of execution, spread or strengthen the common
models. A second kind of reform works within the common models to change the lived
experience of students or of teachers, as in Segal-Levit’s example of new kinds of science
teaching or other successful efforts at such activities as “active learning” or teacher
autonomy. Finally, there are rare reforms that would remove us from the contemporary
common model, such as Freire’s vision or Illich’s proposal to de-school society. The last
reforms are truly radical and very difficult to bring about, although changes of this
magnitude have occurred over the centuries. It behooves reformers to know which kind
of reform they are about.

Organization of This Book

Most of the case studies in this book look at elementary schools, but Rosen and Segal-
Levit focus on secondary schools, Ouyang’s looks at higher education, and Bartlett at
adult education. Most raise serious questions about world culture theory; Bartlett in
particular provides an extensive critique. At the same time, several of the studies note the
value of world culture theory and the significance of transnational models—notably
Brook Napier, Anderson-Levitt and Diallo, and Rosen. Hatch and Honig’s study indirectly supports world culture theory by illustrating the pressures for isomorphism. Several authors take us beyond world culture theory to alternative theories that cast other lights on global school reform: Jungck uses Roland Robertson’s notion of “glocalization,” Stambach discusses Andrew Strathern’s discussion of the interplay of local and universal narratives, Rosen and Bartlett bring in Holland and Lave’s “enduring struggles,” Bartlett develops a concept of educational projects derived from Omi and Winant, and Reed-Danahay demonstrates to the usefulness of Foucault’s notion of discipline in the context of transnational school reform.

This volume begins with three chapters that trace the movement of reforms from Ministries of Education to local schools. Jungck examines one part of Thailand’s National Education Act of 1999, which prescribed the incorporation of “local wisdom” into schools to counter the heavy presence of a global model of schooling. Her examples illustrate the combination of global and local forces in particular schools as teachers attempt to use local wisdom. Brook Napier traces the movement of South Africa’s complex set of reforms from the national ministry, to provinces, sub-provinces, and local schools, noting international influences at ever level. Anderson-Levitt and Diallo consider the movement for greater teacher autonomy promoted by U.S. reformers and by some World Bank reformers in the Republic of Guinea. We show that teacher autonomy is an idea contested back in the United States, transformed by importing officials, resisted by local teachers and yet practiced, sometimes unwittingly, in the classroom.

Four chapters in the middle section further explore local levels, examining reforms as experienced by teachers, students, and parents. Hatch and Honig show that
even in a decentralized nation committed to educational alternatives—the United States—truly distinctive schools are extremely difficult to maintain. They make us wonder whether real decentralization is even possible. Ouyang examines a different kind of “democratizing” reform, the attempt to build the Communicative Method and hence more student participation into English language instruction in China. He explores how and why students and even faculty colleagues at Guandong’s most “progressive” institute for the training of language teachers resisted the efforts of foreign professors whom they had specifically invited to introduce the new method. His study also illustrates how transnational models arrive loaded down with cultural baggage from the source country. Stambach explores Tanzanian parents’ reactions to an English-language program that was introduced into primary schools by U.S. missionaries in 1999. In illustrating how a single program can be interpreted in different ways, it advances a framework that accounts for the simultaneous development of cultural variability and institutional homogeneity in the arena of mass education. Rosen examines the local meanings of “choice” in a very different setting, a city in the United States. She shows how one group of parents appropriated the transnational vocabulary of neoliberalism to contest teachers’ autonomy to adopt a new mathematics curriculum. Significantly, Rosen also argues that local conflicts like the one she describes eventually shape larger, perhaps even transnational, struggles.

Finally, three chapters raise questions about the world culture theory by analyzing reforms that come from outside the transnational system. Bartlett contrasts models of knowledge production in contemporary Brazilian adult literacy programs. The efficiency model of the World Bank and other large donors presents education as investment in
future workers, positioning education in the service of the economy, whereas the popular education, common in non-governmental organization literacy programs, embraces knowledge as power. Reed-Danahay illustrates two cases in which the transnational agent stimulating reform, the European Union, acts to build Europeans or even world citizens, not citizens of nation-states. Because the actors (from government officials to teachers to students) respond through the lenses of both regional and national identities, this transnational policy initiative does not have global, uniform effects. Segal-Levit shows how the culture of scientific education that existed in the former USSR has diffused to schools in Israel, first through the informal efforts of Soviet-born immigrant teachers and only later through official incorporation into the national school system. The effort has led to mutual fertilization and the creation of a hybrid based on the unique experience of the immigrants but adapted to the Israeli system.

Francisco Ramirez closes the book with a comment from the perspective of world culture theory.

References


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Notes

i When I refer to “school systems,” “schooling,” or “schools” in this chapter, I mean state-run or state-affiliated systems intended for the entire population. This includes, for example, the Catholic school systems in France and in the United States, which function as complements to the state-run public school system, but does not include such formal schooling as Quranic schools, which operate independently from the state in regions like West Africa, nor the former system of Mandarin education in China, which was reserved for the few rather than the masses.

ii The label “world culture” comes from Ramirez, Soysal, et al. (1997) and from the reference to a “rationalized world institutional and cultural order” in (Meyer et al. 1997b:151). Other authors refer to the ideas of Meyer and his colleagues variously as “institutional theory” (Berkovitch 1999:7), “institutionalism” (Finnemore 1996; LeTendre et al. 2001), “neo-institutionalism” (Levin 2001), “global rationalization” (Davies and Guppy 1997) and, somewhat misleadingly, as “world systems theory” (Cummings 1999).

iii However, France moved back to history and geography as separate subjects in its elementary curriculum in 1985.

iv As Robin Alexander demonstrates with detailed cases from five countries, the dichotomy between student-centered and content-centered, like all the dichotomies in Table 2, is grossly oversimplified (2000, 2002). Alexander identifies six rather than two “versions of teaching” used in various combinations in these countries. See also the eight-sided layout of teaching philosophies in Peretti 1993.

v Curiously, the progressive movement of the 1910s and 1920s in the United States encompassed a similar tension between a move toward democratic, student-centered pedagogy and a move toward greater efficiency and bureaucratic control (Semel and Sadovnik 1999).
McEneaney and Meyer now suggest, on the basis of new data, that “civics instruction dramatically shifted in the 1980s and 1990s to a model of the ‘postnational citizen’ of the world” (2000:200), but it is not clear how this apparent change in the global model fits their larger theory.

McEneaney and Meyer (2000) try to explain the incorporation of local cultures and local languages within world culture theory as part of an effort to construct individual citizens engaged with a relevant curriculum. However, the picture they paint of an increasingly diversified curricula does not sit easily with their claim that curricula continue to become more similar around the world over time.