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The edge of chaos

School administrators and accountability

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chaos

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Abstract Much has been written about student accountability, teacher accountability, and school accountability. More limited research is available on administrator accountability. Recently there have been substantial initiatives undertaken world-wide to increase educational accountability. With increasing demands and changing expectations in the role of school administration, researchers, practitioners and policy makers and departments of education have become socially preoccupied with educational accountability. The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive literature review on accountability of school administrators over the last two decades to demonstrate how aspiring, new and practicing school administrators understand and meet the demands of accountability in a time of tumultuous change when the stakes are high.

Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you (Paul, Letters to the Hebrews, chapter 17).

Introduction

The above quote is an indication of how long accountability has been on the books. No single date can be pinpointed as the onset of serious thinking about how accountability should be structured and managed in organizations. However, the roots are deeply ingrained in earlier eras that date back to the *Old Testament*. In the book of *Exodus*, chapter 18, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, chastises Moses for failing to establish an accountability system through which he could delegate responsibilities for the administration of justice. In verse 25, Moses accepts Jethro's advice and "chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over thousands". Moses continued to judge the "hard cases", but his rulers judged "every small matter" themselves (Shafritz and Ott, 2001, p. 28).

Socrates explains to Nicomachides that a responsible leader who "knows what he needs, and is able to provide it, can be a good president, whether he have the direction of a chorus, a family, a city, or an army" (Xenophon, 1869, as cited in Shafritz and Ott, 2001, p. 35). For thousands of years accountability has continued to surface in formal and informal organizations. Shafritz and Ott (2001) assert that there are countless examples of accountability systems in the arena of organizational theory, from the classicalist era (pre-Second World War; Fayol, 1916; Taylor, 1916; Weber, 1922) to the neoclassicalists (post Second World War; McGregor, 1959; Merton, 1957; Selznick, 1948; Simon, 1946)



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to the postmodern era and the information age (Fulk and DeSanctis, 1993; Hammer and Champy, 1993; Senge, 1990).

More recently there have been substantial initiatives undertaken world-wide to increase educational accountability (Abelmann *et al.*, 1999; Adams and Kirst, 1999; Banfield, 1992; AWSP, 2000; Becher *et al.*, 1983; Black, 1994; Blasé, 1997; Butterworth and Butterworth, 1998; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Earl, 1995, 1998; Eisner, 1991; Fagan, 1995; Gaines and Cornett, 1992; IEL, 2000; Kogan, 1986; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Milne, 1995; Wagner, 1989; Watts *et al.*, 1998). Much has been written about student accountability, teacher accountability, and school accountability (Ladd, 1996). More limited research is available on administrator accountability (ERS, 1996; ISLLC, 1996).

Twenty years after the landmark report *A Nation at Risk*, education has made some progress but it has been heart-breakingly slow (Feldman, 2003). When the report first appeared, many education organizations went on the defensive (NCEE, 1983). Although the American Federation of Teachers disagreed with much the report said, the federation agreed that the report certainly warranted the attention and support for needed changes in education (Feldman, 2003). According to Feldman (2003), the criticisms and recommendations of *A Nation at Risk* prompted many of the subsequent efforts. Of course, not all the reforms have been responsive or particularly helpful, and they have been inconsistent, ranging from changes in graduation requirements to structural changes like site-based management and more radical experiments like charter schools, vouchers and private management of schools.

Most notably, beginning in the 1990s, the standards movement, a development of *A Nation at Risk's* call for high expectations and goals for all learners, sought to raise achievement by instituting a system of standards for what students should know, curriculum to embody the standards, and the assessments to test how well students meet the standards. Forty-nine states now have content standards for most subjects and assessments to measure student achievement, though curriculum and assessment quality are still weak points in most states according to Feldman (2003). With this in mind it becomes increasingly important to understand the roles of school administrators in making schools effective. With increasing demands and changing expectations in the role of school administration, researchers, practitioners and policy makers have become socially preoccupied with education accountability. DeWittWallace Readers Digest (2003) asserts that one of the reasons for slow progress is due to the poor quality of leadership, a vital ingredient in achieving system-wide, education renewal. It begs to question then why this arena has gotten scant attention. With nearly half the nation's superintendents expected to retire or leave their jobs in the next five years and three-fifths of all districts reporting an inability to attract enough quality candidates for vacant principalships, how can school leaders be held more accountable than ever for

assuring that students meet new learning standards and have authority to achieve results? The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive literature review on accountability of school administrators over the last two decades to demonstrate how aspiring, new and practicing school administrators understand and meet the demands of accountability in a time of tumultuous change when the stakes are high.

