

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NATIONAL SCHOOL CURRICULA:
EVIDENCE FROM ARGENTINA AND CHILE, 1860-1970

August 2018 — First Draft

Jennifer L. Guevara†
(Universidad de
San Andres)

Agustina S. Paglayan*
(University of California,
San Diego)

Camila Perez Navarro‡
(Universidad Catolica
de Chile)

Why do some governments put more emphasis on teaching math and science skills than others? We examine the political factors shaping the formation of national curriculum policies for primary schools and the Normal Schools in charge of training teachers in Argentina and Chile from 1860 to 1970. Drawing on all the laws and degrees regulating the curriculum over time, we construct a novel indicator of curriculum content consisting of the ratio of officially-mandated hours devoted to math and science vs. hours devoted to values education (moral, civic, and/or religious education). We find that, despite their many similarities, Argentina and Chile chose very different curriculum policies during the foundational stages of public schooling in the nineteenth century, and exhibited different trajectories over time, with Chile increasing, and Argentina decreasing, the relative emphasis given to math and science during the twentieth century. Using primary and secondary sources, we find that the political power of the Catholic Church, and its dependence on primary schools to reach the masses, are important determinants of the degree to which the curriculum emphasizes math and science versus values. We also uncover three dynamics that have received little attention in previous research. First, we find that the decision to emphasize math and science in primary and Normal schools may have little to do with the goal of promoting economic development, skills, or social mobility, even if these are possible by-products. Second, teacher unions, when politically autonomous, can be an important driver behind education reforms that increase the weight of math and science in the curriculum. Third, under certain conditions, labor parties may, paradoxically, have an incentive to de-emphasize the acquisition of skills in the classroom.

† Visiting Professor, School of Education, Universidad de San Andres; Affiliated Research, CONICET.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and GPS, University of California, San Diego. Corresponding author (apaglayan@ucsd.edu).

‡ Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile.

Comments welcome. Agustina S. Paglayan thanks the Stanford Center on Global Poverty and Development for funding data collection for this project (research grant AABHE-1160882).

Introduction

The international development community faces a sobering reality: although almost all countries have attained universal primary education, hundreds of millions of children worldwide exit school “without the skills for calculating the correct change from a transaction, reading a doctor’s instructions, or interpreting a campaign promise” (World Bank 2018: 3). This so-called global learning crisis has motivated a vast economics of education literature that, seeking to understand why some education systems are more conducive to the acquisition of skills than others, has focused on identifying what education policies help promote student achievement.¹ But education policies are only proximate causes of learning. The real question is why some countries have policies that are more conducive to the acquisition of skills than others. This is, fundamentally, a political science question. Governments impact the degree to which schooling translates into the acquisition of skills through the choice of public policies that determine how teachers are trained and recruited, the length of the school year and school day, the content of the curriculum, and other consequential policy choices. These choices reflect the balance of power between political actors with competing interests—a balance determined partly by the political institutions that enable different actors to pursue their interests.

Although there is increasing awareness about the centrality of politics in shaping education policy and educational quality, there are many gaps in our understanding of *how* politics shapes education policy choices. This is largely due to the paucity of comparative politics research focusing on education (Gift and Wibbels 2014). Most existing studies seek to explain variations in school enrollment rates and education spending levels (e.g., Brown 1999; Stasavage 2005; Ansell 2010). These studies say little about the political economy of skills formation and human capital, because enrollment

¹ For literature reviews, see World Bank (2018) and Ganimian and Murnane (2016).

rates and education spending are poorly correlated with the level of skills in the population (Paglayan 2018). Only a few studies examine the sources of variation in other outcomes besides enrollment rates and spending. Ansell and Lindvall (2013) seek to explain cross-country differences in the degree of centralization across primary education systems, whether the Church was involved in managing primary schools, and whether the state subsidized private primary education. While these are important markers of how educational authority is distributed, none of these institutional dimensions has clear implications for the development of skills. Studies stemming from the varieties of capitalism literature highlight the role of employers in the emergence of technical-vocational education and training (TVET) systems and the formation of skills at the tertiary education level (Thelen 2004; Estevez-Abe, Iversen and Soskice 2001).² However, we know very little about the political factors that shape the formation of skills in primary education—the level of education that is most widely accessible, and which provides foundations for all subsequent learning.³

In this paper, we seek to increase our understanding of how politics shapes education policies that influence the mass formation of skills. To do so, we focus on explaining a set of policy choices that directly influence what students learn: the content of primary education and the training of primary school teachers as determined by national curricula for primary schools and Normal Schools in charge of training primary school teachers. Political debates over the content of the curriculum are essentially a battle over the goals of schooling and the values that should be transmitted massively. For this

² TVET takes place mostly at the tertiary education level, and therefore affects a minority of the population even in countries that have well-developed TVET systems such as Germany. According to World Bank statistics, only about 18% of secondary school students are enrolled in technical-vocational schools in Germany (the remaining 82% are enrolled in general education). By contrast, 90% of tertiary education students are in technical-vocational programs, but only 50% of the population has access to tertiary education to begin with.

³ A large neuroscientific literature establishes that the period from birth to the age of 8 years is the most important for the development of neural networks that affect lifelong learning (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). This means that, in principle, preschools play a key role in shaping skills. However, even today, for most individuals the first formal educational experience is primary education, which begins between the ages of 5-7 depending on the country.

reason, few education policy decisions have been as contentious as those concerning the curriculum, especially at the primary education level. Historically, important debates took place about what specific set of values should be taught by primary schools, and what the balance should be between teaching skills versus inculcating common values and beliefs. These debates, how they were resolved, and why they were resolved as they were, are the focus of our study.

To conduct our study of the politics of national curriculum policies, we focus on Argentina and Chile, two countries that, despite similar colonial legacies, cultural roots, state capacity, and aggregate income levels, nonetheless exhibit considerable differences in international standardized tests of student achievement. Today, Argentine students perform much worse than Chilean ones, again despite these countries' roughly equivalent income levels (OECD 2014).⁴ Moreover, up until the mid-twentieth century, education experts considered the Argentine public school system to be among the best in the region alongside Uruguay and Costa Rica's systems, whereas Chile did not come anywhere close. Our hope is that by investigating the historical evolution of curriculum policy choices in both countries, we can shed some light on the political roots behind current differences in skills.

Our analysis proceeds in two parts. First, we assemble all relevant national laws, decrees and regulations establishing what subjects must be taught, and how many hours must be devoted to each subject, for both primary schools and Normal Schools, throughout the entire history of public schools systems in Argentina and Chile. Using these documents, we construct an indicator of the relative emphasis given to teaching skills versus values. Regardless of the degree to which these official mandates were implemented at the classroom, they give us valuable information about the intentions of policymakers designing national education systems for the masses.

⁴ E.g., according to PISA 2012, 66% of Argentine high-school students have poor math skills compared to 50% of Chilean students.

The descriptive analysis reveals two main patterns that are the starting point for the second part of our paper. First, we identify stark cross-country differences in educational content during the initial stages of public schooling, with Argentina’s curricula placing much more emphasis on skills (versus values) compared to Chile. Second, we identify critical junctures during the twentieth century that altered the trajectory of national curricula in both countries. We use primary and secondary sources to explain these initial differences in national curriculum policy choices (Section 4) and the reforms that took place in the twentieth century (Section 5).

We find that the political power of the Catholic Church and whether it depended on primary schools to reach the masses, together help explain the degree to which the national curriculum emphasizes math and science versus values. We also uncover three dynamics that have received little attention in previous research. First, we find that the decision to emphasize math and science in primary and Normal schools may have little to do with the goal of promoting economic development, skills, or social mobility, even if these are possible by-products. Second, teacher unions, when politically autonomous, can be an important driver behind education reforms that increase the weight of math and science in the curriculum. Third, under certain conditions, labor parties may, paradoxically, have an incentive to de-emphasize the acquisition of skills in the classroom. In Section 6, we discuss the implications of our findings for a large literature in comparative education and for the emerging literature on the comparative politics of education policymaking.

2 Schools, Values, and Skills

When thinking about what schools do, and how that is reflected in the content of the curriculum, it is useful to classify the kinds of things that schools teach into two groups: skills and values. We define “skills” as knowledge, practical or abstract, that increases individual productivity and therefore has the potential to improve individual prosperity.

We define “values” as the beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors that form part of an individual’s character.^{5,6} Today, the idea that schools should teach skills that enable individuals to live prosperous lives is usually taken for granted, but this was not always so. During the early stages of state-controlled education provision, much emphasis was placed on teaching values. Schools, for instance, played a role in creating a common culture, forging a national identity and patriotic attitudes, disseminating a uniform language, and socializing the masses into specific values and beliefs to serve societal more than individual goals (Weber 1976; Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; De Swaan 1988; Laitin 1992; Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006; Paglayan 2017). This was true in autocracies and in democracies—primary schools sought to teach individuals how to be good subjects and good citizens.

