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Educational Accountability: A Response to Critique, Furthering the International Point of View

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# Educational Accountability: A Response to Critique, Furthering the International Point of View

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As co-editors of *Educational Accountability: International Perspectives on Challenges and Possibilities' for School Leadership*[1], we were interested in exploring lessons to be learned through the comparative study of accountability policy and school leadership. The relationships between policy, practice, and the resulting possibilities for school leaders to transform school

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1 This publication is based on the edited volume "Educational Accountability: International perspectives on challenges and possibilities for school leadership." The volume was developed mainly by members of ICSEI and originated from an ICSEI symposium. It provides an opportunity to assess, reflect on, and discuss current issues surrounding accountability policies in education from around the globe and the implications they hold for school leadership (see also https://www.routledge.com/Educational-Accountability-International-perspectives-on-challenges-and/Easley-II-Tulowitzki/p/book/9781138777897).

International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement
ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
**www.icsei.net**

**3**

effectiveness and improvement undergird the focus of the volume.

Despite the various differences, developments linked to globalization can be seen in all countries. More explicitly, the practice of transnational, comparative judgment of systems influenced by evaluation mechanisms like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in National Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) has had a significant influence in shaping accountability systems. The co-opting of socio-political paradigms for management in a race towards excellence on the global stage is a concomitant effect of globalization. Even still, both educational leadership and accountability are continually defined by the historical and cultural epistemologies embedded within the core fiber of national, and in many cases, local identities of individual communities. Herein lie several tensions for school effectiveness and improvement on the global stage. As revealed through the comparative analysis of accountability contexts, these tensions are most palpable for school leaders as individuals and collectively.

The volume, on which this paper is based, brings together authors, many working in teams, who investigate the conditions of educational accountability, testing, inspection, and leadership within a single national context, thereby providing the readership the opportunity for broader, cross-national comparisons. We clustered national perspectives by geographical and/or cultural proximities to further amplify their nuances. The regions, in non-hierarchical order are: China, Hong Kong, and India representing Asian societies; Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Chile representing Anglo

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

4

societies and the Americas; and Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway representing European societies. Each cluster is complemented by a synthesis and response contribution to further discussions regarding the future of school leadership within the changing context of accountability policies. Each invited contributor is noted within the profession for his or her expertise in educational policy and reform within the respective regions. Their analyses form the foundation of our discussion of lessons learned presented here.

As scholar advocates for school effectiveness and improvement, we wanted to further examine certain propositions brought to the fore by the regional analyses of our expert contributors. Like the authors of individual chapters, our cluster respondents unearth too many challenges of accountability policy and leadership possibilities to be addressed in full. However, as co-editors, we are uniquely positioned to respond globally, drawing on the findings from each of the volume's chapters and their intersections. We address unique perspectives from each of the national and cultural clusters individually and sum up our lessons learned by exploring new wondering. We are particularly focused on the socio-political conditions of, and the democratization of, education change and effectiveness. We present wondering for expansive considerations of leadership possibilities and the contributions of school leaders to accountability policy for systems of educational excellence.

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

5

## European Societies

Jorunn Møller provides a critique of Austria, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Norway.  Each of the countries boasts a history of and still maintains a high level of autonomy for teachers.  While the national assessments and evaluation are relatively low-stakes, legal regulation of education remains resident in this region of the world.  Møller observes, however, that within the constant reworking of the centralization and decentralization binary for educational accountability across these European countries, research presents an acute void. Møller explains that "the chapters do not seem to contest the policy rhetoric about the governing model that calls for accountability, surveillance, measurement, and standards in a critical way" (p. 227). All contexts presented give strong indications that school leaders do not directly challenge the concept of accountability, in general. This consideration is also a premise of the US chapter, which explores Elmore's (2005) notion of school leaders' compliance or response to policy as they "construct" their accountability context.

We attribute this lack of contestation to two key phenomena: 1) the fundaments of school leaders' professional identity and 2) the socio-political positioning of schools along with those who work in them. At their core, school leaders see themselves as stewards of their individual institutions, and by extension, they internalize a sense of responsibility for the institutions' well-being, the well-being of their teachers, staff, and their students alike. For the Arbinger Institute (2016), such responsibility is dependent upon

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net                                                                 6

an outward mindset, a way of thinking that positions the concern for others at the forefront of decision making. Inherent to such identity formation is a sense of accountability. In effect, respectable education leaders are fundamentally champions of accountability in one way or another.

Research on factors that influence those to become school administrators is perhaps the best source for understanding identity formation. The positionality of school leaders' response to accountability policy, as observed by Møller, can likely be linked to altruistic (e.g., positive impact on others) and or influence (e.g., ability to initiate change) motivations. Both are identified among the central motives explaining teachers' desire to become school administrators (Hancock, Black, & Bird, 2013; Hancock, Hary, & Müller, 2012). Internalized motivations such as these not only shape the professional identity of school leaders, but also their core perspectives about accountability. It is our understanding that school leaders' internalized sense of accountability constrains the need to question educational accountability, in general.

