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School Accountability - A Discussion Paper

Introduction

The spectacle of the 'name, rank and number' boys of HMI5 extolling
the virtues of openness to the schools would be merely a joke in
poor taste were it not for the evident fact that the manifest
hypocrisy of the posture has received scant attention. I think
we can assume that Elizabeth House is not the model of institutional
accountability they have in mind, bearing in mind the silent
contempt with which the OECD critique of mandarin power and its
substantial endorsement by the House of Commons has been received.

This paper is about school accountability, but the context is one
in which the accountability of the education system as a whole
is at issue. All of us at this seminar are actors in the educational
arena, influencing its outcomes for better or worse. Parity of
accountability suggests itself as a principle of natural justice,
but the implication of the accountability debate so far has been
that some are more accountable than others. No-one, apparently, is
to be brought to book for failures in research or administration,
nor are the deaf and the blind to be weeded out from the 'eyes and
ears' of the DES. Only the teachers of Tyndale got the sack, I
note, and the main thrust of accountability thinking since the
coming together of Tyndale, the Treasury, and the Rand Corporation
has concentrated on the school as the prime educational actor.

Paulo Freire, in "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", writes,

> "One of the characteristics of oppressive cultural
> action, which is almost never perceived by the dedicated
> but naive professionals who are involved, is the
> emphasis on a focalised view of the problems rather
> than on seeing them as dimensions of a totality."

School accountability is only one aspect of the accountability
problem and only one of the concerns we have about schools.

Accountability and Autonomy

In a democratic society, accountability is a corollary of autonomy.
Schools should be accountable for the ways in which they exercise
the powers we confer upon them. I favour more accountability on
the part of schools because I wish to preserve and enhance their
freedom from external control (though not, I might add, their
freedom from endorsement, criticism or advice).

Those who suggest, as some do, that the goal of greater
accountability will be served by a reduction of the powers
of the school, are talking logical and conceptual nonsense.
Only those who make decisions can be held accountable for their
consequences. I well remember, when I first joined the
Humanities Curriculum Project in 1968, pressing the Director,
Lawrence Stenhouse, to adopt an objectives approach to the
development of the progrmmme. He replied that he would do it only
if I (the project evaluator) accepted full responsibility for the
consequences. The point was clear, and is opposite to the
accountability debate. Any system of accountability must respect
the autonomy of those it seeks to hold accountable, otherwise
it becomes a system of control in which the operatives take the
blame for any failure to deliver what others have promised.
In seeking greater school accountability we should look for
procedures and processes which are consistent with the maintenance
of the school's capacity for self-determination. Power-reduction
is an alternative to accountability, not the same thing.

Accountability and Change

All of a sudden, a system of planned change (the curriculum
development movement) seems to have given way to a system of
planned stability (the core curriculum, back to basics, the APU,
and the renaissance of large-scale testing). Are we to under-
stand from that the curriculum obsolescence problem has been
vanquished, and replaced by a problem of galloping innovation?
It is hard to make sense of the DES view of this. Having
roundly condemned the Schools Council for failing to solve the
obsolescence problem, they are now busy promoting educational
measurement, an inherently conservative process which, as
Friedenberg observes,

"cannot usually muster either the imagination or
the sponsorship needed to search out and
legitimate new conceptions of excellence which
might threaten the hegemony of existing elites."

In thinking about accountability we should pay attention to the
need to foster educational inventiveness in the schools, to
release rather than stifle the creative impulse of the
professional, to recognise reach as well as grasp. To
treat the school as a mere delivery service ("Accountability
is making schools responsible for the achievement of specified
objectives" Miller, 1976) is to treat it with embalming
fluid when it needs adrenalin. Curriculum conservatism
is still a problem, though some would-be- accountants are now
defining it as a desideratum. Neville Bennet could hardly raise
a sample of 'progressive' primary schools in the North of
England, and most of us have been embarassed at some time by
having to confess to eager visitors from abroad that the
English primary school has been mislaid and cannot be immediately
located.

Some Comments on Output Models of School Accountability

We do not understand the learning process very well. We do not
know for sure what causes learning, though we can be reasonably sure
that schools in some way cause some learnings and impede others.
We do not know what constitutes a successful learning milieu
though most schools and families try to construct one. We
suspect that what students learn is the product of many social
and biological forces which interact in ways we dimly apprehend
but cannot quantify in even a single case, so that we are un-
able to isolate the contribution of the school. And we know
that the conditions of social life which generate these forces
are unstable and uncontrollable, so that we cannot know
to whom or what we may attribute changes in the learning
accomplishments of students.

