

# Accountability: Antecedents, Power, and Processes

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**Background/Context:** *In the United States and abroad, public education is changing as the rhetoric of “accountability” is becoming accepted as the self-evident and self-explanatory rationale for momentous policy shifts. Epitomized by the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the U.S. government’s Race to the Top, accountability is becoming a pervasive normalizing discourse, legitimizing historical shifts in educational policy from a social and cultural project of facilitating democratic citizenship to an economic project of engendering usable skills and “competences.”*

**Purpose:** *The purpose of this special issue is to provide context and perspective on these momentous shifts.*

**Research Design:** *The papers point to historic antecedents, highlight core ideas, and identify changes in the balance of power between domestic and global policy makers. The authors are interested in understanding the process by which the new policy frameworks have been constructed and legitimized and how they have changed the accepted “definition of the situation.”*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *An important aspect of these changes are three long-term trends: homogenizing the heterogeneous reality of education; shifting power from locally embedded education professionals to a global elite of economists and statisticians; and the move from soft guidance to hard mandates in an increasingly centralized system of governance.*

During the past decade “accountability” has emerged as the master rationale for education reform. Given its ubiquity and central role in current policy and practice, it is almost possible to forget that even 15 years ago the term was hardly ever used and accountability, in today’s sense, was virtually a nonissue. That is surprising given the certainty with which advocates claim accountability as the needle’s eye through which the camel of public education reform must pass.

How has this change come to pass? How has accountability emerged as the master rationale for contemporary education reform? How has it become the accepted justification for policies from the construction of centralized curricula, to teacher evaluation schemes based on student test scores, to government takeovers of schools that “fail to improve”?

In this special issue we take a longer term view of the social processes that have contributed to the rise of the accountability agenda, suggesting its rise to be inextricably linked to the globalization of education policy. In a global world, policy rationales and policy agendas are no longer defined within the bounds of local communities or even nations (Held 1995; Strange 1996; Kamens 2013; Martens and Jakobi 2010; Meyer and Benavot 2013; Tröhler 2010). They emerge at the intersection of national and international policy discourse, in which transnational policy networks and organizations like OECD play an increasingly central role (Mahon and McBride 2008). The actors in these networks operate at some distance from the traditional mechanisms of democratic control (Apple 2005; Ball 2012; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). In this world, ideas from the periphery of policy discourse may be expanded on and amplified at central network nodes like OECD, from where they return with the force of inevitability to reshape reform activity on the ground. Policies that might have a hard time becoming accepted in local contexts seem that much more irresistible when offered as uncontested consensus of the world’s leading democracies.

To understand these changes that have given us such momentous policy events like Race to the Top and PISA (Torrance 2006; Steiner-Khamsi 2003) we propose to take a look at three large-scale processes that have been instrumental in preparing the ground for them:

- homogenizing the heterogeneous reality of education through increasingly abstract and context-indifferent standards and outcome metrics;
- shifting centers of policy making influence from “local” education professionals embedded in institutions and narratives of national history and culture to a global elite of experts, committed with increasing single-mindedness to the narrative of market efficiency; and

- moving from decentralized governance and soft guidelines to centralized governance and hard mandates.

The accountability agenda derives much of its seeming self-evidence from the popularity the idea enjoys in political democracies where keeping leaders accountable is a basic tenet of democratic vitality. But in politics we hold leaders accountable by judging their choices in context. Educational accountability, by contrast, wants to judge the work of educators based on predetermined indicators that are insensitive to the great variance of people, publics, and places. While we would not kick out political leaders for failing to raise the GNP by predefined percentage points, “accountability” in public education wants to determine educational effectiveness based on context-free rankings.

PISA is a key case in point. Though frequently invoked as proof of the demise of education quality, PISA is not a measure of school effectiveness. The goal of PISA, according to its creators, is not to assess “the extent to which [students] have mastered a specific curriculum” but rather “young people’s ability to use their knowledge . . . to meet real-life challenges,” as defined, in this case, by a group of OECD economists and psychometricians.

#### HOMOGENIZING THE HETEROGENEOUS: COMPARABILITY WITHOUT CONTEXT

That a test of school children would be designed *not* to test school content can be seen as a concession to its particular purpose: the desire to compare school outcomes of students attending vastly different schools, with very different curriculum and culture, whose ability to competently participate in a globalizing economy is what is interesting in the globalizing vista of organizations like OECD. But, though unique in its claim to offer a universal measure of student outcomes around the world, PISA was not the first large-scale test to promise a context-free measure of lasting school outcomes. This distinction goes to the tests of the General Educational Development (GED), created in the United States in the 1940s as a means of measuring the educational attainment of returning veterans. Because nearly a quarter of all veterans had never attended high school, the makers of the GED were tasked not with measuring the “formal curriculum” but the “lasting outcomes” of a person’s learning. They were to assess knowledge with “wide applicability” and the “greatest functional value”—phrases with a resounding echo to PISA’s modern day concerns.

