Examining the Meaning of Accountability: Reframing the Construct

A Report on The Perceptions of Accountability

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BACKGROUND

Over the past 15 years,[1] standards-based accountability has become a mainstay of U.S. education and the centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Though the end goal of this legislation is one aimed at equity (Center on Educational Policy, 2003), it arguably rests on particular tenets and beliefs about accountability.

Federal and state accountability policies advance a particular conception and understanding of accountability, which are not necessarily aligned with public perceptions of the construct or its associated means of assessment.

An ongoing research project conducted by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) sought to uncover what parents and other members of the community think "education accountability" means—specifically, to whom and for what should educators be "accountable"? We explored the meaning of accountability—both by critically considering accountability as represented in the literature and current rhetoric and by assessing the extent to which this notion resonates with the understanding maintained by a sample of community representatives. Our primary purpose in conducting this research was to learn whether accountability, as currently constructed and understood vis-à-vis federal legislation and local policy, adequately addresses public beliefs about accountability.

> This brief describes a study into the meaning of "account-ability"—from the perspectives of parents and other community members. This brief is based on a research report prepared for the Kettering Foundation.

[1] In 1989, President George H. W. Bush convened the nation's governors in Charlottesville, VA, to discuss approaches to increasing academic achievement to enable U.S. children to compete in a global economy. This is often considered the impetus to standards-based reform.

The following broad questions were used to guide this examination. These questions were shaped by our understanding of the empirical research on accountability as well as our research on community perceptions of NCLB and standards-based reforms (Goodwin, 2003; Lefkowits & Miller, 2005.) :

- What meaning do parents and community members ascribe to accountability? What do they want schools and educators to be held accountable for?

- What does the public want students held accountable for? And, what evidence do parents and community members desire or require as an index of pupil or school success?

- Are parents and community members themselves willing to consider their own role(s) in the accountability scheme? If so, what role are they willing to play and to what extent will they consider themselves accountable for a given set of outcomes?

In addition, as we conceived of this research, we thought it important to examine accountability from different vantage points, particularly those of underrepresented populations. For this reason, we also asked whether there were characteristics (e.g., demographic, regional) that appear related to differing perceptions of accountability or evidence. In particular, we were interested in learning whether members of rural communities had varying perspectives and whether members of predominantly Spanish-speaking populations had differing opinions.[2]

METHODOLOGY

Our study entailed the following data collection strategies:

- Examining extant literature on accountability, particularly public perceptions of accountability; and

- Conducting focus groups, follow-up interviews and surveys with parents and other community members (including teachers and school administrators).

Broad questions were used to spark conversations and to frame an initial understanding of the relevant details. In what follows, we analyzed the data from the conversations and have suggested ways to account for the varied themes apparent in the data.

[2]The latter was selected as a subpopulation holding particular importance, given that demographics predict prognostications suggest that the population of English Language Learners will comprise over 40% of school-age children by 2030 (Thomas & Collier, 2001).

FINDINGS
Accountability: What is it?

Typically, general public surveys and polls about accountability fail to differentiate among the many meanings that accountability can embody for individual respondents. Questions often focus only on the public's *support* for the construct of accountability, not *how* the public constructs accountability. However, different models of accountability exist and these may be reflected in how the public "talks about" their schools being accountable. A market model, for instance, consists of individuals being entitled to "vote with their feet." In education, this might be translated as parents being afforded the option to leave a failing school (regardless of what one means by "failing"). Performance models of accountability are goal-oriented and center on a variety of assessment measures; in these kinds of accountability systems, goals and purposes are aligned and clear. Regulatory accountability models hinge on rule-bound behaviors, fiscal accounting, and minimal accomplishment of standards. Other models might also be construed, including ones that focus on assigning roles and responsibilities, particularly responsibility toward and for students.

Through our conversations, we learned that various facets and amalgams of these conceptions of accountability were evident in the public voices in response to questions about how they, personally, define accountability (including for what education should be accountable and to whom education should be accountable).

