

Abstract

In recent years, the accountability issue has become the *eminence grise* of the educational enterprise and has polarized constituencies within and without the educational arena. The divisiveness engendered by this controversy has largely clouded discussion on how to make the educational process more efficient and effective.

This paper attempts to suggest some options for a "middle-ground" approach to the accountability debate. Given the constraints that our knowledge of the teaching/learning process is still modest and precludes "hard" generalizations, and that it is extremely difficult to define certain educational experiences in terms of demonstrable outcomes, this paper argues for a greater educational and social awareness that will recognize the controllable and non-controllable factors in education.

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Accountability: Some Considerations of a Continuing Educational Dilemma

Few contemporary issues in the educational arena have precipitated greater debate and polarization than the accountability movement. In both an abstract and a practical sense, the press for accountability has become the *eminence grise* at all levels of educational endeavour. Concerned with quality and quantity of educational matters, accountability raises a myriad of inquiries of an emotional and value-laden nature which involve administrators, teachers and the community.

Much of the jingoistic fervour and confusion that surrounds the accountability question is far from novel. In fact, the social impetus toward defensible educational procedures can be traced on an historical continuum which dates back to the beginning of this century. Perhaps the most significant historic circumstance to be remembered is that the public schools have proved to be vulnerable to community pressures, particularly to forces of an economic character.¹ In other words, public schools in the twentieth century have been concerned traditionally with explaining their activities to the public.

A brief examination of the scientific management movement of the early twentieth century and its effects on the public schools evidences the assailable quality of the educational enterprise and the sensitivity of administrators and teachers to social criticism.² It is reasonable to suggest that throughout much of this century, school systems have attempted to respond to prevalent civic attitudes which have demanded that educational management should be as efficiency-oriented as the private sector.

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¹Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Reviews of National Policies for Education* (Paris: OECD, 1976)

²Cf. Kerr, Donna H., *Educational Policy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1976), Ch. 1,2.

¹This vulnerability is considerably more an American than a Canadian educational phenomenon.

²Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Obviously, this continuing interest in economic accountability is reflective of a more profound philosophical predilection — simply that investment in social institutions should result in some identifiable good. This utilitarian inclination, of course, tends to operationalize the objective and pragmatic tenor of the North American mind. Scientific methodology, the “drive-force” of much of our social development, has fuelled this industrial disposition. The educational fallout which ensues from this impulse toward precision and proficiency largely explains the public school’s fascination with “the cult of efficiency.”

With a *modus operandi* derived from science and a financial outlook which issues from the business world, it is not difficult to understand the complexion of current educational administration. While knowledge is espoused as the most valuable intangible commodity, the North American experience has vividly demonstrated that learning is not the secret of achievement, but rather that energy or initiative and, most importantly, common sense are the progenitors of success. This dichotomy underscores the accountability dilemma: on one hand, knowledge is associated with virtue; on the other, there is a constant press for growth and the verification of it, regardless of whether or not growth can be proved. Clearly, this emphasis on the demonstrable poses acute problems for educators, who, by the nature of their tasks, are forced to rely frequently on less than visible proof of their labours.

Thus, it can be seen that much of the accountability venture is not a new but an on-going concern which administrators, school trustees and teachers have accommodated for years. What is novel today, however, is not only the intensity and range of this movement, but the interest in enlarging the school’s responsibility from the processes (the dispensation of learning) to the products of education (evidence of what has been learnt).

What has prompted this reawakened interest? In general, it may be explained by the interplay of a host of social forces. From a social point of view, there currently exists a widespread disenchantment with a variety of political and social institutions and their capabilities. A better-informed public is all-too-aware of the daily rash of organizational dysfunctions which plagues institutional life. Coupled with this is an overall feeling of economic insecurity and a concomitant mood of fiscal restraint. No longer is the public-at-large prepared to invest its confidence and resources in any institution without some voice in its operation. These social concerns are reflected in an obvious public militancy aimed at the greater sharing of authority and policy-making.

In effect, the thrust toward increasing public school responsibility is politically, socially, and educationally inspired — that is, accountability has become in large measure a community state-of-mind. Spiralling educational costs, the apparent failure of over a decade of attempts at school reform, more stringent occupational requirements, the inability of the schools to respond to a number of social problems (i.e., poverty and unemployment), and a loss of faith in educational productivity, have each contributed to the impetus for accountability. As might be expected, this public clamour has inevitably prompted considerable tensions between legitimate civic concerns and the universal organizational need for relative measures of institutional autonomy.

