

Reading 8

Accountability for professional practice

Linda Darling Hammond

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All professions are required to be accountable in various ways for the quality of the service they render – to their clients, to the public and to their fellow professionals. In the article from which this excerpt is taken, the writer analyses five forms of accountability that may operate in various institutions in a democratic society. Only two of these forms are applicable to teaching on a regular, day-to-day basis. A third form – legal accountability – comes into effect from time to time when a teacher, school, or education department is held to account in a court of law as a result of legal action, perhaps on the part of parents.

Notes

In this excerpt, only the two forms of accountability that regularly apply to teachers and teaching are analysed, i.e. bureaucratic and professional accountability. After explaining the need for teachers to be held accountable to parents and society, and pointing out the shortcomings of many policies that are aimed at making them more accountable, Darling Hammond goes on to describe how bureaucratic accountability works, and to point out its shortcomings.

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Professional accountability, as she describes it, is far better suited to meeting the needs of learners (and parents) than bureaucratic accountability, which only holds teachers to account for the faithfulness with which they have followed standard procedures and implemented policies.

Reading

The issue of educational accountability is probably the most pressing and most problematic of any facing the public schools today. Gone are the days when the local town council hired the village schoolmaster and fired him at will for any cause. Gone, too, are the days when schoolteachers were so respected in their office that anything within the schoolroom walls was

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accepted as the rightful and unquestioned prerogative of school officials. A more highly educated populace has greater expectations of schools, and a more knowledge-oriented economy raises both the costs and benefits of school success or failure. Today, schools are being held to account by politicians, the general public, and parents for results they should be expected to produce and, often, for results over which they have little or no control [...]

cacophony: chaotic,
discordant noise

operationalized: made to
operate

In the current debates about accountability, *cacophony* rules. There is little agreement, and perhaps even less clear thinking, about what accountability means, to whom it is owed, and how it can be *operationalized*. Many policy-makers seem to equate accountability with something like the monitoring of student test scores, averaged for classrooms, schools, or school districts. Some believe that accountability can be enacted by statutes prescribing management procedures, tests, or curricula. Unfortunately, these approaches to accountability leave the student, the parent, the teacher, and the educational process entirely out of the equation. The production of a test score or a management scheme does not touch the issue of whether a student's educational interests are being well served.

We need to begin to articulate what we mean by accountability, and, in particular, what we mean by professional accountability. I suggest here that a meaningful system of accountability for public education should do three things. It should:

- set educationally meaningful standards for what parents and the general public can rightfully expect of a school system, school, or teacher;
- establish reasonable and practical means by which these standards can be implemented and upheld; and
- provide avenues for redress or corrections in practice when these standards are not met, so that ultimately students are well served [...]

Bureaucratic accountability

Bureaucratic organization and management of schools has increased since the early part of this century, when 'scientific management' principles were first introduced into urban schools in an effort to standardize and rationalize the process of schooling. The view underlying this approach to managing schools is as follows: Schools are agents of government that can be administered by hierarchical decision making and controls. Policies are made at the top of the system and handed down to administrators, who translate them into rules and procedures. Teachers follow the rules and procedures (class schedules, curricula, textbooks, rules for promotion and assignment of students, etc.), and students are processed according to them.

This approach is intended to foster equal and uniform treatment of clients and standardization of products or services, and to prevent *arbitrary*

or *capricious* decision making. It works reasonably well when goals are agreed on and clearly definable, when procedures for meeting the goals can be specified, when the procedures are straightforward and feasible to implement, and when following these procedures is known to produce the desired outcomes in all cases. Bureaucratic accountability ensures that rules will be established and compliance with these rules will be monitored. The promise that bureaucratic accountability makes is that those who violate the rules will be apprehended, and consequences will be administered for those who do not comply.

When bureaucratic forms are applied to the management of teaching, they rely on a number of assumptions:

- that students are sufficiently standardized that they will respond in identical and predictable ways to the ‘treatments’ devised by policy-makers;
- that sufficient knowledge of which treatments should be prescribed is both available and applicable to all educational circumstances;
- that this knowledge can be translated into standardized rules for practice, which can be operationalized through regulations and reporting and inspections systems; and
- that administrators and teachers can and will faithfully implement the prescriptions for practice thus devised and transmitted to schools.