Because school time is limited, there is a trade-off between how much time can be devoted to teaching skills vs. values. Understanding what leads policymakers to emphasize one more than the other is the goal of this study. The content of education is shaped by multiple actors, including those who influence the design of national curriculum plans, those in charge of developing textbooks, and those teachers and school principals who have varying levels of incentives and ability (qualifications and autonomy) to implement official curricula. We focus specifically on the design of national curriculum plans for primary schools and Normal Schools, and leave for future research an analysis of the factors that affect the fidelity of implementation. Our focus on these plans follows prior work by Benavot et.al. (1991), and we share their view that these plans provide, at the very least, important information about the knowledge *intended* to be transmitted by schools to the mass population.

⁵ The distinction, we think, is analytically useful, although we recognize that, in practice, the teaching of skills and values is often intertwined.

⁶ Of course, our definition of “values” includes some attitudes and behaviors that may be helpful for promoting peace or a hard-working labor force, both of which may support economic development. From this perspective, our definition of “skills” would correspond to cognitive skills, while “values” would refer to non-cognitive skills.

Political economists have devoted some attention to the content of primary education, especially the dissemination of what we refer to as values. Much has been written about the process of emergence of a unifying national language and the state's role in spreading that language through a system of primary schools following a national curriculum imposed from the center to the periphery (Weber 1976; Gellner 1983; De Swaan 1988; Laitin 1992). The role of primary schools in constructing the notion of a shared national identity, disseminating a common culture, and instilling specific values and beliefs to legitimize the state has also received considerable attention (Weber 1976; Anderson 1983), with interest in this function of schooling reemerging in recent years (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006; Alesina and Reich 2013; Aghion et.al. 2014; Cantoni et.al. 2017; Paglayan 2017, 2018; Bandiera et.al. 2018). Finally, cross-national differences in the emphasis given to teaching specific as opposed to general skills in secondary and tertiary education institutions have been examined in the context of the varieties of capitalism literature (Thelen 2004; Estevez-Abe, Iversen and Soskice 2001). While important, none of these literatures say much about whether there are cross-national differences in the *balance* given to teaching values vs. skills, and if there are, what are the political origins behind those different approaches to education.

The most comprehensive studies of educational content stem from the work of sociologists John Meyer, Aaron Benavot, and others who have compared the content of national curricula for primary schools around the world, documenting both what subjects are officially mandated in each country and how much time must be devoted to each subject according to national regulations from 1920 to 1986 (Benavot et.al. 1991) and from 1980 to 2000 (Benavot 2004). The core argument of these studies is that there is a worldwide model of what a mass education system should look like, and the global diffusion of this model through a process of imitation has resulted in a remarkable level of "isomorphism" in education institutions. In particular, these studies argue that, at any given point in time from the late nineteenth century to the present, the national

curriculum looks very similar across countries, both in terms of what subjects are mandated and how much time is allocated to each—at least in the intended curricula outlined by state officials (Benavot et.al. 1991; Benavot 1992, 2004; McEneaney 2003; Meyer et.al. 2017).

Although the argument that education institutions look very similar across countries is often taken for granted (e.g., Pritchett 2018), when it comes to the content of the curriculum, there are three reasons why the argument deserves to be re-examined. First, Meyer, Benavot and colleagues relied on reports produced by UNESCO and other international organizations to classify and compare curricular content across countries. Governments seeking to be seen with favorable eyes by these organizations may have incentives to misreport information about their curricular content so that their systems *appear* to be converging toward some international standard of what an education system should look like—producing an exaggerated sense of the degree of convergence in curricular content. For these reasons, the original laws, decrees and other norms regulating the curriculum provide a more credible source for what was the intended curriculum in each country. Second, reliance on UNESCO's reports leads to a lot of missing information about the evolution of official curricula over time. For instance, in their analysis of national curricula from 1920 to 1986, Benavot et.al. (1991) typically have only four data points (i.e., four years) per country. Our analysis, by contrast, uses complete time-series data on the content of the curriculum, enabling us to identify whether and when changes in curricula took place over time. Third, close inspection of the results reported by Benavot et.al. (1991) in their comparison of primary school curricula across countries from 1920 to 1986 reveals that, contrary to the authors' claim, their own data suggests considerable degree of variation in the amount of time devoted to different subjects across countries. For instance, the average proportion of time allocated to teaching natural science across countries was 5.2% of the total teaching

time in 1920-44 with a standard deviation of 4; and the average proportion allocated in 1945-69 was 7.1 with a standard deviation of 4.6. The degree of heterogeneity across countries is even greater when considering the amount of time devoted to moral and religious education. Most of the existing variation in curricular content appears to stem from variation between countries of the same region rather than from differences between regions, suggesting that domestic political conditions play a more important role than colonial histories or global dynamics in shaping the content of primary education.

Against this backdrop, our paper seeks to document the degree of variation in national curriculum plans, and then explain the similarities or differences that we find, both across countries and within countries over time.

3 Evolution of Educational Content in Argentina and Chile, 1860-1970

In this section, we compare the national curriculum for primary and Normal schools in Argentina and Chile over time. We assembled and reviewed all national laws, decrees, and other norms regulating these curricula, and coded the list of mandatory subjects to be taught in each country-year. Whenever possible,⁷ we also coded the number of hours that had to be devoted to each subject, and used this to construct an indicator of the relative emphasis placed on teaching math and science vs. values, consisting of the number of hours officially allocated to math and natural sciences divided by the number of hours officially allocated to moral, civic and/or religious education. In each country, our coding exercise starts in the first year when the national government began to regulate the curriculum (in Argentina, 1880 for Normal Schools and 1884 for primary schools; in Chile, 1860 for all schools), and extends all the way to 2015. However, in the 1970s the national government in Chile abolished Normal Schools and gave full autonomy to universities to design their own curriculum for teacher training. Given our

⁷ National curricula do not always specify the number of hours to be devoted to each mandatory subject.

interest in comparing national curricula across countries, our analysis focuses on the period 1860-1970.

Our analysis reveals important cross-country differences in the content of national curricula during the initial stages of public schooling (Table 1 and Figure 1) and critical junctures that dramatically altered the relative emphasis given to math and science vs. values in each country (Figure 1).

Beginning with the initial differences in curriculum policy, Table 1 shows that the curriculum in late-nineteenth century Chile was much narrower than in Argentina in terms of the topics covered. Chilean primary schools had to teach reading and writing in Spanish, a few elements of arithmetic, and moral education (which was based on Catholic doctrine). In Argentina, in addition to these subjects, primary schools had to teach geometry, natural sciences (including physics and chemistry), French, history, geography, singing, gymnastics, and home-related activities. Also, moral education was secular. The curriculum used by Normal Schools to train primary school teachers fits the same pattern in this initial period, with the Argentine curriculum covering more subjects and more complex knowledge than the Chilean one.

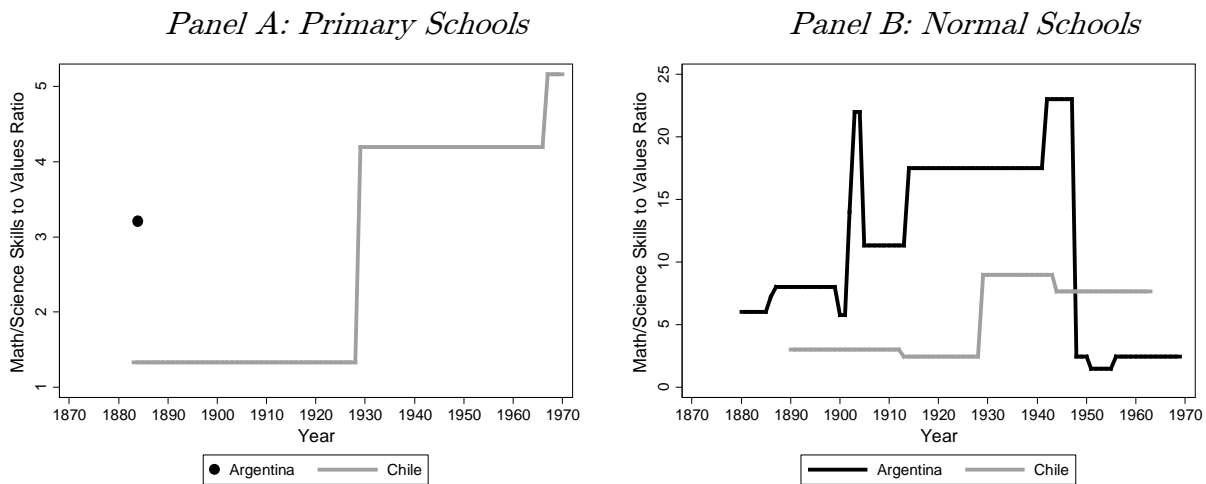
Table 1. List of Mandatory Subjects in Argentina and Chile, circa 1880

