Neo-Institutionalism in Education: An emergent paradigm and its critics

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Outline of Presentation

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Background to neo-Institutionalism

1. AKA 'world polity' approach, 'world culture' or 'world society' approach

2. Many view neo-Institutionalism (neo-I) as a major (macro-oriented) theoretical paradigm in sociology and in other disciplines in the social sciences

3. Academic roots: Sociology department (and later School of Education) at Stanford University in the 1970s: John Meyer, Francisco Ramirez, John Boli, Brian Rowan, David Kamens, later A Benavot, D. Baker, C. Chabbott, Y. Cha, Y. Soysal, G. Drori, many others..

4. Neo-I does not exemplify deductive (top-down) theory-building or 'arm chair' theorizing); rather it evolved through sustained theory testing—mainly between macro- and meso-level hypotheses and various kinds of empirical evidence

5. Neo-I did not originate as a centralized research program, but rather based on collaborative efforts of researchers and many 'generations' of PhD students

6. Is Neo-I a paradigm? For many yes, since it developed a coherent set of theoretical claims and testable assertions which can be applied to many issues and topics in the field of education, but also in other fields: e.g., organizations, development, globalization, international civil society, human rights, gender (woman's status), religion

Neo-Institutionalism in education

Broad, cumulative impact of Neo-I approach in education is based on a very significant quantity of well-cited, peer-reviewed empirical research as well as theoretical (re-)formulations and elaborations. Research tends to be comparative, cross-national, historical, sometimes involving case studies; evidence tends to be quantitative in nature

Examples of areas of educational research in which the neo-institutionalism approach has had a significant impact on the literature:

- The expansion of mass education
- The establishment and timing of compulsory attendance laws
- The organizational character of schooling; patterns of governance
- The educational aims and purposes of education
- The transformation and decline of vocational education
- The structuring of the school knowledge: curriculum and textbook contents
- Gender inequality and gender parity in education
- The antecedents and consequences of higher education
- Globalization and educational policy making

Three broad areas in which neo-Institutionalism has influenced theories and conceptions of education and society

o The worldwide institutionalization of mass and higher education; the process of political incorporation through mass education

o Schools as 'institutional organizations'; Loose coupling and conformity to institutional rules

o The impact of education on society: how do schools influence societal outcomes

I. The worldwide institutionalization of education

"Mass schooling has become a worldwide institution, both as a normative principle and as an organizational reality. The aspiration to achieve universal educational enrollment is found in virtually all national societies and is often written into their grounding constitutions and national laws and policies. Opposition to mass schooling, an ideological stance well documented in educational histories has disappeared…"

"Mass schooling made sense in so many contexts because it became a central feature of the Western, and subsequently the world, model of the nation-state and its development. Nation-states expand schooling because they adhere to world models of the organization of sovereignty (the modern state) and the organization of society as composed of individuals (the modern nation). This development took place earlier in political entities that served as the organizational carriers of the new world models, and thus in the new nation-states, rather than in the old dynastic empires…."

Thus, neo-Institutionalism situates nation-states within a broader world environment and seeks to explain educational developments within nation-states as a consequence of their exposure to the pressures of this environment to adhere to the nation-state model of political organization…

Political incorporation through schooling

The rise and expansion of mass schooling is closely linked to the development and institutionalization of the nation-state. Mass schooling became a core project of the nation-state, a project through which the masses would become members of the nation-state (citizens)....schools were organized to teach the young to identify with their nation-states and with related social, economic, and political structures. This is a central feature of the overall political incorporation process: expanding education so as to turn excluded and disenfranchised masses (workers, peasants, ethnic, religious and racial minorities, immigrants and women) into citizens with basic rights and duties. The overwhelming success of this political incorporation project is often underestimated by scholars who narrowly focus on the cognitive outcomes of education.