The absence of open contestation of general accountability by school leaders does not mean, however, that they do not call into question the mechanisms of accountability nor the excessive burden brought on by compliance. As scholar advocates, we are concerned with the systemic and legitimized agency of school leaders within the policy arena, particularly in contexts where policy is likely to be effectuated from the top down. The structural and disciplinary domains of power relations (Collins, 2009) both confine one's actions via normative expectations and exert pressures to inveigle compliance. According to Easley (2016), "Bureaucracy and hierarchy are the fulcrums

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

7

of such power [relations]" (p. 130). The external, bureaucratic accountability structures addressed in many chapters clearly demonstrate a critical con-tradiction resulting from accountability as a policy apparatus. The inferred aim is to create a high performing system by requiring all schools to account for their actions, whereby underperforming schools will be found out, and a state system of educational excellence will ensue.

On the contrary, compliance accountability has not shown to meet this aim globally. More often than not, the result has been a culture of surveillance; a culture that puts greater emphasis the accountability system itself rather than improving opportunities to learn. Leadership for school improvement at the local level is often overburdened by competing and often incongruent accountability demands. In this policy arena, the bureaucratic social struc-ture tends to relegate internalized responsibility of school leaders as a sec-ond-class citizen. The internal accountability practices designed by leaders and teachers to address the highly contextualized needs of their schools are overshadowed. Møller (2016) further describes that,

> Principals leading successful schools look upon themselves as guardians of certain values that are now at risk, and they work hard to mediate gov-ernment policy and external changes, so that they can be integrated with the school's values. (p. 231)

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
**www.icsei.net**                                                                 8

## Asian Societies

Lee and Kirby (2016) share unique perspectives on the promises and perils of leadership for accountably developed from China, Hong Kong, and India. Similar to their European counterparts, the authors identify a pattern. They also note that "two major mechanisms of accountability are shaping school leadership: internal, self-regulating accountability and externally imposed accountability" (p. 130). They explain that when external accountability dominates, school teachers feel the burn and blame. Based on their analysis, we would like to address two points as fodder for lessons learned: 1) the impact on school culture as a result of accountability and 2) the professional agency of teachers. These phenomena are not mutually exclusive.

We are reminded through various chapters of the importance of the relationship between teachers and school leaders for the advancement of student learning. Teachers are the front line defenders of school learning within their respective classrooms. Their efficiency is largely impacted by how school leaders enact their internalized responsibility for school effectiveness. This relationship and the day-to-day decisions, actions, and regard individuals hold for their jobs come to define the school culture. Accountability policy and the ways schools respond to it directly shape this culture.

Pang (2016) reports on the negotiated relationships between the external school review (ESR) and school self-evaluation (SSE) laid out by the School Development and Accountability (SDA) framework in Hong Kong. Despite

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
**www.icsei.net**                                                                 **9**

hindrances, the central key element of the success for school improvement within this accountability context was the responsive and iterative stance taken by the state. Over time, a leaner, flatter governance structure was developed to facilitate change and implementation effectiveness. Accordingly, "The interdependence between policymaking and policy implementation has been strengthened and reconciled the hindrance from a decoupled school education system" (pp. 99-100). Purposeful interactivity between the central education and local schools is not a common occurrence in many national contexts. For successful schools implementing the SDA framework, high teacher morale and the abatement of an overly complex workload for teachers resulted.

In China, external accountability policy includes a market-based teacher evaluation system. Teachers are monetarily compensated and are rank promoted based on evaluation results. The outcomes have been mixed (Wang 2016). The evaluations function as a competitive mechanism to promote excellence among the teaching force. In turn, novice teachers express optimism about the career development options. Conversely, a fair amount of tension is reported among senior level teachers. Quota restrictions limit their opportunities for promotion, irrespective of their performance evaluation, resulting in a dampened spirit for professional progression.

For India, the conditions derived from accountability can historically be seen as progressively more challenging for teachers. According to Panda (as cited in Panda, 2011, p. 3), "teachers' morals, ethical values, character, conduct

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

10

and accountability have been univocally pronounced since ancient times to the present education system" (2016, p. 125). Even still, conflicting matters regarding an ever-changing and largely emergent accountability system have led to a grossly pronounced absenteeism among teachers.

