Agency, Reciprocity, and Accountability in Democratic Education

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The current policy debate about accountability has triggered fundamental questions about the relationship between the democratic state and public schools. The general push of policy at the local, state, and national levels has been to increase pressure on accountability for measured student performance, following deep-seated trends in society-at-large toward increasing attention to productivity. For policymakers and advocates of performance-based accountability, its advantages are obvious. Schools are simply being asked to make good on their rhetorical claims that they benefit students. For opponents of performance-based accountability, its disadvantages are equally obvious. Focusing on measurable student performance narrows the purpose of schooling to that which can be measured, it trivializes instructional practice, and it demeans the knowledge and skill of those who work in schools by dictating their work with external directives. Performance-based accountability may also introduce strong standardizing and nationalizing pressures that undermine traditions of state and local democratic control of schools, disrupting long-established relationship between schools and their publics. While this opposition is not coherent theoretically, it can be read as an argument that performance-based accountability is fundamentally “undemocratic.” It treats schools as instruments of central authority, rather than as instruments of democratic community. It is essentially coercive, rather than consensual. It overrides the preferences of parents, students and educators in local communities in favor of the dictates of distant authorities.

The central problem of this paper is whether it is possible to square the theory of performance-based
accountability with "democratic" conceptions of schooling. By "democratic" conceptions of schooling, I mean two things: Schools that nurture high levels of knowledge, skill, and competence in students designed to prepare them for participation in democratic life. And schools in which students, parents, and educators have a role in determining the conditions of their own work. I begin in the classroom with conceptions of powerful instructional practice and learning that link to competence in democratic participation, asking what are the conditions that promote such practice. I move the school level, asking what it looks like when this instructional practice in classrooms is nested in schools, asking what organizational conditions promote and nurture this practice. Finally, I move to the system level and ask what kinds of policies correspond to the entailments of instructional practice at the classroom level and of organizational success at the school level.

In general, I find that there are no fundamental contradictions between the requirements of democratic education and those of performance-based accountability. I also find that squaring democratic education with performance-based accountability is a much more complex and demanding enterprise than either policymakers or higher-level administrators have yet acknowledged, and that the risks entailed in bad policy are extremely high for the future of democratic education.

The main lines of my argument are that the conditions for success of democratic schooling are powerfully parallel at the classroom, the school, and the system levels, and these conditions are not necessarily inconsistent with strong performance-based accountability. I develop a theory that connects the classroom, the school, and the system using the central ideas of agency, reciprocity and accountability.

The Socratic Paradox: Agency and Reciprocity in the Classroom

A truism of education is "I can teach you, but I cannot 'learn' you," a phrase that is meant to convey the importance of the learner's role in the act of teaching. My teaching requires your participation as an active agent in order for you to learn. Conversely, your success as a learner depends on my ability to engage you in an activity that leads to learning. There are two fundamental principles at work here: One is the principle of agency, which requires your active consent and engagement with me in the social activity of learning, and my active engagement in eliciting that consent and
engagement. In order for teaching and learning to occur, we both have to actively consent to be engaged. The second principle is reciprocity, which requires each of us to agree to be influenced in our common work by the other’s needs and interests; my interest and need to be effective as a teacher depends on your interest and need to gain something of value from your relationship with me as a student. Teaching and learning is one way we negotiate our individual needs and interests. As with all productive social relationships, the benefits or gains from our mutual engagement in this activity should exceed the costs to each of us, and additionally, if our relationship is multiplied several times over other similar relationships, the collective benefits to society of our learning should be greater than the costs to all of us. In this sense, successful teaching meets the definition of a collective good.

There is, however, buried in this relationship of “teacher” and “learner” a noble lie, or more politely, a paradox. In order for me to exercise agency as a learner, I must believe that, in some sense, I control the conditions of my own learning—at least to the degree that I can claim my portion of the reciprocity in the relationship. But the whole purpose of being in relation to someone called a teacher is that you, the teacher, are supposed to possess more knowledge—of a certain kind, in a certain domain, for certain purposes—than I, the student. If it is true that you, the teacher, know what I don’t know, then how is it possible for me, the student, to exercise agency or assert reciprocity in our relationship? By definition, there is a fundamental asymmetry in our relationship. In order for me, as a teacher, to engage you in learning something, I must know something you don’t. But if I have knowledge and you don’t, that means that the only way you can assert agency in the relationship is by refusing to learn what I know. And so on. . . .