The political incorporation process in earlier eras was certainly **contentious**. The contestation took place not only between elites and masses but also among the elites and masses themselves. The crucial battles were over the question of who was to be included as a citizen. In educational terms the corollary question was who was to be schooled (or not). This was a question because **the educability of the masses** was a contentious issue. Thus **the old debate was over inclusion versus exclusion, which in principle has been resolved in favor of inclusion**.

Source: Ramirez 2005

Political incorporation through schooling

Today the debates are over **the terms of inclusion**: to what extent are individual diversity and difference going to be recognized and addressed in the incorporation process established in schools?

In the past children were expected to become French, or American, or German, or Italian citizens and, in doing so, shed their markers of difference: in terms of language, religion, ethnicity, national origin...

More and more, scholars and political commentators critique such terms of incorporation, which require an individual to shed their markers of diversity. That is, polities should be flexible and more accommodating of diversity and difference. Canada with its deep commitment to multiculturalism is the exception that recognizes (celebrates) diversity.

Impact of this debate in education: How is the national citizen to be constructed in schools and depicted in curricula and textbooks? Today diversity is valued.

Example of 1ˢᵗ neo-Institutional theme: Worldwide expansion of mass education

Key cross-national studies of longitudinal change in enrolment in primary education

(1977) Meyer JW, Ramirez FO, Rubinson R, and Boli-Bennett J, "The world educational revolution 1950-1970" *Sociology of Education*

(1985) Boli J, Ramirez FO, and Meyer JW, "Explaining the origins and expansion of mass education" *Comparative Education Review*

(1988) Benavot A and Riddle P, "The expansion of primary education, 1870-1940" *Sociology of Education*

(1992) Meyer, J. W., Ramirez, F. O., & Soysal, Y. N. "World expansion of mass education, 1870–1980" *Sociology of Education*

A world education revolution?

Compilation of cross-national dataset with economic, political, social and educational variables to explore (test) modernization and dependency theories in early 1970s at Stanford (see Meyer and Hannan 1979)

One line of overall research program: An analysis of the effects of national characteristics on primary, secondary and tertiary educational expansion (1955-1970)

Hypotheses to account for national increases (no declines) in gross enrolment ratios at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, 1955-1970:

Economic development has positive effect   (3 indicators)
Political / Social Modernization has positive effect   (4 indicators)
Strong states/ Authoritarian states has positive effect   (3 indicators)
Ethnically plural societies has negative effect   (1 indicator)
Dependent societies has negative effect   (3 indicators)

Findings: Only 6 of 42 coefficients are significant at .10 level or less

Conclusion: Educational expansion is part of worldwide process

Structural characteristics of societies – economic, political, social, cultural – have a weak impact on national educational expansion. Empirical support for modernization and dependency theories is weak.

National education expansion is, in large part, a self generating process. It expands as a function of the size of the previously uneducated population (like a contagion model)

The pace of expansion is slow at the beginning--only children of dominant economic, political and cultural elites are schooled; then it speeds up in middle of the process as formerly excluded groups gain access (e.g., urban male children, girls, non-propertied classes, and eventually, children living in rural areas, minority, immigrant and disabled children); it finally slows down when almost all children are enrolled (ceiling effect)

Pattern of educational expansion

Pace of educational expansion is like S shaped curve (logistic function) with floor and ceiling effects: slow as the beginning (0-20% enrollment rate), faster in the middle (20-80%), slow again near the ceiling when access is provided for children in hard to reach or marginalized groups (80-100%)

