

**Deconstructing Accountability Through the Lens of
Democratic Philosophies: Toward a New
Analytic Framework**

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Annotation: Over the past five years, the attention of the country has become focused on the theme of educational accountability. An analysis of the term accountability shows that there exist multiple definitions and interpretations. This article helps to focus the national discussion by examining accountability through the lens of varying concepts of democracy.

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyze recent publications on accountability in order to develop a deeper understanding of both the types of accountability that are being discussed in the literature, and to uncover the philosophical underpinnings which drive these discussions. We utilize varying conceptions of democracy in an attempt to discern the underlying assumptions on which various conceptions of accountability rest – assumptions regarding the role of various community members in the education of its children; assumptions about the role of the state in the educational process; and even assumptions about the nature of human beings and human interactions. In doing so, we provide a conceptual framework which allows for a more substantive and explicit debate regarding education, accountability, and their roles in the democratic process.

Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the term “accountability” is one which is used to describe a wide variety of approaches to improving schools, and that these approaches are based on widely divergent ideas regarding the role of education in American society. Indeed, there appears to be a significant amount of conceptual confusion surrounding the use of the term accountability. Because accountability in all its forms has become such a popular approach to educational reform, it is important to understand the parameters of how the term is used, and to explore as well the underlying philosophies that guide concepts of accountability.

To achieve this goal, we analyze recent publications on accountability in order to develop a deeper understanding of both the types of accountability that are being discussed in the literature, and to uncover the philosophical underpinnings which drive these discussions. Through the lens of three philosophies of democracy, we explore very different assumptions undergirding the accountability movement – assumptions regarding

the role of various community members in the education of its children; assumptions about the role of the state in the educational process; and assumptions about the nature of human beings and human interactions. In doing so, we hope to provide a conceptual framework which will allow for a more substantive and explicit debate regarding education, accountability, and their role in the democratic process.

Research Questions and Methodology

To focus our examination of the accountability debates unfolding in these separate but interrelated spheres, our research was guided by the following general questions:

1. What are the different types of accountability that are being discussed in various types of publications?
2. How can utilizing an alternative framework that identifies the underlying democratic philosophies guiding discussions contribute to our understanding of current accountability debates?

To address the questions posed above, we must examine the discourses that exist within separate but interwoven streams of written communication. This is important for several reasons. As Lagemann (2000) points out, the development of policy agendas is not exclusively driven by what is reported in the research literature. Indeed, many argue that educational research is increasingly unavailable to policymakers and the lay public, as educational researchers become more specialized and their writing more inscrutable (Cohen and Barnes, 2000). They argue that as we enter the 21st Century, “research and public affairs have become a species of parallel play; concerns and arguments within research roughly mirror those in the larger society, without contact between the two” (p. 22).

Equally important in the development of educational policy agendas is public opinion, which develops in large part in response to the ways in which topics such as

educational accountability are framed in the newspapers and news magazines that comprise the popular press. Since teachers and educational administrators must implement educational reform measures, and since teachers unions remain so important in the development of educational practice, it is also imperative to examine the ways in which professional publications, such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, frame the debates regarding accountability.

To examine the accountability debates unfolding in these separate but interrelated spheres, we examine three types of publications: academic journals, professional journals, and major U.S. newspapers. Because the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 focused national attention on accountability as a cornerstone of educational reform, we turned to publications from 1983-2000. In total, we analyzed 36 articles; see Table 1 (full citations of each publication can be found in the References section of this paper). Our goal was not to develop a randomized or representative sample of Publications from the three arenas; we are not attempting to prove or test a cause-and-effect hypothesis. Rather, the purpose of this project is to develop a new framework for analyzing the accountability debates, and to determine whether this framework seems useful when applied to a range of publications.

In carrying out this project, we did not plan to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all that had been written about accountability in those 17 years. Rather, this article is more conceptual and preliminary in nature; it represents a first step toward exploring the connections between accountability debates and the underlying political philosophies that drive them. In taking this step, we hope to better understand which uses seem to support democracy and which may support a very different agenda.