	Argentina	Chile
Primary schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reading and writing - National language - French - Arithmetic - Drawing - Geometry - Map drawing - Natural sciences - Physics and Chemistry - Moral education - Civic Instruction - Urban studies - History - Geography - Singing and Gymnastics - Home Economics - Housework <p><i>(Ley 1420 of 1884)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reading and writing in the patriotic language - Practical elements of arithmetic - Legal measurement system - Christian doctrine and morality <p><i>(Ley General de Instruccion Primaria of 1860)</i></p>
Normal schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spanish language - Grammar - Notions of Literature - Composition exercises - Reading and Writing/Composition - Arithmetic - Geometry - Cosmography - Physics - Chemistry - Natural History - Philosophy - Moral and Manners - Civic Instruction - Geography - History - Home Economics and Crafts - Anatomy, Physiology and Hygiene - Drawing exercises - Physical exercise - Singing exercises - Pedagogy - Observation at the School of Application - Practice at the School of Application <p><i>(National Decree of January 24, 1880)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reading and writing - Practical elements of arithmetic - Legal measurement system - Elements of cosmography and physics - Christian doctrine and morality - Sacred history - Religious and moral dogma - History of the Americas and Chile - Music - Horticulture - Drawing - Pedagogical theory and practice <p><i>(Ley General de Instruccion Primaria of 1860)</i></p>

SOURCE: Authors based on national laws, decrees and regulations.

These observations are further reinforced by Figure 1, which measures the ratio of hours officially allocated to math and natural science to hours officially allocated to moral, civic, and/or religious instruction in national curricula for primary schools (Panel A) and Normal schools (Panel B). In the late-nineteenth century, this ratio was considerably higher in Argentina than Chile, in line with our observation that Argentina taught a more complex curriculum and gave more relative emphasis to math and science skills than Chile, in both primary and Normal schools. For example, Argentine primary schools had to devote 24% of total teaching time to math and science (compared to 22% in Chile), and 8% to values (compared to 16% in Chile). Explaining what led to these initial differences in curricular content is the goal of Section 4.

Figure 1. Relative Emphasis on Teaching Math and Science vs. Values in Argentina and Chile, 1870-1970



SOURCE: Authors based on national laws, decrees and regulations.

With respect to the evolution of the curriculum over time, Figure 1 reveals critical junctures that dramatically and persistently altered the trajectory of national curricula for both primary and Normal schools. Beginning first with Chile, in 1929 there was a sharp increase in the relative number of hours allocated to math and science compared to values education. In primary schools, the change in the content of the curriculum was introduced by Law No. 6039: in 1928, according to existing laws and regulations, schools

had to devote 1.33 times as much time to math and science than to values education, but in 1929, that number climbed to 4.2 times as much math and science compared to values education. In Normal Schools, the change was introduced via the National Decree No. 6396 of 1929, and the ratio of hours devoted to math/science to hours devoted to values education climbed from 2.45 to 9. These increases were driven by a reduction in the proportion of time devoted to religious education and a slight increase in the proportion of time devoted to natural science. Religious and moral education had occupied a central role in schools during the first seven decades of the Chilean education system put in place in 1860. However, 1929 marked the beginning of a shift away from values and toward greater emphasis on skills—an emphasis that continued in later decades, with renewed emphasis in the 1970s. Explaining what led to the 1929 reforms in curricular content is the goal of Section 5.1.

In the case of Argentina, in 1948 there was a sharp reduction in the relative emphasis placed in teaching math and science versus education in Argentine Normal Schools (Panel B). For primary schools, throughout most of the period we can track what subjects were mandated but not official time allocations, as these were not specified; but we have good reasons to believe that, as in Chile, the general trends in the content of education exhibited by Argentine Normal Schools closely resembles the trends of primary schools. Normal Schools were in charge of training teachers for primary schools; so, unsurprisingly, changes in primary school curricula coincided or were soon followed by changes in teacher training. For example, in Argentina, curriculum reforms for primary schools and Normal Schools were introduced, respectively, in 1884 and 1886; 1901 and 1902; 1910 and 1914; 1937 and 1942; 1947 and 1948; 1955 and 1956; and 1972.

Specifically, in 1947 the mandatory curriculum for primary schools was reformed, leading, for the first time in Argentine history, to the introduction of religion as a nationally-mandated subject in primary schools. This change was followed in 1948 by National Decree No. 5114, which brought about, also for the first time in Argentine

history, the introduction of religion as part of the compulsory curriculum for aspiring teachers; and a sharp reduction in the relative emphasis placed on teaching math and science versus values education in Normal Schools. The change was so dramatic that it led Argentine teacher training to give even less relative emphasis to math and science than pre-1929 Chile. Explaining what led to the 1947 and 1948 reforms in curricular content is the goal of Section 5.2.

In sum, early on Argentina placed a lot more relative emphasis on teaching math and science (versus values) than Chile. In the twentieth century, the roles reversed as a result of, first, a de-emphasis on religious education in Chile in 1929, and later, the introduction of religious education and the de-emphasis on scientific education in Argentina in 1947-48.

Together, these findings underscore the limitations of past work arguing that national curricula exhibit a high degree of “isomorphism” across countries. Our analysis reveals that in two countries with similar resources, state capacity, colonial histories, and cultural values, national policymakers nonetheless made very different initial policy choices with respect to the content of education, and these initial policy choices evolved in different ways—not just in opposite directions but also at different times, suggesting that domestic factors specific to each country, more than global conditions common to both, were responsible for these changes.

The central questions we tackle in the rest of the paper are the following: Why did national policymakers in nineteenth-century Argentina decide to give more relative emphasis to teaching math and science than policymakers in Chile? Why did national policymakers in Chile reduce the emphasis on values education in 1929, breaking away from a seven-decade history in which religion had occupied a central place in official curricula? Finally, what led national policymakers in Argentina to introduce religious instruction in primary and Normal Schools in 1947 and 1948 respectively, and reduce the relative emphasis placed on teaching math and science?

4 The Political Economy of Nineteenth-Century Curriculum Policy

Argentina and Chile shared many features in the late-nineteenth century. Following independence from Spain at the beginning of the century, both countries had established an oligarchic regime that maintained the hierarchical structures that had existed in the colonial period; and, in both, political elites expected to eventually and slowly extend the franchise. Both had a largely rural, illiterate, and Catholic population. Both faced the continuous challenge of maintaining order throughout an extensive territory. Both had an export-oriented economy that took advantage of rich natural resources and facilitated rapid economic growth. Both relied heavily on foreign investment and debt to finance railroads and other large infrastructure projects advanced by the state. And yet, despite their similarities, they made very different education policy choices, particularly, as we have seen, in the realm of curriculum design.

Understanding these initial differences in curriculum policy requires, first, understanding the main goals of the national primary education systems that emerged in these countries during the late-nineteenth century. In both countries, this emergence responded not to demand from below but to the interests of elites who saw in public primary education a means to shape the moral character of the lower classes to ensure the political sustainability of the state (Tedesco 1986; Oszlak 1997; Egaña Baraona 2000; Alliaud 2007; Serrano, Ponce de Leon and Rengifo 2012, 61-93; Paglayan 2017). After independence, a long period of state-building took place in which the national government sought to build the necessary legitimacy to impose its authority throughout the territory. Primary education was conceived as part of the strategy to attain this. In school, children would be taught to behave well, respect existing authorities and institutions, comply with rules and instructions, and accept their place in society. Both in Argentina and in Chile, the experience of domestic conflict—in the form of seditious behavior, crimes, and civil wars—helped forge a consensus among political elites that

new strategies and policy tools were needed besides repression to maintain order in the periphery and among the lower classes (Sarmiento 1849, 51; Paglayan 2017). The consensus that emerged among liberal and conservative politicians was that teaching the masses proper manners and values of obedience and respect for authority were crucial for the maintenance of peace in these emerging states. The hope of political elites at the center was that, if individuals learned these values and behaviors early on, when their minds were most susceptible to external influence, they would carry on those values of respect for authority and the rule of law throughout the rest of their lives.

An important concern among some members of the political elite was that, by educating the lower classes, they might actually empower them to become even more rebellious and defiant of the state's authority than before. The design of the curriculum played an important role in mitigating these concerns. In each country, national policymakers designed the curricula that they thought would best accomplish the goal of fostering orderly behavior in society.⁸

At first sight, one might expect that, if the main goal of primary schooling was to foster proper behavior, discipline, and obedience, then the content of education should have focused mostly (or even exclusively) on moral, civic, and/or religious education, a common language, and possibly national history and geography, with only minimal effort to teach math or natural science. This was, indeed, the approach taken by Chile.

