



Education Policy Analysis
Archives/Archivos Analíticos de Políticas
Educativas

ISSN: 1068-2341

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Estados Unidos

Sobe, Noah W.; Boven, David T.
Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs as Accountability Systems: Scopic Systems, Audit
Practices and Educational Data
Education Policy Analysis Archives/Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas, vol. 22,
2014, pp. 1-18
Arizona State University
Arizona, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=275031898143>

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SPECIAL ISSUE
**The Comparative and International History
of School Accountability and Testing**

education policy analysis
archives

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open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 22 Number 118 December 8th, 2014

ISSN 1068-2341

**Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs as
Accountability Systems: Scopic Systems,
Audit Practices and Educational Data**

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Citation: Sobe, N. W., & Boven, D. T. (2014). Nineteenth-century world's fairs as accountability systems: Scopic Systems, Audit Practices and Educational Data. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(118). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22.1673>. This article is part of EPAA/AAPE's Special Issue on *The Comparative and International History of School Accountability and Testing*, Guest Co-Edited by Dr. Sherman Dorn and Dr. Christian Ydesen.

Abstract: Late-19th century World's Fairs constitute an important chapter in the history of educational accountability. International expositions allowed for educational systems and practices to be "audited" by lay and expert audiences. In this article we examine how World's Fair exhibitors sought to make visible educational practices and institutions for external validation. Focusing especially on the American education exhibits mounted at Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876), Chicago (1893), and Paris (1900), we use historical documents connected with the preparation of exhibits as well as reports written during and after the Fairs to bring to light the curatorial principles and exhibitionary practices governing education exhibits. This examination helps us to understand educational accountability mechanisms and procedures not simply as technical undertakings, but as social systems with an important set of effects. The scopic systems at play and in contestation for accurately and fairly presenting education systems

for outside scrutiny did much to shape the national/international contexts within which school systems operate as well as in what directions educators and policymakers sought to direct/redirect schooling.

Keywords: accountability; history of education; world's fairs; international expositions; audit practices; comparative education.

Las exposiciones mundiales del siglo XIX como sistemas educativos de rendición de cuentas: sistemas *escópicos*, prácticas de auditoría y datos educativos

Resumen: las exposiciones mundiales de finales del siglo XIX fueron un capítulo importante en la historia de los modelos de responsabilidad educativa. Las exposiciones mundiales han permitido que los sistemas y las prácticas educativas fueran "auditadas" por legos y expertos. En este artículo, examinamos cómo los expositores comerciales trataron de hacer visibles las prácticas educativas e instituciones para la validación externa. Con especial referencia a las exhibiciones educativas estadounidenses en Viena (1873), Filadelfia (1876), Chicago (1893) y París (1900), utilizamos documentos históricos relacionados con la preparación de exposiciones, así como informes escritos durante y después de las exposiciones para examinar los principios de las prácticas curatoriales y expositivas que rigen exhibiciones educativas. Esta prueba nos ayuda a entender los mecanismos y procedimientos de rendición de cuentas educativa no sólo como empresas técnicas, sino como sistemas sociales con un importante conjunto de efectos. Sistemas *escópicos* se pusieron en juego y desafiaron los modelos de presentación de los sistemas educativos para ser sometidos a un escrutinio externo, y contribuyeron mucho para dar forma a los contextos nacionales/internacionales en los que operan los sistemas educativos, así como las direcciones en las que los educadores y los políticos trataron de dirigir y redirigir la educación.

Palabras clave: modelos de rendición de cuentas; historia de la educación; ferias mundiales; exposiciones internacionales; prácticas de auditoría; educación comparada.

Feiras mundiais do século XIX como sistemas de responsabilidade educacional: sistemas *Scópicos*, práticas de auditoria e dados educacionais