A significant piece of western philosophy—or eastern philosophy, for that matter—revolves around this central paradox in the relationship between teacher and student. I have labeled it the Socratic paradox because it presents itself most clearly—to me at least—in the role that Socrates plays in the Platonic dialogues, and, by extension, the role of the teacher in the practice of “Socratic pedagogy.” Plato’s Socrates claims, in the key dialogues that focus on the problems of knowledge and virtue, not to know the answers to the questions he poses, to be interested only in exposing the defects and
shortcomings of other philosophers' ideas, rather than in elaborating his own views, and only to be revealing knowledge that already exists in the mind of the student with whom he is engaged, rather than in any way actively "teaching" that student. In the Socratic dialogue, it is nearly always the student, not Socrates himself, who displays the knowledge or learning that emerges from the discourse.

But how is it possible to get such a result without Socrates actually knowing more than the student with whom he is engaged? Does he "pretend" not to know, skillfully steering the dialogue in the direction of what he already knows and what he wants the student to learn? Or is he genuinely only asking questions that cause the student to reveal the knowledge that is already present, but undisclosed, in the student's mind? If the knowledge the student reveals exists apart from both Socrates and the student, then isn't Socrates also a student, and if he is, who is the teacher? If Socrates were to confess to manipulative intent and simply tell the student what he was thinking, would the student actually "know" it in the same way that he would if he and his teacher were to "discover" it through the process of dialogue? If you believe that the teacher always knows more than the student, then you resolve the Socratic paradox by calling it a noble lie. The teacher pretends not to know what she knows in order to engage the student in a line of questioning that leads the student to a predetermined destination described by the teacher's knowledge. On the other hand, if you believe that, while the teacher may have some comparative advantage in knowledge relative to the student, the good teacher is always "ignorant" or "innocent" in certain important respects, then you treat the Socratic paradox as a genuine paradox. That is, the act of teaching requires the teacher to pretend not to know in order to engage the student in the act of learning, and the act of pretending not to know is precisely what creates the ignorance or innocence that is the occasion for learning. However, if the teacher genuinely doesn't know what she's trying to teach, then the likelihood that the student will learn from the teacher's real ignorance is highly remote. A paradox admits of no logical solution. In its simplest form, Socratic pedagogy entails a paradox.

Skilled practitioners of the Socratic method of teaching often engage in something Plato's Socrates would probably have called sophistry. Rather than living inside the Socratic paradox, they pretend that the knowledge
embedded in the content they are teaching is somehow “revealed” by students’ responses to skillfully-crafted questions initiated by the teacher. In fact, the knowledge is not actually revealed in the students’ responses, it is present in the teacher’s questions. The job of the student is not to discover, master, or understand the knowledge bounded by the teacher’s questions, but to guess what version of the knowledge the teacher is getting at by the form of the question the teacher is asking. I have heard students call this the “what-am-I-thinking?’ game.” Not surprisingly, both students and teachers get very good at this game very quickly with practice—even more so when neither side acknowledges that the game is actually being played. This is kind of teaching is not Socratic in the strictest sense because it doesn’t expose the teacher’s ignorance or innocence in the face of knowledge the teacher is alleged to know, nor does it surface the outright contradiction between this ignorance or innocence and the teacher’s alleged comparative advantage relative to the student in knowledge.

