

ACCOUNTABILITY, EDUCATIONAL LEADERS & EMOTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In an accountability era that seems to be defined primarily by test scores, raising student achievement, and school rankings that lead to either rewards or sanctions, school leaders often feel satisfaction, pride, exhilaration or debilitating anxiety, shame, blame and guilt. Novice and veteran school leaders alike are not exempt from being publicly identified as leaders in 'poor performing' or 'high performing' schools by the media. As parents and the community increasingly reify the power of test data, school leaders become the unexpected victims or heroes of an accountability system within which emotional involvement is often one of the most difficult aspects to deal with. Emotions as a social construction will be examined in this paper, in which sociological, political and institutional factors mitigate or militate educational leaders' feelings within a context of accountability.

KEYWORDS: accountability, educational administration, leadership, emotions, social constructivism, testing

INTRODUCTION

A myriad of accountability definitions exist in the various professional literatures of different disciplines; however, a widely accepted definition within education seems to remain narrow and bound up within large-scale assessment frameworks that focus primarily on testing (Earl and Torrance, 2000). This focus has promoted intense scrutiny into the routines of schools, riveting our attention to an accountability context that seems to be defined primarily by test scores, raising student achievement ratings, and school rankings that ultimately tend to lead us to either rewards or sanctions, leaving in its aftermath school leaders who experience a wide range of emotional vicissitudes from satisfaction, pride, exhilaration and debilitating anxiety, shame, blame and guilt. Neither novice nor veteran leaders are immune from these emotions as they are publicly identified and/or alternatively humiliated or extolled with the discerning epithet of 'poor performing' or a 'high performing' school in the media and as parents and the community increasingly reify the power of test data into a valid criterion of judgement. Such public announcements leave school leaders the unexpected victims or heroes of an

accountability system they had little say in constructing, and within which emotional involvement is often one of the most difficult aspects to deal with.

If we were to focus on this aspect of accountability alone, that is, testing, and examine its usefulness, there seems to exist a rhetoric of accountability often depicted as a panacea for improving the quality of schools in general, and, in particular, raising student achievement levels. Some scholars believe that “at the heart of the current vision of schooling is a corporatized model of education that vitiates the democratic impulses and practices of civil society by either devaluing or assimilating them within the logic of market demands” (Giroux and Schmidt, 2004, pg. 214). What results is a culture of punishment and fear within our schools, as standardized tests result in either a takeover or a closure of schools; probationary status for teachers; loss of funding/accreditation; and dissolution or reconstitution of faculty and administrations.

Arguments against testing are numerous, citing evidence that they cause students to dropout; raise the question of purpose as they become increasingly simplified to ensure that all students succeed; do not always align with school curricula; decrease an emphasis on higher-level skills; result in less time for curriculum beyond the exam; and encourage teachers to teach to the test (Stiggins, 1991). Alternatively, advocates seem to have equally compelling claims supporting high-stakes testing. The benefits according to some include commending tests for exposing the achievement gap between low-income, minority students and other students resulting in individual attention and extra resources (Peterson, 2005). Nevertheless, the topic of testing remains controversial. With the debate still raging, one might ask, what emotional costs are attached to these tests and whom do they affect?

According to Giroux and Schmidt (2004), “testing has become the code word for training educational leaders in the language of management, measurement and efficiency” (pg. 220) where accountability often translates into, *‘I need to know whom I should blame when things go wrong.’* Houston (2007) reports on the seven deadly sins of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), where accountability relies on fear, coercion and blame. He notes that current high-stakes accountability agendas motivate leaders, teachers, children and parents through fear of sanctions and the use of force, threats and punishments, all of which block the pursuit of excellence for leaders and teachers, impede clear thinking for children, and place parents in situations where they feel they must compare their children to other children or worry if their children will achieve post-secondary schooling. Without confronting and analyzing how

particular forms of authority are secured and legitimized, and without efforts to determine how, what and whose values construct this authority, accountability systems are in danger of remaining punitive, regulatory and controlling. Ultimately these values shape the definition of leadership at the expense of leaders' emotions as they are subverted from social justice goals of promoting democracy, critical citizenship and basic human rights. Instead, leaders find themselves working within organizations promoting market values that encourage a competitive ethic among schools and individuals in pursuit of rewards. When unpacking the implications of the shifting educational landscape for school leaders in this paper, I ask the following question: At what emotional costs must leaders continue if they are expected to keep pace with an ideological discourse that Burbules and Torres (2000) maintain creates an urgency, real or perceived, that is driving change within society?

