



# School Acts and the Rise of Mass Schooling

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## Education Policy in the Long Nineteenth Century

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*Edited by*

JOHANNES WESTBERG

LUKAS BOSER

INGRID BRÜHWILER

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## School Acts and the Rise of Mass Schooling

“In this remarkable volume, the editors present thirteen national case studies of the origins and outcomes of school acts that were passed during the construction of public school systems in the long nineteenth century. The chapter authors are leading scholars in the history of education who demonstrate both the distinctive process of school formation in different countries and the parallel processes and shared conceptions that shaped the process. Not only does the book allow us to understand the emergence of mass schooling in comparative context, but it also fosters an understanding that incorporates both the political and social histories of schooling.”

—David F. Labaree, *Professor Emeritus, Stanford University  
School of Education, USA*

“A welcome and timely addition to our historical understanding of the interactions between school legislation and the emergence of modern school systems. Methodologically innovative in their use of new social, cultural and economic approaches, the authors of the different case studies challenge the reader to think comparatively and analytically about the acts, concepts and processes that underlay the rise of mass schooling in the West.”

—Rebecca E. Rogers, *Professor in the History of Education,  
Université Paris Descartes, France*

Johannes Westberg · Lukas Boser ·  
Ingrid Brühwiler  
Editors

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ISBN 978-3-030-13569-0      ISBN 978-3-030-13570-6 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13570-6>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019932933

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Cover illustration: Lyons/Moloney

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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# 1

## The History of School Acts

Johannes Westberg, Lukas Boser and Ingrid Brühwiler

School acts are fundamental to the historiography of schooling. Traditionally, they have been interpreted as milestones or veritable hallmarks in the process aimed at providing education for all. Thus, it is not surprising that, in pertinent studies on the rise of national school systems during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, school acts such as the Prussian *Generallandschulreglement* of 1763, the French Guizot law of 1833,

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J. Westberg et al. (eds.), *School Acts and the Rise of Mass Schooling*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13570-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13570-6_1)

the Swiss so-called liberal school acts of the 1830s, the Spanish Moyano law of 1857, and the Italian Casati law of 1859 are considered pivotal to the development of educational system in their respective countries.<sup>1</sup>

Studies on the origin, content, and effects of school acts have, however, generally been limited by national orientation, addressing an exclusively national readership.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, research results on national school acts are often published in the national language, which makes them inaccessible to the broader international audience.<sup>3</sup> This strictly national perspective might also explain why an international overview of the school acts that were passed during the nineteenth century is still lacking.

Yet, while school acts are unquestionably integral parts of traditional school policy studies, scholars of education have largely lost interest in this kind of legislative history. Following general trends in history, historians of education—inspired by social, economic, and cultural history—have instead focused on instruction practices, gender discourses, economic determinants, or the transfer and transformation of knowledge in educational institutions. Replaced by new research agendas, the history of school acts has almost fallen into oblivion, being perceived as a topic of an outdated historiography.

However, guided by their interest in social, cultural, and economic history, some researchers have begun to rethink the actual value, the impact, and the ostensible purpose of school acts and have started to analyze them against the backdrop of their social, cultural, and economic contexts.<sup>4</sup> As Michel Foucault has noted, there are many ways one can relate to a prescriptive system. Thus, besides being parts of an absolute body of law, the varying nineteenth-century school regulations were also general guidelines, declarations of intent, and sometimes even utopian dreams.<sup>5</sup>

By presenting new research on school acts passed in the West during the nineteenth century, we are continuing this line of research while also addressing the desideratum described above. In the chapters comprising this book, several fundamental questions will be examined, including: Why were the school acts passed, and under what social and political circumstances? What was their content? What was their impact and significance? To achieve a comprehensive comparative and

multidisciplinary analysis of school acts and the role they played in the rise of mass schooling, which is a novel contribution to the field under study, this book includes chapters dedicated to 13 national case studies focusing on the manner in which school acts were embedded in their respective cultural, social, political, and economic contexts. In addition to providing analyses of the content, organization and funding of nineteenth-century schooling through the histories of school acts, this volume thus provides an international overview of school acts unique in scope and detail.

## A Multidisciplinary Conceptual Framework

Returning to the issue of school acts is not an easy task. There is always the risk of repeating, mirroring, or merely negating existing narratives. This book has therefore been written and edited with a number of considerations in mind.