Resumo: Feiras mundiais do fim do século XIX constituíram um importante capítulo na história dos modelos de responsabilidade educacional. Exposições internacionais permitiram que os sistemas e práticas educativas fossem "auditadas" por leigos e especialistas. Neste artigo, vamos examinar como expositores de feiras do mundo procuraram fazer visíveis práticas educativas e instituições para validação externa. Com especial destaque para as exposições de ensino americanas montadas em Viena (1873), Filadélfia (1876), Chicago (1893) e Paris (1900), utilizamos documentos históricos relacionados com a preparação de exposições, assim como relatórios escritos durante e depois das Feiras trazer à luz os princípios de curadorias e práticas de exibição que regem exposições educativas. Este exame nos ajuda a entender os mecanismos e procedimentos de responsabilização educacional não apenas como empresas técnicas, mas como sistemas sociais com um importante conjunto de efeitos. Os sistemas escópicos em jogo e em contestação pela apresentação precisa e justa dos sistemas de ensino para escrutínio externo fez muito para moldar os contextos nacionais / internacionais dentro do qual operam os sistemas de ensino, bem como em que direções educadores e formuladores de políticas procuraram direcionar / redirecionar a escolarização.

Palavras-chave: prestação de contas; história da educação; feiras mundiais; exposições internacionais; práticas de auditoria; educação comparada.

It is widely recognized by scholars that the World's Fairs of the late 19th century were important sites where cultural behaviors and expectations were formulated and policed – and

also that the Fairs played an important role in the development of “modern” social and institutional structures, inclusive of schooling (Dittrich, 2010, 2013; Lawn, 2009; Sobe, 2004). Less recognized, however, are the ways that education exhibits at World’s Fairs functioned as educational accountability systems. In this paper we examine the idea that these expositions can be considered to compose a “global scopic system” (Knorr-Cetina, 2008; Sobe & Ortégón, 2009; Sobe, 2013). Our focus here is on the ways that World’s Fairs functioned like a prisms that focused light and attention on very carefully smoothed-out spaces of visibility. World’s Fairs allowed for educational systems and practices to be “audited” by lay and expert audiences. This ambiguous dual presentation of an education system to both policymakers and the general public, as well as the international frame of reference in which it occurred, makes the late-19th century World’s Fairs (i.e., Vienna 1873, Philadelphia 1876, Chicago 1893, Paris 1900) an important chapter in the history of educational accountability. Conceptualizing the education exhibits at 19th-century World’s Fairs as “accountability systems” helps us understand accountability systems in education today.

The education exhibits at World’s Fairs could include a sometimes-jumbled assortment of objects, documents and information. Exhibitors – whether nations, states/provinces, and occasionally cities or particular institutions – might showcase schoolhouse architecture, design, and ventilation systems; textbooks and other printed matter; globes, maps and other didactic devices; school desks and other items of furniture; as well as maps, charts, graphs, and posters that illustrated various educational aspects such as teacher training, the provisions for centralized and/or local administrative supervision, the geographic distribution of schools, and so forth. At the same time, exhibitors jockeyed with each other – both within a given exposition and across different expositions as they followed one another over the years – to present the most convincing, most reliable and most impressive illustrations of their education systems. The Fairs themselves were enormous international “spectacles” (e.g., Hoffenberg, 2001; Mitchell, 1991; Rydell, 1984) that can be considered quite purposeful social and cultural projections / productions. While exhibits might at times appeal to the emotions and the senses (Sobe, 2004), they focused on spectatorship and the deliberate projection of a museum-going type of visual experience.

In this paper we examine how World’s Fair exhibits sought to make visible educational practices and institutions for external validation. In order to do this we examine documents connected with the preparation of exhibits as well as reports written during and after the Fairs. We are particularly interested in the curatorial principles and exhibitionary practices that governed the education exhibits at this particular series of World’s Fairs. Our research has found that there was considerable variability in the kinds of objects, documents and information that was favored at particular moments across time. Yet, spanning this variety was an over-arching preoccupation with how best to make schooling visible. Below we will discuss several themes that emerge from our primary source data, including: (1) a tendency to talk about standardization and uniformity via quantification, (2) an on-going conversation about whether exhibits should feature educational products or educational processes, (3) a preoccupation with the question of sampling and whether exhibitors should aim to present the highest quality work or should aim for representativeness in their sampling, and (4) an overall emphasis on performativity, which was embedded in the widely circulating notion that if an exhibit *looked* good, that meant that schools *were* good. It is on the basis of all of these factors, the last one in particular, that we propose that the making-visible undertaken in nineteenth-century World’s Fair education exhibits can be catalogued under the heading of audit and accountability systems.