⁸ "In England, there was much debate on whether it was necessary or convenient to extend schooling. Mass education could subvert the existing order, [and] generate expectations [among peasants] leading them to abandon the rural labor force. ... In the Chilean case, the political elite in general supported public primary schooling, with the exception of a few isolated but revealing voices. Maximo Arguelles, congressman and academic, argued that ... reading, especially reading the press, would excite the people's passions as had happened in Chile in 1851 and in France in 1848. There was also a concern that the rural masses' expectations might change, but finally these voices did not have much political influence. Among the political elite, what prevailed was a sentiment of the urgency to expand schooling. On this front, consensus among conservatives and liberals existed" (Serrano et.al. 2012, 82).

In Argentina, some Congressmen expressed concern that transmitting "abundant knowledge can inadvertently produce generations who are physically and spiritually sick." Instead, schools should teach "firm but narrow knowledge" (Diario de Sesiones, 1899; cited in Alliaud 2007, 79). "The education system was configured with the interests of political groups in mind, and for that reason it took a form and goals that did not correspond with the promotion of freedom or emancipation" (Alliaud 2007, 59).

In 1860, the Chilean Congress approved the General Law of Primary Instruction, the first national law granting the central government the authority to regulate primary education. Among other things, the law established a mandatory curriculum that had to be followed by all primary schools in the territory, consisting of only four subjects: reading, writing, Christian (Catholic) doctrine, and basic arithmetic (*Ley General de Instruccion Primaria* 1860, Article 3).⁹ The curriculum for Normal Schools was similarly narrow, focusing primarily on the moral education of prospective teachers (Nuñez 1883). The majority of textbooks approved for use in primary schools sought to shape the moral character of children. The textbooks emphasized “the strengthening of feelings of compassion, love, respect and obedience ... to God and the fatherland;” and taught that a good student “does not laugh or talk with his neighbors, does not dare play, and maintains his eyes fixed on the teacher ... to learn his teachings ... and be the joy and glory of his parents;” and that “if you are a subject, you must obey and behave well” and “must not judge your superiors based on what you see; they have aims you may not understand” (Serrano et.al. 2012, 310-312).

In Chile, moral education was Catholic education. Not only did the mandatory curriculum establish “Christian doctrine” as one of the few subjects that had to be taught everywhere; in addition, the textbooks and exercises used to teach reading and writing often emphasized religious messages. School textbooks made a direct association between submission and obedience on one hand and the contents of Catholic doctrine on the other (Serrano et.al. 2012, 311). For instance, the textbook *La conciencia de un niño* (“the child’s conscience”) began by highlighting the importance of being obedient:¹⁰

“Everything I have I owe to my parents. How can I express my gratitude?
This is what I intend to do: I will behave in a way that always makes

⁹ <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0018152.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0056493.pdf>. See also Cherniavsky (2014).

them feel satisfied. My parents only make commands that are useful to me. If I obey them, everyone admires me and says “what an excellent child.” This way, I not only satisfy my parents but also everyone who doesn’t know me. My parents send me to school, where I can learn useful and good things. There, an instructor teaches us how to behave so we will gain the love of our parents and everyone else.”

It continued by emphasizing that God’s approval was the highest reward for good behavior:

“I satisfy my parents by being good, kind, and very obedient. By behaving this way, I also satisfy God. Always invisible, always present, he sees and knows what I do and what I think in every instant. If I am good, he loves me. God will be the one who will reward me the most; it is for him that I must take advantage of what my teacher has to teach me.”

It promised Heaven to children who accepted their lot on Earth:

“If I am happy with what my parents give me to eat and drink; ... if I am nice to others, I will sow the seeds of my good behavior ... If I behave well and satisfy God, when I die I will go to Heaven.”

And it threatened children with punishment if they misbehaved:

“Jesus said it: those who do not obey the Church are ungodly pagans and public sinners.”

Given that the main goal of the Chilean primary education system was to shape the moral character of the masses, it is not surprising that Congress established a narrow curriculum focused on Catholicism as the basis for moral behavior. The puzzle we need to explain is not why Chile taught no science and little math, but why Argentina taught a lot more. The 1884 Common Education Law (*Ley de Educacion Comun*), the first law establishing a centrally-regulated primary education system in Argentina, mandated the following subjects for primary schools: reading and writing, arithmetic, physics and natural science, Argentine geography and universal geography concepts, Argentine history and universal history concepts, national language, moral and urban studies, drawing, music, physical education, and knowledge of the Constitution.

One possibility is that the Argentine curriculum for primary schools placed relatively more emphasis on math and science than the Chilean curriculum because in Argentina,

more than in Chile, a key goal of primary schooling was to promote industrialization and economic modernization. While logically plausible, this hypothesis is not supported by the evidence. The transcripts of the parliamentary debates leading to the 1860 Chilean law and the 1884 Argentine law demonstrate that in both countries the chief goal of primary schooling, as envisioned by politicians, was to shape the moral character of the lower classes to ensure proper behavior, respect for authority, and respect for the rule of law.¹¹ In both countries as well, the potential of primary schools to promote industrialization was rarely considered; and when it was, it was usually in reference to the role of primary education in shaping individuals' social behavior and attitude toward work, more than their technical skills.¹² Economic development required investment, and to attract investments, the national government had to ensure peace and social order (Oszlak 1997)—and that required primary education (Sarmiento 1849; Tedesco 1986; Egaña Baraona 2000).

Domingo Sarmiento, the Argentine politician who most fervently advocated for a national primary school system, and who in the early 1880s played a decisive role in the design and implementation of the national government's first efforts to regulate primary schools, argued that educating the poor would reduce crime and help protect the upper classes' lives and property "through the moralizing effects attained during the acquisition of elemental instruction" (Sarmiento 1849, 55-56).¹³

¹¹ During the parliamentary debates that took place in Argentina in 1883-84, there were 269 mentions to the word "moral" and only 7 mentions to words beginning with "industr", 41 mentions to words beginning with "trabaj" (work), and 26 to words beginning with "econom."

¹² "The project of modernization and development required a workforce that was capable not in terms of technical abilities (which were unnecessary in the context of an agrarian export-oriented economy) but in terms of workers' attitudes toward work" (Alliaud 2007, 63).

¹³ "The dignity of the state, the glory of a nation, depend on the dignity of its subjects; and this dignity can only be obtained by elevating their moral character, developing their intelligence, and predisposing it to orderly and legitimate behavior. ... The masses are less inclined to respect lives and property when their reasoning capabilities and moral sentiments are less cultivated. For selfish reasons, then, of those who today have greater advantages in society, we must temper their instinct to destroy" (Sarmiento 1849, 48).

What differed between Chile and Argentina were not the goals of primary schooling, but the composition of the ruling coalition at the time when the initial education and curriculum policy choices were made—more conservative in Chile, more liberal in Argentina—and the beliefs that these two groups had about what was the best curriculum to accomplish the goal of promoting order.

Conservatives thought that the way to accomplish order was to emphasize religion and the Catholic idea that, if we behave well in this world, we will be rewarded in an afterlife. In Chile, as discussed above, the idea that God would reward or punish good and bad behavior was very much present in primary schools and textbooks, reflecting the power that conservative groups tied to the Church had in the Chilean Congress in 1860. Conservatives in the Argentine Congress made similar arguments in their appeals to make Catholicism the basis of the moral education provided by schools.¹⁴

“The simple process of learning how to read and write, even if these are not subsequently used to acquire further instruction, is in and of itself sufficient to influence the moral character of the individual. ... These mental faculties influence the moral character, soften the existing manners, and make individuals more averse to violence and blood” (Sarmiento 1849, 55).

¹⁴ “Even when the state accomplishes its functions, especially those functions to guarantee that the activity of each individual does not disturb others, and society, instead of becoming anarchic, maintains order and harmony, the state won’t accomplish those functions in a convincing way if it forgets the guarantee of all guarantees, the basis of all individual and social safety, the supreme law, that is, religion. ... Which of all the sentiments that move the human heart can be more important than the idea that we are all tied to God? ... There has been no society, anywhere, anytime, without religion or without God. When religious sentiment languishes, man reaches his lowest instincts. ... When we legislate on school issues, we legislate on the transformation of society, on the forces that will act on it; it is evident, then, that the law must promote those forces that are not blind, that are conscious and driven by a superior principle of morality, and therefore must promote religion in public schools. ... To leave a great number of children without religious education, children whom we have a special interest to educate and civilize, children who do not have the family means to become more civilized, to leave them without religious instruction would lead to them becoming dangerous citizens” (Goyena, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 6, 1883, 491-492).

“Education without religion will form ... a generation of men without solid principles, without character, without conscience, weak, capable of the fall of the country. ... It will be necessary for the child to know that he cannot kill, and why; that he cannot steal, and why; that he must respect private property, and why. And all this cannot be demonstrated scientifically; it cannot stem from human reasoning alone. These are truths that we know because they have been revealed from above and directly by God. It is not possible, then, to suppress religious teaching from schools” (Achaval Rodriguez, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 6, 1883, 507-508).