At relatively low levels of cognitive demand, the Socratic paradox is less visible than at high levels, but no less present. That is, when teachers and students are engaging around factual knowledge (What did Laura say when she confronted Fred in chapter 3?) or procedural knowledge (Change this adjective to an adverb.), it often looks as though there is no ambiguity in the relationship between teacher and student. It is the student’s job to find the place in the text where Laura speaks to Fred and to report to the teacher what Laura said; it is the student’s job to add an -ly to swift and thereby create swiftly (now use this word in a sentence). It is when you try to get students to reproduce and extend this factual and procedural knowledge that the Socratic paradox becomes more visible. Why is it important to pay attention to instances in fiction where one character confronts another? How is “the swift river” different, in the diction of a poem, from “the river ran swiftly”? Can a teacher engage a student in these latter questions without, in some sense, being genuinely innocent about what the students’ answers might reveal? …about the students’ interpretation, perception, understanding? …about the teacher’s interpretation, perception, understanding. …of the questions? …of the students’ responses to the questions? Could you actually be sure that the students “knew” anything at all about how to read, interpret, and produce written text if they could answer the first set of questions, but not the second? So
the Socratic paradox is embedded in learning at all levels of cognitive demand, though it might be more visible at some levels than at others.

Let’s now revisit the problems of agency and reciprocity in teaching and learning in light of the Socratic paradox. Reciprocity is not just about the problem of how to engage the student in the teacher’s agenda. It is also about the what the teacher learns from the student by putting herself in the position of ignorance and innocence about that which she is alleged to know. Agency is not just about the student’s active consent to be taught. It is about the teacher’s active transfer of agency over learning from herself to the student. Living inside the Socratic paradox means that the roles of teacher and student are complex, reversible, and reciprocal. If the teacher is doing her job, she is actively engaged in learning the content in greater depth as a consequence of teaching it, and actively engaged in understanding what students’ responses say about the nature of the knowledge she is alleged to know. If the student is doing her job, she is actively teaching the teacher what puzzles the knowledge presents by the form of the questions she asks? And the questioning means that, over time, in specific domains of knowledge, agency or control over learning passes from teacher to student, and back again.

In a widely-shown videotape of an eighth grade Japanese math lesson, created as part of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), a teacher of a class of 38 students asks how to straighten a crooked boundary between two pieces of land, while, at the same time, preserving the landowners’ respective shares. As the lesson progresses, students work individually, then in pairs, drawing on the teacher and his assistant circulating through the room and on “hint cards” available to anyone who needs them. Then individual students, selected by the teacher, present their work on the blackboard, each taking a somewhat different approach, some leading directly to the correct answer, some not. Students model with some confidence and pride what they think of as “good” teaching practice in presenting their work, even satirizing their teachers’ penchant for keeping order in the classroom by chastising their fellow students in a good-natured way. The teacher asks questions about the students’ solutions. The students question and challenge each others’ solutions. Students posing difficult questions come to the blackboard to present their own alternatives. The teacher at one point struggles to find
the exact example of student work on the blackboard that demonstrates a particular idea, in effect modeling his own uncertainty. At the end of the class, the blackboard is covered with student work. The teacher calls the students' attention to the various approaches they have taken to solving the problem, and poses a more complex version of the same problem for the next day. In this lesson, there is no question who is the teacher and who are the students. There is, however, a great deal of action and ambiguity at any given point in the lesson about who is teaching whom, and about who is authorized to say what a good solution is. The classroom is a complex anthropological study in reciprocity and agency. The cognitive demand is high. The evidence of learning is abundant, clear, and visible.

Walter Doyle, in his classic article, "Academic Work," argues that the tasks that teachers and students engage in are, among other things, discrete micro-climates of accountability. That is, each task embodies an activity of some kind, a more or less explicit purpose for that activity, a product of some kind, and a set of expectations between teacher and student about what constitutes successful accomplishment of that work. Notice the repetition of the qualifier "of some kind." A classroom task does not have to be well-designed and taught in order to convey powerful ideas about accountability. In fact, all academic tasks convey powerful ideas about accountability. A badly designed and taught task—one in which the activity, its purpose, product and criteria of success—communicates powerfully that the teacher lacks knowledge and authority in the classroom and therefore that the students' role is either to adjust to the teacher's incompetence through compliant behavior, or to resist. In other words, a task does not have to be successful in order to communicate powerful ideas about accountability. One could think of the culture of the classroom as the accumulated residue of the beliefs and expectations about academic work that are conveyed in hundreds, probably thousands, of academic tasks. Later, we will see that the culture of a school can be seen, among other things, as the accumulated residue of thousands, perhaps, tens of thousands, of academic tasks across classrooms.

