

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL PEDAGOGY AND HISTORY OF PEDAGOGY

THE CONCEPTS OF QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN GENERAL AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. This article presents three measures of educational quality and six types of accountability, noting that these terms are complex and often contradictory. These terms are often used uncritically, with the result that educational policies following from them are misconceived or simply drift. For educational policies to be sound, they must be based on a clear use of terms and on a sound understanding of desired objectives. These objectives are matters both of stakeholders' preferences and politics. The subjective and political nature of educational policies should be recognized, so that there can be formed an explicit basis for and consensus around appropriate educational objectives. The purpose of this article is to bring clarity to the common concepts of quality and accountability in education, so that educational policies may be better informed. The methodological basis of the research is the methods of comparative analysis of scientific research in the field of social and natural sciences, the authors of which investigated human, social and cultural capital. The educational establishments of all countries need from time to time to deeply re-examine certain operative concepts. In this regard, an informed consensus needs to be reached about the multidimensional and sometimes contradictory notions of quality and accountability. Habit and drift are not helpful to educational policy; instead, educational values and goals should be actively discussed and clarified in broad national discussions, comprising all major interested parties. A good educational system is ultimately a civic achievement, set within a community of informed and interested stakeholders.

Keywords: educational quality; educational accountability; welfare state; knowledge economy; educational market.

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Introduction. The topics of educational quality and accountability are traditional, but also timelessly relevant. These topics are matters of particularly lively discussion in the present era, when most countries are concerned about their economic competitiveness. However, the terms quality and accountability are usually used loosely and mean different things to different people, with the result that public policies are often the result of false consensus or drift. Policies need to be based on explicit understanding of their premises. The intention of this article is to clarify the meanings of quality and accountability, thus setting parameters for productive policy discussion.

Literature review. Educational systems simultaneously pursue various objectives, and can be configured in many different ways, for different kinds of clientele having different kinds of values and purposes. The issues of quality and accountability cut across all educational objectives.

One prior issue for setting objectives in education is the basic one of identifying the kind of economy we live in. Peters [1] posits three forms of the new knowledge economy – for learning, creativity, and openness – and questions how an educational system can meet the requirements for this new economy. An additional question that comes up is which persons or institutions should decide on goals and policies (ownership) in education. The usual answer is that this is the prerogative of the state. Accordingly, Taylor [2] offers an extended discussion of the proper role of state educational institutions in response to new economic pressures, political and social relationships, and tensions among various institutional and social interests. The many possible roles of states and markets are also comprehensively addressed by Cohn and Geske [3].

Ideologists of market-oriented neo-liberalism are not prepared to concede a monopoly, or even primacy, to the state in educational policy, and argue for a larger role for the market in education. In this regard, Barrett [4] warns against the notion that individual students and their parents should be treated merely as customers of educational services, because customers are not always well informed about the nature of these services. This criticism of market models extends to schools; but schools are not rational market actors, and asking schools to act like private firms can lead to perverse outcomes, as described by Gidney [5].

Underlying such issues are the notion of what actually constitutes quality in education, as examined by Gray [6]; and what is implied by accountability, examined by Epstein [7] and Monk [8]. Obviously, educational policies are shaped around the definitions and purposes assigned by stakeholders to these terms.

Aims. The purpose of this article is to bring clarity to the common concepts of quality and accountability in education, so that educational policies may be better informed.

Methodology. The methodological basis of the research is the methods of comparative analysis of scientific research in the field of social and natural sciences, the authors of which investigated human, social and cultural capital.

Results. In our research, we will drive concept of education quality and accountability.

The concept of quality. Many countries throughout world are properly concerned over quality in education [9]. Those countries most infected by the neo-liberal “audit culture” are also concerned that educational institutions are somehow not accountable for their expenditure of limited resources on education [2]. Each country fears that it is falling behind because its educational system is underperforming for the money spent.

The term quality is freely but carelessly tossed about by politicians, business leaders, and public commentators. But what does this term actually mean? How is to be achieved in practice? Seemingly straightforward, quality is an elusive concept; and much harm can be done by public policies that are inadequately considered.

For example, quality can mean a certain *benchmark* of academic rigour and attainment; but, alternatively, it can mean the amount of academic *valued-added*. A quality educational system can also be said to be one that has a high retention and completion rate, a low retention and completion rate, provides equality of access and social justice, is selective in access, socializes for patriotism and citizenship, creates deference to authority, or stimulates creativity. Many of these indicators of quality are contradictory, and it is obvious that there can be no universal agreement about what quality is. And if policymakers cannot define quality, then how can they identify the factors that are supposed to produce the quality? These are not trivial questions, but go to the heart of stakeholder preferences, education systems design, and public policies.

