

We should rethink accountability in terms of what the student needs as a person.

Some characteristics of being accountable

by Louis E. Barrilleaux and
James C. Carper
Tulane University

Few proposed "reforms" in education have been as voluminously written about, frequently spoken about, or as intensely debated as the subject of accountability. Critics condemn the concept as "inhumane," while zealots proclaim it as the latest "panacea."¹

A salient feature of the recent movement has been the lack of general agreement on the meaning of "accountability." Indeed, the term is frequently used in a highly abstract manner that suggests a political purpose. For instance, advocates assert that the "public" is the entity to whom the educator is to be held accountable. This "public" is presumed to have a common point of view, value system and set of expectations. The concept may not be as clear as its advocates claim when implementation is to occur in a pluralistic community.² This results in misguided expectations, unreasoned resistance and unanticipated consequences.

People working in the field of human services need to know more about the use of accumulated knowledge. But to follow current thought in a mechanical way would destroy the sense of caring, empathy and genuineness which our work in human services has shown to be valuable. So rather than adding operational prescriptions, the writers speak to the issues that observations, studies, and experiences have raised about accountability.

1. To what extent is the **distinction** between education and schooling important? That there is confusion between "education" and "schooling" is obvious. As Americans, counseled by professional educators, heaped many and varied expectations on the schools over the past one hundred years, there emerged a tendency of view most learning outcomes as a direct result of formal instruction.³ This phenomenon has escalated the confusion between "education" and "schooling." Important informal learnings were **assumed** to be outcomes of schooling.

Despite current questions concerning the validity of

this assumption, the escalation continues. So let it be fully recognized that today both public and private institutions of schooling represent the aspirations of people who hold increasing concerns for outcomes over which the schools have marginal influence and control, such as moral development, political sensitivity, and economic success.

Some essential learnings occur only outside the formal structures; schooling is still not all of education.⁴ As a possible necessary precondition for clarifying school accountabilities, is it not appropriate to first articulate realistic social policy for education? The issue for our society becomes, "Who is accountable for education?"

2. To what extent is accountability consistent with the work culture of simple, absolute **institutions**? Long ago, McGregor distinguished between the X and Y assumptions which one may hold about the basic nature of the "average human being."⁵ With the set of X, one assumes that people inherently dislike work; they prefer to be directed and closely supervised while avoiding responsibility. Research does not support the set of X assumptions. Even in under-developed regions, these assumptions are largely ineffective today.⁶

Can we avoid using accountability concepts as though they were strong frameworks put up to help weak and dependent people to function effectively? We ask ourselves, "How can we avoid, in the practice of accountability, the enhancement of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which there are two kinds of people: the elite with intelligence, ambition, psychological maturity, creativity (like us) and the masses who are lazy, irresponsible, interested only in money, needing direction and psychologically ill?"

The principles of institutional accountability are now extending beyond fiscal and legal connotations to include intellectual, attitudinal and other aspects of schooling. In this context, is holding an institution accountable the same as holding an individual accountable? How can conditions for complex ethical choices be satisfied by a collection of people? Given the charge that "Schools have failed," is the accountability movement an attempt to avoid individual responsibility by assigning it to an institution as a **surrogate conscience**? If accountability includes an ethical component and only individuals are capable of ethical choices, can an institution be held accountable?⁷

3. To what extent are participants in the "schooling" enterprise accountable for **results**? As professionals in the field of human services, we cannot assume responsibility for the behavior of our subordinates, clients, or students but only that we have behaved with them in ways that are defensible.

We desire responsibility for the things that we do. On the basis of research, theory and experience we assume responsibility for being increasingly able to give reasons why we do what we do, and we must be even more personally responsible for our own behavior. Of ourselves, we ask, "How can we somehow guarantee our professional services with greater specificity and presumptions of 'goodness' without digging ourselves into a hole of guaranteeing results—the equivalent of assuming responsibility for the behavior of others?"

No one in a helping profession is likely to assume responsibility for a result over which he has no control. It is ludicrous to attempt holding him answerable for a result if he is unwilling to assume responsibility.

While it is possible to extend, give, or delegate authority to others, an individual cannot be made responsible; he must be willing to assume it. The establishment, then, of what service an individual agrees to be answerable for is perhaps the logical conclusion of the accountability process. The fundamental issue may become, "What kinds of controllable results can we expect participants in the 'practice of schooling' to be distinctively answerable for?"