The following section provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on education accountability. First, a definition of accountability is provided. This is followed by a synopsis of how accountability has been redefined. Next the alternative approaches to accountability are addressed. This is followed by a presentation of the current issues on educational accountability. Finally, some concluding thoughts and areas for further research are proposed.

Accountability

Proposals for accountability often fail to recognize the basic elements and conditions of this concept or fail to consider the full range of its implications (Adams and Kirst, 1999). To contend that an individual or an institution ought to be accountable immediately brings to mind the following questions: accountable to whom, for what, in what manner and under what circumstances, with what consequences and/or effects (Kogan, 1986; Leithwood and Earl, 2000; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999)?

The concept of accountability and its implications are quite complex from both a theoretical and practical standpoint (Wagner, 1989). It refers to “the relationship between an individual who dispenses a service and the recipients of that service” (Seyfarth, 1999, p. 103). Being accountable means, among other things, being obligated or subject to giving an account. In saying that someone is accountable “we could imply that he/she is obligated to give a report, description, explanation, justifying analysis, or some form of exposition of reasons, causes, grounds, or motives for what we have observed” (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999, p. 13). The degree to which accountability exists in any relationship will involve exploring whether or not the form of accounting selected, and the manner in which the agent is expected to be accountable, are really suitable for the purposes that accountability is meant to serve (Black, 1994, 1998; Blasé, 1997, 2000; Bolanos, 1994; Brownlee, 1995; Church, 1995; DeMont and DeMont, 1975; Fullan, 2000; NASSP, 1998; NPBAP, 1989; Peters, 1998; Tyack, 1993; Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

Earl (1998) defines accountability as:

A slippery concept that is both emotional and judgmental – it means being responsible or obligated to report and to justify one’s actions to those who are entitled to the information (p. 186).

It is not surprising that there are different perspectives on how accountability can be established and demonstrated. Earl (1998, p. 187) continues, even though

accountability is multi-faceted, two opposing views demonstrate the underlying dialectic:

On the one hand, accountability is seen as answering to a higher power that has the authority and mandate to judge quality, exercise control and order compliance. On the other hand, it is seen as emancipatory. Improvement is predicated on the belief that change is an internal process that cannot be imposed. The power resides in the school or system to reflect on accumulated data and answer to their constituents by communicating findings and a plan for action.

Establishing a culture that promotes accountability, taking responsibility and being answerable for actions is one of the most revolutionary (and therefore most likely to be resisted) of the concepts associated with restructuring. Departments of education are relaxing regulatory activities through such actions as waivers, and district level administrators are reducing oversight efforts, encouraging site-based budgeting and site-based management. Reform efforts have caused accountability to be redefined. However, as opportunities for taking initiatives move to school sites, there is also great expectation that the school sites will be held accountable for results (Angus, 1998; Glickman, 2001; Ladd, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Murphy and Pimentel, 1990; O'Neill, 2001; Rothman, 1993; Willms, 1998). The results seem to create confusion and chaos as educators attempt to come to grips with what all this means.

No employee of a school system is wholly accountable for students' performance. A teacher depends on administrators at the school and the district levels to create conditions that facilitate learning, the principal depends on administrative superiors to provide resources and to enact instructionally sound policies. If the school district has determined what students are expected to learn and provided the resources that teachers need to teach, and if the principal has maintained conditions in the school that are conducive to learning, then the teacher and the school administrator can reasonably be held accountable for exercising good judgement in the selection and presentation of instructional materials, management of student behavior, and allocation of time and resources.

Educational accountability cannot be achieved without first instituting clear goals and standards (Ladd, 1996). According to Ladd (1996) and other researchers (Abramis, 1994; Biddle, 1986; Brown, 1991; Meyer, 1994; Robzek and Dubnick, 1987) there are several issues and concerns of accountability that are currently at the fore for school administrators. If the purposes, intentions, roles and expectations are clearly understood from the outset the chances for successful accountability systems are enhanced. Abramis (1994), Biddle (1979) and Campbell (1999) highlight several key concepts in role theory that connect with accountability. These concepts are prevalent throughout the literature, and are worthy of mention. In particular, four concepts of primary interest are role conflict, role expectations, role evolution, and role change. Two further concepts warranting consideration are role ambiguity and role overload, which

are briefly mentioned below. The first concept, role conflict, is normally defined as the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person. In such a case, the person will be subjected to conflicting pressures, will suffer stress, will have to resolve the problem by adopting some form of coping behavior, and both the person and the system will be disrupted. However, role conflict is only one of several structural conditions that are thought to cause problems in social systems. Others include role ambiguity (a condition in which expectations are incomplete or insufficient to guide behavior) and role overload (when the person is faced with too many expectations). Each of these conditions may produce stress for the individual (Abramis, 1994; Biddle, 1986).