“These truths [you shall not kill, you shall not steal], to be the basis of a moral order, must be rooted in the individual’s intellect. But reason alone cannot take care of this; and therefore the Church says: it is not legitimate, even if we cannot prove it scientifically, to incline ourselves toward these mistaken behaviors; we must believe and submit ourselves to these revealed truths; we must believe there is an

Liberals, by contrast, thought that teaching Catholicism in public schools was likely to create conflict between those who ascribed to this religion and those who did not, defeating the purpose of public schools to unite the population and promote peace and order. They argued, instead, that by teaching children universal truths (e.g., principles of arithmetic, geometry or physics) that were true for everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, schools could contribute to create unity among citizens and thus reduce disorderly behavior in society.¹⁵ Moreover, they argued that knowledge of what constitutes good and bad behavior precedes the emergence of Christianity; that morality

afterlife, because without it, all moral and social order will disappear” (Achaval Rodriguez, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 14, 1883, 611).

“Children should be taught ... “one must not kill” “one must not steal” because God has prohibited it” (Centeno, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 14, 1883, 634).

“If we proceed [without religious education], we will form generations of criminals. ... Study history, and ... what will you find? The disappearance, ruin and decadence of all those societies that did not maintain their religious sentiment. ... Our project begins by stating: “the teaching of morality will be mandatory.” What does the study of morality entail? ... It is based on God, it is based on the principle of an immortal soul which is the basis of human responsibility. ... The student will ask the teacher: why mustn’t I kill? The teacher will respond: You mustn’t kill because it is prohibited by God, ... and if you did, you will be punished by God. This life on Earth is purely transitory; after it comes a life of eternal reward or punishment, based on good or bad behavior” (Gallo, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 12, 1883, 538).

¹⁵ “History tells us that the state has specific ends. The state unites men to one another so that they will pursue common goals. The Church unites men to God so that they will pursue individual goals. ... The state has the duty to form citizens; not jews, not catholics, because that would go against the ends of the state and the freedom of consciousness. Schools must teach universal ideas, not dogmas, and much less to those who do not desire the teaching of principles that go against their own beliefs. The ideas that must be taught in schools must be universal, and the Church is not universal, even if it pretends to be. The teaching of arithmetic, for example, is the same teaching for everyone; the teaching of geometry is the same for everyone, because its truths can be grasped by human intelligence; but the teaching of religion does not fall in that category. For the intelligent man, there is only one arithmetic and one geometry; but there are several religions. From this we can deduce that the state’s duty to instruct with a social goal is fulfilled by teaching what is true everywhere and for everyone, by providing universal knowledge” (Minister of Justice, Worship, and Public Instruction, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 13, 1883, 581).

“The state, which governs inheritances, protects the lives and honor of its citizens, cannot neglect education; and with the same right that it can turn a child into a soldier, it can and must impose on children the duty to instruct themselves, because it matters for the wellbeing of the Nation. ... We mustn’t create divisions inside schools; we mustn’t separate the protestant child from the catholic; we mustn’t do so even if the physical infrastructure of the schools allow for it, because then we will engender fights and discord inside the school, and those will continue in the street, and enter the family, and then go back again from the families to the street, taken there not by the children but by their parents or adults, contributing to sow irreparable seeds of division among the people” (Minister of Justice, Worship, and Public Instruction, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 13, 1883, 583).

“We must call all men and imprint on them, whatever their origin, whatever their beliefs, a love of this land, which they will learn to consider as their own. Your project, members of the Commission, is contrary to these noble principles. The immigrant will stay away from us if we tell him we will oblige their children to learn catholic doctrine” (Gallo, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 12, 1883, 540)

is inherent to man, and that in order to enable men to access universal moral principles, the key was to develop their capacity for abstraction, logic and reasoning.¹⁶ This, they argued, would form the basis of good behavior.

The national curricula of Argentina and Chile, then, despite their important differences, reflected similar goals. Importantly, the Argentine emphasis on math and science was not rooted in a stronger interest to promote the productivity and well-being of the poor. It was a by-product of the particular beliefs that liberal elites held about how best to promote social order.

5 Explaining Critical Junctures in Curriculum Policy

5.1 Chile 1929

The Chilean curriculum reforms of 1929, which marked a break from the past emphasis on religious and moral education and increased the emphasis placed on teaching scientific skills, were introduced during the authoritarian regime of Carlos Ibañez del Campo. Ibañez, a military officer, had become president in 1927 through elections in which he was the only candidate (Correa, Figueroa, Jocelyn-Holt, Rolle, and Vicuña 2015). His rule was “unquestionably authoritarian,” including restrictions on the press, the forced exile of hundreds of politicians, and ruthless repression against labor unions and the Communist Party (which was outlawed one month after Ibañez assumed power) (Collier and Sater 1999, 216). With political parties silenced (Salazar and Pinto 1998;

¹⁶ “Philosophy demonstrates that morality is independent of religion, that the distinction between what is right and wrong, the distinction between rightful and wrongful doing, is a law inherent to man’s nature. The teacher, for example, will tell its disciples: you shall not lie in the name of your own dignity, because if you lie others will think less of you, and so will you” (Civit, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 11, 1883, 515).

“We must teach morality. Moral principles are innate to men; things have been known to be moral since before the existence of Christianity. Some of those moral principles have been adopted by Christianity, but they are universal, and therefore civilizing, principles. ... Morality can be taught without teaching religion because moral principles are abstract, they are present in all human minds, whereas religious principles refer to concrete things. Religious worship has external manifestations. There is no doubt that for certain levels of intelligence, it would be almost impossible to penetrate the mind with abstract principles. From that standpoint, the teaching of morality in schools will be deficient, but this difficulty is also present in all the sciences, and for that reason the teaching of science is so important” (Minister of Justice, Worship, and Public Instruction, *Diario de Sesiones (Diputados)*, July 13, 1883, 508).

Vial 1996), he took advantage of the special powers conferred to him by Congress in August 1927, and ruled by Decree.

Despite his authoritarian style, Ibañez had ample public support, partly because economic conditions were favorable from 1927 to 1930 (Bernedo 1989), and partly because he was perceived—even by liberal politicians—as a “true national leader” who would put an end to the turbulence of the previous decade, marked by mass strikes, economic crisis, and political instability (Collier and Sater 1999, 215).¹⁷

To restore social and economic order, Ibañez relied on a multi-pronged approach which included repressing labor unions and giving legal recognition to unions that were sponsored by his regime (Collier and Sater 1999, 216). His success in reducing mass strikes and containing the threats stemming from communists and anarchists gained him the support of the Catholic Church (Rojas 1993).

However, Ibañez understood that ending the wave of mass strikes that had prevailed in previous years required addressing their root cause: the recurring economic crises affecting Chile. Indeed, much of Ibañez’s efforts as President concentrated on economic reforms to reduce the country’s vulnerability to foreign shocks—by reducing the dependence on agrarian and mining exports as a source of revenue, and the dependence on imports of inputs needed by the manufacturing industry (Gaete 2009). More than any of his predecessors, “he was an economic nationalist who believed that the government should resolve and execute, not postpone, the solution to the nation’s problems” (Collier and Sater 1999, 219). He advanced the construction of a corporatist state, increasing the state’s faculties and suppressing economic liberalism in policymaking (Gaete 2009). New development banks were created to encourage agrarian

¹⁷ During the 1910s and, especially, the first half of the 1920s, strikes and protests from labor unions, often in alliance with middle-class university students, communists, and anarchists, had brought about deep social divisions. A liberal president, Arturo Alessandri (1920-1924), had been unable to contain the spread of strikes and mass protests, largely because Congress, dominated by conservatives, blocked his attempts to introduce the redistributive reforms that had made him so popular during his campaign.

and mining production. The government also lent money to industrialists through the newly-created *Instituto de Credito Industrial*, and made heavy investments in public works that industrialists demanded, including an improvement and extension of the railway system (Collier and Sater 1999, 220). True to his economic nationalism and his concern with maintaining high levels of employment to prevent strikes, credit from the government was only given to companies that employed mostly Chileans (Collier and Sater 1999, 219-220).

The education reforms introduced by Ibañez, first in 1927, and then in 1929, sought to support the goals of his administration: to encourage nationalism, sustained employment, and economic modernization and industrialization—all intimately linked to his encompassing goal of restoring and maintaining social order. Ibañez's diagnosis was that the educational system had to be reformed in order to contribute to these goals (Cariman 2012). First, schools had to “abandon the exaggeratedly humanist legacy” and create a “new mentality, productive and adapted to modern life” (Rojas 1993, 105). Second, education had to contribute to promote social order by encouraging the development of a “nationalist spirit” in students (Rojas 1993).