In each of these contexts, effective school leaders are expected to seamlessly navigate accountability terrains from the national, regional/local authority, and school levels. Such is the task of the effective school leader in a multi-level-accountability context —to mitigate the tensions brought on by bureaucratic accountability policy for the creation of a positive school culture, teacher effectiveness, and ultimately positive student learning outcomes. Yet, we believe that accountability authorities are also responsible for the impending effects on school culture, particularly when the demands of accountability underestimate the implementation capacity or threaten an existing positive school culture.

The extent to which bureaucratic accountability and testing serve as tools to drive and support a culture of affirmed learning within schools (and to a greater extent the national education system(s)) is less understood. There is much to be learned from the negotiated accountability systems like those reported in Hong Kong, although, such approach is aberrant rather than wholesale. To support a culture of affirmed learning, accountability policy must attune to micro-level implementation, whereby the work of teachers and the advocacy of school leaders are considered in a contextually responsive manner. Affirmed learning in this respect engenders a culture whereby teachers

International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement
ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
**www.icsei.net**

**11**

are held in high regard for their role supporting student learning that permeates individual schools and the educational system(s). Rather than bureaucratic accountability that is likely punitive or compliance oriented, distributive and redistributive justice policy (Lowi, 1972, 2010) are options to build a culture of affirmed learning.

Distributive policy reflects systems whereby resources are rerouted to particular constituents and communities to promote development. Redistributive justice refers to the commitment for equitable capacity, in which capital is transferred from one group to another for the advancement of social and political justice. In the case of accountability policy for school improvement and effectiveness, distributive and redistributive justice policies offer opportunities whereby a culture of affirmed learning is systemically managed and celebrated among state authorities as well as school leaders.

## Anglo Societies and the Americas

Spillane and Mertz (2016) provide a review and critique educational accountability reported for Australia, New Zealand, USA, and Chile. Our contributors summate that educational infrastructure is a core theme expressed across the Anglo systems and the Americas.  Each chapter underscores the significance of the intersections between accountability and evaluation and the importance of the need to redefine educational structures for improvement of the instructional core of schools.

International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement
ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

12

Adding to the chorus on accountability research from around the globe, Spillane and Mertz cite the complex, pluralistic environment of accountability as a particular condition of school leadership exhibited throughout these cultural contexts. More specifically, the authors explain,

> School principals have to contend with multiple stakeholders—parents, students, teachers, local community members, boards of trustees, governmental policy makers, and so on—who place different and sometimes conflicting demands on them and their schools. (p. 76)

They further expound, "School principals have to address the dual imperatives of organizational legitimacy and integrity," even though the diverse stakeholders might have incongruent ideas about "what makes for a 'real' or legitimate school" (p. 76).

School leaders' ability to effectively navigate a pluralistic accountability environment requires a particular acumen. It is likely that such skillset does not come fully formed among novice school leaders. Leadership in this context is expansive. It requires a reach beyond testing and bureaucratic accountability outlined above. We understand this context as one that taxes school leaders' internalize responsibility, their understanding of the politics and economics of schooling, as well as their abilities to support students' holistic wellness for learning. Their ability to sufficiently navigate the competing demands of a pluralistic accountability environment hinges on both leadership preparation (see also, Easley & Tulowitzki, 2013; Thody, Papanaoum,

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

13

Johansson & Pashiardis, 2007; Young & Grogan, 2008) and continuous professional development.

One point is clear. Even given these challenges, the core focus of school effectiveness lies with student learning. Researchers (Earl & Katz, 2007; Jackson & Temperley, 2007; Katz, Dack, & Earl, 2009; Spillane and & Timperley, 2004) have studied and advocated for a means that not only addresses the academic core of schooling (i.e., teaching and learning) but also learning for leadership by way of networked learning communities (NLCs). In principle, the networks draw on the tenets of professional learning communities (PLCs) and communities of practice (COP) that seek to foster learning among participants via purposeful interactions. Jackson and Temperley (2007) contend that the school is too small of scale and is too isolated to provide professional leaning for its adult members (including administrators) in a knowledge-based and interconnected society. For this reason, NLCs are espoused as a machinery for learning across networks of schools, thereby engendering student learning, adult learning, leadership learning, organizational learning, school-to-school learning, and network-to-network learning.

NLCs hold the potential to transform individual school effectiveness into systems of educational effectiveness within a municipality, a nation state, and for the international order. Yet, even among the limited mentionings of school networks within the volume (see Easley II & Elmeski, 2016; Imants, Zwart, & Breur, 2016), these examples do not directly seek to refashion the political terrain. They do not seek to address market-based influences of

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

14

school choice that breed competition among schools; and like research on NLCs, their scope is largely boundary-restricted to the internal workings of schools themselves, and not necessarily the broader socio-political conditions that shape schooling. Stated differently, with all of their perks, less is known about the current concept of networked learning communities for the engagement of students, parents, local policymakers, and other external stakeholders for the democratization of school effectiveness and improvement. We agree with Spillane and Mertz in this regard.