Accountability Seen Through the Lens of Democratic Philosophies

In an earlier review of educational philosophies and their relationship to curriculum innovation, Gross (1998) found four philosophic traditions to be in play in most school settings: progressive, essentialist, existentialist, and perennialist. These

philosophies were found to have a distinct and profound effect on a particular type of educational reform—in this instance, curriculum innovation. Utilizing the same approach, we undertook a careful review of the 36 articles on accountability and found that three types of democratic philosophy—Progressive, Essentialist, and Free Market—drive the various conceptions of accountability. These democratic philosophies, and our analysis of their role in the accountability literature, are presented below.

Three Democratic Philosophies: An Overview

Progressive, Essentialist, and Free Market philosophies of education have been relevant in the U.S. for many decades and continue to be important influences in debates over the course of public education. Each is defined briefly in the order of its emergence.

Progressive views of accountability.

Progressive education is, perhaps, most commonly associated with John Dewey (1916), who asserted that education should be student-centered, exploratory, and collaborative. A well known current exemplar of Progressive education is Maxine Greene (1978), who argues that for many individuals in modern society, there is a feeling of being dominated and that feelings of powerlessness are almost inescapable. A way to combat some of these emotions is through progressive education.

Essentialist views of accountability.

Essentialism is often associated with William Bagely, professor at Teachers College during the early decades of the last century. According to Bagely (1964), schools must prepare students for a harshly competitive world. Curriculum should become much more standardized with little local design and should above all be rigorous. So-called soft subjects, like social studies, are suspect and “exacting studies” like Latin, algebra and geometry are to be emphasized.

Free Market approach to accountability.

The Free Market approach to democracy is often associated with the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman and more recently with the ideas of Chester Finn.

This analysis places schools in the same category as other institutions in our economy--that is, organizations that must compete for customers who have free choices.

Concepts of Democracy as an Analytic Tool

Clearly, the three democratic philosophies described above--Progressive, Essentialist, and Free Market--have very different implications when used as a lens through which to view current-day debates surrounding accountability. By examining the underlying philosophies that drive the accountability debates, we hope to develop a clearer picture of the fault lines that exist within the debate.

Below, we examine our pool of publications to determine the ways in which underlying conceptions of democracy are related to conceptions of accountability. The results of our analyses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Publications Analyzed by Type of Democratic Philosophy

	Progressive	Essentialist	Free-Market	Other
Academic Journals				
Education, DeMoulin	x			
Education Policy, Reiger			x	
Education Policy, Manno			x	
Educational Record, Fisher		x		
Education & Urban Society, Ornstein		x		
Journal of Teacher Education, Smith	x			
Social Education, Neil	x			
Journal of Higher Education, Alexander		x		
The Reading Teacher, Raines		x		
Urban Education, Chen et al.		x		
Education & Urban Society, Furman	x			
Practitioner Journals				
Change, Ewell	x			
Educational Leadership, King		x		
Educational Record, Fisher		x		
Educational Record, Seymour			x	
Education Week, Finn et al.			x	
NASSP Bulletin, Streshly		x		
NASSP Bulletin, Buttram		x		
Phi Delta Kappan, Manno				Essentialist/Free Market

Phi Delta Kappan, Towers		x		
Trends, Smith	x			
Popular Press				
Chicago Sun Times, Podgorski				Free-Market/Progressive
Los Angeles Times, Helfand		x		
Los Angeles Times, La Ganga		x		
Star Tribune, Draper				Essentialist/Free Market/ Progressive
The New York Times, Mayer				Free Market/Progressive
The New York Times, Rothstein		x		
The Baltimore Sun, Anderson		x		
The Baltimore Sun, Zernike		x		
The Buffalo News, Editorial				Essentialist/Free Market/ Progressive
The Christian Science Monitor, Paulson		x		
The Denver Post, Carman	x			
The Kansas City Star, Hoffman				Essentialist/Free Market
The Plain Dealer, Frolik		x		
The Washington Post, Schrag	x			
The Star Tribune, Drew	x			

