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EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Lawrence Stenhouse, Director, Centre for Applied
Research in Education, University of East Anglia

Education is one form of the pursuit of human perfection, and because the aspirations of education are limitless, it must always fail. "Success" in education is a product of the lowering of aspiration rather than the raising of achievement. But the fact that education, like art, always fails, does not mean that any kind of failure is acceptable. Failure in education should aspire to be well-judged, competent, and glorious: the attributes of, say, Beethoven's ninth symphony.

The most triumphant failures occur when noble spirits are given adequate resources to meet great challenges. In the arts such circumstances are rare and in each case the product is unique. Virtuoso teaching - from Abelard to Tortelier - is comparable.

Let us be clear that when we talk of state education, we are talking of an enterprise which very seldom indeed provides the opportunity for greatness. The enterprise is immensely worthwhile, but the experience of the teacher is closer to that of the infantryman than to that of Napoleon. Taken by and large, our teachers are only a little more competent than our politicians or our managers. Their task is equally difficult, their performance little better. The schools' record in fighting illiteracy is somewhat better than the government's record in fighting unemployment. It is still not one that invites complacency.

Of course, careful examination of the stock-cupboards of the majority - though by no means all - of our state schools reveals that the equipment with which the teachers go into battle is more like that of Dad's Army than of a *corps elite*. Nor are working conditions conducive to high levels of achievement. For example, a state school headmaster to whom I was speaking

recently, reflected that he could hardly expect his teachers to teach as well as those in the public school in which he had previously served, since they taught 36 periods a week where his former colleagues had taught 22 periods a week.

Nevertheless, we have to face the fact that similar disadvantages dog the managers of British Leyland and members of parliament. No one suggests that as a result they should not be responsible to their shareholders or their constituents. It seems reasonable too, to ask teachers to feel accountable. Yet our perception of the behaviour of managements and governments suggests some problems in accountability. The performance of managers at shareholders meetings and, perhaps even more, of politicians on television, suggests that the notion of accountability can provide a framework for the rhetoric of specious justification.

Accountability must be associated with feelings of responsibility: when people feel accountable they attempt conscientiously to improve their performance: when people feel unfairly called to account, they devise ways of beating the accountants without actually improving the balance sheet.

Any system of accountability should itself take account of the equation of resources. It would be relatively easy and inexpensive to do this. A fairly small sample of schools resourced at different levels could act as a reference point for calibration. The best resourced of our present state schools might provide the base line or ground floor of the index. It would, of course, be improper for calibration purposes to create unfavoured situations, but within the state system as it exists we should be able to select four or five steps downwards from the best resourced schools to those most under-resourced. At the other end it would be necessary, and perfectly proper, to create for the purposes of calibration particularly well-endowed schools. At the top end, for example, you might have a school in which the teachers taught no more than 20 hours a week with classes never higher than 12. The point of such a

calibration exercise would not be to suggest that it would be realistic to construct a state educational system on these principles, but rather to build into any principle of accountability dimensions other than those of teacher competence. No doubt we should find that support investment tails off in its effects; but the point is that there is little excuse for planners knowing so little about its yield.

Against such a calibration there would be, in principle, comparatively little problem in asking schools to assess themselves. Some resources would have to be made available for this exercise, but the effects on performance are likely to be much greater than those of external assessment.

It is my experience that schools will want to use standardised tests within such an assessment, and one could hope that the Assessment of Performance Unit could thrash out what test construction programme it would be best to commission. Such tests should be taken seriously, but not too seriously. They should be instruments through which schools can get to know themselves and their performance, but no claims should be made that they provide a complete and valid picture of that performance. There is much more to an annual report than a balance-sheet, and balance-sheets can be deceptive.

Using tests and judgemental criteria, schools should survey and report on their achievements and their problems. It should be unacceptable for a school to regard any achievement as satisfactory. The level of performance in any area should be acceptable only in terms of the concentration of resources in an alternative problem area. A school's account of itself should combine a diagnosis, and a progress report since the last diagnosis, and long- and short-term future plans relating decisions in the allocation of resources to progress in the handling of problems.

If schools were to give such accounts of themselves, the accounts would be required to be audited by an external evaluator

who, as a result of some study of the school, was able to attest that the school's report on itself is a conscientious and an honest one. A role for HMI here, one would think.

Such a structure of accountability would, I believe, make in the long run for an improvement of our schools. But, given the relative inflexibility in the extent of the resources made available to education, the largest factor in that improvement will be the professional and personal resources of teachers. If teachers teaching more hours than is desirable, sometimes in near-slum conditions, where, with inadequate equipment, they struggle against the problems created for them by the social environment, then the least they can ask is that the education authorities make available on a more liberal scale than has ever before been contemplated resources for inservice self-development. And we need to make these resources available in such a way that we can ensure that the supporting services of educational research will see the need to justify the relevance of their work to the practice of teaching as more pressing than the need to acquire status with academic colleagues.

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