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Are These the Accountable Teacher Subjects Citizens Want?

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Abstract: This paper represents an attempt to bring about more deliberation vis-à-vis the accountability so often called for by society. It is concerned with the impact of contemporary accountability on the subjectivities and identities of teachers and the production of accountable teacher subjects. In problematising accountability, the intention of this paper is not to provide concrete answers but to instigate more creative and critical thinking about and reflections on accountability. This paper sets out to highlight tensions, provoke readers, and generate questions—questions for policy and practice about the nature, value, purposes and effects of contemporary accountability. The issues discussed here are not simply teachers' issues, however, but issues for us all, and collectively we must find solutions. We must ask questions about accountability and questions of accountability and consider how and why professionals are subjected to accountability and the ways in which accountability shapes subjectivity.

Keywords: accountability; subjectivity; identity; discourse; democracy

¿Son estos los docentes responsables que buscan los ciudadanos?

Resumen: Este artículo representa un intento de provocar una mayor deliberación frente a la *accountability* que tantas veces reclama la sociedad. Se ocupa del impacto de la *accountability* contemporánea sobre las subjetividades e identidades de los docentes y la

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producción de sujetos docentes responsables. Al problematizar la *accountability*, la intención de este artículo no es proporcionar respuestas concretas, sino instigar un pensamiento y una reflexión más creativos y críticos sobre la *accountability*. Este documento se propone resaltar las tensiones, provocar a los lectores y generar preguntas, preguntas para la política y la práctica sobre la naturaleza, el valor, el propósito y los efectos de la *accountability* contemporánea. Sin embargo, los problemas discutidos aquí no son simplemente problemas de los maestros, sino problemas para todos nosotros, y colectivamente debemos encontrar soluciones. Debemos hacer preguntas sobre la *accountability* y considerar cómo y por qué los profesionales están sujetos a la *accountability* y las formas en que la *accountability* da forma a la subjetividad.

Palabras-clave: *accountability*; subjetividad; identidad; discurso; democracia

São estes os professores responsáveis quem os cidadãos querem?

Resumo: Este artigo representa uma tentativa de trazer mais deliberação em relação à *accountability* tantas vezes exigida pela sociedade. Preocupa-se com o impacto da *accountability* contemporânea nas subjetividades e identidades dos professores e na produção de sujeitos docentes responsáveis. Ao problematizar a *accountability*, a intenção deste artigo não é fornecer respostas concretas, mas instigar pensamentos e reflexões mais criativos e críticos sobre a *accountability*. Este artigo se propõe a destacar tensões, provocar leitores e gerar questões – questões para políticas e práticas sobre a natureza, valor, propósito e efeitos da *accountability* contemporânea. As questões discutidas aqui não são apenas questões dos professores, mas questões para todos nós, e coletivamente devemos encontrar soluções. Devemos fazer perguntas sobre a *accountability* e considerar como e por que os profissionais estão sujeitos à *accountability* e as maneiras pelas quais a *accountability* molda a subjetividade.

Palavras-chave: *accountability*; subjetividade; identidade; discurso; democracia

Are These the Accountable Teacher Subjects Citizens Want?

Accountability is now a key element of professional life (Glatter, 2003; O’Neill, 2013; Shore & Wright, 2015a). O’Neill’s (2002, p. 45) assertion 20 years ago that ‘the quest for greater accountability has penetrated all our lives’ continues to hold strong relevance today, as does Ranson’s (2003, p. 459) contention that ‘accountability is no longer merely an important instrument or component within the system, but constitutes the system itself’. Although scholars often see it as a term used variously (Ozga, 2020; Poulson, 1996; Verger & Parcerisa, 2017), accountability is not only part of the nomenclature of contemporary education but a very real and live device that works to govern practitioners, appease taxpayers, and supposedly raise performances. Accountability is understood here as something that is ‘done to’ teachers (Reeves, 2004) and also done by teachers—‘things that we do to ourselves and to others’ (Ball, 2003, p. 224). Contemporary accountability is about more than the consequences of performances, but the essence of these performances. It is a type of discipline and control that dictates and coerces deeds and conduct and devises and configures dispositions and characters. Through a concoction of power relations, discourses, judgements, and the possibility of sanctions and rewards, accountability commands us, shapes us, and determines who we are and how we are in relation to others. It produces not just ways of doing but ways of being while at the same time it shifts our entities from that of human beings to human *doings*. The ‘regime of accountability’ (Ball, 2021, p. 59) popularly known as performativity renders us

continually recordable and open to judgements and requires us to focus on targets, indicators and evaluations and live an existence of calculation (Ball, 2003)—for some this accountability brings terror, for others pleasure (Holloway & Brass, 2018).