N=36. Progressive= 10 (28%) Essentialist=15 (42%) Free-Market = 5 (14%) Other= 6 (17%)

Progressive Philosophy: Emphasizing Collaboration and Equity

Among our 36 publications, relatively few [10 articles, or 28%] revealed an underlying Progressive philosophy. Yet among them, we could discern three distinct areas of emphasis. First, there is a concern for how accountability programs are designed. In particular, there is an emphasis on using rich measures, engaging the community and avoiding a bureaucratic structure. Second, the articles describe important values in working with accountability plans once they are in place, emphasizing active learning and communicating with families to deal with inequities in areas such as racial differences in achievement. Finally, these articles speak to the need to see the limits of accountability and warn of a backlash, for instance, against high stakes testing.

All of the articles displaying a Progressive approach to accountability either anticipate a future accountability system or describe how such a system should be dealt with once it is in place. The former group emphasizes values and priorities for accountability systems if they are to be effective and humane. Peter Ewell (1991) speaks

about assessment and an emerging agenda of tests in the K-12 system. He makes the case, however, that early intervention is needed to keep the process participatory and advocates creativity, authenticity and decentralized management. Rothstein (2000) urges policy makers to move away from single, high stakes tests and toward more complex measurements, such as those used by the Middle States Association for accreditation. He further suggests that the visiting team be expanded to include “business leaders, parents from other towns who are active in their local schools, designees of the governor, state legislators or local officials, and college admission officers” (p.2). Lee-Smith (2000) distinguishes between the political culture driving accountability testing and psychometric questions of validity, thereby making the case that these two perspectives are at odds. Smith (1995) argues against a bureaucratically imposed accountability model, asserting that while some would want to adopt practices which rigidly label students as learners early in the school game, such practices emphasize difference rather than commonality. In order for accountability to be effective, Furman (1994) advocates designs built around teacher teams. “The power of the OBE [outcomes based education] process comes from teaming. The major mission of teams is to ensure the success of students by shared planning, shared placement of students, and shared responsibility for student discipline” (p.433). Neil (1999) expands upon this concept, stating schools must find mechanisms to facilitate dialogue about curriculum, instruction and assessment, and student learning if they are to create true communities of learning.

Progressive educators have philosophically consistent ways of responding to accountability plans. Drew (2000) quotes Minneapolis Superintendent Carol Johnson as she depicts the wide variety of efforts needed to make standards equitable across racial and class divides: “Expanding all-day kindergarten to every elementary school, forging partnerships with civic and church organizations, integrating the arts into traditional academic programs...” (p. 1A) are among the strategies that Johnson uses.

Among authors whose vision of accountability is based on Progressive philosophy, a unique vision of the classroom emerges. Smith's (1995) image is perhaps typical,

Walk in the door and look for action. Is the media center full of students working on projects? Are the students working together? Is there evidence of individual, small and large group learning? ...Is there movement, grouping, and regrouping based on student needs and interest?

The focus is to raise student learning through active engagement of the student and in Smith's words, "working together as a learning community" (p. 25). This community includes the classroom, the whole school, families and neighbors. DeMoulin (2000) describes a high school evaluation sponsored by the local PTA and conducted by parents of students in the school. This is another way to blend accountability with Progressive values of community involvement.

In addition to these context-specific visions of an educational system utilizing accountability based on Progressive principles, the authors of this group of publications illustrate larger lessons of civic life that may be learned through the accountability movement. Carman (2000) argues that the accountability movement has raised issues such as the relationship between poverty and reading scores, inequitable funding and unequal access to resources such as quality textbooks. Community groups have used the accountability movement in their pursuit of class-action lawsuits to redress such disparities. Protests against high stakes testing, a part of the accountability movement not advocated by the progressive articles, are also described. Students, their families and sympathetic teachers boycotted tests in Massachusetts and moved to cut funding for tests in Wisconsin. In this way, community action linking educators, students and families was used to reform the accountability movement, rather than become passive participants in it.