Second, role expectations are a combination of the actor's own role conceptions and those of other actors. "Unless alter's role conceptions constitute highly authoritative and very specific prescriptions, there is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between ego's and alter's role conceptions. Role ambiguity may thus result from ego's and alter's divergent role expectations" (Biddle, 1979, p. 195). In addition, Biddle (1986, p. 81) concludes that:

The evidence suggests persons often conform to expectations that are held by others, are attributed to others, or are held by the person for his or her conduct.

Third, role evolution involves the processes and dynamics by which a role is adjusted and modified. Roles may develop to varying degrees and speeds depending on a variety of factors, and such evolution can have significant implications. Finally, role change can be significant due to the implications of adjustments made by school administrators in assuming new roles (Biddle, 1986, p. 196). Since administrators have previous experiences, backgrounds, and skills, they may likely bring to their roles expectations, however realistic, which can impact other actors.

Conversely, according to Meyer (1994), if school administrators do not understand what is expected of them in their role and function as administrators, how can they justifiably be held accountable? The goals and standards are guides used by administrators to determine the needs of their clientele and how these needs may be met. In the final analysis, any system of accountability, whether educational or organizational, rests on the willingness of individuals, both leaders and followers, to accept personal responsibility (Ladd, 1996). Relocating decision-making authority from school district office to the school level is seen as a precondition to awakening that sense of responsibility.

The role of central office is gradually shifting from one emphasizing regulating and initiating activities to one emphasizing facilitation, service, and responsiveness. Some current activities continue to be dealt with best at central office level, for example, networking with other government agencies whose functions overlap with the school district; lobbying for resources at the district, state, and federal levels; and negotiating with teachers unions. However,

responsibilities for many other activities shift to school sites. As responsibilities gravitate to the school site, so does authority, requiring central office personnel to practice more restraint in their relationships with site personnel. Brown (1991, p. 15) states that:

Central office teaming needs to be implemented as a model for schools, exhibiting less reliance on superintendent decision-making and more team decision-making.

Realistic expectations need to be developed about accountability and the site-level personnel need to understand what these expectations are (Meyer, 1994). From an organizational perspective, school districts need to set specific expectations based on their mission and goal statements and to provide assessment approaches as well as professional development opportunities that help site-based leaders become knowledgeable about accountability methods and how to use them (Nagy, 1995). Setting expectations and providing training and support can enhance the ability of the school sites to meet demands for accountability. If these activities are done in a supportive way rather than in a controlling manner, it is more likely that accountability will be viewed as a natural part of the process of moving towards goals.

Redefining accountability

The need for accountability has widespread agreement, but what it means and how it should function are less clear. Further, those who are going to be held accountable are understandably concerned about taking on this obligation, partly because there is little clarity about what it means or how to do it and partly because it requires additional efforts that may lead to the judgement that outcomes are inadequate (Earl, 1998; Wagner, 1989).

If significant progress can be made "up front" in the early stages of reform efforts activities can be more manageable (Ackerman *et al.*, 1996). With purposes established and agreed on by partners, school districts will be in a much better position to make decisions regarding structures and roles. School districts that are contemplating restructuring should explore the need to implement structural and role changes, including decentralization, site-based management, widespread involvement, and participative decision making (Corbett *et al.*, 1996).

Developing structures and roles: decentralization

Centralized systems are based on the belief that a high level of control is needed to assure that minimal fulfillment of expectations will be achieved by those at the service level of the organization. On the contrary, "decentralization requires that you believe in your fellow human beings" (Brown, 1991, p. 108). The assumption behind decentralization is that, compared to those at distant administrative centers, partners at the local level will be more intensely concerned and have a more comprehensive grasp of realities at the school site, which should put them in a better position to make appropriate decisions about

the use of scarce resources. Decentralization is also based on the assumption that change is more likely to occur, and to occur more readily, if the emphasis is on local initiative rather than on reporting and hierarchy. Decentralization can be a way of freeing up partners at the school site-level to take more initiative to create effective responses to the educational needs of students (Brown, 1991; Mohrman *et al.*, 1994).