When powerful, rhetorical devices such as accountability are externally defined, those who are most affected by it (including teachers but also students and communities) were most likely to experience a feeling of disenfranchisement. And for members of the public who perceive themselves to be generally disenfranchised, this feeling was exacerbated when contemplating how to improve education so that it meets their needs. For parents and community members who only speak Spanish, for example, "accountability" is a foreign term.[3]

We also learned that when Spanish-speaking parents had not been given the opportunity or freedom to express their ideas about accountability, the dominant understanding of "accountability" may not have captured their own understanding. Linguistic differences can result in failures of particular notions of accountability to be meaningful for subpopulations. Thus, while students are held to the same standards of "accountability," the concerns that parents are most interested in are disregarded or dismissed.

The following broad assertions reflect our findings related to understanding accountability from a parent and community member lens.

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[3]In fact, the word 'accountability' does not have a direct translation to Spanish and time at the beginning of Spanish-speaking group discussions was dedicated to discerning what participants knew about the formal construct.

- A general understanding of accountability is often linked to fiscal responsibilities. These perceptions and understandings are most closely aligned with a regulatory model of accountability.

A general understanding of "accountability" is often tied to fiscal responsibility. However, community representatives appear to have other, different conceptions of accountability.

In this area, the issue mentioned most often was the lack of available resources. Most participants said that resources available for schools to meet standards are insufficient, especially for underprivileged students.

However, participants were rarely resolute on this issue: On the one hand, some asserted that past failures demonstrate the futility of assuming a positive correlation between increased funding and increased student achievement and that schools need to be held more accountable for how they utilize the resources they receive. On the other hand, some were adamant that increasing expectations without increasing resources is a recipe for failure. Many respondents felt that schools must be given more flexibility in their resource allocation. These respondents were not deeply suspicious of the school's ability to account for the use of these monies; still, these advocates were firm in suggesting that resources need to be positioned strategically, insisting that decisions about funds should be grounded in data or information.

- Community conversation participants also considered the notion of school choice as a leverage point for holding schools accountable. Such conversations clearly reflect a market model of accountability.

Some of our earlier research supports the idea that school choice provisions provide a significant amount of accountability for those parents who are able to take advantage of them (Urschel, Raudenbush & Goodwin, 2003). In other words, parents who can leave when their schools fail to meet their own internal standards for accountability do so. Conversely, parents who have "choice" but no real "access" to alternatives express more interest not only in improving the school but also in keeping local control instead of being "taken over" due to low achievement.

School choice in rural communities is often limited or non-existent. In addition, rural participants in our conversations expressed skepticism over school-choice options at an even deeper level, worrying that their communities may not have carefully weighed the social consequences of alternative approaches to education, including distance learning and home schooling. These rural participants said they felt that school choice advocates had overlooked the lack of social interaction that distance learners and home schooled children experience. In addition, they were concerned that the quality of alternative programs was potentially problematic—that differences between parent approaches to teaching and learning could be problematic.

- Community members consider it important that accountability be linked to standards; however, they are concerned that standards are arbitrarily defined. Conversations about standards and performance were clearly related to a performance model of accountability.

Because standards and their related assessment mechanisms are important indicators of education accountability, it is important to understand the public's perceptions of standards. During McREL's National Dialogue on Standards conversations, we heard time and again that community members believe students should be held to high standards and that standards are important. Respondents in our conversations perceived a clear link between accountability and standards. As one respondent put it:

> *Accountability needs to be set to standards. When the standards are set, the accountability can be maintained. . . . Maintaining the standards every year is important. How we determine if the standards are being met is making the students and teachers accountable for what is taught and learned in each subject matter.*

Participants often expressed strong opinions that there should be different ways for students to demonstrate proficiency in the standards. Consequently, some participants yearned for flexibility in how standards are implemented, taught, and tested. At times, this sentiment was reflected in a strong resistance to national standards, national assessment and national accountability, with participants cautioning that their circumstances and situations are unique and do not lend themselves to being captured by single definitions.