Ibañez's diagnosis that schools needed to be reformed in order to contribute to the country's economic modernization had several similarities with the critiques made by the AGP, the first national teacher union (Nuñez 1986, 46). In the AGP's proposal to teach more natural sciences and more practical-technical skills, Ibañez found a useful ally to reform the education system (Vial 1996). Founded in Santiago in 1922, the AGP's goals went well beyond wage demands; it became an influential pedagogical and professional movement. It argued that the expansion of access to primary education had not been accompanied by an improvement in the material conditions of the working class, because schools often failed to provide even basic skills such as literacy, and did not

teach practical skills that were relevant to individuals' everyday lives (Zemelman and Jara 2006; Reyes 2010). It blamed traditional pedagogies and the emphasis on children's stillness, silence, and rote memorization for these disappointing educational outcomes (Nuñez 2013, 68). Through its Educational Reconstruction Plan of 1926, the AGP proposed a large-scale education reform and a new pedagogy heavily influenced by John Dewey's ideas, that would take into account the biological stages of child development, stimulate the child's natural tendency toward exploration and curiosity, and ensure that all knowledge taught could be translated into practical, work-related skills (Nuñez 2013, 68-69; Nuñez 2011; Cox and Gysling 1990, 64). To ensure proper implementation of this pedagogy, the AGP also advocated for a reform of teacher training programs, including greater inclusion of natural sciences in these programs, arguing that an understanding of Biology was essential for teachers to be able to advance a child-centered pedagogy (Nuñez 2013, 66-69).

The reform of December 1927, introduced by Decree (No. 7500), drew heavily on the AGP's education reform proposal (Nuñez 2011, 2013). Like the AGP's proposal, Decree No. 7500 of December 1927 gave emphasis to "the integral development of the individual, in accordance with the vocations he manifests, for his maximum productive capacity, intellectual and manual" (Decree 7500). It did not reform the national curriculum—that would happen in 1929—but it established a pilot program of experimental schools and gave teachers nationwide increased autonomy to innovate in the classroom. This change in the Chilean educational system—which until then had been mainly dedicated to shaping children's moral character—would require a massive investment of resources; in particular to train new teachers to transform the classroom.

As part of his strategy of coopting labor unions, Ibañez gave the AGP a voice in the education reform of December 1927 not only by incorporating some of its proposals

(Mariategui 1970, cited in Nuñez 1986), but also by appointing several teachers to key positions in the Ministry of Education to oversee the implementation of the reform. For example, former teachers Luis Gomez Catalan and Luis Galdames assumed as General Director of Primary Education and General Director of Secondary Education, respectively (Nuñez 1986).

A few months after the reform was announced, however, opposition emerged from different groups: conservative sectors of teachers who resisted the new pedagogical practices¹⁸; the Ministry of Finance, which opposed efforts to allocate the necessary fiscal resources to implement the reform (Nuñez 1986; Vial 1996); and many teachers who questioned the opportunism of peers who had assumed positions in the Ministry of Public Education (Nuñez 1986). The growing tension between Ibañez and the AGP, “which was incubating underground” (Reyes 2010, 40), was reflected in the conflict that arose in August 1928 in the Normal Schools of Chillan and Angol, where students challenged teachers implementing the reform. This conflict derived in the closure of schools, the dismissal of their staff, the dismissal of Gomez Catalan and Galdames from the Ministry of Public Education, and the removal of the legal recognition previously awarded to the AGP and the National Teachers Association (Vial 1996).

As part of this conflict, the Minister of Finance, Pablo Ramirez, assumed an interim position as Minister of Education, and initiated a new reform (Nuñez 1986; Vial 1996). Between October 1928 and December 1929, Ibañez sanctioned a set of decrees¹⁹ that

¹⁸ The implementation of the reform caused some teachers to oppose the reform. According to Vial (1996), the budget and the implementation of Decree No. 7500 “eliminated two hundred primary school teaching jobs... The innovations, then, forced (or so the new authorities argued) to remove those who rejected them or were too old to implement them” (p. 416). Likewise, “two hundred primary and three hundred secondary school teachers were dismissed, including half of the secondary school principals. To make matters worse, the Treasury was stingy with their pensions and compensations” (Vial 1996, 416).

¹⁹ E.g., Decree No. 5319 of November 1928 reconfigured the General Directorate of Primary Education; Decree No. 5857 of December 1928 reorganized teacher training institutions; Decree No. 5794 of December 1928 approved new primary education study plans; Decree No. 3060 of August 1929 (later approved as Decree No. 6039 of December 1929) established “General Regulations for Primary Schools”; and Decree No. 5103 of November 1929 reorganized Normal Schools.

recentralized educational authority under the Ministry of Education but maintained and consolidated the scientific-technical and nationalist orientation introduced in 1927. The main difference was that, while the 1927 reform had given teachers autonomy to incorporate this new orientation in the classroom, the 1929 reform established a new national curriculum that institutionalized this orientation (Nuñez 2011; Mayorga 2014; Serrano, Ponce de Leon and Rengifo 2013). Specifically, the General Regulations of Primary Schools of August 1929 introduced the following mandatory subjects and time allocations for primary schools: intellectual education (20% of total school time); math (16%); natural studies (12%); manual activities (12%); social education (12%); physical education (12%); arts (11%); and moral education (7%). That is, the reform increased the proportion of time allocated to math and science (from 22% before to 28% after the reform), and decreased that devoted to moral education (from 16% to 7%). The Directorate of Primary Education called on primary school teachers to “study and meditate on these programs” and to “try to interpret them scientifically,” since “only then will our education cease to be a dead or static thing, and become a civilizing force capable of bringing back our old values of virility, honesty, dynamism and perseverance in productive firms” (Ministerio de Educacion Publica 1928, VI).

In addition to increasing the proportion of time devoted to natural science and reducing the time allocated to teaching values, the content of moral education also changed. The curriculum reforms implanted “a de facto laicism, by not associating religion with the moral dimensions of its pedagogical definitions” (Serrano, Ponce de Leon and Rengifo 2013). The old subject “Religion and Morality” changed its name to “Moral Education.” It still included religious instruction, but its teaching was closely regulated by the Ministry of Public Education, which approved a specific curricular program for this subject at all levels of the school system (Salinas 2016). Priests and secular people wishing to teach religion were required to obtain a certificate of religious

suitability from the Ministry of Public Education (Decree No. 1029 of April 11, 1929; Garcia 2014, 204; Secretariado Catequístico de la Acción Católica de Chile 1940, 4), which would be revoked if they did not comply with “the current programs and the hours that set the school timetable” for religious instruction in public schools (Decree No. 1029 of April 11, 1929).

It is important to highlight that the Church did not oppose these curricular reforms. We conducted an extensive review of newspaper sources of the period 1925-1929—*La Revista Católica*, *El Diario Ilustrado*, *El Mercurio* or *La Nación*—and found hardly any Church reaction to the curricular changes related to “Religion and Morality.” The articles on education reform typically reported the changes introduced by the government without documenting any negative reactions by the Church—not even in *La Revista Católica*. Three factors explain the Church’s neutral reaction. First, in 1925, the Chilean Constitution had been reformed and, among the changes introduced was the separation between the state and the Church. As a result, the latter already anticipated for some time that the educational system would be reformed in the direction it took under Ibañez. Second, in order to maintain its power despite the constitutional changes, the Church had already modified its strategy of social insertion: sheltered by the social doctrine, it tried to recruit parishioners by becoming embedded in labor unions, cooperatives, mutualist associations, and other civic associations, decreasing its dependence on education as a mechanism to spread religion (Huerta 1988). Third, the Church maintained a certain capacity to use education to spread religion, particularly through private schools, which were subsidized by the state.²⁰ Our own calculations

²⁰ When Ibañez was vice president, in May 1927, he had announced the suppression of state funding for religion classes “in accordance with the constitutional provisions in force and for economic purposes” (Salinas 2016, 333). But, as a measure of tolerance, the government authorized the operation of the class as long as they were privately funded. These measures were included in the General Regulations for Primary Education of 1929.

based on budget laws show that public subsidies for private schools did not decline after 1925.²¹

In sum, the reform of curricular contents in Chile in 1929 took place in the context of an authoritarian regime and corporatist state where the Executive advanced educational reforms in order to promote economic development and nationalism. Through the use of repression, the Executive did not need to make compromises with traditional political parties to carry out these reforms. The alignment between Ibañez's economic objectives, the AGP's preferences for promoting greater technical-scientific skills in the school, and the cooptation of teachers by incorporating them into the Ministry of Public Education, gave Ibañez an important initial ally for the design and implementation of the reform. The fact that the Church had already started to develop a new strategy to maintain power following the Constitutional reform of 1925—a strategy that diminished the degree to which the power of the Church depended on its influence in schools—made it easier for Ibañez to introduce these reforms.