Site-based management

Beyond changing decision-making structures, site-based management is intended to lead to better ways of meeting the needs of students and the communities from which they come (Mohrman *et al.*, 1994; Corbett *et al.*, 1996). The intent is to open a relatively closed system, so the partners can cooperatively explore delivery of education to meet site-identified goals. They “may plan staffing levels, employ or dismiss the principal, participate in the development of local curricula, and become involved in other important decisions affecting their schools” (Brown, 1991, p. 31). To reiterate, Clark and Lacey (1997, p. 67) from the Panasonic Foundation state:

We believe that decisions affecting the learning of children should be made, whenever possible, by those closest to children and be shared among those who must carry out the decisions. Only then can we expect teachers and school administrators to take responsibility for the education of their students.

For this to become reality efforts must continue to be made to convince potential partners that their involvement and participation are desired and important. It takes considerable effort to change behaviors and beliefs and provide partners with the necessary skills to work together cooperatively. Expectations need to be communicated clearly by central office leaders. Doing business differently requires that the new “rules of the game” must be clear and communicated a number of times and through different media. Second-guessing expectations will never work.

In addition, the principal’s role has undergone a re-conceptualization. From being the authority figure at the top of the school pyramid, the principal must become the facilitator at the center of a complex web of partners. Principals are now expected to base their influence on “professional expertise and moral imperative rather than line authority. They must learn to lead by empowering rather than by controlling others” (Murphy, 1992, p. 125). Many principals continue to need help in making this role change. Some see it as a challenge; others may be cautious but willing to try to change their leadership behaviors. Understanding the roles of followers and agreement or not becomes equally important. Still, others feel threatened by these changing leadership behavior expectations.

Finally, in site-based management teachers must continue to share in school-wide policy making and be involved in the implementation of changes. At the same time structures that encourage involvement and participation in

site-based management must continue to be created, such as school councils, advisory committees, school improvement teams, and so forth.

Widespread involvement and participative decision making

All partners have something of value to offer to restructuring efforts. The payoffs are enormous. According to Corbett *et al.* (1996) the school staff personnel are the most knowledgeable because they are intimately involved in the day-to-day workings of the school. They have important and legitimate concerns that must be included in discussions. Second, the students play an important role. Their participation gives them firsthand opportunities to practice critical thinking and to explore problem solving with adults. Their unique perspective must become part of the dialogue. Third, input from parents and other community members is necessary, both because they have a legitimate role to play and because they must be recruited as partners who will work with the staff to enable students to achieve a meaningful education. Finally, the local business leaders play an important role. They have a sensitivity about basic skills that are required in the economy. They can also partner with schools to identify and secure resources that are needed in support of the educational program.

Because of the relative absence of precedents for participative decision making, relationships may be tenuous and unsettling until a common agenda is created, norms and rules are developed, and trust is developed. It is one thing to declare that there will be participative decision making and quite another to institutionalize it (Fagan, 1995; Gidney, 1999).

There are of course many occasions of accountability where simply relating facts and events is all that is needed. But it is one thing to report that certain events have occurred and quite a different matter to explain or to justify "why" and "how" they occurred (Gaines and Cornett, 1992; Kogan, 1986; Ladd, 1996; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Lessinger, 1970; Wagner, 1989). It is for this reason that rational forms of accounting must be employed and have value in relation to matters where they are needed, for they have the potential to yield this additional insight (Lessinger, 1970; Lessinger and Tyler, 1971). The approaches that accountability may take in schools and school systems, as a whole, need to be better understood as do the consequences of introducing one form as distinct from another (Hodgkinson, 1995; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999).

Alternative approaches to accountability

A major theme of recent debate in education has been to shift the emphasis from a concern for equity (i.e. distribution – who benefits) to a concern for effectiveness (i.e. what gets done). However, each of these concepts is itself value-laden and capable of many interpretations (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999). Therefore the distribution of policy emphasis between them, as well as the definition of the concepts themselves, depends on how accountability is

addressed. Determining “who decides” goes a long way in laying the ground for “what gets done” and “who benefits”.

There are several alternative approaches to accountability (Kogan, 1986; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Simkins, 1997, 2000; Simkins *et al.*, 1992; Wagner, 1989). Each of these approaches is built on a unique system of beliefs and assumptions about schools and how they can change. In essence people will accept accountability processes as they understand them and will reject it if it does not fit with their personal frame of reference.

Market approach

This approach increases competition in school choice, opening up boundaries within and across school systems, school privatization plans, charter schools, magnet schools, academies and other specialized educational facilities. Unlike other models or approaches of accountability, this approach is not concerned with the rearrangement of roles and power within the organizational system of education. Rather it is concerned to establish a competitive environment within which schools are compelled to respond to the wishes of their “customers” through the operation of the market forces (Kogan, 1986; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Wagner, 1989). According to this approach, accountability relationships can be established directly with those who use public services without the need for other groups, such as professionals, public representatives or managers, to interpret the needs for them. In this approach, known for its “motivation” element, schools will offer programs that they feel are good for their clients. At the same time, it is assumed that students’ needs are more effectively met, parents are very supportive of the school, students are likely to be more engaged in their own learning, and teachers are generally more content with their workplace.