Recognizing these parallels, Ethan Hutt examines the history and development of the GED in order to investigate the allure, promise,

and pitfalls of the idea of context-free assessment and accountability. Analyzing the origin and rationale of this much neglected early federal policy intervention, Hutt highlights the usefulness of quantifiable metrics but also the inherent danger of the presumed certainty of these kinds of standards.

Hutt's paper reveals the ability of the U.S. government to bend education policy to the imperatives of political expediency—thereby setting in motion a train of events that go far beyond the limited goals of its originators. The GED was meant to address a unique, temporary problem of tens of thousands of WWII veterans who had no high school diploma and who would have been barred from employment opportunities and further education. But even after this purpose was long accomplished, the GED retained its reputation as an objective, readily available measure of high school achievement that could be used in any context and with any population—a task it was never intended or designed to serve. As analyzed by Hutt, the GED offers a window into education policy making in which many of the elements of today's accountability interventions are already in place: the bending of educational standards to political expediency; the rise of experts as policy makers; and the use of quantitative methods and measures to devise and enforce policies.

In its attempt to measure knowledge that is relevant to the “challenges of today's knowledge societies,” PISA can be seen—like the GED—as a blank canvas on which an elite group of experts have been free to write whatever they happened to deem “relevant.” David Labaree considers similarities between PISA's measuring student achievement across national school systems with different curricula and U.S. policy developments since the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report. Instead of measuring how well students learn what they are taught in each system, it measures a set of economically useful skills that no one teaches. The paper explores PISA and similar international assessments as one type of educational accountability system, based on how well students demonstrate mastery of particular cognitive skills, in comparison with the pre-Common Core state-level accountability systems in the United States, which were based on how well students demonstrated mastery of the formal curriculum.

Labaree traces the construction of new standards and expectations from the 1983 *Nation at Risk* to today's Common Core. In both cases more or less explicit comparisons with other nations served as a key legitimizing foil. Not “falling behind” the economically relevant performance of schools of our main competitors has emerged as a trope that can be readily invoked and repeated in countless ways by the media. The *Nation at Risk* report already contained a quite explicit rationale for policy developments that were to unfold over the following three decades. Of particular interest

is that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) managed to break the longstanding resistance to federal involvement into states' rights by combining an economic efficiency rationale ("we are falling behind our competitors") with an egalitarian rationale ("we leave too many kids behind"), a concern whose sincerity may be doubted, given the "compare, punish and close" mode of operation which NCLB institutionalized.

It is also noteworthy that by forcing states into measuring and reporting students' achievements, NCLB almost unwittingly set the stage for an unprecedented historical shift in American education policy: the move from staunch rejection of federal government involvement in education to the construction of a uniform, centralized curriculum, the Common Core. NCLB laid bare the limitations of a policy regime that left standard-setting sovereignty to the several states, thereby severely undermining the project of universal comparability. State and local control over curricula—until then one of the few articles of American educational faith—suddenly turned into a key barrier to educational effectiveness, making it possible to argue compellingly for something that, until then, was an American anathema: a national curriculum. In this fashion one might interpret NCLB as the law that prepared the ground for the Common Core, which, in turn, finally allows for the creation of a PISA-like ranking of the several states. Once more, "comparability trumps content."

#### OECD AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF EDUCATION POLICY MAKING

With PISA, the OECD—an organization whose self-avowed mission is the growth of market economies—is emerging as an increasingly influential global authority of public education. Set up as an organization to further the interests of the world's most developed industrial economies, OECD has, until recently, limited itself to a monitoring and informing role in education, leaving substantive issues of policy to national governments and international bodies with a more plausible mandate in education.

But with PISA OECD has entered a new phase of global influence. Representing the world's most economically developed nations, it has the financial resources and political clout to shape the "accountability" agenda in ways that rival and even overshadow the influence of national policy makers—thus raising concerns that it is on the way to become a global ministry of education.