In order to illustrate some basic dilemmas, we may note the author’s experience at KIMEP University, Kazakhstan, with Advisory Board meetings of employers, alumni, and students at the Department of Public Administration and International Development [10]. Reflecting the broader cultural assumptions of society, employers report that they would like to receive graduates with stronger practical skills, and tend to undervalue theory and abstraction. It may be said that, for employers, practical skills are a “free good,” and so employers could never have too many of these. However, when the topic shifts to the strong points of KIMEP graduates, employers much appreciate the independence, initiative, creativity, problem-solving abilities, as well as the communication and interpersonal skills of their new hires. These are the so-called “soft skills” or transferable skills, which are becoming increasingly important in the global learning economy [1], and which give KIMEP graduates an advantage on the employment market. In other words, public and market stakeholders do not necessarily understand their own interests; and their simplistic understanding of quality could harm their country. To its credit, KIMEP University has avoided the temptation of the vocationalism that many employers, parents, and students themselves would prefer.

One educational expert who struggled with the concept of quality is Gray [6]. He notes that educators usually try to judge quality against some kinds of standards; but this brings up the question of what are the proper standards themselves. Furthermore, can we devise tests for these standards that are conceptually clear, and whose results are valid? Can we devise tests and standards that are objective? In a word, “no,” says Gray.

A problem with standard tests is that teachers will “teach to the test.” Since teachers might already know what will be on the test if it is a national test, or have a good idea from past experience, they will concentrate on teaching just those things that will probably be on the test. The result is that students get good test scores and teachers get good ratings. For their part administrators can say that they are good administrators, because they hired good teachers who produced good students. Ministry of education officials record and legitimize this seemingly good performance. This is something like a public policy “racket” – everybody comes out looking good. In cases of bad outcomes, however defined or perceived, an entire “edubusiness industry” and cohorts of education consultants, psychologists, and fixers of various kinds stand ready to offer expensive but not necessarily useful services to worried parents and stakeholders [4].

Traditionally, Gray says, we think of standards as being either vocational or academic. Tests for vocational purposes are conceptually easier to devise. For example, can a hairdresser perform all the steps in her job – washing the hair, styling the hair, and cutting properly? Likewise, can a welder produce good welds in various shapes, that can withstand objective pressure-tests without breaking? In such cases the answers to test questions are simply “yes” or “no.”

But tests for academic purposes are conceptually much more difficult to devise. Do we want to test basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills? Social skills? Leadership skills? Do we want educational tests that measure maturity in some way, or well-roundedness in people? How can we test and reward for diligence, originality, and special talents? Educational policy specialists have never come up with definitive answers to these questions. Still, Gray suggests, we do not have to throw up our hands helplessly and say that to devise criteria for good-quality education is impossible; we do not want to say that everything is relative and that one educational system is just as good as another. Gray asserts that we *can* devise at least general standards based on observation and common sense.

Gray says further in this regard that simple quantitative tests of academic quality do not make sense. In his view, broad commonsense judgements of quality are the only ones that are meaningful. More specifically, he says that there are only two basic ways in which the quality of a school’s performance can be judged. The first and easiest way is to compare this year’s performance with the previous year, and the year before that. This method is based on the assumption that the intake of new students has remained much the same in the same school from one year to the next. The second approach for evaluating quality is to compare like-with-like. In other words, how much progress have the students in one school made compared with students in another school having similar kinds of students? Ideally, one would use both approaches at the same time.

Moving on, Gray addresses a major controversy among educators, namely “How much difference do schools make?” That is, to what extent can a good school improve the performance of poor students? And to what extent will the performance of good students decline in poor schools? Gray cites a number of Western studies

that indicate that typically about half of students' performance depends on the kind of school they are attending.

Gray finds three main factors which seem to make a difference in quality within a school:

1. The first of these is the centrality of the institution's *values*. The more effective schools seem to know what they are about and where they are going. These schools have "visible and explicit ideologies" and clear mission statements that outline the schools' aims. One significant feature in this connection is that both the staff and the students can provide a reasonably good description of what is required for success and quality to be achieved.

2. The second factor that distinguishes good schools from poor ones is that the good schools have a press for achievement. Teachers expect their students to achieve; and students in turn find themselves challenged and stretched in the classroom. That is, there is an *atmosphere* that emphasizes attainment.