Under the best of circumstances, there is a discipline inherent in academic tasks that is external to both the teacher and the student. David Hawkins' formulation of this dynamic takes the form of a triangular relationship among the "I" (teacher), the "Thou" (student), and the "It" (content). There are many ways, Hawkins argues, for adults
to relate to children in our society. These relationships take many forms. What distinguishes the role of teacher, Hawkins continues, is that it is disciplined by the presence of content; without content, the relationship of teachers and children is essentially indistinguishable from other possible relationships among adults and children, and (my addition) it therefore lacks the social authority of education.

Accountability, here, is a positive, rather than a normative concept. That is, accountability occurs whether we are conscious of it or not, and its precise enactment is a consequence of the nature of academic work. Teachers and students internalize their notions of accountability as a consequence of the work they do, whether that work embodies powerful normative ideas about accountability or not.

So, for example, low-level academic tasks—filling out worksheets, looking up words in the dictionary and writing out definitions, learning vocabulary words outside the context of written text, extracting historical facts from textbooks—communicate not just a view of knowledge and what it consists of, but also a view of the nature of accountability in academic work: My relationship, as a student, with the teacher consists of following instructions embedded in well-defined tasks and producing discrete responses to well-defined questions. My relationship, as a teacher, with the student consists of defining tasks that I am certain students will respond to in predictable ways so that we, jointly, minimize the level of ambiguity and uncertainty—and cognitive demand—in our relationship. Notice that in this formulation the teacher "solves" the Socratic paradox by limiting the knowledge that is available to both teacher and student to that which the teacher can control. Reciprocity, in this accountability system, approaches zero, because there is little in the task for the student to teach the teacher, and knowledge is defined in a way that puts the teacher in the role of transmitter. The transfer of agency from teacher to student is minimal because the nature of the task locates the knowledge with the teacher and the obligation to learn with the student—knowledge is transferred, agency over learning is not.

Higher-level academic tasks increase the level of complexity of accountability considerably. Giving students the responsibility for forming their own solutions to mathematics problems, based on prior knowledge, inference, and estimation, requires students essentially to teach the
teacher and their fellow students the logic behind their solutions. This kind of teaching also requires teachers to know, and anticipate in their practice, the range of solutions that students will produce, the knowledge of mathematics embodied in those solutions, and the possible misconceptions represented by different solutions. One cannot understand the nature of accountability embedded in this type of task without a detailed knowledge of academic content and of the dynamics of reciprocity and agency between teacher and student. Putting students in charge of initiating solutions to complex problems, for example, sends a very strong signal about the transfer of agency from teacher to student. But it also raises complex issues of what happens when student work reveals "buggy algorithms" and mathematical misconceptions. Tactically, the teacher is then faced squarely with the Socratic paradox: Should she "take control" of the students' learning and rectify errors, or should she lead the students, through skillful questioning, to diagnose these problems themselves? Who is accountable to whom in this transaction? The student is clearly accountable for both forming and arguing a solution. The teacher is accountable for setting the task within which the student initiates a solution, and for engaging students in the diagnosis of their work. But the effectiveness of the teacher depends heavily on the level and range of students' responses; the effectiveness of the students depends heavily on the teacher's diagnostic ability and her command of the content. There is no way to define the accountability in this task without resort to ideas of reciprocity and agency. High levels of cognitive demand require attention to the shifting locus of accountability in the task, and to the transfer of agency for learning within the task.

Notice that, in this formulation, accountability in academic work is coterminous with learning. But it is learning of a particular kind—what Argyris and Schon have called "double-loop learning:" The learning is both about developing increased fluency in the processes of learning academic content and about developing increased fluency in reflecting on and improving the conditions under which the learning occurs. Higher level thinking about instruction is both about learning how to teach, and how to learn, higher level content, and it is about learning how to monitor and improve how the learning occurs. In order to be accountable in a learning relationship, as teacher to a student, or as a student to a teacher, I must accept responsibility for my own learning and I must accept
responsibility for knowing when the work I am doing does not lead to the desired result, and for trying to do something when it’s not working. Learning requires agency over learning.