Despite all this uncertainty, we hear arguments for holding
schools accountable for learning outputs, for ensuring that
students attain pre-specified levels of accomplishment in
pre-ordained knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Such
arguments are either mischievous or unininformed. Not just
because we cannot agree about which learnings are of most

importance (criteria) or about how much of such learnings
fall within our limits of acceptability (standards), although
these are real difficulties. And not even because we lack
the technological capability to design tests which assess
only what we seek to assess, or which are free from epistemological
dogmatism, although such problems are freely acknowledged by
test experts. Even if we could solve these problems, by
standardising the curriculum and outspending the Americans
in test development, there is no way in which the ensuing
information flow would serve the evaluative intent of the
enterprsse. It would not distinguish, for instance, the
school which has effectively minimised failure to learn
and the school which has made little of a following wind.
Stake has written of such accountability schemes;

> "These plans are doomed. What they bring is more
> bureaucracy, more subterfuge, and more constraints
> on student opportunities to learn."

House in similar vein, concludes as follows:

> "I believe such schemes are simplistic,
> unworkable, contrary to empirical findings,
> and ultimately immoral. They are likely
> to lead to suspicion, acrimony, inflexibility,
> cheating, and finally control - which I
> believe is their purpose."

The performance of the school is in part a function of its
circumstances and cannot fairly be assessed without detailed
knowledge of those circumstances. It is the duty of the school
to provide the best possible opportunities for learning consistent
with its circumstances. This should be the basis of a school
accountability model - a process rather than a product model.
If it is reasonable to ask of a school whether it has acted
intelligently and with integrity then we must look at its
actions for the answer, and we are entitled to demand of the
school that it make those actions open to view.

Some notes towards a Process Model

A Process model of school accountability could be brought
about by the initiation and development of school self-
reports for the local community. Whatever the merits of
this or other forms of accountability, the self-report is in
any case a long overdue social invention. As an instrument
of professional accountability it has substantial merits:

1. It testifies to the autonomy of the school and its
    professional status.

2. It locates the development of accountability firmly
    in the hands of those most vulnerable to its consequences.

3. It lets the schools themselves define what they would
    accept as informed criticism. This is most important.
    The school has to provide the data base of a continuing
    evaluation. Failure to provide adequate information
    will leave the school open to uninformed abuse.

4. It offers the best possibility of coordinating information
    gathering for internal purposes with information
    gathering for accountability.

5. In the absence of models of institutional competence or
    effective instructional behaviour, it gives schools the
    opportunity to provide the descriptive basis from which,
    in time, such models might be derived. That seems to be
    a reasonable way to pursue the search for standards.

6. It gives schools the right and the opportunity to define
    the accountability of their co-actors in the system,
    those who make policy, provide resources and services, and
    give advice.

Beginning from scratch as almost all schools will be doing,
there is a long way to go, and the development of school
reports should be fairly cautious, possibly planned to reach
maturity over a period of ten years. In terms of audiences
I suggest they start as feasibility exercises of a purely
internal nature, since schools have little experience of self
description and will have first to engage in a process of self-
discovery before self description can be undertaken. The next
stage, I suggest, could be reports to the managers or governors,
who would provide the first test of the adequacy of the information.
Two or three years of experiment with reports for managers would
be followed by the school report for parents, after which

the possibility of fully public reports could be contemplated,
Once the school self-report goes public then the form and
content of such reports become open to comparison, and make
possible the development of standards of reporting.

The content; the level of specificity and the language of
such reports calls for caution too and a slow build up. It
is not hard to see, however, where they might begin, with
routine information of the following kind:

1.   Names, qualifications and relevant occupational experience
     of the staff, and their institutional responsibilities.

2.   Similar information about local advisors and HMIs in regular
     touch with the school.

3.   Similar information about the board of managers or governors.

4.   Information about the systems of appointment for staff,
     managers and governors.

5.   Information about how to lodge a complaint against the
     school, and about the school's procedure for dealing with
     complaints.

6.   Information about the decision-making processes of the
     school in relation to the distribution of responsibilities.
     Internal forms of accountability and procedures for re-
     viewing practice.

7.   Rules for staff and pupils.

8.   Information about school policy with regard to the promotion
     of academic attainment, social life, pastoral care, and
     health, and how these policies are reflected in the
     organisation of the school and the allocation of resources.

9.   Pupil assessment, pupil records, and examination policy.and
     career guidance . Examination results.

10. Liaison with feeder schools and institutions of further education.
     Liaison with parents.

11. Income and expenditure for the current year.

12. Staff development policy.

13. Extracurricular activities.

14. Discipline policy and procedures for grievance.

15. Provision for remedial teaching, and information about
     professional qualifications of the staff responsible.

16. Involvement with educational experiments.

This will certainly do for a start; it concerns mainly the
kind of information that could quickly become routinised and
require merely updating. Even so, such a basic data bank is quite
sufficient to provide its recipients with insight into some
fundamental issues of school management, organisation, values
and priorities. They can, for instance, evaluate the extent
to which the policy claims of the school are consistent with
its organisational arraagements, its distribution of
resources and pattern of expenditure, and its allocation of
differentially qualified staff. That in itself would be
an important stap forward, and one which would not be
difficult to accomplish.