ACCOUNTABILITY & EMOTIONS

Where then, one might ask, do emotions fit into the leadership paradigm for educators working within such an oppressive organizational climate? Research is almost unanimous in concluding that the principal's role is the key factor contributing to successful schools, policy implementation, learning and achievement (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves and Fink; 2006; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999). Yet the seemingly inevitable progression of global and market changes that have led to increasing demands for accountability in school systems, are shifting the educational perspective. More importantly, these global forces are defining, changing, and at times, diminishing the significance of the principal's role. Complicating these issues further, many countries face the prospect of confronting declining numbers of principals and difficulties with retention and succession (Cowan 2004). If we dig deeper into the currency a leader has within the current accountability era, the situation looks bleak. Although teachers are equipped with academic credentials and leadership qualities, only a small percentage of teachers apply for leadership positions (Cowan 2004). Blackman and Fenwick (2000) report that it is not education entirely that becomes a limiting factor in the principal shortage and problems with succession. Rather, conflicting ideologies and emotions make the administrator's role much more precarious, arduous, and challenging to their ability to prioritize responsibilities and their willingness to take on these positions. Scholars note that leaders are working within a role that is becoming increasingly conflicted, complex and complicated, resulting in role anxiety, emotional stress and professional burnout (Gronn, 2003). Principals are frustrated as they are forced to manage marketplace demands, curriculum change and governance factors as a result

of an increased emphasis on accountability. Leaders are carrying the burden of emotional labour in greedy organizations that demand excessive commitment from individuals in an effort to reduce the costs of production (Hochschild, 1979). These conditions typically lead to burnout and early retirement (Gronn, 2003). When taken in their entirety, the impact of high-stakes accountability highlights key obstructions to the work ethic of education leaders—one of these being emotional pressures.

EMOTIONS AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

When discussing emotions as a social construct, we know they are comprised of more than just behavioral reactions, since they are also shaped by the contexts in which individuals work (White, 1993). In this context, we begin to see emotions resulting from contextual, political and relational phenomena (Hargreaves, 1998). In an era of testing and accountability, profound emotions are often a result of purposes that cannot be achieved; feelings of power or powerlessness; and relationships that lack trust, all of which may result in anxiety, guilt, frustration or fear (Oatley and Jenkins, 1996). These problems, when applied to leaders within an era of high-stakes accountability, become especially visible and compounded as they are faced with increasingly politicized roles.

Studies of effective leadership in the early 80s (Blumberg and Greenfield, 1980) indicate that the quality of a principal's leadership is dependent upon the amount of responsibility, authority and constraints to authority. Furthermore, quality leadership is shaped by the factors that create the constraints and boundaries of that role. Indeed, it seems that federal, state, district and public sector groups have influenced educational governance, affecting the degree of flexibility a principal may have in making decisions about the quality of education (Ueda 1985). Leaders, then, may experience negative emotions due to their experiences with power and politics inside and outside the schoolhouse. Indeed, leaders within organizations often experience feelings of loneliness when there is an absence of emotional understanding (Denzin, 1984). Woods (1983) suggests that often "the only relief for some...[i]s to aim for a measure of role distance, where the individual denies not the role but the virtual self that is implied in the role for all accepting performers" (p. 110). Like Goffman's (1959) notion of 'managing a role', "action may on occasions be simply a going through the motions not as a routine but as bitter necessity, and on such occasions [an individual] may detach and reserve his preferred 'self' for better times" (Woods, 1983, p. 110). Worse, when leaders feel that they either lack skill or competence for their role, they might dismiss any possibility of supporting, guiding or

reinforcing others simply out of uncertainty (Schmidt, 2000). Furthermore, “when conflict cannot be resolved...individuals will...abandon both goals and means and withdraw from the situation” (Calvert, 1975, p. 122). Hargreaves and Fullan (1996) maintain, “leading is a lonely profession” (p. 5) particularly when a leader’s decisions are constantly under scrutiny. In these situations, interactions between teachers and leaders become strained. As a result, trust and respect for leaders become diminished. In summary, then, when related to accountability and leadership, emotions are often defined by a leader’s abilities to achieve (or not) accountability purposes; their experiences of power and powerlessness within an accountability era; and by their relationships with others as they administer accountability mandates within their schools and within the confines of state and district relationships.