Decentralized approach

This approach elicits a community control form of site-based management in the context of typical governance school structures. The devolution of decision making within these structures encourages an account to be shared between professionals within the school, parent representatives and the community, as a whole (Wagner, 1989). School councils are prime examples.

Professional approach

The professional model of accountability is based on the assumption that quality in the educational system is best ensured by granting autonomy to teachers, and others who have been trained in and have access to relevant bodies of professional knowledge and whose professional ethics leads them to act always in the interest of their “client” – the student. It specifies what the teachers, the school and its governance structures, and the district should be accountable for. In other words, the focus here is on the capacity of the

organization to implement and sustain accountability measures (Kogan, 1986; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Wagner, 1989).

Policies, practices, and incentives are created that promote student welfare, ensure opportunities for individuals to practice capabilities as well as require that knowledge be the basis for practice. The “yardstick” of quality under this model of accountability is good practice which is defined by the profession and moderated by processes of peer review such as professional networks of information and exchange, advisory teams, external examiners in higher education and so forth (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999). Principals currently have access to this accountability mechanism. Professional accountability is a more promising approach to improving instruction. By helping teachers extend their professional expertise, providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues, and helping teachers feel pride in their work, the principal can help bring about improvements in practice and gains in student achievement.

Professional accountability alone is insufficient to ensure that educational provision responds adequately to the complex demands of a modern economy and society (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Simkins *et al.*, 1992). Pressures have grown to find other accountability mechanisms that can reduce professional power and increase the influence of other stakeholders in the educational system.

One approach is to subject professionals to managerial control. The argument here is that professional autonomy and judgement must be subordinated to broader corporate purposes. This cannot be achieved by the “collegial” methods of shared responsibility favoured by professionals – such methods are more rhetoric than reality anyway (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999). It is necessary to establish clear organizational goals, agree to the means of achieving them, monitor progress, and then support the whole process by a suitable system of incentives. Only in this way can it be ensured that the organization is effective in the accomplishment of its goals and efficient in its use of resources.

The management approach

The management approach to accountability involves a variety of procedures for “strategic planning”, especially at the school district level, as well as multiple procedures for school improvement planning and monitoring progress (e.g. the accountability reviews carried out by New Zealand’s Education Review Office and Educational Quality and Accountability Office in Ontario) (Butterworth and Butterworth, 1998; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999). The recent proliferation of literature on school accountability lies in the system-level of knowledge to school administrators. School administrators represent both the managerial function at the organizational level and the leader function at the individual level. When this approach is used, generally it is the whole organization that is held accountable but with more responsibility for the senior administrator such as the school principal. The school and its senior

administrator are most directly accountable to the next level in the organizational hierarchy, such as the district office supervisor to whom the school administrator reports.

New managerialism

New managerialism is more of a reform strategy than an approach to accountability. In the last decade in England and Wales, reforms have sought to introduce new forms of accountability which:

- redistribute power in the policy domain from local representative government towards central government and its agencies and newly constituted governing bodies of institutions;
- disempower the service (professional) domain within institutions in favour of a reconstituted management domain; and
- empower “consumers” directly through marketization and, in the schools sector, enhanced “voice” within governing bodies.

It is argued that developments are changing patterns of organization and management within those institutions which are subject to them through the development of new forms of organizational control which can be characterized as “managerialism” (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Pollitt, 1993; Simkins, 1997, 2000).

According to Peters (1992, p. 269), the devolution of decision making is sometimes rooted in a broader reform strategy for public institutions generally referred to as “new managerialism” whereby “it emphasizes decentralization, deregulation and delegation”. Leithwood *et al.* (1999, p. 83) state that:

While there are variants on this approach to accountability among countries, Hood suggests that they share in common a shift in emphasis from policy formulation to management and institutional design; from process to output controls; from organizational integration to differentiation; and, from statism to subsidiarity.

In countries such as New Zealand and Australia where school reform has been substantially influenced by the philosophy of new managerialism, creating more efficient and cost-effective school administrative structures is a second central goal for devolution (Peters, 1992). Typically, this goal is pursued through the implementation of an administrative-control form of site-based management that increases school site administrators’ accountability to the central, district, or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources. The school administrator is clearly who is accountable with administrative-control approaches to site-based management, the account being owed to central administration of the school board or school district.