This paper is concerned with the impact of contemporary accountability on teachers, or ‘teacher subjects’ (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012; Perryman et al., 2017). It discusses some of the ways in which accountability, so often called for by society, affects teacher subjectivity and identity. Through Michel Foucault, Ball (2013, p. 125; 2016a, p. 1131) details that subjects are tied to others by control and dependence and tied to their own identity through self-knowledge or a conscience. This is both ‘the state of subjection’ and the ‘self-configuration of an identity’ (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 87). It is important to stress that in problematising accountability the intention of this paper is not to provide concrete answers but to instigate more creative and critical thinking about and reflections on accountability. It sets out to highlight tensions, provoke readers, and generate questions—questions for policy and practice about the nature, value, purposes and effects of contemporary accountability.

The following section of this paper will briefly outline accountability’s relationship with society: deemed necessary by all, shaped by many, undertaken by few. The ensuing section then discusses teacher subjectivity and identity and the production of accountable teacher subjects. The penultimate section of this paper highlights some key concerns about how accountability affects the teaching profession. Finally, the paper closes by stressing that these are not simply issues for teachers, but issues for us all, and that collectively we must find solutions to the problems of contemporary accountability.

Accountability to Citizens (?)

Accountability is aimed at not only improving performances but building and maintaining the trust of the taxpayer. Politicians regularly remind citizens that they are mindful of their money and of the need for greater productivity and accountability in the public sector (Mooney Simmie, 2012) and it would be difficult for them to ally themselves with the wishes of parents and the voters if they were not concerned with raising standards in education (Chitty, 2014). Education, therefore, is a key area where accountability is promoted and perceived as a necessity. According to Verger and Parcerisa (2019, p. 145), imposing accountability ‘allows politicians to signal to their publics that they are working hard towards education change and that they are concerned with education results and the future of children’. Importantly, the economic concerns that ensure buy-in are not just about our finances here and now but our future prosperity. Drawing on quotes from politicians in the United States, Holloway (2019a) shows this at work. It is explained that

When former Secretary of Education Duncan and President Obama equated the economic well-being and safety of the country with teacher success, it... ‘made sense’ that stringent and punitive accountability policies and practices were necessary to ensure the security of the nation. When teachers bear the burden of keeping the country safe, then guaranteeing teacher success becomes a national priority, and high-stakes evaluation, by any means necessary, is a thoroughly legitimised endeavour. (Holloway, 2019a, p. 408)

The ‘fears and desires’ (Ball, 2009) of citizens make accountability appealing and political discourse makes it common sense; accountability is in all our interests. It is positively associated with terms like ‘openness and transparency’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘democracy’ that, Shore and Wright (2004, p. 103) say, ‘no reasonable person could oppose’. To draw on the words of Perryman (2006, p. 149),

accountability appears as an unquestionable ‘good thing’ with critics positioned ‘as being against progress’.

According to Simkins (2003), views that accountability was too soft or absent in education gave rise to pressures to reduce the powers of professionals and increase the influence of others. As in other sectors in this age of accountability, collegial standards defined by professions have been replaced by control through criteria pre-defined by stakeholders outside the profession (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). Moore and Clarke (2016) refer to the ‘occupational professionalism’ of the past where teachers were deemed sufficiently trustworthy and understandings of and practices relating to professionalism originated primarily within the profession itself and they compare this with the ‘new’ professionalism of contemporary education. ‘Organisational professionalism’, instead, has external origins and is a ‘more aggressive, more strictly defined and more monitored discourse’ (Moore & Clarke, 2016, p. 672). Evaluations, for example, have been removed from the hands of teachers and are now instead designed by politicians, agencies, inspectors, researchers, and parents (Ottesen, 2019). Many play their part in regulating the teaching profession, although the domestic actors tend to be more visible and vocal. These stakeholders act in the ‘best’ interests of society (Sugrue, 2013) and ensure accountability. Policies, ministers’ speeches, media reports, and parent fora, to name a few, all play important roles. Thus, teachers now tend to be dominated by externally prescribed and imposed regulations which become embedded in daily school life and shape practice and internal relations as well as relations to the external.

