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Accountability: Some Thoughts on an Alternative Framework

Joe Petner

To Be or Not To Be

With all respect to Hamlet, we must settle this issue of accountability by saying that to be or not to be is not really the question. It is our duty as responsible professionals to be held "accountable" just as it is our duty as responsible human beings to work toward law and order in our society.

What is being considered in this paper is the notion of what to be held accountable means. Stated in another way, the means by which we move toward accountability should help to determine our view of it and this paper will focus on this view.

The Existing Framework

Sarason in his book, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change, relates that we often operate under the notion that the way things are is the way they should be. This observation seems appropriate as we examine the existing perspective that seems to have developed toward accountability, a perspective that seems limited to narrow concerns in assessment.

This need not be so, but we need to seek some understanding why in order to begin to move beyond the way things are.

It is a truism in research that one's knowledge of methods and techniques should not determine the problems one studies. As Cantril states "all too often scientific pursuit tends to be equated with techniques of investigation." This view leaves us hopeless and helpless and very much in the position of saying that the way

things are is the way they should be. As Arthur Combs so aptly states, "measuring what we know how to measure is no substitute for measuring what we need to measure."

What is being implied then is that for too long we have been contained by our limited measures i.e., tests of achievement.

The net result of all this has served to limit our view of what we need to measure as well as to obscure the purposes of education. We have existed in a tail-wagging-the-dog situation where the purposes of education have become twisted and determined by the instruments that already exist to measure these purposes.

Typically, accountability has come to mean that children must be at "grade level" as verified by some standardized test of achievement or other predetermined norm: that teachers are ultimately blamed if this is not the case, and teachers, in turn, blame the kids for not learning; that parents feel that the schools are not turning out the product for which they have paid tax money; that this now becomes the vicious cycle of self-fulfillment and hopelessness.

Thus, the implied function of schools is to keep everyone just short of their collapsing point. Pupils must always be at "grade level" as teachers are frantically searching for the panacea that will bring all children to that point. Parents no longer view Johnny as their individual child, but as a contestant in competition with others, and desperately seek to make him the winner.

Perhaps in a more profound way, the deleterious effects of this narrow view of accountability has in a very blatant way served to undermine our faith and belief in children as thinking, capable, striving beings. We have taken a dim view of them as agents in their own learning. The argument goes that we must prescribe and

compel children to learn, for unless we do they will not. An analogy might be a cafeteria line where an array of foods are available and the belief that feel given a choice individuals will select only "desserts." Ergo, "man must be compelled to be good, or he will invariably turn out bad."

Several other points need to be made which bear on the ramifications caused by the existing framework of accountability.

Children: The "learning" process for them really involves knowing how to cope with situations in which one's own work and behavior are being evaluated. The task of coping requires much attention, as well as demanding often that one falsify his behavior. The pressures do provide a means for controlling behavior but not necessarily for learning.

Teacher: The great concern for objectivity has caused teacher judgments to be viewed as valueless. This has served to undermine the morale of teachers as they no longer trust their own experiences and capacities for assessment. They are thus beholden to the test makers for an "objective" measure of how Johnny reads, 'rites, 'rithematizes. In fact, they have relegated their responsibility to the test makers, even though research data (i.e., Ilg and Ames, Goslin, et al.) support the effectiveness of teacher judgments in comparison to standardized measures.

This effect of demoralizing has even permeated to the home. We have successfully isolated learning so that it is thought to occur only in the school setting. Parents no longer feel adequate to help their child (i.e., with the "new" math, with phonics, with social studies, science, etc.) because we have confined and obscured the curriculum. Parents have come to disregard the "learning potential" in their very lifestyle and diversity. Jerome Bruner has urged

that "we find some way of connecting the diversity of the society to the phenomena of school, to keep the latter from becoming so isolated and the former so suspicious."

What seems to emerge from the above discussion is the need to think about and construct some alternatives to accountability that serve to increase our existing view and understanding of this issue.

As Jerome Bruner states, "evaluation is often viewed as a test of effectiveness...of materials, teaching methods, or whatnot...but this is the least important aspect of it. The most important is to provide intelligence (information, description) on how to improve things."

Documentation

The essence of documentation can be conceived as establishing a data-base of the classroom/school. The process itself can probably best be related in a biographical or historical framework rather than a directly evaluative framework. That is, we first seek to describe the phenomenon and its relationship to the totality in which it exists. From this description, we may then begin to make some judgment along a great range of dimensions or standards.

An underlying assumption is that the process of documentation of the classroom or school provides us with an informed basis from which to make decisions about curriculum, needs and interests of children, a child's growth in reading, math, etc. Through the process of being better informed teachers are in a position to make better responses to kids through their teaching. The potential also exists for encouraging parents to help in the documentation, as well as keeping them better informed. Information that will be more than a letter grade

or test score. This information also provides the potential and means for refreshing and renewing the classroom and the school.

The question that lies before us is what and how to document? To discuss this in detail is not within the scope of this paper. However, some brief mention needs to be made with respect to how and what.

What: Essentially the answer to this question must be determined by each individual. This point of determination is within the framework of our discussion in terms of expecting teachers to make decisions and then evaluate these decisions in the service of practice. It is not unreasonable to expect teachers to have thought about purposes and priorities of the curriculum. Nor is it unreasonable to expect that parents would be involved in helping to make and evaluate these decisions.

The fact that typically we have not done this is evident in Silberman's analysis of the "mindlessness" with which we function. Another point to be made here (Pat Carini has made this evident) "that if we cannot evaluate what we are doing, maybe we don't know what we are doing."

How: The question of how to evaluate/document is directly related to the what. A variety of forms is available. However, the forms should be revealing to those who can use them. They should be viewed as partial descriptors, and thus, must be integrated and substantiated by the context in which we sample. We must attempt to avoid the fragmentation of making judgments of isolated elements (i.e., quantity, correctness, completion, speed - elements more appropos to production in industry).

In conclusion, the question of accountability must be faced squarely and necessarily. What is at issue here are the purposes and means for which we are to be held accountable.

Perhaps, in a more profound and fundamental way, Whitehead directs us. He suggests, "primarily it is the schools and not the scholars which should be inspected. Each school should grant its own leaving certificates, based on its own curriculum. The standards of these schools should be sampled and corrected. But the first requisite for instituting educational reform is the school as a unit with its approved curriculum based on its own needs, and evolved by its own staff."

The directive includes an important aspect heretofore not mentioned. It places the issue of accountability in the realm of "for whom." Clearly, Whitehead believes it is for the schools and for a changing society. He conceives of the school, as framed by Schaefer, in terms of A Center of Inquiry. The requirement which emerges from this conception is that a process of reflection and investigation must be established. Thus, schools must encourage, support, and sustain inspection through this process of inquiry. Teachers, aides, administrators, parents, and children must perceive themselves as capable and active participants in this process.

As John Dewey aptly states, "Aims mean acceptance of responsibility for the observation, anticipations, and arrangements required in carrying on a function...." I choose to accept his challenge.

The choice is firmly based on my beliefs about the purpose of education, and reflects to a large degree my own personal needs and goals. It will and must provide the basis from which I evolve the practice in which I engage. However, the emphasis is not on guaranteed outcomes but on what I believe to be a defensible way in which to proceed based on my current knowledge as well as the search for additional knowing. I must admit the choice is exploratory and highly subjective, but this does not necessarily preclude its validity or usefulness.

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