Rural community members tended to demonstrate heightened resistance to imposed standards. However, they also worry that education standards have declined, and that the meaning and validity associated with any inferences made about assessment results have declined.

The imposition of "national standards" has other, potentially harmful consequences. As less and less authority is granted to local communities and their citizens, a sense of educational anomie among the public may emerge. Essentially, when the intimacy of education is lost, parent- and community-member perceptions of schooling as isolated and insular are reinforced. And while one could cogently argue that this has already happened in larger urban areas, in our conversations with rural community members, it was clear that some still held fast to an idyllic notion of a common school. Rural community members, when pressed to reflect on what students should know and be able to do, felt that not only do students need to know how to read and write (the basics), but also schools need to recapture "something we've lost," which one participant explained as "being a good citizen, being patriotic, having trust, civics, honesty, integrity." This sentiment, although strong among members of rural conversations, was shared in non-rural settings as well.

Rural participants also worry that standards have declined. What these participants saw as particularly disconcerting, however, is that the community does not know—or is never told—that the standards have declined.

One rural participant suggested that the assumption among the public is

> . . .that 'passing' still means a score of at least 70. . . . The [state education agency] is not publicizing [that the standards are now lower].

In addition, these rural participants perceived the lowered expectations as impacting more than test scores, including criteria for selection into the National Honor Society. They perceive this to be a pervasive but largely unrecognized problem because administrators are content to report only the information that they are required to report.

Members of the Spanish-speaking community negatively compared the educational experiences of their children in the U.S. education system to their own.

Immigrant parents from Latin America also expressed exasperation with U.S. standards, considering U.S. standards to be inadequate compared to the standards in their own countries (though variability among the Spanish-speakers is evident, with sentiments more obvious among those Spanish-speakers who immigrated from larger urban areas in their respective countries of origin). For them, the definitions of accountability advanced in the U.S. represent a subpar understanding of what matters in education or of what it means to be educated compared to their own experience. These parents also complained about low teacher quality, particularly in bilingual education, and the slow pace of learning for non-English speaking students.

- The public wants evidence of accountability, though they do not always consider "test results" adequate measures. In other words, current performance models of accountability may not suffice.

Insistence on a performance model of accountability was not always a clear priority of community representatives though many conversations centered on issues associated with these models. Accountability through student testing has been a fairly persistent feature of the education landscape. On the surface, at least, the public seems to accept that students will be taking tests to determine the extent of their content knowledge in given areas and to ascertain just how U.S. students measure up to those in the rest of the world. Tests bearing higher stakes, such as those used to determine whether students are proficient, underperforming or should advance or graduate, are a more recent development and have met some resistance.

Additionally, for the most part, participants agreed that some form of testing is one legitimate way of ensuring accountability. The belief is that measuring student learning provides the public reassurance that children are learning what they need to compete in a global environment.

However, claims regarding support for testing and assessment must be qualified—testing is favored when it is diagnostic, is used in a way that is meaningful for students, and is not a one-shot assessment but includes a variety of assessments. Nevertheless, very few conversations moved toward questioning the foundations of accountability. Thus, participants offered suggestions, such as school systems need to recognize students' individual learning styles and match those styles with appropriate assessments. One Spanish-speaking participant even emphasized the theory of Multiple Intelligences, noting that children can demonstrate intelligence in ways that are not assessed by the current testing and then such intelligences go disregarded or under-appreciated by the school system. Using different forms of assessment to demonstrate accountability was perceived as one means of providing parents and educators a better picture of what students know and are able to do.