First, and most importantly, this book is not an attempt to establish a new grand narrative on school acts and nineteenth-century schooling. Although we acknowledge the value of theoretical models linking schooling to state formation processes, world systems, or the global model of the nation-state, we believe that the international history of school acts is best served by adding more facts, further nuances, broader historical context, and new questions to the established historiography of education.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, this edited book presents the first international analysis of school acts that provides rich insights into both their similarities and their differences. Consequently, this book is an attempt to address the classic issue of school acts by using the insights yielded by human, social, and cultural sciences research carried out in the last decades. In this respect, the analyses presented herein are truly multidisciplinary, since they are informed by recent studies in economic history, education, social history, cultural history, and sociology.

As a consequence, all authors that have contributed to this volume concur that social, economic, political, and religious factors have played varying roles in the history of schooling, and that this has to shape the analysis at hand. In some instances, the narrative of social struggles or

the formation of a nation-state will be more important, while in other cases the narrative of economic development or religious conflicts will be stressed. As will be shown in this book, nineteenth-century schooling was shaped by a wide range of historical processes. Schooling is therefore not a phenomenon that can be reduced to industrialization, social control, the dominant religion, or the process of state formation.

Second, with this book, we intend to develop an analytical framework that may place future comparative research on nineteenth-century school policy on a firm footing. A central element to such a framework is a well-conceived set of analytical concepts. Many of the concepts commonly used in historiography of education such as “school acts,” “school system,” “compulsory education,” “nation,” or “citizen” are not as well delineated as they may seem at first glance, as their meaning and implications differed from country to country and changed over time.<sup>7</sup> The concepts that we use to examine the history of school acts and schooling must therefore be carefully chosen and well elaborated.

To begin with, we stress the importance of defining the above-mentioned notions of school acts and school systems, and how they are applicable to the historical cases analyzed in this book. In order to compare national school systems, the features of each historical phenomenon under investigation have to be scrutinized and described very carefully. For instance, some of the school acts discussed in the chapters that follow were not laws in the common usage of the word (i.e., laws passed by parliament), but rather law-like regulations or ordinances issued by the King or a ministry. We therefore use the term “school act” in a generic sense, to refer to all kinds of constitutions, laws, regulations, ordinances, statutes, and even draft laws that either had sustainable impact on the development of a national school system or that have been recognized to have had such an impact.

The wider international perspective enabled by this book similarly calls for a considerate use of the notion of “school system.” Generally, nineteenth-century school systems were less systematized than their present-day counterparts, as they varied greatly in form. Some of those systems could be called “organizations,” whereas others were “institutions,” to use a distinction introduced by Reiner Lersch. Lersch defines “organization” as a planned and rational process to perceive certain aims

like selections or qualifications, whereas “institutions” emanate from the social life of a community.<sup>8</sup> Owing to its ambiguity, it has been our ambition to adopt a clear usage of the term “school system.”

Likewise, the comparative history of school acts indicates that we have to be considerate when using expressions such as “compulsory education” and “compulsory schooling.” As evident from the following chapters, nineteenth-century school systems were marked by several definitions of school age, as well as the number of years that children were supposed to attend school. The Italian Casati Law (1859) stipulated, for example, only two years of compulsory schooling, while the second Ferry Law (1882) mandated compulsory education for all French children between the ages of six and thirteen.

There was also no common understanding of the term “compulsory.” School acts could require all school-aged children to attend school, or could mandate compulsory education but not compulsory schooling (as the Ferry Law of 1882 did). They could also merely allow school boards to implement compulsory school attendance (as was the case with the English Education Act of 1870) or make schools compulsory for school districts to establish, but not for children to attend (which was indeed the demands of the Swedish school act of 1842). The compulsory nature of schooling also varied according to social class. In the Netherlands after the school act of 1878, for example, compulsory schooling was only a reality for the poor who had to send their children to school in return for poor relief. In addition to the wording of the legislation, the compulsory nature of schooling was also conveyed by its implementation. Attendance and absenteeism ratios reveal to what extent compulsory education was enforced, to what extent it had already been instituted, or to what extent it remained a hope or an unfulfilled expectation. The introduction of such differences into the history of school acts—which from a distanced international perspective has been perceived as the continuous enactment of (almost) identical compulsory education acts—is one of the main contributions of this book.