Essentialist Philosophy: High Standards for Global Competition

Like the Progressives, Essentialists too have values they see as intrinsic to workable accountability systems. For this group, a core value is the need to face a

challenging world with tough new standards. Competition and systems that select the best students are preferred to a reliance on equity; and a general critique of the Progressives' emphasis on process is central. Finally, those publications reflecting an Essentialist philosophy raise their own larger issues, such as the need to hold parents accountable for their children's educational success, and the need to compete internationally to avoid what President Bush (LaGanga 2000) described as an educational recession.

The demands for higher standards that the information age places on the economy come across clearly in the Essentialist articles. Fisher (1993) illustrates his image of a demanding college curriculum designed to meet new conditions. "If your institution already requires, for all who graduate, fluency in at least one foreign language, computer literacy, a hard science, and coursework in international, inter racial and gender studies, you are beyond this barb, if not your present organizational design and disposition are not doing the job..." (p. 16). Along with their own curriculum focus, the Essentialists place an emphasis on competition to spur on results. Training programs that emphasize group responsibility are, therefore, criticized. "Because Total Quality Management (TQM) traditionally places no emphasis on competition or individual accountability, there is no one to take responsibility as an organization flounders, for in such a system, no one is accountable..."(p.19). Even accountability plans generally seen as comprehensive, such as outcomes based education (OBE¹), are criticized when group gains overshadow individual performance. Towers (1994) notes, "Outcome-based teacher education unfortunately hampers the ability of teacher educators to sort and select the most capable students for licensure" (p. 626).

Coinciding with these calls for demanding course work, individual accountability and competition often include a critique of Progressive values and practices, particularly

¹ Outcomes Based Education (OBE) described above, widely discussed and initially implemented in schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s sought to directly connect instruction and curriculum to specific, measurable results. It became controversial in some quarters when those goals were criticized. These problems were especially pronounced when the goals appeared to mandate social values.

the emphasis on community involvement. Ornstein (1986) decries the fact that schools have been “increasingly burdened with the tasks and responsibilities that other social institutions no longer do very well or do not undertake. The schools have been asked to develop the child’s human potential regardless of background or ability, to educate him or her as well as possible, to mold a healthy and responsible citizen” (p. 227). Similarly, these authors argue that accountability should shift “the analysis of teacher competency from the process to the product, from teacher behavior to teacher effects” (Ornstein, 1986, p. 228). Teachers are to be evaluated on student achievement, almost to the exclusion of everything else. In fact, too much teacher power is perceived to be a dangerous thing, as can be seen in Fisher’s (1993) emotional description of one college’s faculty. He states, “anytime anyone--administrator, trustee, or even faculty member--suggested anything that was not in keeping with the perceived interests of the faculty organization, the person was either neutralized or effectively eliminated.” As a corrective to the faculty’s power, Fisher advocates a get-tough policy in which faculty would see “increased teaching loads; dramatic reduction in emphasis on scholarly publication... required student advisees and posted office hours for every faculty member...” (p. 17).

The values of tightly organized, results oriented accountability translates into specific action plans for the Essentialists. Streshly and Newcomer (1994) describe the implementation of a management by objectives (MBO) system, “Managers (including classroom teachers) decide what they want to accomplish. They decide how they will proceed. Finally, they agree on the evidence of outcomes that will indicate success” (p. 65). Streshly and Newcomer envision teachers as managers, a clear connection to a business model quite fitting for this MBO plan. Empowered teachers may be an emphasis in this plan but the overarching theme is control that is external to the learner. Someone else decides what will be learned, how instruction will be organized and under what circumstances learning will be evaluated.