## Commentary on Lessons Learned: Expanded Possibilities

The role of school leaders to influence school effectiveness and to transform education accountability policy is paramount. In a prior work, we (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2013) explain that, "the one readily observable impact of globalization on the profession has been the act of policy copying, adopting, or borrowing" (p. 3). In particular, the convergence of accountability policy across public authorities around the globe impacts the practices of school leaders. As suggested from the insights of our contributors, school leaders' capacity for boldly reshaping accountability perspectives and policies is hopeful, but yet fully actualized.

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
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15

## Network Leadership

School leaders may not be able to categorically dismantle bureaucratic accountability in favor of affirmed learning, for example. Yet, as public service members in a position that offers ties to many stakeholders (including supervisory and inspection authorities), they are uniquely endowed with a particular asset to shape the accountability landscape at home and abroad. In this regard, we advocate for what could be understood as networked leadership. Networked leadership engenders a democratic practice that brings together school leadership stakeholders (internal and external), acting together to collaboratively fashion systems of educational effectiveness and improvement. Chief among network partners are school leaders, student leaders, community leaders, school system leaders, and public authority leaders who are, in turn, accompanied by others for whom the decisions, functions, and products of their enterprises directly shape the educational system. Different from NLCs, networked leadership is operationalized at the policy and broader structural resource levels. What's more important is the positionality of influence within the network.  School leaders to state leaders alike within these networks are uniquely positioned to leverage responsive and equitable policy for practice.

It is within these networked contexts that school leaders are better able to give voice to both the successes and challenges of their daily experiences with pluralistic accountability. Policy makers often understand schools from a distance, possibly swayed by their childhood memories of their former class-

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

16

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

17

rooms and by data generated from league tables and other public authority assessment reports designed for finite purposes. To exemplify the scope of the matter, Nathan Gibbs-Bowling (Personal Communication, October 26, 2016), 2016 Washington State (US) teacher of the year, explains that his survey of teachers revealed that his peers do not readily feel listened to by policy makers at the district nor state levels. It is highly plausible that a lack of intimacy with the innermost conditions of schools, for example, renders policy makers handicapped. They are handicapped to fully understand the impact on teaching, learning, and social capital development among adults working in/with schools that is brought to bear by bureaucratic policy. Networked leadership is a means for mitigating these limitations in the policy arena.

Building on the lessons learned from the field is important for shaping responsive policy. We know that the instructional core of schools is teaching and learning. As noted above, affirmed learning is a vital condition to support this core. Similarly, the multiple demands placed on school leaders in a context of pluralistic accountability tax the implementation of accountability policy in ways that beg greater attention to the holistic conditions that affect school improvement and effectiveness—conditions both within the school and those of the communities that shape affirmed learning. Ultimately, network leadership holds the capacity to balance the power structures of educational policy, thereby redistributing the power of influence more holistically and equitably to support policy and practice. Not only for the aim of individual school effectiveness but for systems of educational effectiveness, at the

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www.icsei.net

18

state, national, and international levels. While there is much discussion within the profession in support of scaling school effectiveness, we strongly urge a focus on networked leadership and other means for scaling the capacity for systems effectiveness.

## Capacity Building through Preparation

Based on the insights from around the globe presented in the volume and addressed in this paper, we return to one lesser, but crucial, point that underscores the capacity of school leaders to navigate the multiple demands of pluralistic accountability. We fully recognize the herculean efforts school leaders exercise for navigating the complexities of bureaucratic policy demands to yield equitable social capital for affirmed learning. And, even though networked leadership holds its own promises, greater attention to leadership preparation and development is required. In a prior inquiry (Easley and Tulowitizi, 2013), we found that university-based leadership preparation programs in the US were less likely to emphasis curriculum focusing on "school improvement, social justice, and democracy" (p. 751) beyond their theoretical foundations.

The limited attention to school leaders' contestation of the policy rhetoric in critical ways within the volume reaffirms the notion of a momentous capacity gap—a gap between leadership preparation and development and the demands brought on by bureaucratic and pluralistic accountability. Even in a

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ICSEI Bookshelf Series: Issue 1
www.icsei.net

19

world where redistributive mechanisms like networked leadership are mandated on behalf of systems effectiveness, such edicts alone are not likely to fashion the requisite skills for school leaders to engage efficaciously. Ideally, the road to effective systems of affirmed learning supported by equitably policy technologies is paved by tools of capacity for new and experienced school leaders to fully participate in the accountability area in ways that advance the profession. Both formal and informal avenues of leadership preparation and continuous development represent a focus on the right things when school leaders are nurtured and supported for their abilities to leverage equitable conditions of teaching and learning locally and beyond.

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20

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**21**

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**22**

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**23**

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24

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**25**