Political accountability

This approach uses voting to register approval or disapproval of a candidate or ballot initiative. Elected officials who fail to carry out the actions to which they

committed themselves during a campaign may find themselves held accountable by voters who remove them from office in the next election. School board elections are an example of political accountability applied to schools (Adams and Kirst, 1999).

Legal accountability

This approach relies on the courts to enforce legal mandates related to schools. For example there are certain procedures that legally must be followed by school personnel in identifying and providing educational services to children with disabilities (Adams and Kirst, 1999).

Bureaucratic accountability

This approach is achieved by assigning responsibility for oversight of subordinates to those who hold supervisory positions in a bureaucratic organization. Thus, the superintendent of a district oversees the work of school personnel at lower levels of the school hierarchy, and the principals supervise the work of teachers, counsellors, aides, secretaries, and so forth. School administrators currently have access to bureaucratic accountability mechanism. Most administrators discover that bureaucratic accountability has limited uses (Adams and Kirst, 1999). It is exercised through teacher evaluation and authoritative actions to direct the work of teachers, but neither of these tools can be counted on to produce marked improvements in teacher performance. If carried out sensitively over a period of time, evaluation can help teachers to do a better job, but the results depend as much on the teacher's desire to improve as on the principal's actions.

Moral accountability

This approach operates on the premise of personal obligations or sense of duty whereby educators' actions are conditioned by conscience and loyalty to the work-based principles and values they deem to be important (Wagner, 1989). According to Adams *et al.* (1999, p. 471):

Educational policy treats moral dimensions of educational accountability as individual idiosyncrasy, thus not worth addressing. As a result this garners little attention, except as a "rhetorical target".

A number of theoretical issues arise in the design of performance-based accountability systems. In general, the key is to separate the goals for students from measuring the performance of the school system.

Issues of accountability

School administrators are no strangers to accountability; whenever a problem occurs in a school, heads turn automatically toward the office. However, the recent emphasis on high-stakes, standards-driven accountability systems poses some issues for school leaders. Ladd (1996) asserts that fairness is a key issue

and an accountability system would be deemed unfair if it typically favoured schools serving one type of student rather than another. There are issues of skills and knowledge as well as issues of authority and support that need to be considered when embarking on a system for principal accountability. According to a study on principal accountability, conducted by the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP, 2000) there is strong support for training before holding the principal accountable for knowing . . . in much the same way that principals guide and assist staff members with knowledge and skill before holding them accountable for knowing.

Meyer (1994) argues that if the goal of accountability system is to induce school officials to change their behavior, the accountability measure should reflect primarily the factors under their control and not the factors that are outside their control, such as the socioeconomic backgrounds of students.

A second issue is whether performance-based accountability systems are incompatible with more ambitious and experimental forms of assessment that reformers advocate as essential for encouraging higher-order thinking and problem solving (Ladd, 1996). According to the American Federation of Teachers (Feldman, 2003), the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) does not take into consideration the context of schools when determining if the school is rated an "A" school or an "F" school. Instead the ratings are based only on student scores from the standardized tests.

A third issue relates to whether the undesirable side effects of accountability and incentive system can be kept to a tolerable level. For example, school programs should focus on all grades in a school rather than just a selected few, to reduce incentives for school administrators to focus resources on selected grades to the detriment of others (Ladd, 1996; Nagy, 1995). Consequently, a school administrator needs the support and the authority to make decisions of this nature.

A fourth issue focuses on the extent to which the technical complexity of a well-designed accountability system is compatible with political and implementation demands (Goldstein, 1993; Ladd, 1996; Meyer, 1994). Many administrators within the system do not understand how their accountability systems work. This lack of understanding can be a problem. People who know the expectations tend to live up to them, especially when results are linked to consequences. It makes administrators within the system suspicious of the system, and makes it difficult for them to make that link between what they are doing in the schools and what is being rewarded. It also means that technocrats who control the system effectively end up making policy decisions (Nagy, 1995; Olson, 2000; Rothman, 1993; Willms, 1998). It is clear that the administrative accountability systems and incentive systems are not a panacea for the challenge of school reform. The success of such programs in generating change is dependent on the capacity of the state or province to follow through in providing the necessary assistance and support to individual schools, teachers

and administrators (Banfield, 1992; Barber, 1994; Ladd, 1996; McEwen, 1995; Whitty, 1998). Clarity of expectations, purposes or intentions of accountability, and accountability procedures would seem to be key components of any accountability system.