5.2 Argentina 1947-48

During the 1930s, profound economic, social, and political changes occurred in Argentina. First, the rapid growth of the industrial sector in metropolitan Buenos Aires led to a sudden inflow of immigrants from the Interior and to the formation of a large, urban working class in need of political representation (Rock 1985, 232-261). Second, the Catholic Church embarked on a project to become more embedded in society, known as *recatolización de la sociedad* (Plotkin 1994; Bianchi 2001). Third, the relative political stability experienced since 1880—even after the extension of the franchise in 1912, which resulted in power-sharing between the urban middle class and the traditional upper class—was suddenly interrupted in 1930 by a succession of military coups that gave the military an unprecedented role in the national government (Rock 1985, 214-261; Plotkin

²¹ Authors based on budget laws 1925-1935.

1994; J.C. Torres 2002). Fourth, during the Great Depression and especially during World War II, Argentina found itself unable to place its grain exports in continental Europe, and unable to import the coal, oil, and heavy industry goods it needed. In this context, the national government turned to a confrontational relationship with the rest of the world, especially Britain and the United States, and used propaganda to exacerbate nationalist sentiment and justify its isolationism (Rock 1985, 238-261). It also introduced a set of economic policies to promote industrialization and import substitution, and strengthen the domestic capacity to produce arms.

Over this decade, “nationalism emerged as a major force in Argentine politics” (Rock 1985, 228). It was a particular type of nationalism, imbued with military authoritarianism, clericalism and Catholicism, anti-Semitism, antianarchism, anticommunism, corporatism, and anti-imperialism (Rock 1985, 230; Plotkin 1994; J.C. Torres 2002; G. Torres 2014). These ideologies signified a sharp departure from the liberal, secular and republican principles that had prevailed since 1880; and for that reason, they were not easily accepted by the urban middle class and by some members of the upper class (especially landowners who were harmed by high export tariffs and those members of the elite who preferred to keep a distance from the Catholic Church).

It was in this context of social division, industrialization, and political reconfiguration that General Juan Domingo Peron was elected president in 1946. A member of the military, between 1943-1945 he had held powerful positions in government. As Minister of War, he gained credibility as a leader in the country’s struggle against dependence on “imperialist forces.” As Secretary of Labor, he began cultivating a broad base of political support that extended well beyond the right-wing nationalists in the army and the Church. By selectively granting legal status to labor unions who sided with the national government, and resolving in their favor during labor disputes through the enactment of improvements in workers’ conditions (e.g., paid

vacation and sick leave, pensions, accident compensation), Peron cultivated a *quid pro quo* relationship with supportive unions, while isolating the rest. Despite his corporatist approach, he gave a political voice to the working class that they had never had before, and emerged as the “defender and protector of the working class” (Rock 1985, 254).

When Peron became president in 1946, he did so with ample support from the working class. Although he was elected in competitive elections, once in power he continued the authoritarian practices of the military governments that preceded him, persecuting and jailing opponents, closing newspapers and radios, and reforming the Constitution to remain in power.

As president, he continued to cultivate the support of union leaders and the working class by extending the corporatist state and introducing a battery of redistributive policies. Amongst these was the expansion of access to secondary and tertiary education (Tedesco 1980; Fiorucci 2012), which, he argued, had been reserved to the urban elites (Camarota 2011). In addition, under his government, the number of teaching jobs grew exponentially²²—a politically convenient growth considering that women were granted the constitutional right to vote in 1949.

Peron’s working class support contributed, ironically, to his gaining the support of right-wing Catholics. The Church welcomed an end to threats of violence from anarchists and communists, and Peron’s cooptation of labor unions helped put an end to those threats and maintain labor peace (Rock 1985, 257-258). But the Church demanded more from him. In 1943, a military regime seeking to obtain the support of the Catholic Church (G. Torres 2014, 174) had introduced catholic education in public schools by Decree (No. 18411/43), breaking down the secular tradition that had prevailed in Argentina’s educational system since 1884. This increased the Church’s ability to advance its project of *recatolizacion* (Bianchi 2015, 28). However, aware of the

²² Between 1946 and 1955, the number of primary school teachers increased by 50%, compared to a 38% increase in the number of primary school students (Ferrerres 2005).

frailty of Executive Decrees, which could be undone by any president, the Church conditioned its support of Peron's presidential candidacy on the passage of a law of Congress that guaranteed religious education in public schools (Bianchi 2015, 28). In August 1946, two months after Peron assumed power, the Senate approved a bill that gave legal force to all decrees issued in 1943. After extended parliamentary debates in the Chamber of Deputies, the bill was passed in April 1947 (Caimari 2010, 161).

The Peronist Deputies founded their support for the Law in the principles of Catholic nationalism:

“Our tradition is Christ and to confront her is to confront Christ. God is the national soul” (Senator Lasciar, *Diario de Sesiones (Senadores)* 1946, 146).

They argued that the 1884 Law was “a violent break from the purest Argentine tradition” (Senator Diaz de Vivar, *Diario de Sesiones de la Camara de Senadores* 1946, 12), and that the introduction of religious education represented a return to Argentina's roots: “between a tradition of three and a half centuries and another of only sixty years, the first is the true one, grown on the back of centuries, initiated from the moment in which the great navigator sank his knee in America” (Guillot, *Diario de Sesiones de la Camara de Senadores* 1946, 99).

Moreover, religious education was considered an element of social order:

“Religious education, by smoothing the rough edges between men, contributes to the destruction of any sign of anarchy and outrage” (Senator Lasciar, *Diario de Sesiones de la Camara (Senadores)* 1946, 146).

Peronists' interest in religious education was part of their broader interest in using the education system to disseminate moral values, patriotic attitudes, nationalist sentiment, and loyalty to Peronism. They believed future citizens needed to be educated in a set of ethical and moral values to serve national interests. The reorientation of education was one of the goals of the First Five-Year Plan (1946-1952):

“If we are going to teach in the Argentine Republic, it is not possible to teach without always having in mind what Argentina wishes to achieve in future times [...] You cannot teach or train men who are not oriented to the national needs” (*El Monitor de la Educacion Comun* 1948 (67), 8).

Peron’s government wanted to create a new educational system that abandoned the emphasis on teaching skills and replaced it with greater emphasis on moral values to reorient children towards the values of the new national project: nationalism, Catholicism, anti-imperialism, and loyalty to Peron. The emphasis was on producing “good” students rather than “wise” students, respectful of the traditions of their country, among which Catholic religion was included, and alignment with the needs of the Nation (Iglesias 2012). They blamed encyclopedism and positivism for focusing more on “instructing” skills than on “educating” the “integral” child—by which they meant cultivating spirituality, morality, and values. This can be seen in the speech of Miguel Mordegia, who intervened the National Council of Education: “[It is necessary] for the Argentine School (...) to abandon the molds of sterile encyclopedism; we cannot disguise the faults and fatal results of a school that instructs without educating” (*El Monitor de la Educacion Comun* 1948 (65), 67).

The pedagogues and Ministers of Education of the period emphasized the “integral” role of schools. In the Second Five-Year Plan (1953-1957)²³ the goals of schooling were defined as:

1. To worship God in the consciences, exalting the spiritual over the material;
2. To suppress the class struggle to reach a single class of Argentines: well-educated Argentines. Comprehensive education of the soul and the body; moral, intellectual and physical education;
3. To unite in a single wish, in a single will, all the Argentines. In order for this national feeling to deepen and have deep roots throughout the Republic, we have extended the classroom to the four corners of the country...;
4. Every Argentine must seek to own a piece of land and a piece of the sky of his homeland. Owner in the material of a piece of the soil to fertilize it with his effort and embellish it with his intelligence; in the

²³ Its implementation was interrupted when Peron was overthrown in 1955.

- spiritual, of a piece of ground so that the desire for moral perfection can fit;
5. To disseminate the doctrine of economic and political independence to strengthen national and international peace for the reign of justice (*Segundo Plan Quinquenal*, 77)

The introduction of religious education in public schools came along with new curricula for primary schools (Decree No. 26944/47). The new curricula were designed from an “integral education” perspective:

“It is indisputable, from the point of view of the present national interests, that education should contribute to forge and consolidate the unity of the people in the moral, economic, political and cultural aspects, respecting and stimulating men to unfold their own possibilities” (Ministerio de Educacion de la Nacion 1952, *Labor desarrollada durante la primera presidencia del General Juan Peron*, 63-64)

The curriculum included the need to teach the love of God as the center and axis of moral life, to love the country and to have the basic techniques for the development of intellectual life (De Luca 2015).