Rethinking Accountability Systems

In contemporary educational research literature it is common to encounter the notion that policymakers, the educational bureaucracy and educational researchers need to work together to better implement “accountability systems” (e.g. Linn, 2003). Nonetheless, when we use the term “accountability system” in this paper it is not outcome measures, process variables and data-driven analysis that we are indexing. Instead, we are interested in thinking about the ways that educational accountability systems work as social systems which function in particular ways with particular effects (Sobe, 2012).

In approaching accountability as a social system we draw on the work of Michael Power (1994) who has offered a very compelling analysis of the explosion of audit practices in Britain at the end of the 20th century, remarking that this has involved:

...the spread of a distinct mentality of administrative control, a pervasive logic which has a life over and above specific practices. One crucial aspect of this is that many more individuals and organizations are coming to think of themselves as subjects of audit. (Power, 1994, p. 3)

Auditing practices emerge, Power proposes, “when accountability can no longer be sustained by informal relations of trust alone but must be formalized, made visible and subject to independent validation” (pp. 9-10). In an anthropological mode, he (1997, p. 123) also refers to auditing as a “ritual of verification,” a characterization since taken up by many scholars. Shore and Wright proposed in 2000 that in the UK auditing had migrated across diverse domains much in the manner of what Raymond Williams would refer to as a keyword. It had become the “centre of a new semantic cluster” (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 60) and exploded beyond its financial meaning to factor into the operations of a wide range of social institutions. In the US and in other settings it is accountability that is more popularly the master concept that describes and prescribes a particular mentality of administrative control. Yet there is a basic overlap in the ways that “accountability” has become ritualized, encapsulated in culture, and has emerged as a “commonsense” way of doing things. In fact, as education researchers like Taylor Webb (2005, 2006) have pointed out, the relational aspect of accountability (i.e., someone being held responsible for something) fades from the scene with surprising frequency. Though we judge this to be a travesty, in this paper we fixate on the ways that accountability so often collapses into a set of technical procedures, which – while they may not be linked to a democratic politics of holding decision-makers responsible – still do the tremendously consequential “political” work of establishing norms, constructing subjectivities and helping to establish what is and is not possible. Our aim is that a more accurate diagnosis of the politics of accountability will facilitate more effective and more democratic interventions on the part of educators, policymakers and researchers.

While they were of a different order, we are proposing that the educational exhibits at World’s Fairs worked as audit and accountability “rituals of verification” in their own right. In place of the present-day mentality of administrative control that is disseminated in and through auditing/accountability practices (and is often labeled as “neoliberal”), Fairs can be seen as spreading ideas about modernity and what it meant to be properly modern. In his description of the education exhibits at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition Robert H. Bancroft, author of the Chicago Fair’s official history, declared:

Here may be compared the systems of countries many thousands of miles apart, the systems developed under autocratic and republican rule, denominational systems with those of the state, all grouped within a few thousand yards of space, and yet

presenting a clearer illustration of methods, appliances, and results than could be obtained from an extended tour of the world. (Bancroft, 1893, p. 252)

By bringing the distant and disparate into the same space and onto the same plane of visibility, the international Expositions of the late 19th century generated the matrices of comparative gestures that so powerfully informed the “reflexive modernization” endeavors of the era.

The early history of the field of comparative education, from the 17th through the mid-19th century, is one dominated by travelers’ accounts where summaries of education systems in different lands were compiled – even, at times, according to pre-specified and standardized lists of questions (Sobe, 2002). By the end of the 19th century, taking an international comparative and an empirically-grounded stance towards studying and reforming school systems had become diffused beyond an elite world of specialists. The exhibit halls of the international expositions form an often overlooked chapter in the history of comparative education, the examination of which makes our present era of global rankings, benchmarkings and international educational comparisons seem less anomalous and novel than it is sometimes taken to be. In like manner, the international Expositions form an important chapter in the comparative history of accountability in education – in that World’s Fairs themselves were an educational accountability mechanism of considerable significance in shaping schooling and school reform/modernization projects around the globe at the close of the 19th century.

