

Educational Accountability: A Comparative Perspective

"In educational matters, not all men honor the same virtue."

Aristotle

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Introduction

First, I would like to qualify this presentation by pointing out that I have had relatively little direct experience with respect to educational accountability. My major prior relevant experience relates to having participated in an evaluation of President Johnson's Neighborhood Youth Corps, a special program designed to provide employment experience to young unskilled individuals. I also was directly involved in a pilot project in program budgeting and information systems at the University of Oregon. Despite this rather limited experience, I would like to summarize some of my reactions to the popular movement referred to as educational accountability.

Background

The idea of educational accountability derives from the private business sector. In private business, the accounting department is responsible for keeping management informed as to its performance. Since outcomes in business such as profits, interest charges, etc., are easy to measure, accountability is easy to establish. If a branch department store is performing poorly, it will clearly show in the accounting data. In the 60s, a group of public administrators initiated a movement to have a similar process for public services. As a result techniques such as PPBS (Planning-Programming-Budgeting-System) and cost-benefit analysis, became increasingly popular during the 60s (see Dorfman 1965; Somers and Wood 1969; Hinrichs and Taylor 1969). President Johnson, attracted to the notion, instructed U.S. government agencies to adopt the PPBS system. Though the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was affected by such a policy, educational accountability did not become a popular notion until the 70s, though it definitely represents a logical sequence in the movement toward more rational program evaluation methods. Management by objectives, behavioral objectives, and national assessment (see Ahmann 1976), are all manifestations of this movement.

America's Educational Crisis

Educational accountability is clearly one of a number of responses to America's educational crisis. The nature of this crisis has been presented by a wide range of educational critics (see, for example, Rafferty 1962, Postman and Weingartner 1969; SVS 1970; Silberman 1970; Holt 1964, etc.) Though this crisis has many elements, in this presentation, I would like to focus on problems with respect to learning outcomes. A wide range of empirical evidence suggests both *declining* basic skills in reading and math and still inadequate levels of competency for millions of Americans in terms of functional literacy and numeracy. Twenty percent of the adult population in the U.S. lacks functional literacy competencies. The summary of data in Table 1 shows the declines in test scores over the past 15 years. Before discussing educational accountability as a response to the crisis, first I would like to discuss in more detail the alarming test score declines, which have become public knowledge as a direct result of educational evaluation carried out by ETS, a major testing organization in the U.S.

Table 1 . .

Test Score Declines in the U.S.

Year	Mean Score SAT Verbal	Mean Score SAT Math
1951-52	476	494
1960-61	474	495
1965-66	471	496
1970-71	454	487
1975-76	429	470
1976-77	429	471

Source: Wirtz et al., 1977: 6

The Test Score Declines

There has been a wide range of speculation as to why test scores have declined. Much of this speculation has been highly subjective and impressionistic. Nevertheless, extensive empirical evaluation has been carried out to try to ascertain the reason for test score declines in the U.S. (see Harnischfeger and Wiley 1975; Wirtz et al. 1977; NAE 1977). The results of such evaluations are briefly as follows:

A first explanation considered was that declines might be related to the tests themselves. Extensive analyses indicate that the tests have not become more difficult over the years. In fact, if anything, there has been an "upward drift" in the scaling of the scores, thus making the tests somewhat easier. A second explanation relates to the composition of those taking the test. With increased educational

opportunity, a broader and larger group of individuals has come to take standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). This factor is estimated to account for from two-thirds to three-fourths of the test score declines noted for the period, 1963-1970. Since 1970, this factor can explain only about 25% of the decline in test scores. Researchers argue that it is a combination of a number of other factors which is responsible for the test score declines. These other factors are:

- 1) A widespread increase in electives for high school students with less emphasis on critical reading and careful writing.
- 2) A decline in seriousness of purpose with regard to education as reflected in grade inflation, automatic promotion, reduction of homework, and lowering of college entrance standards.
- 3) Increased amount of time spent by children in watching television.
- 4) The change in American family structure, e.g., greater divorce, working mothers, etc.
- 5) National problems and disruptions, particularly the Vietnam war and Watergate, which affected the morale of America's youth.
- 6) Changing cultural values with less emphasis on motivation and achievement.

Given America's educational crises and the declining test scores, it is easy to understand the appeal of educational accountability, particularly in the face of soaring educational costs. Taxpayers and consumers of education are demanding that educational administrators be *accountable*.