Different historians have supported the idea that both the introduction of religious education and the implementation of a new curricula were part of a larger process of politicization of school curriculum (Bianchi 1996; Gvirtz 2014). This phenomenon meant the introduction of partisan-political contents within mandatory education. For instance, school textbooks started to worship the character of Peron and the first lady, Maria Eva Duarte de Peron (known as “Evita”), who was designated by the Congress as the Spiritual Leader of the Nation. In some textbooks the traditional reference “My mother loves me” was replaced by “Evita loves me” (Wainerman and Rajzman 1987, 73). After Evita passed away, in 1952, her autobiography *La razon de mi vida* became mandatory reading in all the schools of the country.²⁴ Although it is true that since the organization of the educational system the state had expected teachers to play a political and ideological role, serving as agents of the state in the construction of social

²⁴ Research suggests some teachers were reluctant to follow these mandates (Gvirtz 2014). They would use the partisan-political aspects of the curricula for activities such as underlining, summarizing, copying, and dictation. They followed the curriculum but overlooked their partisan-political aspect as much as possible.

and political order, their role had always been non-partisan (Fiorucci 2013). This neutrality fell apart during Peronism.

To implement the education system that Peron had in mind, his administration sought to transform the teaching profession: “the specific purpose of the teacher is the spiritual, Christian and patriotic work of educating the Argentine child” (*El Monitor de la Educacion Comun* 1948 (67), 905-908). It was particularly concerned with creating a teaching body loyal to the ideological principles of Catholic nationalism and, later, Peronist doctrine (Fonte 2016):

“...for the recognition and respect of the fruitful work —always difficult and sometimes heroic— of the teacher; with its greater dignity (...) But we also say that the revolution (...) fairly claims the collaboration and loyalty of the teachers (...) The mission of a teacher cannot be limited to a ‘job’. The country has placed in their hands the future, embodied in the soul and heart of children...” (*El Monitor de la Educacion Comun* 1946 (65), 885-886).

Peron himself argued: “the teacher of the new Argentine school must be an example of citizen faith with a strong sense of its mission and clear understanding of the problems that concern the present and the future of the nation” (Presidential speech of August 4, 1947).

While some teachers were co-opted by the regime—specially by the creation of the first national teachers’ union in 1947—others opposed it (Fonte, 2016). For the first time in Argentine history, teachers who opposed Peronism were exposed through summary proceedings (Fiorucci 2013, 5), and some were purged from the teacher workforce for being *antiperonists*.

In this context, teacher education programs underwent reforms in terms of both their admissions criteria and their curricula. For admission into teacher education programs, a new examination was introduced (Decree No. 31653/47) to screen applicants based not on their academic merit but on their “vocational” spirit (Gvirtz

1991). A new curriculum was introduced (Decree No. 5114/49) based on the following diagnosis:

“the prevailing positivist orientation had overestimated natural scientific knowledge over the spiritual disciplines that take into account the development of the person; (...) we should contribute to forming the national conscience; (...) it was necessary to include matters that would ensure unity and doctrinal coordination of the whole nation” (Decree No. 5114/49, 14).

For the first time in Argentine history, teacher education institutions taught religion, and their emphasis on moral education also increased, while the emphasis on science decreased, following the curricular reforms for primary education introduced two years before.

The emphasis on teaching values in primary schools and Normal Schools represented a turning point in Argentina’s history of education. The 1884 Law created a secular public system and contributed to cement the idea that education had to be secular among teachers and other educational actors. This idea was abandoned during Peron’s first presidency. The 1930s had marked the beginning of a new period in Argentina’s political history, and the education reforms introduced by Peron sought to ensure the endurance of these changes by forming citizens who subscribed to new values: nationalism, Catholicism, anti-imperialism, and loyalty to Peron.

6 Conclusion

This paper examines the political economy of national curriculum policies for primary and Normal schools in Argentina and Chile from 1860 to 1970. Our findings contribute to the vast comparative education and history of education literatures, and to an expansive literature on the comparative political economy of education. First, our finding that two countries as similar as Argentina and Chile exhibit important differences both in their initial choices concerning the national curriculum and in the subsequent trajectory of these curricula, suggests the need to revisit the idea—prevalent

in comparative education research—that education policies exhibit remarkable cross-country isomorphism due to the global diffusion of education best practices. Not only do we find less isomorphism than the global diffusion hypothesis would suggest, but also, we find that domestic forces rather than global imitation were the leading forces behind curricular reform.

Second, our analytical and methodological approach also contributes to the history of education field. Much research tends to study education reforms as if these were driven by education-specific factors only. We encountered this often in our own search for secondary sources for Sections 4 and 5: existing studies would provide detailed descriptions of the content of reforms, but when it came to explaining why they took place, they would often focus only on changes in pedagogical ideas, or changes in who was the Minister of Education, ignoring the larger macro-political context in which these changed were taking place. Alternatively, a few studies focus only on macro-political factors (Narodowski 1996). Our approach attempts to bring together the macro-political level of analysis with the education-specific forces driving education policy choices. This is inherently an interdisciplinary approach that combines the analytical tools from political science with the rich knowledge on the history of education systems. Our approach proves fertile to explain long-term trends in curricular reforms. Further research could explore this pathway to understand the evolution of other types of education policies.

Third, our paper contributes to a growing literature on the comparative political economy of education. We move away from the literature’s emphasis on the politics of educational expansion, and examine instead why some countries promote more skills acquisition than others. While this question has received some attention in studies of skills formation in secondary and university education, we focus on the politics behind policy choices that shape skills formation in primary schools and Normal Schools training primary school teachers, because primary schools are the first formal

educational experience available to most individuals, and contribute the building blocks for subsequent learning.

Our political economy analysis suggests four general lessons. First, policymakers may adopt education policies that place an emphasis on teaching skills for reasons that have nothing to do with promoting the social mobility of the lower classes, or even aggregate economic development. This conclusion stems from the comparison of curriculum policy choices made in nineteenth-century Argentina and Chile. In Argentina, as in Chile, political elites turned to primary education as a means to shape the moral character of the lower classes, their main goal being to promote social order. The reason why the Argentine Congress introduced a national school curriculum that emphasized teaching math and science, and not the heavily Catholic curriculum introduced by the Chilean Congress, was that the liberal elites that dominated the Argentina Congress in 1884 thought that the best way to promote social order was to teach individuals how to think abstractly. It was through logic and reason, they argued, that individuals would be able to understand why refraining from killing or stealing was in their own best interest. Acknowledging that the promotion of skills can be a simple by-product of education policy choices designed with other purposes in mind—here, to promote social order—is an important lesson today, especially for international donors seeking to address the so-called global learning crisis.

Second, the Catholic Church, an actor not relevant in political economy accounts of skills formation in secondary and tertiary education, plays a key role in the formation of skills in primary schools. When the Church depends on primary schools to reach the masses *and* it enjoys considerable political power at the national level (as in 1860s Chile and 1940s Argentina), then the curriculum is likely to place less relative emphasis on teaching math and science skills than when the Church does not rely on schools to gain new members (1929 Chile) or does not have much political power (1880s Argentina).

Third, labor unions in general, and teacher unions in particular, can sometimes be an important force behind reforms that seek to improve the degree to which schooling translates into the acquisition of productivity-enhancing skills. While it is common for scholars and policymakers to argue that teacher unions tend to block reforms that improve educational quality, our analysis of the reforms taking place in 1927-29 Chile and 1947-48 Argentina suggest a more nuanced story. The Chilean reforms, which increased the emphasis on science and reduced the emphasis on religion and morality, were largely based on reforms proposed by the AGP, a politically-autonomous national teacher union that advocated—like other labor unions—for the material improvement of the working class. By contrast, Argentina lacked a politically-autonomous union to advocate for the working class. The first national teacher union was formed by the Peronist administration in 1947, and its legal recognition was heavily dependent on the union’s support for the Peronist educational project, which entailed using primary schools to promote nationalism, anti-imperialism, Catholicism, and loyalty to Peron. Ironically, in Argentina, a government that had ample support from the working class introduced reforms that expanded access to education but reduced schools’ historical emphasis on teaching skills.

Fourth, our analysis suggests there is considerable path dependence in education policymaking, and points to conditions that favor reform. In both Argentina and Chile, curriculum policy exhibits a pattern of initial choices that set each country on a decades-long trajectory, interrupted by radical reforms that mark the beginning of a new trajectory that also persists for a long period. We leave it for further research to examine the reasons for this persistence, but want to highlight here that the critical junctures taking place in 1929 Chile and 1947-48 Argentina were both introduced by authoritarian regimes that had strong military presence, a particular concern for

advancing nationalism and industrialization, and a diagnosis that the education system they inherited had failed to accomplish this.

More broadly, our work demonstrates the value of adopting a historical lens when studying the comparative political economy of education. Argentina and Chile exhibit important differences in the degree to which their education systems, today, promote the acquisition of skills. We could attempt to explain these differences by referring to the quality-oriented education reforms made in Chile since the 1990s, or the deterioration of educational quality resulting from the decentralization of Argentine education in the 1990s. But we would be missing an important part of the story if we failed to notice that the differences we see today have been brewing since the mid-twentieth century. Acknowledging the presence of these deeply-rooted historical forces is an important first step for anyone wanting to transform education systems today.

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