3. The third major factor that makes schools effective and of good quality is the *relationships* between students and teachers. There is an absence of conflict between students and teachers; and, beyond this, a more positive mutual respect or rapport. There are also many opportunities for students to establish stimulating and productive relationships with teachers, and each student has the opportunity to find at least one teacher for whom that teacher is special in some aspect related to learning. Put another way, when the student graduates she or he will remember at least one teacher in the institution who had a significant influence on her or his life.

To restate, the dimensions of quality listed above cannot be measured quantitatively and therefore do not lend themselves to managerial and top-down controls and pressures. Each of these quality criteria is based on common sense and observation. Very importantly, one notes that quality is achieved by the personnel directly involved – teachers, faculty, and students. There is not much place for oversight by a diverse and fragmented public (public choice) nor oversight by distant state bureaucrats (managerialism) who are unacquainted with specific classroom conditions and the pedagogical process.

It is thus no accident that publics and bureaucrats are not part of Gray's narrative. Gray assumes that the teaching community itself is the best custodian of education. It is also no accident that the educational systems rated the most highly in the OECD and other literature are in those countries in which the teaching and faculty professions tend to be unionized or have strong teacher and faculty associations, and which are able to articulate educational issues at first hand. The educational systems of these countries also tend to be highly decentralized. Some such countries are Finland [11], Sweden [12], and Canada [5].

Accountability. As with quality, it is proper for countries to have an ongoing concern for accountability. The term is often heard; but what kinds of accountability are there?, Epstein [7] asks. Usually the first thing we think about when we hear the word "accountability" is the proper and democratic accountability to the taxpayer. Since taxpayers – the general public – are paying for education and supporting it in other ways, they are entitled to see that their money is spent effectively on the uses

for which it was intended. But, says Epstein, accountability is a two-way street. The consumers or “clients” of education – parents and students – are also entitled to something; they are entitled to quality and social justice. So here we are speaking about accountability to the citizen. That is, the educational system should be designed in such a way that young people from all social categories should feel comfortable within it, and that this system should provide them with an equal opportunity in life. We should keep in mind that parents are taxpayers and students eventually will be taxpayers; therefore the distinction between taxpayers and citizens is not clear. Here we see the germ of a political conflict, for who decides on taxpayers’ versus citizens’ rights? In other words, to whom does education “belong” – to taxpayers or citizens, or does it belong to governments or business?

Epstein’s basic argument is that governments often use the democratic-sounding term “accountability” in fundamentally undemocratic and therefore unaccountable ways. She says that most governments are disproportionately answerable to business interests, and therefore a hidden “business agenda” or business priorities (narrow vocationalism in employment and applied science in higher education) and not a civil rights agenda nor social priorities (in general education) are emphasized. Thus governments will make sure they spend enough money on the things that business wants: basic literacy and numeracy, sciences, computers, and manual skills such as typing and computer keyboarding. Governments and their business allies are also interested not only in what is taught, but also how things are taught; therefore they wish to promote things like discipline, obedience, and social conformity. What tends to be forgotten in the educational system, Epstein says further, is such things as education against racism, against religious prejudice and intolerance, and against discrimination against women or others. Forgotten is the functioning of society itself, and the development of social capital (trust and goodwill) in society [13].

Looking at the concept of accountability in more detail, Epstein lists six general kinds:

a. *Accountability to the market.* One of the major ways in which governments define accountability is with reference to the market. In principle, the market is supposed to empower consumers; that is, consumers have money, and so the market must satisfy them. But whenever there is the operation of markets, there is also the potential for social inequality and access to education that is sub-optimal for the national economy. However, governments usually do not do much to compensate citizens for inequalities created by educational and employment markets. The result is that the children of poor people, rural people, and ethnic minorities are often left behind.

b. *Accountability in school budgets.* In this connection, Epstein says, the so-called “market accountability” is allowed to operate at the level of the individual school or university. What has been happening in the USA and Britain is that the government provides a certain amount of base funding (say 60% or 80%), but then parents and local municipalities have to make up the rest, or else find sponsors in the business community. The problem here, of course, is that some municipalities are richer than others, or contain more industries and broader tax bases than others.