To many educators, the most distressing aspect of accountability today rests on the implicit demand for the expansion of school responsibility. Overloaded with an already vast array of pluralistic concerns, accountability is an overriding burden for

school personnel. Whereas once the efficiency of public education was computed on the basis of pupil/teacher ratios, expenditures-per-student, classroom size and the number of program offerings — in short, the efficient use of financial resources — today's accountability not only focuses on the measurement of educational processes but on the achievement of definite educational products. Undoubtedly, educators have been quick to realize that the current brand of accountability has removed much of the locus of responsibility for educational attainment from parents and students and has shifted it to the jurisdiction of the schools. This dramatic change compels educators and not their clients, as it did in the past, to defend levels of educational achievement — an untenable task in the eyes of many.

To clarify further discussion, a working definition of accountability is evidently necessary. What is accountability and what does it mean to educators? In its simplest form, it concerns relating educational "inputs" to educational "outputs,"³ a process which ordinarily involves a more stringent definition of pedagogical goals, a continual monitoring of procedures, a careful scrutiny of financial support, and an evaluation of the aims achieved, the procedures employed, and the overall cost of reaching specified goals. Implicit in this mechanism is the consideration of educational value and responsibility, not to mention fiscal restraint and caution. Above all, accountable system attempt to answer the questions - who should be accountable to whom, how, and for what? These simply-stated, but nonetheless vexing, questions in turn provoke a potpourri of other inquiries — what should be measured and how, what criteria should be established and who should construct these standards, who should evaluate them, and what will evaluation mean? Responses to these questions, however, must be realistically grounded in answers to another set of inquiries, many of which exist in the realm of the intangible — what are the goals of the schools, how are they determined and by whom, can they be measured and to what end? From a further philosophical perspective, one might ask, can educational ends be foreseeable, and, if so, should they be foreseen?

Classically, the accountability movement is rooted in the interaction of social and political exigencies and evolves through a concern with economics to the analysis of school governance, the competence of personnel, and lastly to the services received by the students. It is largely the case of a social dynamic acting on a perennially conservative organization.

As an educational creed, accountability is predicated on *measurement* and the *identification* and *assigning* of responsibility. Four relatively distinct concepts characteristic of accountability have been identified: performance reporting (proof of results); technical reliance (criterion-based tests, systems analysis); political responsiveness (obliging the needs of constituencies); and institutional processes (the delivery and production of educational services).⁴

In other words, systems desirous of accountability exhibit certain tendencies. Notably, these include the propensity toward stating specific outcomes in behavioural terms, the framing of pedagogical objectives and the processes employed in their attainment. Focus is generally concentrated on content/skill mastery and on the confirmation of performance criteria. Standardized tests which measure entry and exit competencies are widely used and there is some credence

³M. Lieberman, "An Overview of Accountability", *Phi Delta Kappan* (December, 1970): 194-95.

⁴Henry M. Levin, "A Conceptual Framework for Accountability in Education", *School Review* (May 1974): 363-391.

placed in the advantages of technologically-assisted learning. In the main, accountability centres on the demonstration of basic skills in core subjects, although there are visible "spillover" effects in other areas.

In its insistence on the demonstration of educational gain, accountability has legitimized the notion of performance-contracting both on the part of school personnel and private agencies. In fact, it is a common accountability strategy to "go outside" the public school systems to special consultants for assistance in evaluating programs, techniques, and administrative and teacher competencies.

In the promotion of a rigorous awareness of organizational goals, considerable attention is directed at improved management and information systems — an inclination which is substantially housed under the "management by objectives" (MBO) rubric. This approach is characteristic of numerous accountability efforts which display some flirtation with technical alternatives (educational reform through science). The introduction of corporate techniques such as Program, Planning, and Budgeting Systems (PPBS) and Program Evaluation and Review Techniques (PERT) is commonplace, and these are widely viewed as effective formats for the identification of objectives, the allocation of resources, and the evaluation of programs, administrative procedures and educational products. The popularity of these managerial innovations invariably rests on their "feedback loops" which facilitate constant communication and measurement.

These systems also provide the opportunity for the greater sharing of information — an important adjunct since the public is adamant in its intent to abolish the one-way information flow that has traditionally characterized social agencies such as schools. Management systems of this nature make it possible to disseminate data on program development at various stages, thus placating the demand for a two-way information exchange.