Producing Education Exhibits / Producing Accounts of Schooling

We have examined the curatorial principles and exhibitionary practices that guided those presenting at each of the major international Expositions held over the period 1873 to 1900, placing special emphasis on the American exhibits that were mounted at each Fair. A key concern across these three decades was how to make visible the operations of school systems and institutions for external validation. Though there were similarities and intense cross-referencing across the different events, no absolute agreement was reached on what precisely where the best ways to create accounts of schooling. What might be most noteworthy, however, is the impulse to render educational arrangements and practices auditable that pervades nearly all discussions of educational exhibits at World’s Fairs. This impulse was notable in four distinct themes that we found in the primary sources. First, there was a tendency to talk about standardization and uniformity via information on educational systems that was in some ways quantifiably, or able to be expressed with numbers. Second, we observe an ongoing conversation about whether exhibits should feature the “products” or outcomes of schools or the “processes” and methods by which and through which different schools operated. Third, in instances where a decision was made to present educational products/outcomes, exhibitors became preoccupied with the question of how to select “results”. A common debate, for example, was whether an exhibit should present the highest quality work or a representative sample of student work. Fourth, throughout these World’s Fair education exhibits we witness an overarching emphasis on performativity and a conscious styling of education exhibits as an arena of performance in and of themselves that – as we see echoed in many contemporary international standardized testing projects – became increasingly divorced from actual educational practices and problems.

Numbers and the Quantification of Education Systems

One of the themes that emerged from our primary source data was a tendency to talk about standardization and uniformity of educational systems via quantification and statistical analysis. This

was perhaps most evident at the *Weltausstellung* in Vienna in 1873. The organizers of “Group 26” requested exhibitors to present “all the arrangements and contrivances for the better nursing, training, and rearing of children” including the “history and statistics of a school” (Van Buren, 1872, pp. 22-23). This collection of statistical information was of great interest to the organizers of the educational group because it was seen as the best way to make plain the “great diversity which exists relative to the arrangements for public instruction in different [nation-]states” (Eaton, 1873, p. 52). In addition to school furniture, sanitary treatments, samples of penmanship, textbooks, and newspapers dealing with education, those developing the group asked states to bring statistics for – and models of – anything that could not be physically conveyed to Vienna (Eaton, 1872). However, each nation appears to have internally organized and selected their exhibit materials in a different manner. Only the host country’s exhibit seems to have fully seized on the importance of presenting statistical data to exhibition visitors. In Austria the *Weltausstellung* statistical formulary was distributed at the level of individual schools and passed up the administrative chain through district and national officials, with proper calculations performed at each step along the way (Eaton, 1873). Fussell (1874) notes that only Hungary and Austria actually presented statistics concerning enrollments and types of schools nationwide.

In Chicago in 1893, the avowed goal of the World's Columbian Exposition's organizers was to provide a comprehensive collection of educational items to Fair visitors. The exposition’s official history claimed that never before had a greater selection of “specimens, descriptions, apparatus, models, and programs pertaining to every grade and class of education, from the kindergarten to the university, and to schools of medicine, law, and the mechanic arts” been brought together (Bancroft, 1893, p. 233). The chief of the education department at the 1893 Fair, Selim Peabody, seems to have been “unimpressed by many national efforts to show the qualitative advantages of their educational systems” (Education at the World's Columbian Exposition, 1896, p. 456). In agreement with the general sentiment Peabody expressed, many exhibitors decided to focus less on student work and instead display the quantitative improvement of their educational statistics over time. The display from the state of California, for example, consisted almost entirely of statistical charts. These showed the increases in student enrollment, teacher salaries, school expenditures, and the value of school properties that had developed between 1860 and 1892 (Final report of the California world's fair commission, 1894). Not surprisingly, the Californian representatives saw these statistics as being indicative of great improvements being made.

This focus on statistical data continued through the turn of the 20th century. At the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, the American exhibitors put a great deal of effort into their statistical presentations, arguing that this was the primary way that the objective superiority of American education could be established (Draper, 1900). Butler’s (1900) description of American education at the *Exposition Universelle* showcases statistical tables that compared the United States and European countries with regard to the school-aged population, the size of land grant universities, and a host of other data. For example, he noted that the United States federal government had given away more acreage to Land Grant universities than the entire area of Austria and Moldova combined (p. xvi).