The public as Ingersoll (2006, p. 235) and later Ingersoll and Collins (2017, p. 77) point out, ‘has a right and, indeed, an obligation to be concerned with the performance of teachers’. The rise of performance data has seen parents and other stakeholders become more demanding (Honingh et al., 2020) and we might also consider the aspirations of middle-class parents (Biesta, 2004) and the impact of today’s more educated parents (Sugrue, 2015). The imbalance of power in accountability relationships, however, positions teachers against the public; those held accountable and those wanting their accounts. Despite the need for accountability in the eyes of citizens, this one-way relationship of accountability is often somewhat inaccurate. The accountability between parents and schools tends to be indirect with direct accountability actually taking place between schools and the state (Biesta, 2004). Glatter (2003, p. 53) distinguishes between contractual and responsive accountability, where the former ‘is concerned with the degree to which educators are fulfilling the expectations of particular audiences in terms of standards, outcomes and results’ and the latter refers to consultive decision-making with relevant stakeholders. Particularly as part of quality control, the main purpose of accountability is to monitor, control, and develop the education system and Glatter (2003) explains that it is contractual accountability that prevails, with governments or their agencies setting the criteria and stipulations and not parents or ‘consumers’. According to Wrigley (2003), the terms of accountability are far from democratically determined, and Biesta (2017) makes the point that it is the state guaranteeing the quality of service provided through the formulation of standards and systems of inspection and control. As O’Neill (2002, pp. 52-53) says,

In theory the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions more accountable *to the public*...But...the real requirements are for accountability to regulators, to departments of government, to funders, to legal standards. (Emphasis in original)

Moreover, while there is a rationale for clear descriptors and a simplified ‘transparent’ language (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011), accountability is not necessarily always understood by those supposedly involved. Not only can there be a lack of experience in or knowledge of school operations (Ingersoll, 2006), but O’Neill (2013) makes the point that the complexity or even

obscurity of accountability systems often fail to garner trust from the public and can inadvertently have the opposite effect. According to O'Neill (2013, p. 13), those invited to place their trust in accountability are often not well placed to do so:

It is true that a great deal of information about schools and exams is made available to the public in the name of transparency; but transparency or disclosure is a far cry from adequate communication, and may not offer enough to those who have little time or expertise to enable them to place or refuse trust intelligently...it is evident that current systems of accountability are too complex for pupils, parents, or even teachers to judge them for themselves. Hence it is not reasonable to expect that they should be trusted.

Thus, at this point we might wonder: is accountability giving citizens what they want?

Teacher Subjectivity and Identity

Teacher identity here refers to how teachers, 'both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers' (Mockler, 2011, p. 519). Rather than how others identify us, it is about who we think we are and who we want to be (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008, 2009). The concept of identity has different meanings in the literature but it is generally agreed that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon best characterised as an ongoing process (Beijaard et al., 2004). According to Varghese et al. (2005), a particular conception of identity has gained acceptance in anthropology, sociology, and related fields such as education. This understanding of identity revolves around certain central ideas: that identity is not stable but shifting; that identity is not context free but crucially context dependent; and that to a large extent, identity is constructed, maintained, and negotiated through language and discourse (Varghese et al., 2005). Teacher identity is therefore fluid, dynamic, and prone to change as discourses change.