Through no fault of their own, children in poor municipalities fall behind; and *de facto* they are no longer equal citizens of the country because they no longer have equality of opportunity.

c. *Accountability as consumer choice.* An additional component of market accountability through which it has been tried to make schools accountable is the notion of consumer choice. The idea is that there should be open enrolment to schools. Instead of being required to send their children to the nearest local public school, parents are given the market choice to send their children wherever they want. In this scheme, good schools are supposed to attract more students; and so, in order to compete in the new “educational market,” poor schools will have to improve their education. This idea is attractive on the surface level, but the problem is that schools are not businesses and are constrained by their legal public mandates in the extent to which they may choose students or redeploy internal resources. Moreover, some “entrepreneurial” schools may be successful in increasing their enrolments not because they offer quality but because they are better at public relations and marketing. They may impress uniformed parents and students through glossy brochures, attractive cafeterias, nice buildings and sports facilities, or “star” teachers and faculty, but lack the educational basics such as libraries or skilled teachers [4]. This market scheme does not address what should be done with the weaker schools, which may be weak for reasons that are not their fault; and it ignores the educational system’s obligation to serve all students fairly.

d. *Upward accountability.* In this context, providers of education (school directors, teachers) are held accountable to groups or individuals (school trustees, boards of governors, municipalities) in positions of greater power than the workers in the teaching profession. But the trustees and governors do not necessarily know better than the school directors, teachers, and parents themselves the things that need to be done in the schools. Probably even less likely to know these things are ministry bureaucrats from far away. A symptom of the latter is poorly conceptualized directives that are unimplementable and time-wasting.

e. *Accountability as appraisal.* Another version of upward accountability can be seen operating in policies about appraisal, which is carried out exclusively by those higher up in the hierarchies of educational institutions. Thus senior teachers appraise junior teachers; department heads appraise senior teachers; and are themselves appraised by inspectors. In this context, appraisal cannot make schools accountable to students and parents, because the teachers in the schools must report to the educational hierarchy and government instead.

f. *Accountability to government.* In conclusion, Epstein says, in the most striking example of upwards accountability in the USA, schools and teachers are to be held accountable to government for the transmission of the curriculums contained in the National Curriculum, as specified by the Ministry of Education. The curriculum set by the Ministry takes precedence over students’ and parents’ wishes; so here, accountability to the citizens is again lost. Parents might have the theoretical right to hold governments democratically accountable; but in day-to-day practice the

hierarchy of the Ministry, usually allied to businesses and employers, is little accountable to citizens.

It is worth mentioning at least briefly an offshoot to the accountability movement, namely *educational productivity research* described by Monk [8]. It was believed that if policymakers could determine what kinds of education are more productive in terms of finance and learning results than others, then policymakers could design educational programs in ways that are more accountable. Educational productivity research tries to identify which kinds of education, or which means of delivery of education, are more effective across a broad range of factors. Such factors can be organizational, financial, the home environment, the school environment, the qualifications of teachers, the characteristics of students, the curriculum, or just about any other factor that affects education in some way. However, says Monk, for all the educational production research that has been done, it is very difficult to identify reliably the factors that contribute to good learning by students. One therefore surmises that educational policymakers and administrators devise policies and procedures not so much on the basis of empirical pedagogical science, but more simply on the basis of tradition and habit, trial and error, or political convenience.

To reiterate, if we do not have a clear idea of what produces good teaching and learning, we cannot understand what produces quality and accountability. Why do teaching and learning proceed well in one school, but not in a similar school in the same neighbourhood? Why is it so difficult for poor schools to identify the reasons for and to copy the success of good schools? However, policy questions of these kinds often go un-discussed. Consequently we do not have transparent, professional policies, but false consensus, drift, and incrementalism –which are not really policies at all. And if they are not policies, then they are incapable of implementing any reforms that may be necessary for the modern educational environment.

Conclusions. This article has highlighted conceptual issues concerning the educational objectives of quality and accountability, along with the sociological and organizational complexity of educational reform. The article has also emphasized that simplistic policy assumptions should be avoided and that educational institutions are not easily amenable to elitist or market management methods.

Both neo-liberal market and bureaucratic-managerial panaceas are misguided. We should be cautious in devising public policies based on fashions of the day, because the results might be poor. Stakeholders in society, business, and government should certainly take an interest in education, lending support and judicious criticism. But at the end of the day, the teaching community should be entrusted as the main custodian of education, basing itself on common sense.

The educational establishments of all countries need from time to time to deeply re-examine certain operative concepts. In this regard, an informed consensus needs to be reached about the multidimensional and sometimes contradictory notions of quality and accountability. Habit and drift are not helpful to educational policy; instead, educational values and goals should be actively discussed and clarified in broad national discussions, comprising all major interested parties.

A good educational system is ultimately a civic achievement, set within a community of informed and interested stakeholders.

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