Further steps would involve the school in compiling accounts
of its instructional strategies in different knowledge areas,
its choice of textbooks and other materials, its views of the
learning needs of the pupils, and its processes of assessment.
In these matters responsibility for the preparation of reports
should devolve to the departmental level, and reporting
operate on a rota basis, each department producing an
account perhaps once in three years.

As the reporting system develops it should be possible to
build in the process of curriculum review, so that such reports,
together with professional and public responses to them, are
used by the teachers concerned to evaluate and regenerate their
professional practice. This could also, in time, become a
public evaluation exercise.

It would be pointless to speculate further. The issue is
whether a system as this, which combines a process of self-
reporting with a process of self-evaluation responsive to the
comments generated by the reports, satisfies both the need
for greater accountability and the need for teachers to retain
professional control of the educational encounter. Personally,
I can't think of a defensible alternative.

Political Prospects for the Adoption of the Process Model

If indeed accountability is the thick end of the wedge of managerialism in education, it may be naive to advocate a devolutionary model of the kind I have outlined. It will not command much support among those politicians and bureaucrats who have been most prominent in the accountability debate. It may however, in time and under conditions of pressure, attract the schools as an alternative to external control.

The Prime Minister has initiated a national debate about the alleged curriculum 'problem', with a view to introducing changes in the pattern of management, and consequently in the balance of power. His own ministry has already thrown its hat in the ring, with suggestions that would lead to a much more centralised system, a national 'core' curriculum, and systematic monitoring of the service through performance assessment. Curriculum development within such a structure, it is argued, would be more effective in harnessing education to the drive for economic expansion and more economical in the use of increasingly scarce resources. These probosals have been launched at a point when the central ministry's two partners in the traditional 'cooperative' structure, the local education departments and the teachers, are under intense pressure, Local government bureaucracies, constrained to cut their expenditure, have exploited their new corporate management structures to put the squeeze on the big-spending sector, education, and many Chief Education Officers feel they are fighting a losing battle for survival in their own back-yards, isolated in their efforts to maintain both local and professional control. The teacher organisations, faced with declining numbers, increasing unemployment, and exhortation to make less do more, feel compelled to adopt a militant unionising stance, thus eroding the credibility of their claims to the kind of 'professional' responsibility that would be responsive to the need for priority determination with a no-growth economy.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that the DES bid
will succeed. The British, even in extremis cherish tradition,
and are deeply suspicious of structural change. What's more,
'bureaucracy' has a bad name, and the ministry's proposal
envisages an increase in its own staffing to cope with its
new role. Following upon the unprecedented growth of local
bureaucracies of the last few years, and the fact that this
has been accompanied by cutbacks in the services they are
employed to provide, there is a deep scepticism about any
plans or promises which are premissed upon an expansion of the
civil service. There will be those who will argue that, since
one of the major aims lying behind the reorganisation of
local government was to create units of sufficient size to
sustain increased levels of autonomy, and since the general
trend in British government is towards devolution rather
than centralisation, the present proposals, if implemented,
would involve the government in contradiction. They would argue,
too, that the ministry's expressed concern abut parental
criticism of schools is more likely to be defused by strengthening
and extending local determination than by enhancing remote
control. But neither centrism nor localism, cast in these
terms, is calculated to appeal to the educational professional,
whether teacher, advisor, or officer. The option is between
national or local bureaucracies, both of which threaten the
tradition that broadly, and certainly in particular cases,
protects the individual school from uninformed interference
and nourishes its capacity both for growth and for responsiveness
to its particular clientele. What we can expect to see,
in the immediate future, is a closing of the professional
ranss at the local level by those who view with dismay both
corporatism in local government and centrism in Elizabeth House.
There is no doubt that such efforts at unified resistance
are unlikely to succeed unless the professionals can enlist
a degree of community support that in the past they have
felt free to neglect. A process model of school accountability
could have a role to play in the coming battle for control of
the schools, especially if Stuart McLure is right about the 'rising
tide of educational consumerism'.

Concluding Comments

There is no case for a renaissance in large scale testing. It
tells us too little about what students learn. It tells us
nothing about how to remedy deficiency. It requires more
standardisation of provision than is compatible with legitimate
diversity or professional discretion, more stability of
provision than is consistent with the promotion of curriculum
development. It understates educational purposes, is expensive
to develop, hard to interpret, open to abuse, biased, obsolescent,
coercive, and authority based. It tells us nothing about the
competence of the schools individually or collectively so it
is irrelevant to the accountability issue.

HMIs should go back to their role as individual school inspectors,
the case by case appraisal of school problems, needs and efforts.
It is a worthy tradition, and one which is clearly assimilable to
the kind of process accountability model suggested in this paper.
If they persist in pursuing through the APU the DES aspiration for
a more centrally controlled curriculum, then ahead of them lies
failure and alienation. There is no place in our system for
the kind of techno/bureaucratic accountability schemes whose
craters now pit the countenance of American education.

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