According to Mockler (2011), teacher identity is formed and re-formed over the course of a career and mediated by personal experiences, professional contexts, and external political environments, while Day et al. (2006) similarly put forward that identity can be affected by external, internal, and personal factors. Identity, Ball (2013) maintains, is enabled by subjectivity, what Lambert and Gray (2021, p. 9) report as being 'a process of becoming, constantly in flux, and forever engaged in dynamic power flows'. Subjects are both constituted and governed by others and at the same time constituted and governed by themselves (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) and how others organise us will affect how we see ourselves. Subjectivities and identities are not stable and the impact policies can have on teachers can vary. There is the production of 'particular kinds of teacher subjects' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 6). Skinner et al. (2021) point out that teachers can struggle with a sense of identity loss if they are required to leave behind old values, while others might be more positive. The professional identities of experienced teachers in particular can be problematic when reforms conflict with their experiences (Lockton & Fargason, 2019). It is important therefore to note the likelihood of differences in response to reforms by those who have experienced more autonomy in the past and those who enter the profession not knowing any different (Day & Smethem, 2009) — 'new kinds of teacher subjects' are produced (Ball, 2003, p. 217). While many studies continuously highlight accountability's negative impact on teachers (see for example, Brady & Wilson, 2021; Gerwitz et al., 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Skerritt, 2019a; Skinner et al., 2021), there are also now many recent studies in various international settings pointing to how today's teachers can be more enthusiastic about and embracing of accountability regimes (see for example, Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Holloway 2019b; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Perryman et al., 2017; Sullivan et al.,

2020; Wilkins, 2011). Over time accountability has been normalised in many countries and this is reflected in the makeup of these systems' teachers. In many cases, these teachers are children of accountability: schooled, trained, and now practising in contexts of routine accountability. They are the products of such systems (Wilkins et al., 2021) and accountability is the episteme of their time (Buchanan, 2015).

In this paper, teachers are thought of as 'good' people doing 'good' work (Ball et al., 2012, p. 41) and making positive contributions to society (Moore & Clarke, 2016). As Craig (2017) asserts, most people become teachers to change the lives of young people. They are professionals doing vital work both inside and outside of classrooms, all of which help prepare young people for adulthood. While the role(s) of the teacher is widely appreciated by citizens, it is also often unappreciated and disregarded and what is known as 'teacher bashing' (Ball, 1990; Ingersoll, 2006) will resonate with anyone with experience of working in education. Nonetheless, the accountability of contemporary education and the calls for it by citizens shape the subjectivities of teachers and produce accountable teacher subjects. In what follows, some of the impacts of this accountability on subjectivities are questioned.

Accountability: Are We Doing This Right?

Accountability can be difficult to argue against and the idea of the 'unaccountable teacher' is not a favourable one (Mockler & Stacey, 2021). Here, however, some key concerns vis-à-vis accountability are discussed and it is envisaged (and hoped) that readers will begin to form their own additional questions as they peruse. Indeed, some prompts are provided throughout.

Does Accountability Generate More Trust in Teachers?

Accountability can be divisive, pitting taxpayers against teachers, but to what extent are stakeholders such as parents actually informed of or engaged in contemporary forms of accountability? If accountability is predominantly between schools and states, we might consider how conducive official discourse is—Biesta (2004) would have us think that this accountability could be an end in itself. It might be of benefit to politicians and policy makers to be seen to make difficult decisions with public funds and to have public sector workers subjected to their guidelines (Mooney Simmie, 2012) but it is quite possible that the current culture of accountability 'actually damages trust rather than supporting it' (O'Neill, 2002, p.19) or repairing it (O'Neill, 2002, p.58). A school principal explains:

The effects are dire – harming the real job to an extreme degree, and undermining confidence in the service so that parents are at our throats. (Ball, 2016a, p. 1137; Ball, 2016b, p. 1053; Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 91)

Distrustful public perceptions can erode professionalism and autonomy (Mooney Simmie et al., 2019)—and this is without considering discourses that frame teachers as 'risky' (Holloway, 2019a) or over-allocate them blame (Lingard et al., 2017). Even without populist rhetoric, the basic accountability package of contemporary education can divide and accelerate the divide between teachers and the public and produce shifty subjects. The readily available information, data, and complaints procedures can potentially give rise to 'suspicion, low morale, and may ultimately lead to professional cynicism' which could then give reason for public mistrust (O'Neill, 2002, p. 57).

Does Accountability Reassure Teachers?