What McREL has both heard and documented over the past several years (and what rings true with our present examination of "accountability") (Goodwin, 2003; Lefkowitz & Miller, 2005.) is that the public is not convinced that standardized testing and single test scores are the ultimate indicator of student success. These community concerns undermine the legislation's focus on testing as the proxy for accountability. Participants in our dialogues insisted that there is more to accountability than just test scores; indeed, Latino participants explained that they want other indicators

Community members generally consider "success" or "failure" designations given to schools (primarily via the use of standardized tests) a poor proxy for the nuanced ways they construe accountability.

(e.g., graduation rates, alumni attending college, faculty longevity and years of experience) to identify which schools are good schools. These participants also worry that non-English speaking students had to take tests in English. In these cases, the test is not measuring how much or what the student knows but their understanding of English. Moreover, in general, participants were uncertain that testing could actually improve schools.

The public's knowledge of NCLB and its accountability provisions has certainly increased since McREL began its conversations about education reform. Our respondents expressed concern that schools will not be able to perform at the levels indicated, particularly if resources (including financial and human resources) remain at their current level. As the ramifications of NCLB student testing unfold (including those associated with the reconstitution of schools or school "takeovers"), it is very likely that we will witness a public backlash against standards, testing, and accountability.

The public considers testing in isolation very reductionistic, but this is the lynchpin of NCLB's accountability. When accountability evidence is construed as poor, faulty or inadequate, claims made about education that rely on this evidence are considered invalid.

- Community members perceive the ideal education as a societal and shared responsibility, often expressing a desire to play a more active role in and take more responsibility for the education of children. Moreover, they view accountability as an ethical, moral responsibility to children. This model of accountability is one of shared roles and responsibilities for education.

Members of the Spanish-speaking focus groups provided an interesting way to frame these two facets of accountability when they distinguished between education accountability and school accountability. For them, school accountability is centered on shared responsibility; for a school to be successful, all stakeholders need to work together. On the other hand, education accountability is about teachers and schools being responsible for the education of their children and being responsive to student and parent needs. Issues associated with these forms of accountability are addressed in the following paragraphs.

School Accountability

The vast majority of community representatives felt that accountability responsibilities should not just reside in the education system—that accountability "is a societal issue" and, as such, the community, its students and its parents need to be accountable.

Many of our conversation participants consider the current accountability movement too shallow—that parents, community members and students are not held accountable. Parents fail to engage in school activities, community members ignore the needs of schools by voting down mill levies and not volunteering to help, and students fail tests that are high stakes (for schools but not for students).

Most respondents indicated that the primary responsibility for educating youth lies with the education system and that accountability provisions are necessary to ensure that educators perform their job, However, they also consider education a "societal issue."

Although participants suggested accountability ought to be shared—that the onus of responsibility for ensuring student success should not just fall on teachers and schools—participants were reluctant to provide ways they might be held accountable. In other words, the public's willingness to take responsibility for education may be more of a general acknowledgment than a press for actual changes in policies or in their own actions or behaviors.

Members of the public often voice concern that parents can be isolated from the schools and that the schools need to do a better job "reaching out" to include them. Participants often suggested that parents could serve as resources but were not naive about the effort (and financial resources) that would be necessary to form stronger bonds with the existing human resources in the community. Although they considered ways of increasing involvement through requiring and monitoring, they also acknowledged that mandated parent involvement would

fail, particularly in the absence of dedicated resources for encouraging parent and community involvement. Yet many participants are convinced that engaging the broader community is crucial to the success of public schools.

However, the onus for organizing such efforts and for communicating needs continually fell back to the schools—if the schools could create and post (on the Internet) an electronic list of their needs, community members could determine what needs they were able to fill. Or, if the schools organize "parent portals" to communicate with parents and keep them abreast of their children's progress, parents could play a more significant role. Such proposals provide an interesting indication that the public is willing to assist but really wants the education establishment to provide a structure for their participation.

Education Accountability

Regardless of the acknowledgement that community is important to education and that accountability ought to be shared, almost all participants (including educators and parents) across all the focus groups, interviews and surveys agreed that schools need to be held accountable for student learning, and, without accountability, students will not succeed academically. Without a doubt, parents, community members and educators themselves consider education accountability to be the primary responsibility of the institution of schooling (and its functionaries).