**Individual Actions, Collective Results: Agency and Reciprocity in Schools**

In a descriptive or positive sense, the learning that occurs in schools is a composite of the thousands—indeed, tens of thousands—of micro-decisions that occur around academic work among teachers and students in classrooms. Likewise, since each academic task is its own micro-climate of accountability, accountability in schools is constructed from these micro-decisions. Accountability in the aggregate is about accountability in the smallest unit—the teacher and student in relation to each other in the presence of the content. Again, this definition of learning and accountability is not about what people in schools should do, it is about what they do do. So schools in which students and teachers relate to each other around low level work that requires neither to exercise much agency over their learning construct very powerful accountability environments—they are simply powerful in reinforcing low levels of learning, agency, and accountability. Schools in which students and teachers work together on higher-level tasks requiring higher levels of learning and agency over learning construct powerful accountability environments at higher levels.

The problem of learning and accountability in schools is fundamentally a problem of collective action. The fact that learning is supposed to occur in schools is no guarantee that it actually does, nor does the existence of the school as an organization assure that the learning that occurs in one classroom bears any necessary relationship to that which occurs in any other classroom. If schools tend toward being “loosely-coupled” organizations, as many sociologists argue, then one should expect a high degree of variability among classrooms in the tasks that teachers and students construct for learning. This variability in practice would produce variability in student learning. But accountability applied to schools, as opposed to teachers and students working in classrooms, presumes that schools are able to act as collectivities, not just as collections of teachers and students in classrooms.

Schools construct powerful accountability environments out of the way they do academic work, whether they are aware of it or not. These environments can operate to pull the organization toward higher levels of collective action.
and higher levels of student learning, or they can operate
to pull schools apart into highly variable and weak
learning environments.

There are essentially two solutions to the problem of
collective action in organizations—control and
coordination. In the first instance, someone—a principal,
for example—assumes responsibility for telling students and
teachers what to do in such a way that the result of the
work of individuals in classrooms aggregates to a coherent
result at the level of the school. In the second instance,
individuals agree to coordinate their behavior in such a
way that it produces a more coherent result. Most
strategies for making schools act as if they were
organizations involve combinations of both control and
coordination. But accountability systems, and enduring
American views of leadership, tend to treat school leaders
or principals as the primary agents of accountability in
schools. The mythology of American education is heavily
tilted in the direction of "strong leaders make good
schools."

My interest, however, is less in which of these
solutions to the problem of collective action is more
promising than in the similarity of the problems of control
and coordination at the organizational level to the
problems of the Socratic paradox at the classroom level.
In fact, control and coordination present nearly identical
problems at the school level to those presented by the
Socratic paradox inside classrooms. If I, as a leader,
induce collective action through control, I have, in
effect, taken responsibility for telling you what to do,
which is the equivalent of the teacher assuming full
responsibility for telling the student what she needs to
know. Notice that control falls apart as a strategy of
collective action, when it does, for exactly the same
reasons that telling falls apart as a strategy of teaching.
The fact that I am telling you what to do requires (a) that
I know what to tell you to do; (b) that you are willing to
consent to my telling you what to do; and (c) that you
actually know how to do what I'm telling you to do. If any
of these conditions fails, control loses its power to
produce collective action. If I am a principal, for
example, and I tell you, a teacher, to teach reading and
writing at a higher level, there is no guarantee that I
will know what to tell you to do, or that, if I knew, I
would know how to tell all teachers to do the same thing.
Since, you, as the principal, are not doing the teaching—I
am, as the teacher—I can chose, within limits, whether and
how to consent to your request, and if I choose to resist, I increase your difficulties in managing me substantially. Suddenly, I become a very costly part of your organization. Finally, your request assumes that I actually know what to do, and that for some reason I am not doing it. More likely, I am not doing what you want me to do because I don’t know how to do it, and your telling me to do it doesn’t make it possible for me to learn. This conundrum begins to sound like “I can teach you, but I can’t ‘learn’ you.” It begins to sound like this because, in some fundamental way, it is the same problem.