Net Enrollment Ratio

100%

10%

Time ------------ >
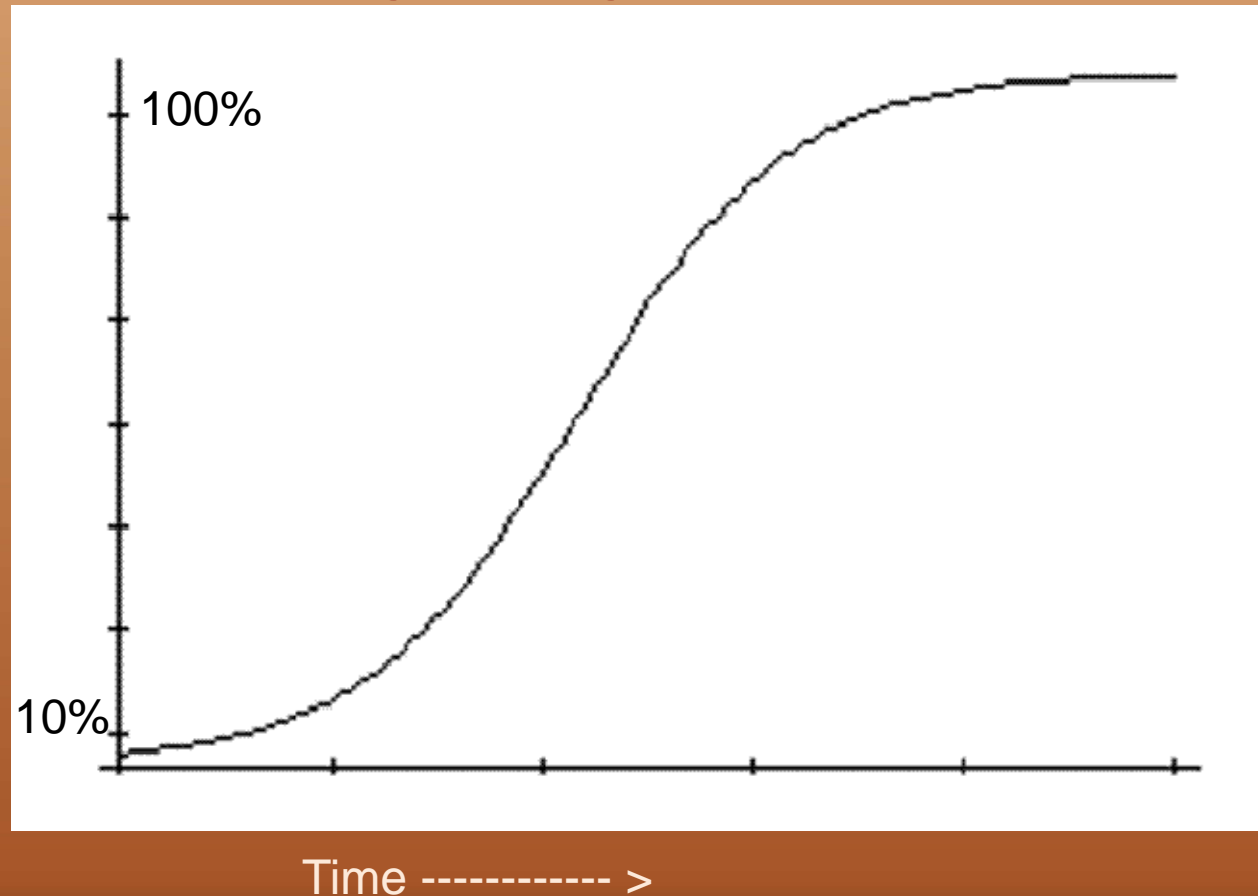
How valid and generalizable is early cross-national research? What is missing?

- Only examined 1955-1970 period; what about other periods?

- Missing information for the poorest and smallest independent countries, as well as dependent colonies that become independent after 1960

- Measurement error in primary enrolment ratios: gross vs. net enrolment ratios

- Number of cases/countries used to examine the correlations between national characteristics and educational expansion varies from 27 to 95

- No actual measure of incorporation into world polity, or the effects of the world system

What was the pattern of educational expansion before 1950?

Challenge 1: to collect **comparative historical data on primary-level enrolments** in the absence of international agencies involved in its standardization: from census compilations, comparative education publications (encyclopedias, dictionaries), emerging statistical bureaus/offices in Europe and North America, historical documents, current studies, etc. Cross-check the reliability of educational data from different sources

Definitional issues: What is the beginning and the end of primary education in each setting? Which grade levels to include? (Does this change over time)?

Missing data: Are enrolments in all types of schools included in each country or colony? Which school enrollments are excluded from national accounts?