This accountability bears a different meaning than the one that is traditionally and formally advanced. Accountability here is synonymous with the system being responsible and responsive to the students' needs and not centered on academics or standards. One respondent's resistance to traditional conceptions of accountability was striking:

> The word [accountability] is not appropriate, in any meaningful way, in regard to education. One is dealing with phenomena (developing minds and bodies) over which no group or individual has complete control –including the young minds themselves. Anyone involved in the process is responsible for doing the best job that he or she can do, but no one can properly be held accountable....

This individual's response suggests that accountability indicates "responsibility," but this responsibility appears to be more of an ethical obligation than an issue of accounting for one's work, actions, successes, failures and so forth.

Accountability defined as the system being responsible and responsive to the needs of children was also reflected among some of the Spanish-speaking participants. Spanish-speaking parents are interested in their children's education. But, the ways in which Spanish-speaking parents understand their role and what it means to be involved bears a mark of cultural difference. That is, the education systems in Latin America do not "define" parent involvement the same way as the U.S. does. From this, however, we cannot infer that parents from those countries

do not have expectations of the schools—they do care and have opinions about the responsibilities of education and of educating youth, but have yet to be given a voice.

Regardless of parental involvement, schools—and particularly teachers—are responsible for ensuring that students' learning takes place. This sentiment was strong among parents in the Spanish-speaking groups. These respondents were adamant that students need to learn, but that teachers need to teach equitably whether parents are involved or not. In other words, these parents worry that students of parents who are not vocal or obvious participants are short-changed in their education, but that students whose parents are involved are afforded more attention, more opportunities and, ultimately, a better education.

To the degree that the system marginalizes community concerns, the public feels as if the system has failed them (and not met their accountability expectations). When accountability is tightly framed as consisting of quantitative factors, and these factors are considered present and accounted for, education professionals may perceive that they have completed their responsibility or fulfilled their obligation. However, parents and community members may be looking for a response (and a responsibility) from educators and the education system that does not separate the analytic task of accountability from social, moral and political responsibilities. This position, while not extensively represented in our data, represents a non-traditional understanding of accountability that refuses to be overtaken by technical and analytical concerns.

Framing accountability through technical proficiency forecloses the possibility of reacting to school situations in a moral, caring way. As Schwandt (2002) suggests, treating education as though technical solutions for emerging problems translate into practices that allow teachers to correct "deficiencies" obscures a deeper level of moral accountability. Sure, members of the education profession may be armed with "good science" or may be able to recite and apply a series of "decision rules;" however, the decisions that educators make are still inseparable from the moral responsibility to defend their actions and decisions. In this scenario, evidence-based tools to increase one's control over practice are bound to be considered more important than taking responsibility for the moral-political decisions made in the classroom —thus, the importance of professional wisdom in guiding decisions is relegated to the machinery construed as "accountability."

CONCLUSIONS

Parents and community members do not always understand the nature of standards, accountability or testing—they want to be informed, but the conversations are often abstruse and the information is not always related to aspects that they consider important. Initiatives to involve parents in the interpretation of student-level data is a potential area for improving school-community relationships. For such initiatives to be successful, the evidence that parents and educators are co-exploring must be related to the data needs of communities. Moreover, the rationale for selecting and analyzing such evidence, in addition to framing relevant claims and conclusions (about student knowledge and abilities), must be transparent. Research aimed at understanding the framing of accountability and whether it improves school-community relations is, therefore, necessary.

The voices of parents and community members—how these groups understand and give meaning to the construct of accountability—have been largely ignored. How these stakeholders make sense of education appears to be different than how it has been externally framed for them. Searching for ways to engage parents and community members in conversations about accountability may be one means of reframing the construct of accountability to make it more meaningful.

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