Leaders are in relation to teachers and students in schools as teachers are in relation to students in classrooms. The ability of teachers to respond to leaders depends on the teachers’ capacity to learn new practices, but in order for teachers to learn, they must, in some sense take responsibility for their learning, and in order to take responsibility for their learning, the leader has to transfer agency for learning from the leader to the teacher.

When leadership and accountability become coterminous with learning in schools, the principle of reciprocity governs relations between leaders and teachers: I can only do, as a teacher, what I know how to do. So your responsibility as a leader is to set the conditions in place that permit me to have access to do the work that you, as a leader, expect me to do. Likewise, your effectiveness as a leader depends in large part on your capacity to learn how to function at higher levels as an enabler of my learning, and you do this in part by examining your own knowledge and skill as a leader based on your understanding of my practice as a teacher. Hence, control succeeds as a strategy of collective action to the degree that it evolves toward the transfer of agency and reciprocity. To the degree control evolves toward the transfer of agency and reciprocity, it ceases to look like control and begins to look like coordination.

Coordination is what happens when people willingly consent to orchestrate their actions around a common purpose, with varying degrees of external control. Some forms of coordination occur spontaneously in life outside the bounds of formal organization. Walking down the street in mid-town Manhattan, for example, requires a high level of coordination among individuals and a fair degree of skill in discerning where to place one’s body at a given moment. For some of us, this skill is automatic. Some forms of coordination are structured more formally. We
(some of us anyway) queue up at intersections and wait for the "walk" light to flash in part because we consent to have our individual behavior controlled in order to orchestrate our collective behavior in more sensible ways. As is evident on any given day at 42nd and Madison, or in Harvard Square, some people consent to these controls, some don't. Failing to consent to these formal structures can, however, carry costs.

Organizational structures of schools can be viewed as matters of convenience, existing largely to make the coordination of individual behavior more (or less) likely to happen. I often encourage my students to imagine that the structures of schools are like the lines on a soccer field: They set certain conditions and limits on what individuals are allowed to do, but the play is continuous within these limits and the results of the play are determined by some complex interaction between the skill and knowledge of the players and the formal dimensions of the field. We may change the nature of the play by altering the dimensions of the field—playing on a smaller field favors those who have quickness, a larger field favors those with tactical skill and conditioning. That is, we can choose deliberately to construct the field of play to favor and reward certain types of skill and knowledge. Open structures in schools—structures that encourage high levels of interaction around the work of teaching and learning across classrooms—favor and reward people who are more interested in interactions with others. Closed structures—structures that focus the attention of teachers and students inward toward their own work—favor and reward people who like privacy and control. Structures are, in other words, instrumental. They favor various kinds of skill and knowledge.

Below the level of formal structures there is the "real game." The continuous play of individuals in real time. And out of this play develops the informal structures and routines by which things really get done. One of level and knowledge about the play involves the work itself, another level involves interaction with others around the work. One can be good at the work and lousy at interacting with others around the work, or vice versa. Being good at one doesn't guarantee being good at the other, although being good at the work collectively requires that everyone be good at interacting with others in some degree.

At the level of the school, the problems of learning may be parallel to those of learning at the classroom, but
they are also more complex, if for no other reason than that they occur at a higher level of aggregation. The work is not just about how teachers and leaders interact around instructional practice, it is also about how these parties interact around the formal and informal structures within which the work gets done. Formal and informal structures can enable the work or they can constrain it. Learning how to make structures work in an instrumental way—in a way that supports the work of instruction—is a domain of knowledge in itself. It is also a domain that entails individual and collective learning. It does a leader no good to have knowledge about how structure influences work, or vice versa, if that knowledge is not shared by people who work in the structure, because they have to act on the knowledge in order to make the structure work. Notice the parallel here between how people in schools learn about the relationship between structure and practice and the idea of double-loop learning around instructional practice in classrooms. Just as the learning around practice in classrooms is both about the practice itself and the conditions under which the practice can be improved, so learning at the school level involves learning both about how to cooperate around practice and how make the structures within which people work operate instrumentally to enable cooperation around practice.