Accountable schools or school systems are often further characterized by their staffing arrangements. The differentiated staffing model is the most celebrated in this regard. This model assigns instructional personnel to tasks in accordance with individual capabilities and aspirations. Roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated and salaries are awarded on the basis of position (instructional positions range through a number of stages from intern to master teacher and are generally augmented by the use of non-professionals, such as teacher aides). The strength of this approach resides in the obvious competition it fosters — if one performs effectively at specific levels, promotion is forthcoming. As a postscript to this discussion, it might be added that this model to date appears beset with problems of insufficient funding and the lack of adequate personnel preparation.

Lastly, the desire for accountability may be reflected by alterations in scheduling. This may involve an extension of the school year, or at least some modification of classroom time which attempts to maximize the uses of physical facilities and resources. Except for the fiat of precedence, there are few rationales which support the notion of a school year as it is currently structured. Conceivably, re-engineering in this area could produce impressive gains in terms of costs and efficiency.

When one examines the general parameters of the accountability issue, there is great difficulty in establishing what might otherwise be termed consensus positions. Undoubtedly, it is a far simpler task to ascertain the extremes. Nonetheless, several notions exist which are commonly shared. First, no one appears to disagree with the need to define objectives, or to measure the results and modify programs accordingly. Secondly, there is an overall realization that educational effectiveness

must be improved. And, finally, few would debate the glaring need for the public schools to provide reasonable standards of achievement for students, particularly as it relates to literacy and basic computing skills. However, whatever consensus does emerge with regard to increasing the effectiveness of public education, it is rapidly submerged in the undertow of political urgencies. Few issues, it seems, have proved to be as volatile as accountability in dividing individuals and groups within the community, the government and the schools.

Critics of accountability are vociferous in their opposition. For the most part, they contend that the overt reliance of this movement on evaluation and measurement entails a number of disastrous educational consequences. What evidence exists, they argue, that the sum of objectives stated in behavioural terms will equal the qualities of character and mind which we wish to impart in education? Moreover, how can there be explicit evaluation with only implicit policies? This line of thought holds that, because teaching is an applied art based on a somewhat incomplete science, the quantification of effectiveness is not always possible. Furthermore, our current knowledge of the teaching/learning process is still modest and precludes "hard" generalizations. With the realization that many important educational gains defy measurement, tentative approaches will have to suffice since the complexity of the educational enterprise prevents the generation of absolutes.

Of all opponents, the accountability press has had its most dramatic and singular effect on teachers. Upset with the accusatory edge of this movement, teachers see themselves as the victims of public mood which demands an ever-increasing array of specialized educational services yet, at the same time, calls for a rollback of school expenditures. Many teachers and school administrators see accountability as little more than a public and governmental reaction to the exponentially rising costs of education. Nothing, they argue, is made more apparent to the public than the increase in instructional salaries, when, in fact, the real costs occur in connection with reduced class sizes and extended periods of training. From this perspective, many teachers view accountability as a search for a scape-goat and a process which invariably connotes competency ratings conducted by students, supervisors or outside observers.

Although rating scales abound for the measurement of teaching and administrative effectiveness, research findings are equivocal on the accuracy of evaluation devices. Indeed, the measurement of competency is viewed as a threat to professional freedom and is strongly opposed by teachers' associations who claim that professional competence cannot be evaluated when instructional staff cannot control the environmental variables which are far more instrumental in effecting growth than the experiences provided by the school. On the basis of major research studies, e.g., the Coleman report in the United States and the Plowden report in Great Britain, teachers argue that they cannot be responsible for guaranteed educational outcomes when the most telling influences on the cognitive and social development of students exist outside their domain. Important also is the fact that children's capacity for learning varies according to age, from which the inference can be drawn that certain teachers in specific grades are faced with overcoming greater pupil handicaps than others. This, in itself, renders inequitable the idea of fair evaluation of teacher ability on the basis of pupil growth.

If scholarly concern with the difficulties of evaluation is justifiable and credible, teachers might well ask what is the primary motivation behind the press for accountability? Is the improvement of the instructional program the overriding issue, or is it something else — finance, economics, or the search of social

theorists for another educational panacea?