Principals are in a position to help direct the course of their own accountability rather than have systems imposed upon them. The role of the principal has become different from what it has traditionally been (Hallinger, 1996; LeBlanc, 1994; Leithwood and Aitken, 1995). For example, if the principal is responsible for student achievement, some of the tasks that take time away from the principal fulfilling that role might not be part of the principal's job description in a performance-based system.

According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 2000) principals need to receive ongoing professional development, especially in the areas of assessment and evaluation. There is strong support for training before holding the principal accountable for knowing in much the same way that principals guide and assist staff members with knowledge and skill before holding them accountable for knowing. In order for such professional development to occur issues need to be dealt with such as authority and support concerning principal responsibilities.

Finally, there is an issue of internal-external congruence and conflict on accountability systems. Because policy makers intend performance accountability to promote greater student achievement, the standard for evaluating an accountability system must be that system's ability to support teaching and learning practices which raise student performance (Adams and Kirst, 1999). The standard necessitates a design linkage, through consensus or appropriate incentives, between external accountability standards and the pre-dispositions of the administrators, teachers, and students who are responsible for meeting those standards (Adams and Kirst, 1999; IEL, 2000).

Adams and Kirst (1999) assert that research on internal accountability should examine issues of external-internal congruence and conflict. Maybe if internal accountability systems were better known to policy makers and utilized, there may be less need for external interventions. Perhaps also the local internal policies are more attuned to local democratic concerns that conflict with federal and state and/or provincial interventions and that encourage higher and different student attainment standards. According to Abelman *et al.* (1999), formal accountability measures are more powerful when they are congruent with individual values and collective expectations. If responsibility, expectations, and accountability measures are not aligned, accountability systems are usually weak.

School administrators need to blend the different signals about accountability in order to formulate coherent local policies. The key task for these administrators is to create common expectations among teachers concerning what they are accountable for in that they need to raise the

collective sense of teachers about accountability's specific standards and measures (Adams and Kirst, 1999). Effective administrators can accomplish these tasks through a variety of capacity-building techniques that link internal and external accountability at the site (Newmann, 1997). District offices and other policy makers approaching the selection of accountability would do well to consider explicitly the assumptions underlying their instruments of choice.

Advocates of accountability often see it as a simple matter of testing results. But as research indicates (ISLLC, 1996; Gaines and Cornett, 1992; Adams and Kirst, 1999), effective accountability is a system that links standards, testing, professional development of administrators and teachers, reporting, and consequences. Without careful alignment of the component parts, testing alone will have little effect. They need to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of selecting a repertoire of tools that share the same basic assumptions about schools and schooling (Newmann, 1997; Adams and Kirst, 1999).

In the USA a system has been developed whereby a comprehensive set of standards for principals is being outlined with indicators that support those standards. The Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 1996) developed a set of six standards for school administrators, with a focus on knowledge, dispositions and performances. It was borrowed from their colleagues Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), as it was apparent that a set of common standards was absent in the arena of school administration. The consortium believed that the standards approach provided the best avenue to allow diverse stakeholders to drive improvement efforts along a variety of fronts. The ISLLC is responsible for the standards and has linked those standards to ongoing professional development and training, licensure, and assessment of school administrators (Fullan and Mascall, 2000; ISLLC, 1996). According to the ILSSC (1996), a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:

- facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community;
- advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
- ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;
- collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources;
- acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and
- understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

A full consortium adopted the set of standards on March 2, 1996. All members believed that the guiding principles should acknowledge that standards must reflect the centrality of student learning and the changing role of the school administrator. They were unanimous in their belief that the central aspects of the role are the same for all school administrators. Currently, these standards are being implemented in more than 40 states with hopes of enriching and enhancing the role of school administrators.

The role of the school administrator involves a myriad of responsibilities on a daily basis. Such responsibilities include:

- developing, implementing, and monitoring procedures and practices;
- influencing, establishing, and sustaining their school culture conducive to continuous improvement;
- leading the development and evaluation of data-driven plans;
- assisting instructional staff in aligning curriculum;
- monitoring, assisting and evaluating staff implementation of effective instructional and assessment practices;
- managing human and financial resources; and
- communicating with colleagues, parents and the community (ISLLC, 1996; Fullan, 1999).

To ensure that these and other tasks are carried out effectively, school administrators need support systems put in place that will allow them to work within the parameters of district policies and best practices to meet standards (Eisner, 1991; Fullan, 1999; Lake *et al.*, 1999). At the same time administrators need to involve the whole school in a focused improvement strategy, aligning resources to support the goals, and seeking outside help when necessary (Lake *et al.*, 1999). In addition to support, they also need the authority to access district and community resources as well as to make decisions based on effective school practices and maximization of student achievement for all students. Meeting new standards requires sophisticated leadership to maintain a steady focus on improvement while still satisfying the relentless everyday demands of constituents (Levesque *et al.*, 1998).

