School Leadership and Accountability:
Moving beyond Standardization of Practice.

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Introduction

In educational policy discussions schools are increasingly perceived as the unit of measurement, clearly implying new expectations of public reporting. This is the case in Norway as well as internationally. *Accountability* has become a popular concept in this regard. The meaning of the term is, however, more elusive and may be difficult to put into practice. In the English language, it is possible to lexically distinguish between *accountability* and *responsibility*, although accountability to some extent has replaced responsibility. In Norwegian both of these concepts refer to the same meaning, which is responsibility. While responsibility concerns the obligations teachers and school leaders, as part of a profession, have to each other in answering questions about what has happened within one's area of responsibility and provide a reliable story of practice; what has happened and why it has taken place, accountability is located in a hierarchical practices of bureaucracy. Public trust is to be secured by specifying performance compliance. Both Blackmore (2001), based on the Australian context, and Ranson (2003), based on the English context, argue that new educational accountability has been more about regulation and performance than educational improvement, local capacity building, and the encouragement of democracy in schools. It seems like accountability has become not only a tool within the system, but it has constituted the system itself. Thus, the bureaucratic State has been changed into the evaluative State.

Part of this change is related to the movement towards decentralization which has focused questions around the professional ability of teachers. The diffuse borderline between political and professional responsibility seems to represent a major problem. Conservatives see opportunities for potential abuse in school-level control, particularly if teachers are able to capture the process of school governance. If school-based management is to be introduced, they suggest that lay control must be assured. From the left it is argued that deregulation, choice, local control will ultimately favour those with greater personal and family resources. Greater inequality will result, with the best getting better; the education gap between rich and poor will widen. At the same time, blame will be decentralized. Central agencies will no longer carry the political burden of confronting those who accuse them of ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Thus, decentralization of the educational system, irrespective of motives, puts in focus the balance between political and professional power over education (Lundgren 1990).

In a modern society it is reasonable that stakeholders require information about curricular processes and educational results to be reported. How do teachers and school leadership execute the societal mandate established in policy decisions? Are teachers working efficiently and appropriately with students, and are school leadership in control of optimal resource allocation and staff support? Are students learning what they should in our schools? How do teachers and leadership accept the responsibility they have for student- and institutional results? Although such questions are no new issues on the block, the multifaceted manifestations of accountability requirements show signs of more top-down control. During the 80s both politicians and top administrators have raised doubt about the extent to which teachers are making claims on behalf of their clients, or perhaps rather on behalf of their own

interest as a group. This is probably the reason why external evaluation of education at various levels has become in focus in recent years. Education policy could no longer be based on widespread trust in the professional competence of educators; their performance should be controlled and judged according to criteria established outside the profession. The new understanding of accountability includes holding student results as the unit for evaluating teachers' instructional practice, as well as establishing the individual school as the unit of institutional achievement.

The paper aims to discuss alternative frameworks of accountability which move beyond standardization of practice. I start with a clarification of what I mean by standard-based reforms and accountability as concept. Then I move on to discuss what we know about the link between accountability and school improvement. Finally, I highlight some claims about what would allow school leaders and teachers to take risks and be imaginative in their approach to school improvement.

A Culture of Performativity

Standards have become a central issue of educational reform in many countries. It is almost like a mantra for school reformers, and increasingly, in many countries there is a trend towards developing a culture of performativity, borrowing frameworks and ideas particularly from UK and USA. There seem to be numerous examples of policy copying, following site visitations, study tours, electronic networking amongst national agencies and authorities. Professional standards for teachers and principals have been developed, and benchmarking and comparison are at the heart of the new performance assessment. These standards represent detailed expectations of what is considered as preferred practice among school leaders and teachers, and in practice they provide new forms of regulation and control of preparation programs for school leaders as well as of accreditation and professional upgrading. Gronn (2003) applies the concept "designer leadership" to underscore how standards for school leaders have become a defining theme for leadership in the appearance of regimes of assessment.

Although performance standards can provide comprehensive description of the elements of principals' and teachers' work, and the development processes used in validating the standards are often hugely consultative, there are several important weaknesses connected to it. A main criticism is related to its decontextualized feature (Louden and Wildy 1999). The approach tends to privilege the demand side rather than the supply side of the solutions to problems; the language of standards tends to privilege an individualistic leadership notion through its stories of "turn around" specialists for failing schools. In addition, standardized evaluation policies and protocols tend to create as many problems as they solve (MacBeath 2006).