The history of the rise of mass schooling in the “Western” world of the nineteenth century is interwoven with state formation processes, or, in some cases, with nation-building processes. It is therefore

unavoidable that some of the analyses presented in this book extend to the concepts of “state,” “nation,” “nation-state,” and “citizen.” Since the case studies examined in the subsequent chapters cover a broad variety of states, we have to be precise about the concepts used to label the political entities being analyzed. As it turns out, the notions of “nation” and “nation state” might be the most difficult concepts to deal with. Fortunately, there is a vast, and still ongoing, debate on that topic upon which we can draw, ranging from Ernest Renan’s question “What is a nation?” to Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities,” and Oliver Zimmer’s “Contested Nation,” to name but a few.<sup>9</sup> We are aware of the difficult nature of those notions, which is why we asked the authors to apply them with the necessary caution. Similar consideration should be given when using the term “citizen.” Following Daniel Tröhler, we finally reconciled the difficulties inextricably linked with these complex notions by understanding them as floating signifiers which can have changing meanings in different contexts. To give but one example, a German *Bürger* is not necessarily the same as a French *citoyen*, or an American *citizen*.<sup>10</sup> Yet, if we take these differences into account, we can certainly describe and compare how the citizen was shaped through schooling in all those countries.

## National and International Perspectives

Although this book’s focus is on school acts and the development of mass schooling in specific national and regional contexts, its aim is certainly not to celebrate national exceptionalism or to retrieve new national master narratives. Instead, we have encouraged the contributing authors to examine national idiosyncrasies and to highlight certain aspects of the school acts because those idiosyncrasies can tell us how school systems developed under specific historical circumstances. To indicate this, we have encouraged the authors not only to use the English terms that may veil national differences, but to also note the terms in national languages for denoting primary schools. Merely the wealth of such terms (including *common school*, *almueskole*, *Lagere*

*School*, *scuole primarie*, and *Volksschule*) implies a range of differences that should be included in the analysis.

Furthermore, such national idiosyncrasies can serve as starting points for international comparisons and a more nuanced analysis of the history of schooling in general. Although the difficulties in drafting school acts—due to linguistic, religious, or other conflicts—may be perceived as the result of a historically unique national setting, this volume shows that nineteenth-century educationalists in different countries faced similar challenges. The chapters on Switzerland, Canada, and the Netherlands are good examples of this feature of the nineteenth-century school acts.

In order to facilitate such international and transnational research on the history of schooling, we also encouraged the authors to consider international convergence or entanglement. To do so, we asked them to look for transnational exchanges, such as the transfer of knowledge, borrowing, diffusion, and lending of ideas, whenever possible. The case studies presented in our book reveal that ideas and schemes traveled between countries, and that school systems in various ways influenced each other. The role of the Prussian school system in the development of schooling in England and Sweden and the impact of the Silesian abbot Johann Ignaz von Felbiger on schools in Russia, Switzerland, and the school system of the Habsburg Monarchy are merely two examples highlighted in this book. Therefore, if they are applied in a meaningful way, concepts such as the transfer, lending, and borrowing of knowledge not only help us to understand the historical developments in a single country, but also allow us to reveal the entanglements in the history of schooling in the Western world.

Nation and state formation are, nevertheless, vital topics and have therefore been dedicated sufficient attention in this book. We are, however, well aware of the top-down model that is usually revoked when discussing the rise of mass schooling. As Raymond Grew and Patrick Harrigan once remarked, a school system, like a national anthem or a constitution, “appears to be the direct expression of a national state, which prodded local governments, passed laws, and spent money making education available to all.”<sup>11</sup> Despite addressing the theme of school

acts, however, this book does not primarily focus on state intervention. Instead, the chapters of this book clearly show that social, economic, political, and religious factors have had varying impact on the national histories of schooling, and that the state, the local community, and parents have all played important roles in the expansion of schooling.

In sum, this book is not about state intervention, good or bad governance, and it is certainly not about best practice, a concept that has proliferated across the educational policy research in recent years. Instead, by placing school acts in their social, economic, and political context, and by examining the various ways those acts were connected to local, regional, and sometimes even national practices and conceptions of schooling, this book aims to augment the reader's understanding of school history perceived through the complexity, temporality, and contextuality of past events. In other words, the aim of this book is elevating the research on nineteenth-century school acts to the standards of twenty-first-century historiography. This, we believe, is required in order to provide a solid foundation for future comparative analyses.