Curriculum is to be centrally designed and controlled, according to the Essentialist philosophy. For example, King and Evans (1991) speak of a “massive curriculum development effort” to “design down” from exit outcomes to specific lesson outcomes for every student” (p. 74). Buttram and Waters (1997) refer to Grant Wiggins’ work in assessment as “discussing the need to move beyond content and performance standards and develop work-design standards to focus and align curriculum, instruction, and assessment.” Chen et al. (2000) site an example sponsored by the Erikson Institute School Project whereby teacher teams were trained to use standardized test results to modify curriculum and instruction. Indeed, assessment, in the form of high stakes tests, seems central to the Essentialist’s formula of accountability. Helfand (2000) describes the use of standardized tests, such as the Stanford 9 battery in California. “If the schools do not significantly improve their Stanford 9 test scores next spring, they could see their teachers reassigned. Campuses that continue to struggle two years down the road could be waving goodbye to their principals as the state swoops in, takes over and, possibly, closes their doors” (p. 1). Under such pressure, the end result seems to change from generalized learning to test performance. “The bottom line is that our test scores are not good enough,” reflected one principal (Helfand, 2000, p. 2).

Schools missing the mark need to complete action plans, but these too come under scrutiny by state officials. Annual testing of students in these accountability plans is common with some calling for more frequent use of tests. One Maryland plan required a reading test of kindergarten students in the fall and spring to measure progress (Anderson, 2000). Of course, not all writers are equally comfortable with centralized accountability systems. Raines (2000) accepts the reality of such mechanisms while suggesting greater involvement by educators. “...whether or not policy makers should legislate educational practice is no longer the question. They are doing so. The issue has become whether professional educators can use research and effective practice to influence policy makers’ decisions” (p. 642).

Currently, the movement toward an Essentialist approach to higher education is also described in the literature. While defending the rights of higher education to resist, Alexander (2000) explains how the Essentialist's economic competition motivation is now impacting colleges and universities.

To achieve the ends of economic growth, governments resort to many devices that are presumed to create greater efficiencies in the use of public dollars while expanding the reach of higher education. The entire nature of the traditional relationship between government and higher education is in the process of significant change in stretching the public dollar to serve more students in attempting to maximize economic returns (p. 413).

Finally, the Essentialist plan, like the Progressive strategy, extends beyond the school. The emphasis, however, is quite different. Where the Progressives look to the community to help establish the values and goals of education (perhaps using accountability to serve their common vision), the Essentialists bring the community, especially parents, under the focus of accountability itself. In this way, everyone serves the accountability system and is responsible to it. Paulson (2000) portrays a series of ideas to "loop in often disengaged families." These include family report cards which include checklists in academics, health care, nutrition and cleanliness. One Chicago plan involves parent counselors who "visit the home and try to work with the parent to get the parent back on track" (p. 2). In California, church groups make home visits. Teachers in a similar plan make house calls, even before there are test results to "set the tone," for the year (p. 3).

The larger issues which the Essentialists focus on have much to do with international competition and maintaining a strong economy. The threats to U.S. living standards, if the educational system is not rapidly made more productive, are clear in the articles. Republican president George W. Bush speaks of an education recession which "could threaten the health of the nation, economically and otherwise" (LaGanga, 2000, pt.

A, pt.1, p.14). Bush points to the fact that American high school seniors ranked poorly when compared to students from other industrialized countries. It is this economic competition and the protection of our economic position in a rapidly changing world that typifies the Essentialist voice in the articles. The demand for greater rigor in our system, in our relationships and in an imposed system of educational organization seems to derive from the sense of threat seen in current international economic realities.

Free Market Philosophy: A Consumerist Model

While there were fewer articles that we considered purely Free Market, several important qualities stand out that lead to a third parallel force in the democratic views of accountability. First, the world view is one of pleasing customers--in this case, students and their families. Like the Essentialists, competition is a central value. In the case of publications reflecting a Free Market philosophy, however, the competition in question is not our nation state versus the rest of the industrialized world. Instead, providers of a desired service--schools-- compete in a free market place for customers. Thus, the system in operation is meant to imitate the world of other businesses with the possible addition of some consumer information so that people can make reasoned choices among providers. The larger vision of Free Market planners places individualized freedom of choice as the most fundamental of all freedoms, in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Seymour (1993) uses the Total Quality Management (TQM) model to articulate the guiding vision of Free Market accountability advocates.