The bottom-line assumption is that this process, if efficiently administered, will produce the outcomes that the system desires. If the outcomes are not satisfactory, the final assumption is that the prescriptions are not yet sufficiently detailed or the process of implementation is not sufficiently exact [...]

In the bureaucratic model, teachers are viewed as functionaries rather than as well-trained and highly skilled professionals. Little investment is made in teacher preparation, induction, or professional development [...] Little time is afforded for joint planning or collegial consultation about problems of practice. Because practices are prescribed *outside* the school setting, there is no need and little use for professional knowledge and judgement. Thus, novice teachers assume the same responsibilities as thirty-year veterans. Separated into ‘egg-crate’ classrooms and isolated by packed teaching schedules, teachers rarely work or talk together about teaching practices. The bureaucratic perspective on teaching work provides no reason for them to do so.

In the bureaucratic conception of teaching, teachers do not need to be highly knowledgeable about learning theory and pedagogy, cognitive science and child development, curriculum and assessment; they do not need to be highly skilled, because they do not, presumably, make the major decision about these matters. Curriculum planning is done by administrators and specialists; teachers are to implement a curriculum planned for them. Inspection of teachers’ work is conducted by hierarchical

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capricious: here, this refers to sudden and unpredictable decisions

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superiors, whose job it is to make sure that the teacher is implementing the curriculum and procedures laid down by the authorities. Teachers do not plan or evaluate their own work; they merely perform it.

Teacher accountability is achieved by inspections and reporting systems intended to ensure that the rules and procedures are being followed. Teachers are held accountable for implementing curriculum and testing policies, grading policies, assignment and promotion rules, and many other educational prescriptions, whether or not these treatments are appropriate in particular instances for particular students. As a consequence, teachers cannot be held accountable for meeting the *needs* of their students; they can be held accountable only for following standard operating procedures. The standard for accountability is compliance rather than effectiveness.

The problem with the bureaucratic solution to the accountability problem in education is that effective teaching is *not* routine, students are *not* passive, and questions of practice are *not* simple, predictable, or standardized. By its very nature, bureaucratic management is incapable of providing appropriate education for students who do not fit the mould on which all of the prescriptions for practice are based.

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Professional accountability

Professionalism depends on the affirmation of three principles in the conduct and governance of an occupation:

1. Knowledge is the basis for permission to practise and for decisions that are made with respect to the unique needs of clients.
2. The practitioner pledges his first concern to the welfare of the client.
3. The profession assumes collective responsibility for the definition, transmittal, and enforcement of professional standards of practice and ethics.

Professionals are obligated to do whatever is best for the client, not what is easier, most convenient, or even sometimes what the client himself or herself might want. They are also obligated to base a decision about what is best for the client on available knowledge – not just that knowledge acquired from personal experience, but also that clinical and research knowledge acquired by the occupation as a whole and represented in professional journals, certification standards, and specialty training. Finally, professionals are required to take into account the unique needs of individual clients in making their judgements about what strategies or treatments are appropriate.

These are fine goals, but how are they operationalized to result in something that might be called professional accountability? These

requirements suggested greater regulation of *teachers* – ensuring their competence through more rigorous preparation, certification, selection, and evaluation – in exchange for the deregulation of *teaching* – fewer rules prescribing what is to be taught, when, and how. This is, in essence, the bargain that all professions make with society: For occupations that require discretion and judgement in meeting the unique needs of clients, the profession guarantees the competence of members in exchange for the privilege of professional control over work structure and standards of practice. Collective *autonomy* from external regulation is achieved by accepting collective *responsibility*.

The theory behind this equation is that professional control improves both the quality of individual service and the level of knowledge in the profession as a whole. This occurs because decision making by well-trained professionals allows individual clients' needs to be met more precisely, and it promotes continual refinement and improvement in overall practice as effectiveness rather than bureaucratic compliance becomes the standard for judging competence.

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