Conceptualizing Accountability

Accountability means having to answer for one's actions, and particularly the results of those actions. It is a multilayered concept which defines a relationship of control between different parties, and has a connection to trust. As such, accountability is a social practice pursuing particular purposes, defined by distinctive relationships and evaluative procedures (Ranson 2003). One has to answer questions about what has happened within one's area of responsibility and provide a story or an account of practice; what has happened and why it has taken place. Within the school system often the answers are evaluated by a superior against

some standards or some expectations, which means that accountability is located within hierarchical practices of bureaucracy. But accountability is also an important dimension of professionalism. This dimension highlights that the teacher is morally responsive to the student's and the parents' needs, as well as responsive to the public through the mechanism of the state. In moral terms accountability can be seen as keeping to ethical standards held by teachers as a group and as individuals (Møller 2005; Sockett 1993).

The discourses of accountability are often a mixture of several forms of accountability (Elmore 2003, Sirotnik 2005). Sinclair's (1995) refinement of different forms of accountability offers a lens through which we may more closely examine manifestations of accountability. A distinction between five forms of accountability can be made. It encompasses political, public, managerial, professional and personal. *Political and public accountability* concerns being responsible to the mandate and function of that particular organisation in society, and being responsible towards the local community of which one is a part. *Managerial accountability* refers to a person's position in a hierarchy and responsibility towards superiors concerning tasks that are delegated. The point is that schools as collective entities are accountable to the higher levels of the educational system. It focuses mainly on monitoring inputs and outputs. There is also a *professional accountability*, where a person's commitment to a community of professionals makes him/her perceive a duty to adhere to the standards of the profession. This is about teaching as a moral endeavour. Codes of ethics have for instance become a familiar part of the rhetoric of professional control of the work in schools, even though the influence of these codes is uncertain. Professional accountability implies that teachers acquire and apply the knowledge and skills needed for successful practice. In addition, it involves the norms of putting the needs of the students at the centre of their work, collaborating and sharing of knowledge, and a commitment to the improvement of practice. Finally, the category *personal accountability* can be included, i.e. the values that are sacred to a person. It concerns fidelity to personal conscience in basic values such as respect for human dignity and acting in a manner that accepts responsibility for affecting the lives of others. This kind of accountability is regarded as particularly powerful and binding. It is likely to expect that emotional labour will be stressful if personal values are in conflict with other kinds of accountability. However, personal standards of good teaching are to a great extent implicit. Collective and critical reflection, which could serve as a protection against arbitrariness in teaching is needed. Those responsible for schools cannot rely on personal accountability alone. It is not the individual who is awarded autonomy in school, but the profession. As a profession teachers and school leaders should enter the public debate with their critique and internal defined criteria of teacher professionalism.

In this paper I will particularly focus on the tension between managerial and professional accountability and highlight some shortcomings and advantages of different accountability systems.

Accountability and School Improvement

When people talk about holding schools accountable for results, the dominating discourse across the world tends to be related to *managerial accountability*. This has to do with a shift in focus in accountability policies during the last decades; from a focus on providing educational inputs and processes, to a focus on measurable outcomes. It means that schools are held accountable for generating improvement in student learning outcomes, and is based on a view that school will do better if they are given clear information about their performance on national tests. Test scores are used as evidences of how well the system is

performing at an aggregate level. However, by this shift in focus there is a risk of ignoring some of the most critical purposes of public schooling, for example preparation for participation in a democratic society or processes that creates and sustains social justice, which is not easily or cheaply measured (cf. Soder 2005). Many valued educational objectives cannot be captured for measurement within this perspective of performance-contracting. For example, how can external control by means of tests measure the students' curiosity and creativity, or the results of the school's work in creating personal identities? There is also a risk of ignoring that students in order to be educated require basic educational tools and resources like qualified teachers, books, high-quality instructional materials, facilities and safe schools. These conditions vary significantly across different areas, and some of the most important conditions are beyond the control of the local school, Therefore politicians and state officials should be held accountable for providing these necessary conditions. Resources and opportunities matter and it is highly dubious that we have this absence of accountability for anyone above the level of schools. Too many countries have established an accountability system that seems rooted in the assumption that rewards and punishments based on test score outcomes only, will improve schools. However, a closer look into practice shows the failure of this postulation (Oakes et al. 2005).

