Reviving the "Policy Bargain" Discussion

Professional Accountability and the Contribution of Teacher-performance Assessment

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The issue of educational accountability is probably the most pressing and most problematic of any facing the public schools today.

—Darling-Hammond 1989, 59

Very little has changed in sixteen years. Today accountability is probably the most important challenge facing teachers as they strive to provide learning opportunities for their students. However, according to Darling-Hammond (1989), legal and bureaucratic forms of accountability dominate teachers’ lives. Bureaucratic accountability mechanisms in the form of regulatory procedures that aim to ensure teacher compliance through rewards and sanctions are still at the center of teachers’ lives. In 1989, Darling-Hammond argued that accountability reduced schools’ and teachers’ ability to respond to students’ needs, and that professional accountability mechanisms held the most promise for improving professional practice and enhancing learning outcomes for every student.

In this article, I use the models of accountability outlined in Darling-Hammond’s (1989) article as a lens to examine the current climate of educational accountability, particularly the status of professional accountability, and to explore the role of teacher-performance assessment. The question at the core of this exploration is, Are we closer to a strong model of professional accountability today than we were sixteen years ago? Or are we looking at an entrenched bureaucratic model for years to come?

Accountability

What does it mean to be accountable as a teacher? Accountable to whom? Accountable for what? Answers to these questions frame the ways in which systems of accountability are developed and operationalized. The accountability models that are currently in place rely on government agencies to implement mechanisms to assure the public that all students are achieving the same acceptable standards of achievement. Proponents of professional-accountability systems argue for a system that enables and encourages teachers to be client oriented, to use all available knowledge in making professional decisions, and to strive to learn and improve their professional practice.

In 1989, Darling-Hammond outlined the following accountability models designed to safeguard the public interest:

• **Political accountability.** Elected officials must stand for reelection at regular intervals so that citizens can judge the representativeness of their views and the responsiveness of their decisions.

• **Legal accountability.** Courts must entertain complaints about violations of laws, as enacted by representatives of the public, and of citizens’ constitutionally granted rights, which may be threatened either by private or legislative action.

• **Bureaucratic accountability.** Agencies of government promulgate rules and regulations intended to assure citizens that public functions will be carried out in pursuit of the public goals voiced through democratic or legal processes.

• **Professional accountability.** Governments create professional bodies and structures to ensure competence and appropriate practice in occupations that serve the public and also delegate certain decisions about

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occupational membership, standards, and practices to these bodies.

- **Market accountability.** Governments allow clients or consumers to choose what services best meet their needs; to preserve the utility of this form of accountability, monopolies are prevented, freedom of choice is protected, and truthful information is required of service providers. (1989, 61)

Moreover, Darling-Hammond suggested that all of these accountability mechanisms have strengths and weaknesses, and that each may be applicable to particular activities:

Political mechanisms can support the public establishment of general policy directions in areas subject to direct government control. Legal mechanisms are most useful when rights or proscriptions are clearly definable and when establishing the facts is all that is needed to trigger a remedy. Bureaucratic mechanisms are most appropriate when a standard set of practices or procedures can be easily linked to behavioral rules that will produce the desired outcomes. Market mechanisms are helpful when consumer preferences vary widely, when the state does not have a direct interest in controlling choice, and when government control would be counterproductive to innovation. Professional mechanisms are most important when safeguards for consumer choice are necessary to serve the public interest, but the technology of the work is uniquely determined by individual client needs and a complex and changing base of knowledge. (1989, 61)

In 1989, legal and bureaucratic forms of education accountability dominated. Revisiting the issue in 2004, Darling-Hammond (2004b) affirmed the continuing dominance of these approaches combined with some emerging market accountability in the growth of charter and magnet schools. Current education accountability means monitoring test scores averaged for classrooms, schools, and districts and monitoring compliance with a prescribed curriculum designed to help students learn what is on the tests. Rewards and sanctions are linked to compliance and noncompliance. Such a model of accountability views students as uniform blocks of clay, learning as standardized shapes and markings on the clay, and teachers as automations who work the clay more or less according to formula. It does not promote a view of teaching as intellectual work involving professional judgment—which is the essence of teacher professionalism (Tripp 1993).

Standardization is promoted in the name of ensuring a good education for all. Learning goals are established as common standards or outcomes that are assumed to be the most appropriate for all students of a certain age and developmental level, and teachers' work is structured to ensure strict compliance in pursuit of these goals. Not only are the expected outcomes the same for all students irrespective of background and experience, but also in many cases, students are exposed to the same curriculum in the pursuit of these outcomes. These outcomes are then measured and compared to other classrooms, districts, and states in which students have experienced the same curriculum. Any attempts to individualize means grouping students and treating the groups alike. Thus, a model of accountability that values responsiveness to individual students is at odds with a model that is based on the premise that all students can and should achieve, which implies that if they do not, it is either the fault of the students or the teacher. Much of the stress in teachers' work lives stems from trying to negotiate these two accountability frameworks.