Products or Processes

Another theme that became apparent in looking at these primary sources was an on-going conversation about whether exhibits should feature educational products or the educational processes that produced them. The Austrian organizers of Vienna’s 1873 *Weltausstellung* asked that in addition to statistics and quantitative data, exhibitors present “school-houses and school apparatus; ... exhibitions of means of instruction, ... [and] methods of instruction” (Van Buren, 1872, pp. 22-

23). They were attempting to strike a balance between these two foci. From the extensive report of the Canadian commissioner (Fussell, 1874) we learn much about the educational exhibits of participating nations, and it turns out that most seem to have focused on presenting the superior features of their education systems not through the work produced by students but rather through the presentation of equipment, books, and architecture. From the quotidian benches on which elementary students sat to the textbooks used in classroom lessons, exhibitors tried to provide a complete picture of the state of educational progress in their respective nations by showing to tools used in the production of educated students. In fact, many of the exhibitors at Vienna found shortcomings in each other's displays when they did not focus enough on the *process*. For example, in his assessment of fine art education in the United States, Austrian commentator J. Langi noted that several "of the higher schools in New York exhibited framed drawings ... but they did not illustrate the method of instruction" (cited in Thurston, 1876, p. 452). There was a clear conflict between those who wanted to see demonstrations of educational processes and those who wanted to see the final products of educational endeavor.

The 1873 Vienna exposition was a direct reference point for the organizers of the 1876 International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine, commonly referred to as the Centennial Exhibition and held in Philadelphia. In the domain of education, the commissioners of Group XXVIII envisioned a program that would outdo the presentations mounted in Vienna three years earlier. As at Vienna, each participating nation again interpreted the requests of the Centennial Exhibition's organizers differently. In November 1875, the Chief Superintendent of Education of Ontario had his office send a circular to inspectors and school trustees across the province urging the submission of student work to show the *products* of education. At the same time, he asked for photographs of school buildings, examples of educational apparatus, globes, and models of school buildings (Hodgins, 1877). Putting the focus much more clearly on the process, the delegation charged with preparing the United States educational exhibit at Philadelphia specifically requested historical accounts of American colleges and universities, sample grant and endowment applications, maps and plans of grounds and buildings, information on college societies, as well as information on ways that laboratories and observatories functioned (Walker, 1880). Generally speaking the American exhibit was seen as a great success. The Canadian delegate reported that the Canadian 1876 exhibit was comparatively small and consisted primarily of simple examples of pupils' work and photographs of school buildings rather than the more grand models and apparatuses that had been requested (Hodgins, 1877, p. 10). In their own appraisal, Canadian exhibitors had been unable to find the right balance between showing educational products and educational processes. Similarly, the United Kingdom's exhibit included some photographs of London schools, writing frames for the blind, examples of school registers, "a few maps, and a solitary example of calligraphy, which last did not arrive" (Reed, 1877, p. 300).

For the Chicago exhibition of 1893, much leeway was given for individual American states to produce their own displays as they saw fit. In New Jersey, organizers made it clear that they wanted a full complement of photographs and plans of school buildings, disciplinary and instructional aids, lesson plans, textbooks, and student work in all areas of education (Catalogue and report of special committee, 1894, pp. 6-8). When the exhibition was finally mounted, some complained that the Americans focused too heavily on student work. The display of Norwegian education in Chicago was far less concerned with showing the work that students were producing. Instead, Norway's material included instructional materials used by teachers, textbooks, and educational furniture – with no mention at all of any student work displayed (Catalogue of the exhibit of Norway, 1893). As mentioned earlier, Selim Peabody, the chief of the education department at the Chicago Fair regarded the "written examination papers, themes, and drawings" presented at the fair as

“worthless” for demonstrating the superiority of an educational system (Education at the World's Columbian Exposition, 1896, p. 456).

At the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, many of the exhibitors seem to have felt that the best way to demonstrate the quality of their systems was through a presentation of their school buildings. According to Morrison (1900) these buildings “were an infallible index of the educational status of the community in which they were located” (p. 411). The American exhibit, on the other hand, placed great emphasis on the modernization and democratization of schooling. These exhibitors were proud that “education, once the peculiar privilege of the few, must in our best earthly estate become the valued possession of the many” (Adams, 1900, pp. 830-831). They felt that the product—a democratic citizenry—was more important than methods and apparatuses used.