Some evidence of the impact of outcomes-based accountability is beginning to accumulate, particularly based on studies within the US context. Obvious limitations of this approach have been documented. First, it concerns the lack of validity of the outcome measure on which improvement is to be based, and the measure of outcomes is too distant from the complexities of what is central to teaching and learning. Second, instead of motivating for improvement, problems of motivation increased in some low-performing schools. Negative incentives actually undermined innovation and risk-taking in threatened schools. Attention was drawn to the survival of the school rather than student learning. In addition, the reallocation of resources seemed inadequate and weakly specified. One big problem with test-driven reform models is that they are rooted in the assumptions that all children are ready to be assessed at the same time in the same way on the same things. In addition, teachers don't have useful information for making good and professional instructional decisions about individual students (O'Day 2002; Sirotnik 2005).

In his work on accountability and school improvement, Elmore (2006) has shown how school leaders use the accountability system to position themselves and their organizations in a favourable place to gain resources and capacity. However, this is not the same as saying they are successful leaders for the students or for society as a whole. Elmore argues that the problem is that many schools have little knowledge about how to respond to accountability policy effectively. His studies have demonstrated that the success of an accountability system depends on how it facilitates engaging the knowledge, skill, and commitment of people who work in the schools. Therefore, it is important to explore if there is an overinvestment in testing and control and an underinvestment in knowledge and skill. It is not sufficient to establish a policy of accountability if it is not followed by a practice of school improvement.

Is professional accountability a more promising alternative? At least it seems to address problems of motivation more productively and it draws attention both to teaching as practice and to teachers' collective responsibility for student learning. The information which is shared is more immediate that the one accumulated at higher levels of aggregation. Hence, it is easier to discover the links between strategies and their effects. For teachers it seems to strengthen the emphasis on their identities as educators. It is also argued that there is some evidence that professional accountability is essential for a school's ability to respond effectively to

outcomes-based accountability. However, there are studies which indicate a weakness of professionalism in many schools. Herein rests a serious limitation of this form of accountability. Also, it does not help ensuring equal opportunities for all students (O'Day 2002). However, there is a tension between the teachers' demand for autonomy, for an independent right to draw up and discuss the ethics of professional practice, and the control of this practice by the democratic state. This should mobilize teachers in collaboration with principals to enter the public debate with their critique and internal defined criteria of teacher professionalism. A professional role entails professional responsibility, and this implies that teachers must make their experience more visible. Alternative forms of accountability must be publicly acceptable.

That's why it is important to distinguish between professional and personal accountability. The first implies that the teaching profession has the right and duty to construct and uphold standards of good teaching. An individual right to set one's own standards for teaching does not correspond with the conditions of professionalism. It is not the individual who is awarded autonomy, but the profession. And as a profession teachers should enter the public debate with their critique and internally defined criteria of teacher professionalism. In addition to their efforts of voicing protests against more managerialism in schools, teachers should lead the drive to resolve the tension between managerial and professional control by promoting forms of accountability that are publicly acceptable.

One of the Norwegian schools which participated in the Successful School Leadership Project can serve as a fine example of how professional accountability is established locally. The leaders and the teachers had worked for years with systemic school based evaluation for the benefit of school development. Such evaluation is a way of being accountable, as they see it. They were able to provide documentation of the work they were doing to the outside world, but first and foremost they gave priority to school based evaluation in order to develop their practice. Three teachers volunteered to take a lead in analyzing findings from questionnaires, of which some were developed at county level, some at national level, and some at local level. The evaluation team had interviewed colleagues and students in order to negotiate how to interpret the findings. They were pleased to learn that the evaluation showed students and teachers agreed that most teachers provided good instruction and most students were highly motivated. These teachers demonstrated how both external and internal evaluation could be used as a tool for developing the school (Møller et al. 2007).

What should accountability systems include? First, there should be a focus on accounting for conditions as well as outcomes. Standards must specify both learning outcomes students are expected to achieve and the resources and conditions necessary to support teachers and students to produce those outcomes. Second, state officials should be made accountable to students and parents. In other words, an accountability system should include measures of student learning and about the conditions and learning opportunities at the classroom level, so that policy makers have the opportunity to assess whether inputs as well as outcomes are meeting expectations. It should include information about the performance of the officials above the level of the school in providing the resources, conditions and opportunities that learning requires. Moreover, it should include procedures for responding to failures and incentives that will induce better performance by these actors in the future (Oakes et al 2005).