As aforementioned, accountability depends on the identification of objectives and the measurement of performance. It is precisely these exercises that provoke the most strident discussion. In short, problems relating to goal delineation and measurement are overwhelming. To begin with, the continuing failure of state or provincial departments of education to articulate educational objectives in other than "umbrella" or "motherhood" terms has meant that school districts have been deprived of educational leadership in a much-needed area. As in the case of larger political entities, individual communities have rarely decided what their educational ends should be — whether they should emphasize citizenship or training, or a combination of both. Given the supposition that educators and the public can agree on some broad common goals, the question of how to translate these ends into a measurable currency remains.⁵

It is generally conceded that much of the educational experience involves growth in the affective domain, an area which defies precise calibration, and that many educational activities result in a number of unintended outcomes. Can these eventualities be weighed in an accountable system? If so, how, and on what basis? Alternatively, if certain aspects of learning are seen to be immeasurable and intangible, should they continue to be included in a system besieged by demands for accountability? How can the gaps between the general goal definition of state or provincial departments and the specific objectives of particular classrooms be narrowed? These are clearly difficult questions.

Even within the more circumscribed confines of the individual classroom the debate rages. Opponents of accountability, mainly teachers, charge that the explicit interest in behavioural objectives and standardized measurement devices are suggestive of a uniformity which does not permit student variability and flexibility. For example, in a core subject such as English, standardized achievement tests may evaluate a student's ability to learn new words or to synthesize new material but may not measure discrete skills involved in grammar for which the teacher could be held accountable (the agreement of subject and verb, etc.). Similarly, these evaluations of performance may be valid in terms of class or school averages, yet fail to identify individual needs or to provide clues for remedial action. Moreover, if teacher competency is to be linked to pupil performance, teachers may learn to teach for specific tests (as many teachers did for government-set examinations). Thus, even at the most finite levels, measurement is problematic.

Despite the ever-present polarization of opinion, all of this discussion inevitably precipitates the framing of a most obvious and necessary question — what can be done to ensure greater educational effectiveness? Working within the current state of knowledge on this issue, several considerations and strategies can be entertained.

Essentially, whatever alternatives exist to current courses of action, these options must encompass some viable pedagogical middle-ground. Without a tenable consensus position and the support of personnel in all areas of educational endeavour, the likelihood of change is greatly diminished. Therefore, the inclusion of parents, students, teachers and administrators is mandatory in any effort to promote effectiveness. Additionally, it must be understood that efforts to improve educational effectiveness are logical components of the educational process and not punitive activities designed to isolate blame. Above all, accountability emphasizes the need to blend humanistic and rationalistic perspectives.

⁵These goals are often acknowledged to include: the development of students' self-concepts, attitudes and interests, the provision of rudimentary learning skills and a body of elementary knowledge deemed necessary by society, and the opportunities and abilities necessary to pursue a career.

At the risk of oversimplification, accountability can be seen as a method of enquiry which prompts questions applicable to any individual involved in education — what are the tasks to be attempted, how can they be approached, is there an advantageous strategy, how can this be identified, and can the effectiveness of these efforts be demonstrated? In a fundamental sense, accountability speaks to the need for sound financial planning and investment.

As in the case of all effective social organizations, educational systems must identify and rank individual and community needs; programs must be developed in line with available resources (human and otherwise); tasks and responsibilities must be assigned; and, evaluations of program effectiveness must be conducted. Of course, the value of these procedures is predicated on the assumption that a more complete and accurate knowledge base will ultimately serve to refine the instructional process and improve the educational product.

Aside from the need for a responsive administrative model, what are other possible guidelines for a more accountable public school system? Undoubtedly, much can be done in the area of goal definition. Community agreement on educational aims, although difficult, is of critical significance as is the support of those who are assigned to act upon these goals. The establishment of common points of reference by the community and educators will undercut numerous potential problems. Concrete local decisions on educational direction are of invaluable assistance to educators in illuminating operative social pressures (and pressure groups), curriculum emphasis and the community's expectations of individual and industrial needs.

On the basis of written objectives, strategies or designs for learning can be discussed. As is currently the case, general educational policies should be created by the body politic and executed by the administrative staff within the system. Public involvement means that each constituency within individual districts can be made aware of the limits of educational effectiveness — that is, the fact that educational inputs and outcomes are never completely controllable. Nonetheless, one can be optimistic in efforts to raise educational effectiveness, if not efficiency.

It is vital that educational goals are realistically stated. This does not mean that outcomes must be stated in behavioural terms, although some areas lend themselves to this (the successful student will evidence his ability to type 45 error-free words per minute), what is important is that acceptable outcomes according to subject and level should be defined; in other words, there should be some criteria of proficiency. Where there is difficulty in establishing demonstrable standards, it should be decided what can be accurately measured and what cannot. Moreover, it is significant to know at what level of the educational taxonomy these measurements are being made (exponents of accountability have frequently been charged with failure to evaluate the higher cognitive processes). Perhaps there is some value in separating cognitive and non-cognitive goals.