Given the busy nature of contemporary schools and climates of accountability, the stress from always ‘trying to catch up with things’ amidst an array of responsibilities can contribute to a sense of inadequacy and failure (Skinner et al., 2021). Conveniently, accountability seeks improvement—to refine practice, to always do more, to go above and beyond. It is not just about current performances but future performances (Ranson, 2003). The now prevalent discourse of the ‘reflective practitioner’ who strives for improvement in a rather unquestioning way (Perryman et al., 2017) reflects this. For many, however, there is ontological insecurity: ‘unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent’ (Ball, 2003, p. 220). Thus, what we are left with are many teachers left feeling, *inter alia*, overworked and exhausted, stressed and worried, torn between what they want to do for students and what they judge to be best for students, and what accountability ultimately requires them to do. In many instances compliant subjects are produced in the midst of negativity, as we see in the following comments made by teachers:

You have to put some values on the backburner to appease what the school wants you to do. It’s as simple as that. (Skerritt, 2019a, p. 585)

This is the system, follow the system. (Skerritt, 2020, p. 14)

There can be confusion and inner conflicts about roles, values, purposes, and what is deemed right and wrong and many will have feelings of shame and guilt, and feel helpless, defenceless, and hypocritical. Of course, some will take reassurance from accountability but this can present its own issues (see for example, the section below entitled ‘Does Accountability Produce Humanistic Teachers?’).

Does Accountability Improve the Work of Teachers?

It can be difficult to challenge or criticise contemporary policies when values such as accountability and transparency would normally be espoused by professionals (Shore & Wright, 2015b). Thus, accountability dominates, and for many terrorises. While it can be hard to argue against accountability there are indeed arguments that accountability can make things worse (Ingersoll, 2006; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017), have teachers report on what they are doing instead of actually doing it (Ball, 2016b), and undermine (O’Neill, 2013) or distort performances (Ranson, 2003). To draw on the words of O’Neill (2002, pp. 49-50):

I think that many public sector professionals find that the new demands damage their real work...Each profession has its proper aim, and this aim is not reducible to meeting set targets following prescribed procedures and requirements...Much professional practice used to centre on interaction with those whom professionals serve: patients and pupils, students and families in need. Now there is less time to do this because everyone has to record the details of what they do and compile the evidence to protect themselves against the possibility not only of plausible, but of far-fetched complaints.

It is now well documented that many teachers feel that the nature of their work which is increasingly dominated by administrative demands often detracts from what we might consider to be their *real* work (see for example, Brady & Wilson, 2021; Gewirtz et al., 2021; Skerritt, 2019a;). The pressure, bureaucracy, and accountability teachers are subjected to can be perceived as being for optics as opposed to serving students’ best interests (Skerritt, 2021).

Does Accountability Enhance Collegiality among Teachers?

The divisive nature of accountability can also separate teachers. In some countries numerical scores might be used to grade and categorise performances, which is ‘divisive and unhelpful’ according to this teacher in England:

and it’s even more wrong for staff within a school to do it to each other every term.... The observer should not be jury and judge. It might make good TV like *The Apprentice* but it’s no way to build morale and build a team. (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 90)

Some teachers can be rewarded in staff meetings for their teaching while students’ academic grades and teachers’ behaviour management performances can also be made available to staff as a ‘league table’ for teachers or as a type of ‘public humiliation’ (Skerritt, 2019a). There are the ‘good’ teachers and the ‘bad’ teachers, or the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the games of accountability: the ranking and rating of data; the compliments (or complaints) from parents; the celebration (or ignoring) of work in staff meetings; the competition of and for career progression. Identity construction, as Gewirtz and Cribb (2008, p. 40, 2009, pp. 137-138) explain, involves individuals actively choosing and negotiating identities based on available discourses which involves us ‘strategically positioning ourselves in relation to others...In defining who we think we are, we are inevitably separating ourselves off from what and who we are not’. Thus, teachers are separated not just by how and where they are placed but how and where they place themselves in terms of their own makeup, psyches, and subjectivities.

Does Accountability Produce Humanistic Teachers?

Concerns that spontaneity and human emotion are being driven from teaching (Wrigley, 2003) are not new. A recent example comes from Gewirtz and Cribb (2020, p. 225) as they highlight the dangers of schools focusing on what can be ‘weighed, measured, audited and rewarded or punished’:

there is much less scope to relate to students in open-ended and human ways and thereby, in turn, for students to be given opportunities to develop their own relational capabilities. So much of the discourse in schools is dominated by what are seen as definitive facts about students (e.g. their test scores in different subjects) and so little by the whole of their individual and collective personhood.