Challenge 2: to collect data on the **school age population** of different states and colonies during the 1870-1950 period (i.e., age group 5-14). Where data is missing see if an estimate is possible.

Develop primary enrolment ratios for large number of countries and colonies.

The construction of a new cross-national dataset of primary educational expansion

Table 2. Number of Countries or Colonies with Actual or Estimated Data Used to Construct Primary Enrollment Ratios at Each Point in Time

Data	Circa 1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1935–40
Primary enrollments								
Actual reported figures; no estimation procedures used	40	49	75	91	103	115	123	120
Size of school-age (5–14) population								
Number of cases with reported figures	19	23	28	32	34	41	68	43
Additional cases estimated	21	26	47	59	69	74	55	77
Primary enrollment ratio								
Both reported and estimated figures of the 5–14-year-old population	40	49	75	91	103	115	123	120

Estimating the school age population

Table 3. Mean Values of the Ratio of the School-Age Population (5–14 Years), to the Total Population at Each Point in Time, According to the Countries' Level of Development[a]

Level of Development	Circa 1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1935–40
More-developed countries	.222 (17)	.220 (16)	.224 (18)	.212 (19)	.210 (21)	.198 (21)	.188 (22)	.181 (15)
Less-developed countries[b]	.229 (2)	.215 (4)	.248 (12)	.244 (11)	.238 (15)	.250 (17)	.243 (36)	.249 (23)

[a] Level of development was measured according to per-capita energy consumption in 1929 (United Nations 1952). Countries located in the top one-third of the distribution on this variable are defined as more developed; those in the bottom two-thirds are defined as less developed. Figures in parentheses refer to the number of countries used to calculate each mean value.

Table 5. Mean Primary Enrollment Ratios, by Major World Regions, 1870–1940[a]

Region	Circa 1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1935–40
North America/Oceania	66.8 (4)	78.2 (3)	84.3 (4)	86.0 (5)	75.8 (6)	73.9 (6)	75.5 (6)	79.1 (6)
Northern Europe	56.0 (12)	56.1 (14)	60.1 (13)	67.3 (13)	69.1 (13)	67.2 (14)	69.9 (15)	72.0 (12)
Southern Europe	26.2 (4)	35.3 (4)	34.7 (6)	37.5 (6)	37.4 (5)	37.5 (6)	46.7 (6)	50.8 (6)
Eastern Europe	16.9 (3)	19.3 (3)	21.1 (5)	28.6 (5)	39.4 (6)	35.6 (11)	43.9 (10)	48.2 (10)
South America	15.7 (6)	16.1 (6)	19.3 (12)	22.3 (13)	27.9 (13)	30.4 (13)	37.2 (12)	40.7 (13)
Central America	10.4 (2)	17.5 (5)	20.0 (7)	21.0 (9)	23.6 (9)	25.2 (8)	29.1 (9)	33.7 (9)
Caribbean	22.1 (3)	24.3 (4)	31.2 (13)	41.5 (13)	48.3 (13)	43.4 (13)	52.6 (14)	59.0 (13)
Asia	8.1 (4)	11.2 (5)	12.0 (7)	13.7 (9)	14.1 (12)	16.9 (13)	22.8 (13)	30.6 (13)
Middle East/North Africa	n.a.	10.7 (2)	15.3 (3)	11.1 (6)	12.5 (8)	15.8 (10)	19.2 (12)	22.5 (13)
Sub-Saharan Africa	16.6 (2)	17.2 (3)	10.2 (5)	14.9 (12)	12.2 (18)	14.6 (21)	15.0 (26)	19.6 (25)
Totals	33.5	33.3	31.5	32.9	33.3	33.3	37.1	40.8
Number of cases	(40)	(49)	(75)	(91)	(103)	(115)	(123)	(120)

[a] The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of cases.

The expansion of mass education: 1870-1980

"…Countries in the old core were already approaching universal mass education by 1870. Thereafter, mass educational systems appeared at a rather steady rate around the world until World War II, with a sharp increase in the rate at that point."