#### *PISA's Impact*

One indication for PISA's influence on the ground is the growth of participating countries from 32 in 2000 (the first PISA survey) to 64 in 2012. Another is the "shock" and subsequent reform scramble that countries

from Germany (Ertl 2006) to Japan (Takayama 2008) have experienced. A recent OECD-sponsored study of PISA's impact concludes that "PISA has become accepted as a reliable instrument for benchmarking student performance worldwide" (Breakspear 2012: 4). This study, which queried the members of PISA's governing board, found that of 37 responding countries, only two Islam-influenced countries (Turkey and Indonesia) rated PISA as a "not very important" indicator of the effectiveness of their school system (18). The author asked what, if any, changes in educational policies and practices took place in light of PISA outcomes. He found that PISA exerted significant normative pressure to align domestic policies with the standards and competencies PISA targets and measures. He found that government officials rely on PISA's league tables to make inferences that "other countries are improving at a faster rate and overtaking us" (e.g., England-UK) (13); that some countries compared themselves to top-ranking countries inferring that their national system suffers from "strong socio-economic background effects" (Germany, Scotland-UK) (12), or pronounced gender differences (Korea). Countries like Canada and Chile changed their own assessment in order to link national and PISA results (20), while Ireland, Germany, Greece, Norway, and the United States revised their curriculum to "include PISA-like competencies." As the U.S. representative on the PISA board put it: "PISA has been assessed, along with other frameworks, in the formation of the new Common Core Standards" (24).

As Daniel Tröhler shows, the process that culminated in the creation of PISA has actually been long in the making. His paper analyzes the political strategies of the early OECD stakeholders in transforming schooling from a cultural to a technological system. OECD's experts early on confronted the problem of standardizing different existing patterns of thoughts and institutional behaviors in the member countries. The European standardization process observable in the early 1960s triggered by the OECD effectively influenced the organization of educational policies on the level of the national education departments. In line with the OECD's "consensus"-based strategy of policy formation, the new ideology was transported, disseminated, and implemented by bypassing political taboo themes and controversial topics. This paved the way for the process of standardization and formal adaptation of the organization of education and educational planning. Although seemingly focused on the production of comparable data and statistics, it transported specific ideologies of how society and its citizens should be shaped.

This role of the OECD as a hub of a specific policy agenda whose core principles are borrowed from neoliberalism (Harvey 2005) has become particularly pronounced over the past two decades. As Heinz-Dieter

Meyer's study of the evolution of OECD policy positions shows, moderate positions mindful of the disadvantages of standardized, context-indifferent, summative assessments had influence in the OECD as recently as the early 1990s. Key policy makers within the OECD resisted schemes of uniform assessment that would privilege accountability as a control mechanism over its use for professional learning and pedagogical improvement. That moderation gave way in the mid-1990s to an increasingly aggressive "new public management" orientation, replacing the logic of education with the logic of economic efficiency. Ironically, as the OECD's campaign to bring neoliberal accountability to all schools in all nations draws ever wider circles, the degree to which the organization makes itself accountable to the democratic publics is rather limited. As the PISA juggernaut gathers momentum, it paves the way for an ever broader menu of services, including costly consulting and restructuring services, delivered by private multinationals, which address the educational shortcomings that PISA presumably uncovered.

#### POLICY CENTRALIZATION AND MICROMANAGING MANDATES

As educators across nations scramble to implement some of the most intrusive education policies, bringing in their tow unprecedented degrees of centralized policy control, few have yet paused to ask how long-cherished principles about government's limited role in education have been turned upside down. This is the focus of the last set of papers by Münch and Leonardatos and Zahedi, dealing with the policy fallout of PISA and its national correlates in Germany and the United States. In both countries, deliberate and long-held commitments to prevent centralized government control over education are pushed aside as governments replace their traditionally facilitating and enabling role with micromanaging mandates.

It is worth recalling in this context that the United States is the nation that refused to establish centralized control over education. The founders preferred decentralized school governance because history had taught them that "those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny," as Jefferson put it in his "bill for the more general diffusion of knowledge." This refusal to expand political power by granting it educational authority was later reflected in the Constitution's deliberate silence on education—a silence that produced almost two centuries of federal educational abstinence.

The federal abstention from education was broken during the Civil Rights and Great Society era, when the nation had to harness federal power to redress fundamental human rights abuses—the de facto denial of access for black Americans, for children with special needs, and for

children from poor families. Looking back on the origin of federal activism in education we can see that, noble and necessary as these interventions were, they established a precedent of educational emergency activism (Berliner and Biddle 1995) when real or perceived emergencies were used as pretext to override long-standing political self-limitation on the part of Washington. Ever since, it has sufficed to declare shock with Soviet sputniks or Japanese manufacturing prowess to justify increasingly intrusive federal education mandates.