4. To what extent does the movement sharpen the destructive **conflict** between humaneness and accountability? Clearly, there are two conflicting philosophical positions now operating and directing demands on schools. While leaders are being called on to make an accounting for the time, money and energy poured into their institutions, there is an opposing force to make schools more humane with great stress on spontaneity, flexibility and creative experience. All participants in the schooling enterprise are demanding more autonomy for themselves—consistent, of course, with a work culture characterized by increased ambiguity and recognition of the importance of developing independently strong people.

In schooling, one alternative over the other is unacceptable. The execution of skills alone is empty, while "love" and neo-humanism alone are not enough. How can we assist in the resolution of the accountability—humaneness forces? Is this conflict our base of opportunity as mature human service professionals?

May we begin by rethinking accountability in terms of what the student needs as a person, rather than what it is the public wants—which is often defined in self-serving economic and social terms? The principles and techniques that are now being heralded as new are derivatives of those that captured education during the early decades of this century, although the labels have been updated. The consequences of those early procedures are well-documented.⁸

5. To what extent is the accountability movement and the condition of schooling an appropriate **pairing** of solution and problem? In education, practitioners tend to deal with "solutions" first; minimal attention is given to the analytical aspect of solving problems. This inability to find functional problems and communicate them to others is a serious obstacle to improvement.

Educators have a reputation of being a source of answers. The public demands a close correspondence between questions and answers, and schools are generally not allowed or required to adopt a problem finding stance to obtain resources for improvement. Consequently, little or no relationship may exist between what reformers say needs to be done and the problem as perceived by those who must implement an "improvement" program.⁹

The interest in accountability, as it is currently expressed in the quantifying of outcomes, might lead to disastrous effects. Those who most enthusiastically promote accountability as a lever for improvement are accustomed to mechanistic models which have been useful to engineers, economists and business firms. Some school problems **do** yield to mechanistic analysis. But when it is people with whom we deal, and when the goals we seek are complex human attributes, mechanistic models may be of less help.

How can we, then, account for our greater aims in the current movements? Can we avoid the small scale suggestions of mechanistic models? In fact, are we suf-

ficiently secure about the nature of the fundamental problem to adopt the accountability model as the wise solution?

6. To what extent are we able to specify the necessary **preconditions** under which accountability might be a viable process? The following is offered as a beginning:¹⁰

- a. The special function of "schooling" is agreed upon and objectives are clear. (This assumes the larger task of identifying the components of the "educational" configuration.)
- b. Schooling outcomes are within the power of the accountable persons to control.
- c. Individuals and groups negotiate the conditions and results for which they agree to be held answerable.
- d. Standards for quality are clear and measurable.
- e. Particular plans of action are focused upon the achievement of particular students.
- f. Professionals at all levels of the schooling hierarchy are accepted as experts in the various phases of the learning and management process.

As the current advocates of accountability become genuinely concerned, they will talk more about the problems of recruiting intellectually mature people into the field of teaching, the kind of education that teachers need to be culturally literate and the kind of preparation and continuing support that educational managers need. And we would, therefore, hear less about fearfully monitoring teacher performance, auditing student outcomes, and technological aspects of the movement.

Footnotes

1. Robert L. Leight (ed.), **Philosophers Speak on Accountability in Education** (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1973); Leon M. Lessinger and Ralph W. Tyler (eds.), **Accountability in Education** (Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones, 1971).
2. See Daniel E. Griffiths, "The Collapse of Consensus," **New York University Quarterly**, 7 (Fall, 1975), pp. 2-7. Here he discusses social pluralism and the current disorder in American institutions.
3. Henry L. Perkinson, **The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education, 1865-1976** (New York: Random House, 1977).
4. For examples and discussion of this point see James S. Coleman, "How Do The Young Become Adults," **Review of Educational Research**, 42 (Fall, 1972), pp. 431-439.
5. Douglas McGregor, **The Human Side of Enterprise** (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).
6. Peter F. Drucker, **Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices** (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 231-245.
7. Harry S. Broudy, **The Real World of the Public Schools** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 123-148.
8. Raymond Callohan, **Education and the Cult of Efficiency** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).
9. Wayne Doyle, "What is the Problem? What is the Solution?" **Administrator's Notebook**, 25 (Number 4, 1976-77).
10. For additional discussion of this point see Broudy, pp. 123-148.