School administrators face ethical dilemmas as a regular part of their daily work (Crowson, 1989) and it seems reasonable that they should be expected to be competent in the skills of moral reasoning. While many school administrators undoubtedly already are competent in this area, the formal consideration of ethics in administrator preparation curricula is needed. As the populations served by public schools become increasingly diverse, school administrators need to become more proactive in creating environments for students, teachers, and parents that are supportive and inclusive of differences and that are responsive to the rapidly changing social contexts within which schools must operate, for they will surely be held accountable for “knowing”

and “practicing”. The more complex society gets, the more sophisticated leadership must become.

According to Fullan (1999, p. ix), “complexity means change, but specifically it means rapidly occurring, unpredictable, non-linear change”. Moreover, the pace of change and accountability is ever increasing, as James Gleick, the author of *Chaos*, pointed out in a recent book called *Faster*, which he subtitled *The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (1999). This presents a dilemma for school administrators. On the one hand, failing to act when the environment around them is radically changing leads to extinction. On the other hand, making quick decisions under conditions of mind-racing mania can be equally fatal. Non-linear, messy and unclear role expectations, role definitions, goals and objectives often get school administrators into trouble. However, the experience of this messiness may be necessary in order to discover the hidden benefits – creative ideas and novel solutions are often generated when the status quo is disrupted. The central tendency of dynamic, complex systems such as school systems “seems to constantly generate overload and cause fragmentation” (Fullan, 1999, p. 108). Pascale *et al.* (2000, p. 6) state that:

In the face of threat, or when galvanized by a compelling opportunity, living things move toward the edge of chaos ... the condition evokes higher levels of mutation and experimentation, and fresh new solutions are more likely to be found.

For school administrators, the main problem is not the absence of innovations in schools but the presence of too many disconnected, episodic, piecemeal, superficially adorned projects. Fullan (1999, p. 109) asserts that they are faced with “turbulent, uncertain environments and suffer an additional burden of having a torrent of unwanted, uncoordinated policies and innovations” raining down on them from hierarchical bureaucracies. Consequently, school administrators find themselves managing and leading schools in a culture of change that directly places them on the edge of chaos (Walker, 1999, 2000).

Conclusion and implications for further research

Currently, school administrators are very conscious of the pressure of changing social, political and professional expectations for them. They perceive a push to adopt new and expanded administrative roles within a context of much increased demands for professional accountability. This is experienced within a general educational reform movement that seems to influence all areas of the educational enterprise. The challenge for school and district office administrators is meeting these social and professional demands, without losing sight of the need to meet the needs of children and protect their best interests.

Based on the literature conveyed here there are two specific implications for future research. These relate to clarifying the nature and function of leadership and a pervasive social preoccupation with accountability. These implications are outlined as follows.

Leadership development

The whole concept of leadership development must be integrated as a component of the overall process of educational governance in a school district. At this time there are limited examples of documented leadership development processes (i.e. succession planning) in school districts. Finding relevant information requires searching under other labels and categories of literature such as “effective school districts” and “educational governance” and “transformational leadership” and “organizational learning”. In particular there is a need for research that clearly conveys the links between leadership development and more generalized school district leadership practices. Leadership development cannot be treated as a lone concept in isolation, but rather as a component of organizational governance and procedural structures within a school district whereby clear expectations and limitations are set in terms of followers’ beliefs, actions, attitudes and abilities.

Accountability

There is a considerable gap between the perceptions of academics and educational practitioners when it comes to defining accountability. Compared to the consensus apparent across the conceptualizations of accountability presented by Kogan (1986), Wagner (1989), Leithwood (1999) and Leithwood and Earl (2000), there seems to be a broad range of interpretations and ideologies reflected by practitioners in the field. Individuals often associate accountability with performance appraisal, report cards, and site plans rather than some sort of rationalized and integrated school district process. It is clear that current academic notions on accountability are not filtering down to the perceptions of school administrators. Moreover, it appears that much of what passes for accountability-oriented school reform is driven more by what might be considered ideal rather than empirical evidence. Clearly there is a need for much more research and documentation of school district-based leadership development processes. Given the continuing emphasis on decentralized school system governance processes, it seems crucial to conduct more research on how senior administrators can best convey, encourage and facilitate their expectations of accountability to the schools and the people working in them.

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