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## Accountability

MICHAEL FIELDING & FRED INGLIS

**ABSTRACT** This contribution republishes extracts from two important articles published around 2000 concerning the punitive accountability system suffered by English primary and secondary schools. The first concerns the inspection agency Ofsted, and the second managerialism. Though they do not directly address assessment, they are highly relevant to this collection for three reasons. Firstly, assessment data feeds into both: in other words, they constitute part of the 'high stakes' of the present system. Secondly, the descriptions they provide of the educational and social damage caused by inspection and data-driven management is highly pertinent to the test system. Finally, these aspects of governance along with high-stakes assessment are explicitly located within a broader ideology and policy framework of neoliberalism which distorts educational aims.

*The following extracts are taken from articles originally written to explain the effects of accountability in school inspection and management. Readers will immediately recognise their relevance to current discussion of school assessment. Both extracts call for a sea change in power relations and a different kind of partnership between students, parents and teachers.*

*From Michael Fielding (2001)  
'Ofsted, Inspection and the Betrayal of Democracy'*

### **Education, Schooling and the Eradication of Exploratory Discourse**

Public education remains under siege from a reductionist populism that deploys a false clarity under the rallying cry of a largely manufactured common sense... Oppositional or even mildly interrogative voices are no longer heard, or, what is worse, no longer understood beneath the incessant onslaught of government edict and media barrage... If the language of inspection is reduced and confined

to the language of school performance then it must inevitably be a prison of its own myopia. If it embraces the language of education as a creative, exploratory process then it has to find other ways of addressing the quite proper requirement of a communal, democratic responsibility that is honest in its intentions and forthright in its judgements.

### **On the Self-serving Smugness and Insolent Promiscuity of Accountability: democratic deficit**

Accountability has the feel of bureaucratic rationality about it: it is, as Inglis reminds us, 'legal not moral' (Inglis, 2000, p. 422). Accountability is socially and politically at home in predominantly contractual arrangements that lay down clear requirements for the accomplishment of certain tasks and outcomes. It tends to operate in hierarchical regimes where those who are accountable bear virtually all the contractual weight of whatever is specified. Motivation tends to be extrinsic to the task in hand and the sustainability of the required work rate or specified outcomes has more to do with the threat of penalties than the fulfilment of internal satisfaction or moral obligation.

In sum, accountability tends to be a largely negative instrument of social and political control; it eschews any form of serious moral engagement in favour of a contractual or technical agreement; it operates most effectively within a psychological ambience of apprehension; and ... it is particularly susceptible to the culture and practice of blame...

My second point about the largely lopsided nature of accountability arises from this last argument about inequities of power between those who are accountable and those to whom they are answerable... The cult of the customer is one which sanctions an ever-expanding set of demands... Customers have and feel no obligation to play an active part in the accountability process other than to apportion blame or praise in a way which carries consequences only for those who receive it...

As Fred Inglis insists so elegantly and with such terrifying insight:

'Accountability' is, after all, not the same thing as responsibility, still less duty. It is a pistol loaded with blame to be fired at the heads of those who cannot answer charges. (Inglis, 2000, p. 424)

### **Renewing the Moral Resonance of Reciprocal Responsibility**

Whereas the discourse of *accountability* has no real place for the enduring mutuality of human engagement, within an aspirant democracy the notion of *responsibility* accords it a central significance. Because responsibility is primarily a moral, not a technical or contractual notion, it both elicits and requires a felt and binding mutuality that does not depend upon the hierarchical arrangements so typical of accountability. Motivation tends to be intrinsic, both to the general requirements of the practice under consideration and to the specific tasks or intentions in hand.

In sum, responsibility tends to be a largely positive, morally resonant means of encouraging mutually supportive endeavour to which both, or all, parties feel reciprocally and interdependently committed... Its response to failure is not to blame, but to require restitution and redoubled commitment within the context of appropriate support willingly given.

When we hold each other responsible we do so in ways that tend to reinforce the necessity of reciprocal engagement and foreground a set of dispositions and motivations that presume a human desire to do what is right and celebrate what is creative and joyful in each other's endeavours.

### **Relating Means and Ends: on the necessity of a personalist dialectic**

In the *high performance* school, which is the kind of school that is embodied in the approach of Ofsted and of 'school effectiveness', the personal is used for the sake of the functional: community is valued, but primarily for instrumental purposes within the context of the market place... The significance of both students and teachers is derivative and rests primarily in their contribution, usually via high-stakes testing, to the public performance of the organisation...

In the *person-centred* school the functional is both for the sake of and expressive of the personal. Its outcomes are widely and imaginatively conceived and its success is as satisfying morally and interpersonally as it is instrumentally... The arrangements we devise to enable the schools to fulfil and demonstrate their democratic responsibilities towards the communities they serve will also be educative, engaging, inclusive and imaginative... Ofsted is anti-educational; it not only excludes the very things that are generally agreed to be most important and most enduring but also is substantially and dispiritingly dull.

#### *From Fred Inglis (2000) 'A Malediction Upon Management'*

Accountability is legal not moral. It is a principle of bureaucratic rationalisation; it plants the bars in Weber's cage. It also brings out the poverty of a blind insistence on rights. The principle holds that duties are subordinate to rights, and that the determination of rights-fulfilment is only secured by tabulation. A right is satisfied when evidence is produced not so much that duty has been done but that the documentation on hand codifies its doing... Rights command duties, trust is dissolved by surveillance, deceit and mendacity have their hour.

Auditing is an act of policing. There is nothing necessarily forbidding about that. We all check up on others and ourselves. Certain corners of social life need more checking than others (shady corners, unfamiliar ones, ones where you don't know what's going on)...

Pockets of doubt and checking may be created and institutionalized but surely not as an entire principle of social organization? The more one thinks about it, the more apparent it is that the imperative 'never

trust, always check' could not be a universalizable principle of social order: constant vigilance is somehow autodestructive.  
(Power 1997, p. 2)

Not only can one simply not have a society in which nothing is to be trusted, the development of auditing techniques, especially when audit as an idea so overreaches its originally financial limits, becomes first, ideological; second, pathological; third, venal... But as soon as the ideology is accepted in the conversation of the culture – and for our postmodern antirealists all you ever have to go on is 'conversation' – it breeds, as all parasites must, its own pathology. It insists on accountability as necessary where before there had been the inevitably messy give-and-take of human dealing.

'Accountability' is, after all, not the same thing as responsibility, still less duty. It is a pistol loaded with blame to be fired at the heads of those who cannot answer charges. The pistol is fired in public. Its lesson is that wounds shall be visibly inscribed on reputation. Pathology turns to psychosis, or the unbroken cycle of the application of checks as to quality and answerability from which there is never any escape.

### References

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