## The School Acts of the "West"

The format of an edited book imposes limitation on the number of chapters, thus mandating careful selection of the case studies. In order to obtain a well-balanced picture of nineteenth-century school acts, we included in this selection not only politically, culturally, and economically eminent nineteenth-century European nation-states, such as England, France, and Germany, but we have also deliberately selected countries that have received less attention in an international context so far.

The inclusion of a variety of case studies allows us to represent a wide range of historical expertise with regard to school acts. The countries discussed in this volume are all located in the northern hemisphere, and they all belong to the so-called Western World, including Russia which, at least for its European part, may be seen as a Western country. The selection of countries spans from west (the USA and Canada) to east (Russia) and from north (Sweden and Denmark) to south (Italy and Spain), including Prussia, the Netherlands, the Habsburg monarchy,

France, Switzerland, and England. In this book, the analyses of these countries' school acts have been presented chronologically, from the Austrian Felbiger school act of 1774 to the Elementary School Act 1870 for England and Wales.

All the countries examined in this book were, or became, sovereign states in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> We have included countries of different sizes, economic structures, financial capacities, and denominational affiliations. We have chosen to analyze countries with a long-standing tradition of (public) school development, as well as those with no such tradition. We discuss cases when school acts had major impacts on school development, when school acts remained rhetorical, and when national school acts were not possible to issue. Finally, we have included monolingual and multilingual countries,<sup>13</sup> religiously homogeneous and religiously heterogeneous countries, and countries with varying governments, including monarchies, democracies, empires, and nation-states, as well as countries that were subject to changing political systems. Although limited, our selection of case studies thus allows for investigations into school acts in a variety of historical contexts.

To focus on a limited number of countries nevertheless implies certain omissions. It would have been interesting to cover, for example, the colonial experience of nineteenth-century school acts in countries such as Ireland or India, or the post-colonial history of South American countries such as Brazil or Chile. In the latter case, the constitution of 1833, declaring the state's responsibility for public education, and the law of 1842, which established a public education system, would be of particular interest.<sup>14</sup> It would also have been useful to discuss the history of school acts that were passed in tumultuous political situations. These include the school act of 1808 on the organization of elementary schools in towns and villages in the Duchy of Warsaw (created by the Tilsit treaties of 1807), and the regulations for general education (1869) in the late Ottoman Empire that, as a part of a major political and administrative reform movement, mandated that primary schools be established in all villages and towns.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the remarkable histories of school acts in the Baltic states—informed by Swedish, German, and Russian school systems—certainly deserve to be examined in a wider international context.<sup>16</sup>

Not being able to cover all these historical cases is regrettable. In particular, the history of school acts and schooling in the colonial world deserves a comprehensive analysis. However, since the complexity of the colonial experience is well known, this book could not have covered the emergence of colonial and post-colonial school systems and their relation to the colonizing powers in Europe in sufficient depth.<sup>17</sup> What is gained by focusing on the part of the world referred to as “the West,” however, is a clearer and more encompassing analysis of the varying historical experiences that can be found among those countries. As evident from this book, these experiences were far from uniform.

## Coherence and Research Questions

The quality of an edited book like this one depends mainly on its coherence. To meet this objective, we have encouraged the authors to relate their analyses to the following main topics.

First, we asked the authors to address the historical background of the school act(s) under investigation. This background may, for example, include a short overview of preexisting school structures, along with the social, economic, political, and religious background of the school act and the reasons for its passing. In this respect, we have encouraged the authors to discuss what problems the school acts were supposed to solve or what new situations they were supposed to create (such as to create a national identity, a sense of belonging to a state, or a sense of morality).

Second, we have encouraged the contributing authors to address the content of the school act in terms of organization and funding of the school system and the content of the instruction intended to be carried out at schools. This may include issues such as social origin and the ages of the children that the school act applied to; the degree to which the school acts made schooling compulsory for children; the school subjects the school acts promoted; the overall purpose of instruction; the administrative and financial role of school districts (communes, municipalities, townships) in the school system and its level of decentralization/

centralization; the requirements imposed on teachers' training; and the structure of teachers' salaries.

Finally, we have asked the authors to address the consequences and outcomes of the school acts. Such a discussion might focus on measurable factors, including changes in school enrollment, absenteeism, literacy rates, days and hours spent in school, and money spent on education. Similarly, the authors may focus on contemporary perceptions of the school acts' impact. In this respect, we have invited them to discuss the kind of human beings that the school acts were intended to create, such as responsible national or local citizens, obedient subjects, devout Christians, or any other desired aspect.