There are a number of key concepts underlying educational accountability which I would like to summarize briefly:

Minimum Competency Requirements

This concept is becoming increasingly important. The basic notion is that every high school graduate, for example, should be able to demonstrate functional competencies in major areas. The state of Florida, with a new Educational Accountability Act, is the first to test statewide to decide who will be graduated. In a preliminary test given to high school juniors in Florida, 36% failed to attain minimum competency in mathematics and 8% failed reading and writing. Thirty-two other states in the U.S. are also planning to take action to try to reverse the trend of declining academic skills.

Gain Scores

In evaluating the performance of a school or a school district, it is important to note gains made. Since initial cognitive entry skills have a strong bearing on end-of-year achievements, it is inadequate to look only at final scores (see Bloom

1976). In contrast to minimum competency which emphasizes a standard level of attainment, the notion of gain scores focuses on development and change.

Educational Malpractice

We are all rather familiar with medical malpractice. In such cases, it is common for the patient to sue a doctor for damages where incompetence has brought injury or harm to the client. A number of educational malpractice suits have now been filed in U.S. courts. In one case, a high school graduate could neither read nor write. His parents sued the school district for graduating their son without adequate basic skills. At this point, the judicial outcome of such cases is not clear, though I personally doubt that defendants will win such cases, since in education it is difficult to ascertain unambiguously causes of learning failure. Nevertheless, the potential threat of such court suits represents a significant factor making educators more accountable to their clients. Some skeptics may consider the application of the malpractice notion to education as absurd and ridiculous. I would disagree. In my own view, educational malpractice may even be more serious than medical malpractice. A lost finger may be a minor matter compared to the development of a negative self-concept, or a hatred of learning, or lack of competency to function in a complex environment.

Educational Accountability - An Assessment

A number of educators have written about accountability (see, for example, Dyer 1973; Goodlad 1975). A number of questions arise such as accountability for what. Dyer (1973) emphasizes accountability for cash, for things, for deeds, and for results. It is, of course, results accountability which has attracted the attention in recent years. Accountability with respect to the process of learning has received much less attention. Also there is the extremely complex issue of accountability to whom? To whom are teachers most accountable, their principals, their students, their fellow teachers, their community, the taxpayer, or their higher level administrators? Should students also be accountable to their teachers? Should families be accountable for providing a positive home environment for learning? When students fail, who is ultimately to blame? The community might be responsible if it has failed to tax itself adequately to provide needed educational resources. Or the Teachers' Associations could be faulted for not allowing incompetent teachers to be dismissed. Or parents might be blamed for not providing a positive home environment for learning. In summary, it seems clear that the principal, the teacher, the student, and the family should all bear responsibility and accountability for learning. Given the natural ambiguity associated with educational objectives and the multiplicity of factors that *account* for learning success and failure, it is no easy task to implement a concept of accountability in the educational field.

Despite the rational appeal of accountability, certain unintended negative consequences may result from an emphasis on such an approach. Behavioral distortion is probably the biggest danger. Once individuals become aware of the outcome criteria being used to measure performance-effectiveness, various distortions may begin to emerge. We are all familiar with the common practice of teaching to the external test. In such cases spontaneity, creativity, and natural learning may be sacrificed so as to give maximum time to preparing for the external examination. Another example of such behavioral distortion relates to the use of student-credit hours as the criterion for allocating budget among university departments. The response of one department to such a system was to change its 3 hour courses to 5 hour ones. In fact, the number of hours taught remained unchanged. With this change, the department's work load appeared to have increased 67%. Another department hired a charismatic, easy grading professor to teach a popular course that attracted 2,000 students, which had a major effect on its student-credit hour production. In England, in the late 19th century, bright students were known to have substituted for poorer ones to try to fool his Majesty's Inspectors (Sherwood 1977: 233).

Testing and accountability tend to go hand in hand. Thus, the tyranny of testing concern (see Hoffman 1962; Houts 1977) naturally arises. Certain groups even plan to take court action against states introducing standardized minimum competency tests. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to deal directly with the whole testing controversy. Nevertheless, it is only realistic to assume that testing will almost inevitably be a part of any accountability effort.

There is also, of course, a major controversy about behavioral objectives. As with testing, behavioral objectives are likely to be a core element in any accountability program.

The Future

It is impossible to deny that there is much educational malpractice as epitomized by America's educational crisis and declining test scores. The costs of such malpractice are too high to ignore. In this sense, the movement for more educational accountability is encouraging. Forceful sanctions are indeed necessary to minimize waste and negligence. To improve educational learning outcome through greater accountability, the following strategies might be considered:

- 1) The use of a voucher system (originally proposed by J.S. Mill in his "Essay on Liberty" and later popularized by Milton Friedman (1955). This is the ultimate in educational accountability. Schools which fail to serve go broke. Though this scheme may sound farfetched, a

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