The Best Examples or Representative, Average Examples

Once exhibitors made a decision to include, or focus on, the products of educational systems, they were faced with the question of what student work to include. Sources show a preoccupation among exhibit organizers with the question of sampling. Some seemed convinced that exhibits should aim to present the highest quality work that students in a system could produce. Others aimed for a representative sample of student work across ability levels. At the Vienna *Weltausstellung*, for example, the Swiss delegation first collected the best material that their students produced for a preliminary national exhibition of education that was held in Winterthur in February 1873. The best of this material was then shipped *en masse* to Vienna and partially unpacked for the exhibition, which began in May (Hodgins, 1877).

Three years later at Philadelphia, American exhibitors felt that a different approach was more appropriate. According to J.P. Wickersham, Pennsylvania Superintendent of Education and a leading force both behind the Centennial Exposition and the Pennsylvania contribution to the American exhibits, the goal “must be a full, fair, and systematic representation of American Education” (as quoted in Hodgins, 1877, p. 9). He did not think that a display showing only the best of the best would be beneficial to those visiting the Centennial Exhibition. The American delegation desired a display that was wholly representative of the nation's system of education and the US educational exhibit space in Philadelphia was organized on a state by state basis (Stockwell, 1877). This does not seem to have been perfectly realized and Walker (1880), in describing the exhibits put on by many US states, laments that none of them actually did provide a full representation of the state's education system.

At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the American educational establishment focused much more on providing examples of the best work that American students could produce. For the state of New Jersey, a strict chain of command was put in place to select student work for the exposition. Teachers were first supposed to select the best examples from their classes to send to principals. Principals sent the best of these selections to their district superintendents who then sent the best work to the state committee. The members of this committee then, presumably, made the final decision about what to include in the New Jersey exhibit (Catalogue and report of special committee, 1894). At every level, quality was deemed to be more important than quantity and teachers were encouraged to not collect materials “until the work of the term is well advanced, in order that better results may be secured” (p. 10). In some US states, the organizers did not simply take the best examples of student work to Chicago. Instead, teachers had students produce material specifically to be considered for inclusion in the World's Fair (Catalogue and report of special committee, 1894, pp. 8-11). The German display, on the other hand, attempted to show ordinary school work. Bancroft (1893) noted that the German “collections are specimens of pupils' work, not

specially prepared for the purpose, but selected as a fair illustration of what is being accomplished in the various school departments, including the manual training schools” (p. 241). Rather than showing the best of the best, the German delegation intended to show the average German school experience.

Performance and Perfecting the Art of the Exhibition

The final theme that presented itself in our analysis of the primary materials on the organization of world's fair education exhibits was an overall emphasis on performativity. This was embedded in the widely-circulating notion that if an exhibit itself looked good, ipso facto, the schools being presented *were* good. In Vienna, this was evident in the presentations made by several countries of full-scale models of school houses. The American schoolhouse attracted considerable attention. Several Austrian educationists condemned the American display saying that it was not properly a schoolhouse, but only a single school-room, adding that “not even the smallest community in Europe could use a school-house built after the model exhibited” (Thurston, 1876, p. 442). Others were more charitable in their assessments of the American country school building. The report of F. de Tschudi from Switzerland described it as “remarkable by the extremely practical character and by the careful attention which the North American pays to everything connected with the school” (Thurston, 1876, p. 482). M.E. Levasseur's description of the American schoolhouse for his French audience mentioned that the Americans saw themselves on the cutting edge of pedagogical science in their promotion of coeducation. He noted that the schoolhouse “had two entrances, one for the boys and the other for the girls; each sex occupying one of the sides of the room, for in the United States the instruction is given to the two sexes in common, the Americans seeing in this mingling a cause of emulation” (Thurston, 1876, p. 351). In presenting their schoolhouse for public audit, the Americans were trying – with mixed results – to show that their schoolhouses were objectively good.

For the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, these performative aspects of the displays were no less important. Again, Walker (1880) noted that none of the exhibits put on by many US states gave a full representation of a state education system. In his view, the problem stemmed from a lack of sufficient pressure from national organizers to get the job done correctly (p. 5). Other countries seem to have included materials in their exhibits that went above and beyond the exhibition classes designated by the Philadelphia organizers. At the same time, it was noted by at least one commentator that there were several countries which were represented in other sections of the exhibition, but which did not exhibit any educational material in Group XXVIII (Walker, 1880). The impressiveness of the exposition displays themselves was a key concern and Walker offered a scathing critique of Austria-Hungary's exhibit which was particularly limited given the “magnificent display” (p. 99) that had been presented in Vienna three years earlier. This was in contrast to the United States which was seen as having presented a fine exhibit in Philadelphia and, thus demonstrated that it had a fine educational system (Reed, 1877).