The provider of the input is the supplier; the recipient of the output is the customer. In a quality-driven environment, the customer defines quality by clearly expressing his or her input requirements or expectations. The supplier, in turn, delivers a quality product or service by adding value in such a way that it meets or exceeds customer expectations (p. 10).

Thus, roles in this approach are clearly defined and, seemingly, not exchangeable.

Whereas a Progressive might consider all people to be learners in a successful school, the

Free Market concept makes one either a supplier or a consumer of services. Nor is there the anticipation of a long term commitment on the part of either party as the Essentialists might envision in the relationships among the state, the school and the family as seen above.

In operation, the Free Market approach is still somewhat theoretical since there are currently few publicly financed school choice examples. However, Finn et al. (2000) and Manno et al. (2000) describe a system they call accountability-via-transparency, which gives a fairly clear idea of how such a system might operate. According to Finn et al. (2000), transparency is “a regimen where so much is visible in each school that its watchers and constituents (including families, staff, board members, sponsor, the press, rival schools, and others) routinely ‘regulate’ it through market-style mechanisms rather than command-and-control structures.” A key feature of transparency is information, and Finn et al. suggest another model adapted from the corporate world, something they call Generally Accepted Accounting Principles for Education or GAAPE (taken from the guidelines known as Generally Accepted Accounting Principles for Accounting).

This concept contains three levels. The first level requires schools to “routinely and systematically” reveal information on performance, organization and finances. The second level of transparency requires charter sponsors to share “criteria and procedures for school approval, monitoring, intervention, and renewal, and supply comparable information about each school for which they are responsible” (p. 44). The final level forces the state to share its overall information about charter programs and evaluations of them. Taken together, the GAAPE seems meant to give all parties in the transaction needed information. Consumers (students and families) can compare schools for desired qualities and results. Existing and potential suppliers (schools and entrepreneurs) can see where there is competition and where their idea might find a niche. Finally, regulators (the state and charter school sponsors) are themselves regulated. For example, on a much

smaller scale, Reiger (2000) reported the results of a parent evaluation of their children's high school.

Yet the larger message of the Free Market strategists is clear: "Either the school shapes up or it finds itself without students (or its charter renewal). Conversely, a school that works well will find people beating a path to its doors" (Finn et al., p. 42). Simply put, if the world is a marketplace, why shouldn't we run our education system in the same manner? There is also an implication that other systems (Progressive and Essentialist) insult the intelligence of the public by insisting that people are not wise enough to make their own choices in k-12 education when they are required to do so in every other facet of American life.

The Essentialist Blends

While most of our publications are framed by one clear democratic philosophy, three of the articles combined an Essentialist and Free Market perspective. Since these three articles are drawn from either the popular press or professional publications, there is some reason to believe this combination of Essentialism and Free Market thinking is becoming closely associated with accountability rhetoric among the general electorate. Frolik (2000), covering the George W. Bush campaign for the presidency, provides a good example of this thinking. Bush states, "Without regular testing, without holding people responsible, accountability is just a political myth. Without accountability, there's no pressure for change. Without change, there's no chance for some children to learn" (p.13A). This is the same Essentialist point of view referred to above. However, Bush then brings about a Free Market theme when he suggests that federal money be given directly to parents if their children's schools do not meet testing targets. This money could be used to provide educational services (tutors) or as tuition to another public or private school.

Manno (1995) combines the Essentialist point of view with Free Market thinking when he says, "First we need high, uniform, but sensibly drafted academic standards for

all children and a system of accountability that has real consequences for success or failure in reaching those standards. Second, we need great diversity in the nature of schools and in the ways professional educators seek to produce results, with families free to choose those schools that best meet their needs” (p. 724). He underscores the connection between the two approaches to accountability, stating parents will “vote with their feet and with their pocketbooks” (p. 726) by favoring schools that maintain high standards and avoiding those that do not.