LEADERSHIP & EMOTIONS

The impact of high-stakes accountability on educational leaders remains understudied, particularly within the affective realm of such a phenomenon. Evidence is emerging, however, showing us that emotions in the system are pervasive as public schooling is increasingly being reduced to a fear-driven exercise (McGhee and Nelson, 2005). It seems that what might have been a well-intended culture of educational accountability aimed at improving schools, has resulted in system of unintentional consequences, driven by a culture of fear. In the past, school leaders’ performances were assessed using a variety of indicators that reflected the complexity of the job; now their effectiveness is determined in much narrower terms based primarily on how well their schools perform on standardized tests (McGhee and Nelson, 2005). Evidence shows high rates of principal removals from schools as a result of student test scores leaving principals feeling demoralized, isolated and humiliated.

Further to this point, studies indicate that stress on the job ranks as one of the primary inhibitors for educators seeking or maintaining school administrator positions (Cushing et al., 2003). Stress comes from many arenas, including public criticism; high accountability demands; high levels of responsibility while authority and flexibility are simultaneously reduced via union contracts; and fiscal and legal requirements (Cushing et al., 2003).

When examining more closely the aspects of leadership that seem to generate anxiety, researchers conclude that data use by principals tops the list since test data provides evidence of weakness in schools and the need for change (Schmoker, 1999). While it is often difficult to disentangle the consequences of the use of data or change, cumulatively, the results of both instill anxiety for both principals and teachers since change threatens extant routines and

practices, and data can result in the termination of jobs and school closures.

If we delve further into some of the challenges leaders face in an era of accountability that might invoke anxiety and stress, we see that the leadership landscape is changing with the changing expectations for the position; the movement to define new standards for candidates; the complex balance between leadership and management skills; a nationwide focus on school wide improvement efforts; long hours, high stress; and an imbalance between authority given and the level of accountability expected (Ferrandino and Tirozzi, 2000). Further to this, principals feel overwhelmed and anxious about not having enough time to develop high achieving schools when having to 'sell their school' to the public and parents. When taken in their entirety, the impact of accountability and its resultant marketization, highlight key obstructions to the work of education leaders.

CONCLUSION

Within a context of accountability, some scholars (Bottery, 1996) argue that what is needed to alleviate emotional tensions and focus on positive modes of success in schools is more emphasis on celebrating aspects of student learning not captured in external, quantitative forms of accountability (Hargreaves, 2003). Leaders need to work towards developing reflexive forms of accountability that involve teachers, students and parents (Earl, 1995). This requires leaders to understand the meanings and forms of assessment and thereby develop alternative forms (Stiggins, 1991). Leaders must not only understand and promote sophisticated forms of accountability, but they also need to do so creatively by fostering teamwork and distributing leadership. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) suggest that the role definition of a leader should not be so specific as to impede them from using their own principled discretion. Hargreaves and Fink (2006), argue that the leaders of tomorrow must focus on sustainability. Particularly, in an era of quick fixes, what is needed most are long-term values, leaving enough latitude for leaders to put their own personal stamp on the work they do in schools. Perhaps what is needed is a new form of moral courage to overcome the nascent fear that pervades our schools in an era of accountability. Yet it is almost certainly a fallacy to believe that our leaders alone can, or should, solve problems related to our current societal turbulence without the collaboration of society as a whole. More than ever before, communities, organizations, government and special interest groups must cooperate to instil democratic and moral values in our schools, and in this way, promote a dynamic of accountability that is sustainable and morally just.

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