At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago much effort was again put into perfecting the performative aspect of national displays of education. The U.S. state of Michigan had hoped to mount a presentation organized strictly along the lines of age groups and development. However, the larger cities of the state refused to participate in the display unless their contributions were broken out and they were able to show their work separately. In the end, the Michigan organizers relented and their exhibit was much more fragmented than they had initially hoped. They were worried that this was seen not just as a poor exhibit, but as a reflection of a deficient system of education in the state (Weston, 1899, p.165). Outside of the public school system, the organizers of

the American Catholic education exhibit wanted to “make the best possible use of this most favorable occasion to show the world what the Catholics in the United States are doing for education. ... Such an exhibit as the Catholic schools can make will surely serve to enlighten the public and to allay prejudice” (Maurelian, 1894, p. 14). America's Catholic school administrators deliberately sought to present materials that would show that the system shepherded by teachers scraping by on meager parochial salaries was just as good as those receiving larger state paychecks.

The chief goal of the American exhibitors at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris was to demonstrate that America's national educational system – so far as a disparate collection of state educational systems could be called national – was objectively as good as, if not better than, that of any other country (Butler, 1900). The US educational exhibits in Paris were bold and start in their claims that the representation and performative display linked to an empirical reality of superior educational practices.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to make clear how education exhibits at a set of late-nineteenth-century World's Fair exhibits (Vienna 1873, Philadelphia 1876, Chicago 1893, Paris 1900) sought to make visible educational practices and institutions for external validation. We have found that the curatorial principles and exhibitionary practices that governed the education exhibits at these World's Fairs exhibited a trend towards quantification. We also find that the question of whether to focus on “processes” or “results” and whether, within the category of results, the student work should be exemplary work or representative work were persistent, unresolved questions. Finally, we find an exhibitionary culture that made the conscious styling of education exhibits as an arena of performance and competition in and of itself. Countries mounting education exhibits at late-19th century World's Fairs inserted their education systems into an international comparative “house of mirrors” where the representation of a presumed educational “reality” ricocheted across national and international audiences. In a striking similarity to what we see happening today, the self-referentiality of comparing one exhibit-performance to a previous fair's exhibit-performance meant that in certain respects, to borrow language from Knorr-Cetina (2008), there were at least some observers/participants who increasingly directed their attention to the reflected or represented reality over actual embodied, pre-reflective experience and knowledge.

All in all, we have argued that education exhibits at World's Fairs can be considered an important, early form of educational accountability. This is not because of any relational, democratic politics of accountability (of someone of some institution being “accountable” to anyone else or any other but rather because it is important, we propose, to understand the ways that accountability functions as a social system. Of course there are many significant differences between the educational accountability systems perpetuated via late-nineteenth-century international expositions and what we see occurring at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In our view there is increasing awareness today that auditing/accountability practices are not simply passive and “neutral” forms of observation and measurement but that they shape the standards of performance, that they profoundly shape the activities of educational institutions and even that they construct the very contexts within which they operate (e.g., Hursh, 2005; Lindblad & Zambeta. 2002; Ozga, 2009; Ranson, 2003; Rose, 1996; Sobe, 2012; Suspitsyna, 2010). We see that schooling, learning and pedagogy are increasingly being designed to be monitorable and calculable (Taubman, 2009). Above we have shown that similar, if less intense and less compressed, compulsions shaped the production of student work and the gathering of statistical educational knowledge at the end of the 19th century.

Inasmuch as accountability systems can be understood as social systems we can study the comparative history of accountability in education by examining the history of audit practices when schooling practices and systems were submitted for independent validation. We have argued here that the World's Fairs of the end of the 19th century were one such site where education was submitted for independent validation. Then, as now, the scopic systems at play – and in contestation – for accurately, “representatively” presenting education systems for examination did much to shape the national/international contexts within which school systems operate as well as in what directions educators and policymakers sought to direct/redirect schooling.

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SPECIAL ISSUE
The Comparative and International History
of School Accountability and Testing

education policy analysis archives

Volume 22 Number 118

December 8th, 2014

ISSN 1068-2341



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