The centralization of governance we are witnessing in the United States is also at work abroad. Germany, a nation which long prided itself on pioneering large-scale public education in the liberal spirit of *Bildung*, is a case in point. After World War II Germany responded to the devastating experience of Hitler's National Socialism by creating constitutional anchors designed to safeguard liberty. One of them was Germany's educational federalism, which explicitly denied central government the power of education policy making, placing it instead in the hands of the several states (Laender). Hitler's ability to subjugate an entire nation into tyranny had been linked to the National Socialist's project of utilizing schools as a centralized mechanism of ideological indoctrination and political recruitment (Herbst 2002).

In both countries, these wise and long-held provisions against centralized education control are currently being tossed aside with abandon. Richard Münch analyzes the impact of OECD's PISA test series on Germany as a procedure that subjects nationally diverging educational traditions to a common, globally uniform concept of education. As global models of educational efficiency impinge on historically grown life-worlds, the latter have to prove their validity in the light of the ruling scientific knowledge. Local cultures of education, which previously claimed their own validity and dignity, are exposed to educational standards which claim scientific authority that locally developed standards cannot match.

Education as internalization of a cultural tradition is replaced by a model of investing in the development of globally useful human capital and competencies. In this process transnational networks of educational researchers in the OECD oust national actors such as teachers' associations and professionals in ministries of education from their position. This profound transformation is facilitated by the fact that it acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy generating precisely those norms, expectations, and governance structures that it needs to justify further advancement of its global agenda.

Similar developments can be observed in the United States where politicians and pundits have used the latest international educational assessment to declare yet another instance of American educational



mediocrity. The most recent case in point here is “Race to the Top,” one of the most intrusive uses of U.S. federal government power to date. Focusing on the way Race to the Top impacts the reality in schools and classrooms, two sitting New York State principals, Harry Leonardatos and Katie Zahedi, provide an account of how this type of accountability impacts daily practice of public schools. They provide a perspective on “accountability in action,” in particular the newly mandated “Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR),” in which teacher evaluations are directly tied to student test scores. The authors chronicle the effects of APPR, focusing on the ballooning of red tape, the expansion of unaccountable private influence, and the erosion of trust and cohesion among the members of educational communities.

Their paper describes a scene of hasty and often half-baked change measures, pushed through by “consultants” with questionable credentials, in a culture of distrust vis-à-vis principals and teachers. The reform relies heavily on psychometric schemes which aim to turn education into an all-measurable process, even if these schemes are as opaque to the public as they are easily manipulated by politicians.

#### ACCOUNTABILITY CONTESTED

A century has passed since Max Weber diagnosed “rationalization” and the attendant “march of bureaucracy” as irresistible secular trends driving institutional change by their promise to bring transparency, accountability, and efficiency to modern governance (Weber 1946). But Weber also famously warned that as administrative efficiency trumps all other values and principles of social policy, the world we create for ourselves increasingly resembles an “iron cage of servitude” in which beliefs, values, and attitudes are streamlined to produce a degree of mental conformity that bodes ill for the intellectual and cultural diversity that are vital prerequisites of creativity and innovation. And the late Isaiah Berlin warned that closing one’s eyes “to all that proves incapable of quantification” is characteristic of “a form of false consciousness of bureaucrats and administrators” and “perpetrate[s] absurdities in theory and dehumanization in practice” (Berlin 2002: 26).

The papers in this special issue document the social and political work required to remake public education in the image of the kind of abstract standards bureaucracies understand. We get to see how the actions of national and state governments, education experts, and transnational policy organizations, as well as on-the-ground practitioners, coproduce an emerging new regime of power in which education is at risk to be no longer responsive to the needs and values of local communities.

Do we need to better heed Weber's and Berlin's warning? What is won if, in order to make education more "legible" for governing elites (Scott 1998; see also Bourdieu 1998), we increasingly standardize the very process meant to produce individuals capable of mastering the challenges of work and participation in complex societies? And what may be lost if our zeal to improve a country's ranking on an exceedingly narrow test of learning leads to closing one's eyes "to all that proves incapable of quantification"?

Given the stakes, educators and policy makers may want to ask if "accountability" as practiced today indeed deserves the status of a self-evident, self-explanatory master rationale harnessed to justify questionable education reform at home and abroad.

#### NOTES

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