These criticisms are not to suggest that accountability is a bad idea. The question is, What form of accountability will enable and indeed encourage teachers to be responsive to students and their parents, to make informed decisions, and to work toward the "public good"? What form of accountability works toward ensuring that every student has the opportunity to learn and has access to high-quality teachers? What form of accountability works toward reducing and eliminating inequities in society? Professional accountability offers promise.

**Professional Accountability**

Darling-Hammond incorporated three principles in the conduct and governance of an occupation into her definition of professional accountability:

- Knowledge is the basis for permission to practice and for decisions that are made with respect to the unique needs of clients.
- The practitioner pledges his first concern to the welfare of the client.
- The profession assumes collective responsibility for the definition, transmittal, and enforcement of professional standards of practice and ethics. (1989, 67)

A self-regulated teaching profession takes collective responsibility for ensuring that all those permitted to teach are well prepared, that they have and use all available knowledge to inform professional practice, and that they maintain a primary commitment to clients (that is, their students and the public). A professional accountability model comprising these dimensions represents a "policy bargain" that the profession makes with society whereby greater (self-) regulation of teachers is guaranteed in exchange for deregulation of teaching: "For occupations that require discretion, knowledge, and judgment in meeting the unique needs of clients, the profession guarantees the competence of members in exchange for the privilege of professional control over work structure and standards of practice" (Darling-Hammond 1989, 67). Has this bargain been kept? Given the dominance of bureaucratic models of accountability, the answer is no.
But why? Has the profession been able to uphold our end of the bargain? During the 1980s, moves to professionalize teaching stemmed from a belief that teachers could be vehicles for school reform; to do so they must be knowledgeable and have greater decision-making capabilities. However, a backlash of sorts subsequently ensued, fuelled by concerns that teachers thus “empowered” would be unaccountable. In 1989, Darling-Hammond suggested that professional development schools (PDS) could provide the organizational structures to facilitate professional accountability mechanisms (see Latham, Crumpler, and Moss 2005). Although progress has been made on this front, the dominant model of professional development has kept the PDS idea on the margins.

Recently educational researchers have done a good job of communicating to society just how important quality teachers are by suggesting that certified teachers are more effective than uncertified teachers in terms of student achievement (for example, Darling-Hammond 2004a; Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy 2001). Add to this evidence suggestions of uneven allocation quality teachers in schools—underprepared teachers are found in disproportionate numbers in low-performing schools and in schools serving large numbers of minority students, poor students, and English language learners (Darling-Hammond 2004a; Esch et al. 2004)—and the focus shifts to issues of teacher quality—how to define it, how to measure it, and how to achieve it.

To be sure, the profession has changed. It has sought to regulate the preparation of teachers, support their entry into the profession, and recognize highly accomplished teachers. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) arguably represent the profession’s best national attempts to self-regulate entry into the profession. Created in 1954, NCATE accredits institutional units that offer teacher-preparation programs, while the more recently established TEAC accredits individual programs. However, fewer than 40 percent of existing teacher-preparation programs and/or the institutions that offer them are nationally accredited (Wilson and Youngs, forthcoming). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) represents the profession’s attempt to make teaching focused on student learning and to acknowledge highly accomplished teachers. It also has had some effect on teacher preparation (see Galluzzo 2005).

Just as professional organizations have increased their visibility and influence, the federal government also has entered into the teacher-quality arena but has taken a stance very much at odds with NCATE, TEAC, and NBPTS. According to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), subject matter knowledge and verbal ability are important determinants for high-quality teaching (U.S. Department of Education 2003, 2004). This perspective is paving the way for the deregulation of teacher preparation, on the assumption that subject matter knowledge is best acquired outside schools of education and all other information can be picked up on the job. “Reducing barriers to becoming a teacher among otherwise highly qualified individuals” is a priority (U.S. Department of Education 2004, 2).

Proponents of diminishing the role of schools of education in teacher preparation draw on research and evaluations such as the recent Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. study, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and examined the effect of Teach for America (TFA) teachers on student achievement as compared to a control group of non-TFA teachers. The study found that TFA teachers had a positive effect on math scores and no effect on reading scores (Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman 2004), with the suggestion that such alternative preparation is as effective as, if not more effective than, traditional preparation pathways when the measure of effectiveness is student learning outcomes as defined by standardized achievement scores. Likewise, the establishment of and extensive funding support for the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) further exemplifies the federal government’s interest in and support for bypassing traditional teacher preparation. The ABCTE was designed to ease entry into teaching by allowing teacher candidates with an appropriate undergraduate degree in a relevant subject matter to take a certification examination, rather than complete an approved teacher education program. Federal government support for alternative pathways, which often bypass teacher preparation, is strong:

The Department is committed to continuing to forge strong partnerships with states, institutions, and national organizations, such as the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence, the National Center for Alternative Certification, Teach for America and the New Teacher Project, to help to continue building momentum for change. (U.S. Department of Education 2004, 13)

Although a struggle for control of the preparation of teachers has been waged for several years now, states themselves have bureaucratic accountability systems that accredit teacher-preparation programs and certify entrants into the profession. Regulatory processes aimed at ensuring quality teachers in the profession usually include some combination of (1) teacher assessment and procedures for certification and (2) accreditation of teacher-preparation programs or the institutional unit offering them. However, it seems that neither these certification systems nor the associated accreditation systems have gained public confidence. There has been a steady development and implementation of various forms of teacher assessment for teacher-
licensing decisions (usually in the form of tests). In 2002, thirty-seven states relied on teacher tests to determine teacher licensing decisions at the entry level and also to determine entry into teacher-preparation programs and tenure (Wilson and Youngs, forthcoming; Youngs, Odden, and Porter 2003). The 1998 reauthorization of Title II of the Higher Education Act, which mandated that each state annually report the percentage of teacher candidates who passed state certification tests, has served to further legitimate bureaucratic models of teacher testing.

Research on teacher tests indicates that they have little predictive validity, causing questions to arise about their capacity to measure a teacher's ability to teach and even whether they measure anything worthwhile (Wilson and Youngs, forthcoming). Moreover, given the current ambivalence about the value of teacher preparation offered in higher education institutions, proponents of a professional model of teaching are concerned that teacher tests may provide inappropriate short-cut routes into teaching (Youngs, Odden, and Porter 2003). In addition, other issues also have been raised in regards to the inherent bias in pencil-and-paper tests of teacher knowledge, which makes some teacher candidates advantaged or privileged in taking the test (Tellez 2003). Tellez concludes that "paper-and-pencil tests of pedagogy are a blunt tool for assessing an extraordinarily complex human endeavor" (16).

In response to the identified shortcomings of tests of basic skills, tests of subject matter knowledge, and tests of professional knowledge, many states have moved to the use of performance assessments in making teacher-licensing decisions. This movement away from paper-and-pencil tests may provide the profession with an opportunity to re-open discussions around the "policy bargain," which can strengthen the profession and instill public confidence in the profession's ability to self-regulate.

**Performance Assessment**

Consistent with a bureaucratic model, earlier approaches to teacher-performance assessment implemented during the 1980s in Georgia, Florida, and Texas focused on a uniform set of teacher behaviors and strategies regardless of context (Youngs, Odden, and Porter 2003). But the new generation of teacher assessments, those based on observation and interrogation of classroom practice, has the potential to authentically measure a teacher's ability, to use and contribute to the professional knowledge base, to be responsive to the learning needs of every student, and to inquire into and reflect on their professional practice (Pecheone et al. 2005; Larsen and Calfee 2005). These teacher-performance assessments aim to provide mechanisms for accountability based on the assumption that teaching is not a decon-
the status of the profession by recognizing teachers’ work as intellectual, complex, and requiring informed professional judgment. A professional accountability model also can be a catalyst to encourage further reflection and inquiry, help teachers identify professional learning needs and career aspirations, and assist them in these goals.

Performance assessment can strengthen the framework of such a professional accountability system. Darling-Hammond and Snyder’s four principles for assessment can further guide us:

1. Assessments sample the actual knowledge, skills, and dispositions desired of teachers as they are used in teaching and learning contexts, rather than relying on more remote proxies.
2. Assessments require the integration of multiple kinds of knowledge and skill as they are used in practice.
3. Multiple sources of evidence are collected over time and in diverse contexts.
4. Assessment evidence is evaluated by individuals with relevant expertise against criteria that matter for performance in the field. (2000, 527–28)

Therefore, as a profession we need to continue our investigations into teaching, learning, and learning to teach to support and inform such a process. We must continue our activity to further develop and refine a knowledge base for teaching, including our understanding of how teachers develop professionally and how they use their knowledge in different contexts. We also must consider the assessors; they must be members of the profession and well trained.

Despite this optimism about the potential of reclaiming and strengthening professional accountability through performance assessment, I offer a cautionary note. Although the ability to judge teaching as a contextualized professional practice is a major strength, we must be sure not to essentialize the teaching act as teacher-performance assessment becomes a high-stakes evaluation. We must frame a system that is able to recognize and validate teacher knowledge, commitment, responsiveness, and capability in various settings with all learners. We will be able to feel confident that we have developed a trustworthy approach to teacher-performance assessment and professional accountability when the quality of a teacher working in traditionally underserved and marginalized school communities is equally able to be identified, interpreted, and judged as a teacher working in schools serving historically privileged populations. To do this, a notion of quality teaching as a knowledge-informed and client-responsive professional judgment must underpin all approaches to teacher-performance assessment.

Key words: professional accountability, standards, teacher-performance assessment

REFERENCES