A sensible solution seems to be a combination of professional and outcomes-based school accountability might be promising. There is a need to find a balance between professional and political power over education. A professional role entails professional responsibility, and this

implies that teachers make their experience more visible. At the same time, particular attention to developing the knowledge base necessary for valid interpretation of the collected information is crucial.

Summing Up

The struggle between political and professional power over education includes a power struggle in society about who should set the standards in teaching. From a political perspective, there are other social groups wishing to define educational quality, but, as yet, they have had little bearing upon the practice in schools. Intensified administration, in the form of external regulation, might solve some problems, but new problems will undoubtedly appear. In the long term, there is the risk that teachers' enthusiasm and commitment will be lost - a far greater problem for schools. It has still to be proved that intensified administration produces better schools. Education cannot be developed mechanically with administrative decrees and regulations.

The public has a right to know how well our schools are educating future citizens. But at the same time, those who shape accountability systems for schooling must themselves be held accountable for doing it in a responsible way. It is crucial to operate on two fronts simultaneously. Improve the education for children in schools is hard work, and it is crucial to demand that policy makers and school officials invest the necessary resources where they are needed most and provide professional development so that teachers can do a good job. I follow Elmore (2006) when he argues that the present accountability policy will not increase school performance without a substantial investment in human capital aimed at developing the practice of school improvement in a diverse population of school leaders and teachers. The present model of managerial accountability, particularly in USA and UK, does not work because it lacks a practice of school improvement to go with the policy of accountability. The way schools respond to the accountability is probably dependent on their capacity for being professionals and involving themselves in internal evaluation of practice. Schools "improve by engaging in practices that lead them to be successful with specific students in a specific context". It requires collaborating and sharing of knowledge, and a commitment to the improvement of practice.

Time and space is required for reflection of current praxis in schools, and principals have delegated power and mandate to deal with such structural preconditions. Providing structures is necessary, but not sufficient. Teachers must be offered systematic prospects of competence enhancement to benefit from such structures. They need an opportunity to acquire both subject-related knowledge as well as analytical tools for quality assurance and evaluation. School principals have a great responsibility in this regard. We know how competence contributes to increased confidence in professional practice and teacher-student interaction. Moreover, confidence often accommodates innovative exploration of structural options, and increased openness towards student suggestions and feedback. In other words, leadership accommodation for systematic competence development in school staff facilitates increased potential for student learning and institutional development.

Demands for change have heightened in modern times. In addition, work-life is more intense than before, illustrated by the increasingly urgent requests for reorganization and efficiency within the school sector. Numerous teachers experience a pressure on time in accomplishing a wide range of tasks. This is less the exception than the common rule within organizations dominated by conflicts and contrasts. Insecurity and risk being a prominent feature of societal

development, lack of confidence in own ability and competence, added to organizational conflicts directs attention and energy to aspects of educational change preventing institutional development. Attempts to enhance quality in education should include evaluation on how municipalities execute their role as school owner. It should focus on their understanding and execution in accepting the mandate of education, as well as how support structures for goal-realization within schools are established at this level of governance. Through deliberated priorities, the chief executives and superintendents at district and municipal level hold the power to affect and control the individual school through selections of important issues and corresponding incentives.

I will end by quoting some claims for developing more responsible accountability systems, put forward by Kenneth Sirotnik in his book about "Holding Accountability Accountable" (2005:10-14). They are built on what we know about good teaching, learning and assessment, and about the necessary conditions within which good education can prosper. Also, they illustrate how patterns of accountability should be reciprocal.

-   Responsible accountability systems must pay attention to lessons of the history of accountability paradigms and critical analyses of their successes and failures
-   Responsible accountability systems must pay attention to the history of schooling and attempts to change and standardize behaviour through impositions of consequences
-   Responsible accountability systems must be as focused on schooling conditions and equitable opportunities for student learning as on what students should be learning
-   Responsible accountability systems must attend to all the core purposes of public schooling in a political and social democracy
-   Responsible accountability systems for educational practices must themselves be guided by sound educational practices
-   Responsible accountability systems must be as focused on the continued learning of educators as they are on that for students

We need to be reminded that the present managerial accountability systems, with its strong focus on outcome measures can too easily push schools back into more conservative patterns rather than liberating them. The focus can be on raising tests scores instead of serious concern about how to promote good education for all children.

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