Although these guidelines have encouraged dense examinations of school acts in their complex historical context, they nevertheless imply that some aspects of this history have been given less attention. For example, the gendered dimension of primary schooling certainly requires a further and a more systematic analysis. Even though the gendering of secondary education and the feminization of teaching are well-known phenomena, primary schooling nevertheless requires further attention in this respect. Similarly, the joint history of school acts and minorities in nineteenth-century schooling deserves more attention. This includes, for example, the education of Sami people in Sweden, Polish speakers in German-speaking areas, and Muslims in Russia.<sup>18</sup> Further studies of the borderlands are also required, including eastern Latvia, Schleswig-Holstein, and Alsace-Lorraine.

**Acknowledgements** First, we would like to thank the authors of this book. This volume would never have been compiled without your expertise, enthusiasm for the topic, and your willingness to spend considerable time and energy on writing, revising, and editing your texts. We also wish to thank Daniel Tröhler for his insightful comments, and his thorough yet always constructive criticism. For financing and hosting a workshop in October 2017, where we had the chance to discuss the book chapters for the first time, we thank the *Sven och Dagmar Saléns Stiftelse*, the Swedish Research Council, and the Department of Education at Uppsala University. This workshop marked a major step in the process of writing this book. It gave us the opportunity not only to discuss the structure and the content of each

chapter, but also to learn more about some general problems and obstacles we had to overcome to produce a coherent and insightful volume. This discussion was continued during a double session at the ESSHC 2018 in Belfast, where additional steps toward the publication of this book were taken. The process of finalizing the manuscript was supported by subsidies from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Northwestern Switzerland, and funds from Örebro University, Sweden. We would like to thank those institutions for their support. Finally, we wish to thank our editors at Palgrave Macmillan, Eleanor Christie and Rebecca Wyde. Working with them has been a wonderful experience. From the beginning to the end of this project, we benefitted tremendously from their support.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Green, *Education and State Formation*; Criblez, Jenzer, Hofstetter and Magnin, *Schule*; Beltrán Tapia, “Enclosing Literacy?”
2. See, for example, Clay, Lingwall, and Stephens, “Schooling Laws”; Skinningsrud and Skjelmo, “Fra dansk provins til konstitusjonell stat.”
3. See, for example, Petterson, “1842, 1822 eller 1882?”; Diebolt, Jaoul, and San Martino, “Le Mythe De Ferry: Une Analyse Cliométrique”; Skinningsrud and Skjelmo, “Fra dansk provins til konstitusjonell stat: Arbeidet for en norsk skolelovgivning 1814 til 1827”; Westberg, “En politisk illusion?”
4. See, for example, Soysal and Strang, “Construction of the First Mass Education Systems”; Petterson, “1842, 1822 eller 1882?”; Diebolt, Jaoul, and San Martino, “Le Mythe De Ferry”; Clay, Lingwall, and Stephens, “Do Schooling Laws Matter?”; Cappelli, “Escaping from a Human Capital Trap?”; Lindert, *Growing Public*.
5. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, ch. 3.
6. For an introduction to these theoretical perspectives, see, e.g., Green, *Education and State Formation*; Caruso, “World Systems, World Society, World Polity.”
7. See, e.g., Tröhler, Popkewitz, and Labaree, *Schooling and the Making of Citizens*.
8. Lersch, “Schule als Sozialsystem.” See also Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*.

9. See also Billig, *Banal Nationalism*; Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales*; Stukenbrock, *Sprachnationalismus*.
10. Tröhler, "Curriculum history," 285. See also Tröhler, "Curriculum history in Europe". Tröhler, "Internationale Provokationen."
11. Grew and Harrigan, *School, State, and Society*, 3.
12. With the exception of England, which was formally part of Great Britain.
13. In the nineteenth century, however, many of the so-called monolingual nations, such as France or Germany, were in reality multilingual.
14. Freeburger and Hauch, *Education in Chile*, 3.
15. See Kazamias, *Education and the Quest for Modernity*, 63–64; Winiarx, "Education in Poland," 115.
16. Kruze et al., *History of Education and Pedagogical Thought in the Baltic Countries up to 1940*.
17. Benavot and Riddle, "The Expansion of Primary Education," 202–3.
18. See, e.g., Elenius, "A Place in the Memory of Nation"; Dowler, *Classroom and Empire*.

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