Central to the concept of educational effectiveness is the need for a comprehensive information system which can generate relevant data to improve the decision-making process and provide timely reporting on program success to individuals within and without the framework of educational operations. As alluded to previously, a main current in the entire accountability movement is the public desire for a greater knowledge of institutional activity (a civic interest by no means confined to school systems). If reporting methods are to be effective, they must not only describe the success or state of overall learning designs or techniques, but they should report on the academic, health and social well-being of the student.

However, it should be pointed out that even sound information systems are not without problems. Many decision-makers simply do not have the time or expertise to evaluate data. As a result, policy decisions are normally made on the basis of what is expedient and possible. Perhaps the hiring of specialized assistance whenever required might offset this liability.

Educational accountability also relies heavily on the existence of a continuous planning capability. To date, planning often appears to be a sporadic event which surfaces in educational organizations close to the time of the budget (similarly, one could suggest that citizen demand for accountability is likewise motivated — that is, community concern with educational waste increases around the time of the annual tax assessment). At best, this is a highly unsatisfactory situation. For administrative practices to be rational, they must include an ongoing planning function as part of the daily operational routine. To develop effective alternatives to extant programs, and to engender advantageous learning sequences and environments, both short- and long-term strategies must be formulated.

PPBS and PERT administrative models are of particular assistance in this regard. Built in to these systems are planning components which facilitate immediate and future program design. Models of this nature are also popular because of their insistence on goal definition, information flow, and their evaluative techniques which permit program development and effectiveness to be monitored at various points. Additionally, PPBS and PERT have proved to be useful devices in identifying spheres of authority and responsibility. For an educational enterprise to be either effective or accountable, there must be a clear statement of who is responsible for what, how evaluation will occur and on what basis.

Other important considerations in creating a more effective teaching and learning process include the development of appropriate in-service programs to increase teacher awareness of pupil growth and the conditions that sponsor it. Principals, of course, can play a crucial role in this area. By assuming a greater responsibility for program development and instructional competencies, administrators at this level can appreciably affect innovation and foster a school climate favourable to a more effective management of time and talent.

Classroom effectiveness can likewise be raised if teacher-training institutes centre their efforts on the preparation of teachers equipped with the tools of self-analysis and the ability to modify their teaching techniques and strategies according to varying learning situations.

In conclusion, some general considerations should be noted. From an administrative point of view, it should be understood that most educational programs have multiple objectives which tend to change with time. This change factor obviously deserves attention. Also, administrative efforts should be made to separate controllable factors — this would, at least, lend an air of rationality to planning. Above all, it must be recognized that no educational program will ever prove to be highly efficient — we simply do not understand the social tableau to the degree where this might occur.

If we are to frame meaningful strategies to counter current educational problems, it is of elemental importance to define the limits of our capabilities and to tailor our expectations accordingly. There are no simple solutions to complex issue — that is, the public schools can only be accountable for so much, for clearly difficult social and educational problems are unlikely to disappear. What this suggests in relation to accountability is that the schools should narrow the scope of

their concern, settle for incremental gains instead of attempts at total reform, and, in doing so, undercut the high expectation/low yield syndrome which plagues education in general.

The press for accountability may well prove to be a blessing for the schools in that it offers an opportunity for educators and the community to decide mutually what are the legitimate tasks of education and how should they be attempted. Dialogues on the accountability issue can outline the reasonable responsibilities of educators, the services that school systems can provide, the educational ends which can be evaluated and with what precision. If realistic pedagogical goals can be identified and agreed upon, no longer will schools be regarded as an "imperfect panacea" for a host of social maladies.

Depuis quelques années il faut rendre comptes objectifs de tout ce que l'on entreprend. Cette obligation est devenue l'*éminence grise* du domaine de l'éducation et a polarisé l'attention de tous ceux qui s'en occupent. Les divergences engendrées par cette controverse ont beaucoup obscurci les discussions consacrées aux moyens de rendre l'éducation plus utile et plus efficace.

Cet article voudrait suggérer une attitude plus nuancés dans le débat au sujet des comptes à rendre. Comme d'une part nos connaissances du processus enseignement/apprentissage sont encore bien incomplètes, ce qui empêche toute généralisation intrasigeante, et que d'autre part, certaines expériences entreprises dans le domaine de l'éducation peuvent difficilement se définir en termes de résultats démontrables, cet article propose, dans les domaines social et éducatif, une plus grande souplesse qui reconnaîtrait en matière d'éducation, des facteurs contrôlables et ceux qui ne le sont pas.