Hoffmann (2000) describes yet another form of Essentialist- Free Market blend when he illustrates an accountability system for teachers in Kansas City. Teachers in this scheme will be observed and sorted into categories, with special attention paid to those in the lowest level of performance. Those teachers are to be re-evaluated six weeks later and may be terminated if they do not improve. In this way, control for quality based upon pre-determined standards (Essentialist) could lead to competition for new job openings (Free Market) when teachers in the lowest category fail to improve within the set time limit.

Conclusion

It is our assessment that examining the philosophies of democracy that underlie various notions of accountability provides us with a far richer, more nuanced, and ultimately more meaningful way of analyzing the accountability debates. As can be seen in the analysis in this paper, conceptions of Progressive, Essentialist and Free Market democracy are easily discernible in the various writings about accountability. As a result, we are able to examine the basic assumptions on which the various conceptions of accountability rest--assumptions regarding the proper role of education in a democracy; assumptions regarding the role of various community members in the education of their children; assumptions about the role of the state in the educational process; and even assumptions about the nature of human beings and human interactions.

Our data analysis suggests that Essentialist philosophies of democracy are clearly driving the accountability debates. As is true with all three of the philosophies examined,

Essentialism is not a politically neutral concept. Essentialism assumes that schools exist to advance the financial well-being and intellectual superiority of the United States. It follows that the citizenry develop a primary loyalty to a national corporate structure in which the well-being of the country is placed before the intellectual or financial well-being of themselves as individuals. However, this loyalty is not reciprocated, since the increasingly global economy (and federal policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) ensures corporations will seek out the cheapest labor, which is oftentimes outside the boundaries of the United States.

When applied to educational policies such as the accountability movement, Essentialist conceptions of democracy become especially problematic. The uniform standards that the Essentialists insist upon are by definition inflexible, and as a result cannot likely respond to turbulence (Gross 1998) that is an integral part of the world as we know it in the early 21st century. Thus, Essentialist-based accountability may ultimately, and paradoxically, result in the inability to respond quickly and well to the rapidly changing conditions around us.

Those who define accountability using a Free Market philosophy assert a very different form of allegiance—this time, to the ability of the individual family to choose the best educational “product” for their children. Under this framework, there is little sense of community, or the belief that education must serve the common good, as Horace Mann (Messerli 1972) insisted upon. Instead, education is a commodity, much the same as any other consumer good that can be purchased in the United States.

But Free Market notions of accountability essentially ignore the fact that the financial resources that individual families would need to have access to a meaningful choice is absent. In most of the large urban school districts that are targets for proponents of choice and/or vouchers, the amount of money that a family would receive to spend on each child’s education does not even come close to the tuition of well-regarded private

schools. Thus, in the end, Free Market approaches to accountability are basically empty promises to many of the neediest students and their families.

Progressive conceptions of democracy point to a very different vision of accountability that is built on collaboration, trust, and broad community involvement. The ten articles which espoused this approach to accountability emphasized a fluid, more multi-dimensional approach to both the implementation of accountability mechanisms, and the measurement of student achievement. While Progressive arguments regarding accountability are often dismissed by political conservatives as too “subjective”, in fact Progressive forms of accountability provide the opportunity to triangulate data, as multiple forms of assessment—tests, portfolios, teacher evaluations, parent evaluations—are all designed to reflect the achievement of the student. Moreover, unlike Essentialist or Free Market forms of accountability, Progressive philosophies of accountability afford the best opportunity for local control.

Uncovering the philosophical and ideological assumptions which drive current debates on accountability provides us with a powerful tool to examine whether, and how, various forms of accountability are “in synch” with our own conceptions of the role of education in American society. The term accountability is chameleon-like, changing its meaning and its function to suit whichever political philosophy is driving those who champion it. By developing a deeper understanding of the conceptions of democracy that underlie various forms of accountability rhetoric, policy and practice, we are better equipped to meaningfully engage in what has surely become a spirited and high-stakes debate about the future of American education.

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