Around the world, and it is perhaps more pronounced in countries where accountability is already more established, we are seeing signs of many teachers now championing accountability. While such tensions could undermine collegiality and general staff relations inside schools, which in turn could impede teaching and learning, we should perhaps be particularly concerned about the professional identities of the apostles of accountability. Previous assertions that ‘teachers need to be more extrinsically motivated, replacing the humanistic, altruistic and caring approach of teaching with a colder, individualistic manner that is self-oriented and goal-driven’ (Skerritt, 2019b, p. 164) may be somewhat inaccurate, however. Wilkins et al. (2021) have recently conceptualised the arrival of a generation of teachers able to justify their work as being underpinned by a socially progressive moral purpose, but it is suggested that there is the possibility that ‘more fundamental aspects of social justice and equity, such as the need to support students to develop as critically engaged citizens, empowered to participate fully in society, will be increasingly side-lined’ (Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 41). Similarly, research by Frostenson and Englund (2020) points to how teachers can hold on to humanistic professional values which we would have previously thought of as diverging from

performative values but at the same time it could be argued that these teachers' ideals and values are not 'genuinely humanistic' if they are constructed and filtered through performative logics (Frostenson & Englund, 2020, p. 708). To what extent, therefore, are these teachers serving students' best interests? Even for those with a genuine belief that they are, *inter alia*, committed to social justice, that they are adopting a humanistic approach, that their work is underpinned by an ethic of care, can this truly be the case if their identities are also shaped by overarching regimes of accountability? Whether this accountability is experienced negatively or positively, there will be further unintended consequences for those on the receiving end of their work and in neither case, one still contends, are students likely to receive ample, never mind optimal, attention (Skerritt, 2020).

Does Accountability Strengthen the Professional Responsibility of Teachers?

The tensions discussed above can compound and bring about the erosion of professional responsibility. Accountability can unsurprisingly damage the goodwill of teachers and the busy nature and reality of teachers' daily work means that there is not adequate time to see to all the tasks, duties, and responsibilities that they are faced with, never mind the add-ons. Accountability recognises this, as is reflected in the 'voluntary' yet compulsory nature of some initiatives—they are optional but obligatory (Perryman et al., 2017; Skerritt, 2019a). Elements of the teaching profession, including the extracurricular, that teachers once had time for and passion for are now often redundant; they are undervalued or simply not valued—or when it is metrics that are prioritised the activities that cannot be calculated do not count. Thus, accountability can rework professional responsibility. As Cochran-Smith (2021, p. 14) explains, this shift is not simply an issue of terminology:

the distinction between accountability and responsibility...is more than a matter of semantics. The former often connotes obligation and coercion, while the latter suggests professional willingness and commitment.

Solbrekke and Englund (2011, p. 855) similarly distinguish between responsibility as proactive action voluntarily initiated by professionals in accordance with the commitments embedded in the purpose of the profession and accountability which is the contractually obligated reactive reporting on actions and results whereby professionals are controlled by predefined measures. Such distinctions are important or otherwise arguments against accountability could come across as arguments for irresponsible action (Biesta, 2004). As the following disclosure from this teacher indicates, it is difficult to be a professionally responsible subject when accountability dominates:

What I went in to teaching for was to be with the kids. I wanted to help them, and at the end, I know this sounds horrendous but the kids actually became an inconvenience—they were getting in the way of everything else I needed to do...At the end of the day I was being judged as well. So I was marking the kids' work but my work was being marked by senior leadership so *I* was still a student. (Skerritt, 2019a, p. 586. Emphasis in original)

With many of today's professionals turning more to utilitarian as opposed to morally responsible decision-making to 'survive' (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011, p. 856), 'the moral aspects of professional responsibility seem to be diminishing in significance' (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011, p. 857). Accountability, relative to responsibility, is pervasive and can have negative consequences for the health, thoughts, and actions of professionals (Sugrue & Mertkan, 2017). Even for those in favour of the accountability that dominates their professional lives, could their priorities, even subconsciously, be contorted?