Little evidence that national characteristics predict growth in primary enrollment ratios over time. Little (statistically significant) impact of urbanization, religious composition, independent status, racial composition, ethnolinguistic heterogeneity, political linkages, and year of compulsory schooling.

"Once countries enter the world of mass education, reporting some level of enrollment, growth is general--modified by floor and ceiling effects. Neither the properties suggested by traditional functional analyses nor the categories developed in a typology of polity linkage to world models make much difference. Countries move toward universal mass education at rates that vary, but do not vary much with the general predictive factors we have considered…"

The expansion of mass education, once formed, was endemic throughout the period, but rates of expansion increased after World War II. In the 1870-1940 period, expansion followed an S-shaped diffusion pattern, limited by floor and ceiling effects, as if education systems were growing on a societally engendered process within a supportive world context. After World War II, the same process continued, but an added force that applied everywhere (limited only by ceiling effects) gained strength-as if the world society itself was playing an immediately directive role

Source: Empirical evidence and main arguments found in: Meyer, J. W., Ramirez, F. O., & Soysal, Y. N. (1992) "World expansion of mass education, 1870–1980" *Sociology of Education*

II. Schools as 'institutional organizations'

Classic study: Early 1970s examination of organizational satisfaction and governance patterns in 30 San Francisco Bay Area school districts, which included surveys of 30 superintendents, 103 principals and 469 teachers

Researchers found:
- Educational reforms announced enthusiastically by leaders and authorities, but never actually carried out
- Many rules and regulations filled the file cabinets of school administrators, but few took much notice; teachers taught in the classrooms according to their own rules.
- State (California) and US federal funds flowed in and elaborate reports were sent out to give the appearance of compliance to regulations, but what went on in the classroom seemed little changed.
- In fact it seemed that outside authorities had little impact on what transpired in class: teacher-student interactions were little affected by the next classroom, by the teacher's training, by the school's principal

Sources: John Meyer and Brian Rowan 1977. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony" *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2): 340-63

An institutional theory of educational organizations

- According to traditional, rationalistic theories of organizations, schools are viewed as formal organizations; they construct a workable division of labor (hierarchy of authority), with specialized positions and specified tasks that are carried out by different people. Managers coordinate the system of work so that explicit (learning and teaching) objectives are accomplished.

- The lack of coordination, the inefficient chain of command, the non-compliance with state and federal standards, which the authors found in their study, should mean, acc. to traditional theory, that such organizations would fall apart and eventually fail or 'die' (like businesses in market). Such inefficient organizations should be rife with administrative conflicts, lack of consensus over appropriate school policies and many unhappy workers. But this simply was not the case in the schools studied: Schools rarely failed, personnel and programs were relatively stable, outside monies and resources continued to be allocated and school employees tended to be quite satisfied. How to explain this contradiction?

- Meyer and Rowan began elaborating an institutional theory of organizations. They argued that schools, like other institutional organizations, are judged not by their closely monitored output (what they produce), but rather by their form (internal structure), and the extent to which it conforms to important institutional rules in the environment. In conforming to such institutional rules, these organizations gain valuable resources and thus increase their potential for success and survival. In doing so they buffer or decouple their main activities and practices (teaching) from external scrutiny.

Schools as loosely coupled organizations conforming to institutional rules

- According to institutional theories of organizations, schools

- seek to maintain their legitimate status as schools to survive:

- they must be accredited, they hire teachers who are credentialed, they carefully assign students to classes which are organized in a sequence of grades that have standardized meaning throughout country, they teach a curriculum made up of subjects in standardized categories (reading math social studies, not cosmography, astrology, morality).

Thus, rather than tightly coordinating instruction in classrooms and output, schools spend much more time and energy conforming to various institutional rules: general cultural beliefs (what are appropriate teacher roles, what are legitimate subjects to teach), requirements enforced by occupational associations (tenure and seniority rules), mandates by state and federal governments (certification and accreditation requirements) as well as local or community standards (evolution theory vs creationism; climate change as science or not, sex education).