Looking Ahead

Accountability can often be seen as being either ‘all good’ or ‘all bad’ (Scheurich et al., 2000, in Sloan, 2006) but it is not inherently good nor bad on its own but shaped by larger policy and political agendas (Cochran-Smith, 2021). Solbrekke and Englund (2011), for example, remind us that it is not simply accountability but the politics of contemporary accountability that challenge the moral implications of professional responsibility. Gewirtz and Cribb (2020, p. 220) also make the important point that the ‘past was not all good and much of what was good no doubt survives’, and the intention of this paper has not been to romanticise the past or to decry accountability but to open up a discussion about the nature, value, purposes and effects of contemporary accountability. At the same time, I suspect that at this late stage, readers are not so naïve as to think that my position on the current state of accountability is so evenly balanced. The tendency for critics to commonly qualify their critiques with ‘not all bad’ assurances, as noted by Holloway (2021, p. 151), resonates deeply with me here. Although I am not advocating any kind of accountability-free education, I am conscious that I have nonetheless included concessions throughout to show that I am not too distant from mainstream thinking (Holloway, 2021). I am also not too distant from the accountable teacher subjects I write of here. To draw on the words of Holloway (2021, p. 148), we are all subjects of discourse (Foucault 1977, 1980). We do not sit in some privileged ontological position that allows us to ‘see’ the discourse from the outside of it. Therefore, making sense of schooling through the same onto-epistemic lens that gives shape to our own subjectivities and understandings of ourselves is precisely how discourse and power/knowledge operate.

At the risk of this paper operating on the ‘hidden premise’ principle where certain things are implied and certain questions are raised without any clear assertions (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2009), to be more explicit at this point, my writing here has been motivated by a desire to approach some of the things that make me ‘burn with rage’ and a hope that this writing ‘might change those things’ (Savage, 2021, p. 282). Around the globe accountability is affecting teachers (and we can extend this to those in higher education), their work, their relationships, and their sense of self in ways that that should concern us all. This culture of accountability was introduced in the name of greater democracy but ironically prevents teachers from working more democratically with students and parents (Wrigley, 2003). What has been democratised, however, is the surveillance of teachers (Page, 2017; Skerritt, 2020). In this strained (un)democratic space, some subjects are struggling, other subjects are thriving, but all of these subjectivities require further deliberative work.

An antidote to this accountability could be through collective action and a reassertion of professional values (Shore & Wright, 2015b). Teachers are often unable to make a difference to the things they think are worthwhile when they act on their own and so concerted and collective professional and political action may be required (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009) if the aim is to reclaim the heritage of previous generations of teachers (Sugrue, 2013) and ‘bring professional responsibility back in’ (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). As well as reasserting teacher professionalism there could be a reconnection of schools to communities (Wrigley, 2020). Here, teachers would not only need to recognise the threats to their professionalism but make these visible to the wider public (Biesta, 2015), exposing the dangers of what might initially appear to be conducive (Biesta, 2017). This might involve public debates, a social movement, and the strengthening of trade unions (Wrigley, 2020). The professional voice of teachers becomes suspect within accountability cultures (Biesta, 2004) and greater autonomy for some groups such as parents can inhibit teachers’ autonomy (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009), meaning an

alliance is of increased importance. In some contexts, parents have been opting their children out of standardised testing and Sugrue (2017, p. 179) suggests that teachers make opportunities such as these 'to join forces with parents and public. This is not just a matter for teachers, however. It is both an individual and collective responsibility that requires the combined attention of us all (Sugrue, 2013). The onus is on us to search for alternatives 'before morale, moral compass and a sense of professionalism is eroded further' (Sugrue, 2017, p. 179). While it is teacher subjects specifically discussed here, Ball and Olmedo (2013) remind us these are not simply 'their' struggles but also 'our' struggles. As well as educators, we should be mindful that, as Thompson et al. (2021) point out, audit and accountability regimes also have consequences for school communities.

This paper represents an attempt to bring about more deliberation vis-à-vis accountability: as Stephen Ball, influenced by Foucault, might say, 'maybe we should try and think about this better' (Mainardes & Marcondes, 2009). I am with Holloway (2021, p. 165) when she puts forward that it is important 'to question the extent to which teachers can exercise professional discretion and respond to the immediate needs of their students and schools, even when this is in opposition to the dominant views of the school, community or government'. There is an important role here for academics but there is also a need for policy makers, practitioners, parents, and the public to ask themselves if the current forms of accountability are providing the most efficient means of enhancing the quality of professional work in everyone's interest (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). We must ask questions about accountability and questions of accountability and consider how and why professionals are subjected to accountability and the ways in which accountability shapes subjectivity. To begin, this paper closes with a simple question: are these the accountable teacher subjects citizens want?

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