Schools conform because they know their survival and success depends on it. Schools don't fail if their instructional performance is abysmal, when kids get to high school or college but don't know how to read or write, when students don't internalize proper moral standards and become drug dealers of thieves. Rather they fail when their conformity to institutional rules is called into question. (not having credentialed teachers, not having correct special programs for gifted, disadvantaged, not segregating)

III. How does education affect society? The impact of education on societal outcomes

Conventional ways of describing the main impact of education on society:

1) **Socialization**: education maintains and passes on (transmits) a cultural heritage -- the accumulated knowledge of earlier generations (values, beliefs and norms);

2) **Training** (also a form of socialization): Basic education inculcates in young children basic skills (literacy and numeracy) and general cognitive capacities. Secondary and post-secondary institutions teach specific skills and bodies of knowledge, which in turn, increases the ability of young people to perform more effectively (more competently) the roles they will enter as adults in society and especially in the economy.

3) **Allocation**: schools represent the legitimate means by which individuals are allocated to work positions in labor market

Some scholars (functionalists) claim that schools allocate the most talented and capable individuals to the most important positions in society. Others (conflict theorists) argue that such allocation basically reproduces the class structure and power and authority of the dominant classes. Both agree that thorough allocation processes, education has an important impact on society.

See Figure 1

How does education affect society? The impact of education on societal outcomes

Neo-Institutional theory argues that the most important impact of education on society is by **classifying young people into socially meaningful, and institutionally embedded, categories with distinct social status**

Educational levels (primary, secondary, tertiary), school grades (1rst, 3rd, 9th, etc.), curricular tracks (e.g., academic, vocational, comprehensive) and academic disciplines (history, geography, physics, etc.) are all types of institutional categories, which, in and of themselves, denote differential social status. Of the various statuses individuals attain in the course of their productive lives, they acquire considerable social status based on the variety of institutionalized educational categories they pass through.

Most institutional categories are commonplace and confer minimal social status; others, however, denote statuses judged to carry significant positive or negative social value: a "college graduate", a "high school dropout", a "gifted seventh grader", a "special education pupil", and for a select few, a "doctor of philosophy".

While all schools confer commonplace statuses, some schools acquire the right to confer "special" statuses on their students -- a "certified public accountant", a "clinical psychologist" or a "master of business administration" -- each of which is codified in the formal educational credentials or diplomas they receive upon graduation. Special statuses, often due to the substantial market value they possess, mark those individuals who have acquired expertise in a field and who expect to be distinguished from others who have not attained similar credentials and who therefore cannot make such claims of expertise

How does education affect society? The impact of education on societal outcomes

Where do schools receive the authority to confer social status on their pupils and graduates? According to the neo-I approach, schools receive a charter (or socially defined mission) from a legitimate political authority in society -- frequently a central or federal state, but sometimes a colonial administration or religious organization -- to define and classify individuals in special ways. These charters specify, in effect, the labels (social statuses) that each educational institution can confer on those who pass through its classrooms.

Schools belong to a select group of institutions empowered and chartered by society to grant social status to individuals. This relatively exclusive societal mandate reflects the conviction that education is an efficient and legitimate way to allocate status in the modern world. Thus, an important effect of education lies in the power it holds to certify and sanction differences between groups, positions, statuses, and individuals based on their educational achievements and attainments, on the one hand, and the authority to create new positions and categories of status, on the other.

Furthermore, the categories that schools apply as well as the labels they confer are deeply embedded in wider institutional environments. Local schools are local in name only: they are tightly connected to rationally organized, national and international systems of education. In this sense, major educational categories such as classroom, grade, curricular track, ability group, school subject, curricular timetable, transcript, and credential carry broad symbolic meanings due to their strong institutional moorings. They are public in character, guided by notions of rationality and purposive action and modeled on nationally, as well as internationally, recognized entities, rather than local or particularistic ones.

Lines of Critique and Conclusions

Thank You!

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