When we say that schools are "accountable" in everyday discourse, we normally use that term in a normative sense. We mean that schools are acting in socially approved ways toward certain external publics—parents, communities, policymakers, etc. This use of the term suggests that some schools are "accountable" and others are not. In a positive, as opposed to a normative, sense however, all schools are accountable in some ways for some things to someone. That is, schools that appear to be atomized and purposeless in their approach to academic work—apparently accountable to no one—have chosen, either actively or by default, to construct accountability in a certain way. The people in these schools have, in effect, decided that they are primarily accountable to each other to maintain and protect a work environment that they perceive to be beneficial to themselves. If members of the organization violate this fundamental understanding of accountability, they will likely face sanctions from their colleagues. Likewise, when schools form tight and corrupt relationships with their communities—when they serve as employment agencies and conduits for political patronage, for example—they are in powerful accountability relationships with
external actors. Failure to provide the benefits that the community expects brings sanctions. Similarly, schools in high socio-economic communities often form implicit contracts with their communities in which the school agrees to provide access to privilege in the attainment structure—university admissions, for example—in return for social support in the community. Community members have strong incentives to participate in this bargain because their property values and property taxes reflect the implicit price they have paid for access to attainment. These schools are, in a sense, highly accountable, but they are accountable primarily for attainment, not for academic learning or for performance. If members of these schools violate the implicit attainment contract by, for example, calling attention to grade inflation or the low quality of academic work done by teachers and students, they will be sanctioned both by their peers and their communities.

In each of these cases, and in many more we could describe, schools are highly "accountable" to their own constructions of accountability and/or to the constructions of accountability that are hard-wired into the logic of confidence by which they maintain relations with their communities. Performance-based accountability policies embody a particular normative view that is just one of many possible versions of accountability vying for the attention of schools and their communities, and not necessarily the most powerful one at that. Accountability policies do not operate in a vacuum. We didn't simply "discover" accountability with the advent of performance-based accountability policies in the latest era of educational reform. Various forms of accountability are already embedded in schools, and the current form of accountability that is sanctioned by policy is one among many forms of accountability abroad in schools.

To say that schools are, or should be, accountable for students' academic learning, then, is to take a particular normative view of what accountability means. When this view of accountability is embodied in policy and set in motion in the world it refracts through many different accountability micro-environments at the school and community level. If this situation sounds similar to the problem of adapting teaching to the multiple demands of students’ prior knowledge in the classroom, it is. Just as teachers face students with multiple points of access to learning, so too do policymakers and administrators face schools, and school systems, with widely divergent points of departure. Some of these points of departure entail
fundamental conflicts over the meaning and purpose of accountability itself.

Schools differ not just in their constructions of accountability but also in their organizational attributes, capacities, and cultures. Probably the most robust finding to date from research on accountability policies is that the strongest initial predictors of the impact of policy on student performance are the attributes of schools rather than the attributes of the policies themselves. That is, policies send a signal about the type and level of performance expected of schools, this signal is refracted through a multitude of schools, and what emerges is a highly variable response depending on the specific characteristics of the schools. There is also a high degree of convergence on which aspects of schools seem to be most influential in determining their responses to external pressure for performance. The basic finding here is that schools that have high levels of agreement on the nature of the work, coupled with powerful normative cultures for making those agreements binding, are more successful in responding to external pressure for academic performance than schools that don’t have these attributes.

One construction of what these powerful normative cultures are about is “internal accountability.” **Internal accountability** is constructed as a deliberate contrast to **external accountability**. That is, internal accountability describes the conditions in a school that precede and shape the responses of schools to pressure that originates in policies outside the organization. The level or degree of internal accountability is measured by the degree of convergence among what individuals say they are responsible for (responsibility), what people say the organization is responsible for (expectations), and the internal norms and processes by which people literally account for their work (accountability structures). Weak internal accountability occurs when there is little convergence between what individuals think they are responsible, what people express as the collective aims of the organization, and the structures by which work is monitored. So, for example, a school with weak internal accountability might have high variability among teachers in classroom practice, low agreement on whether the school can actually affect student learning in the face of community influences, and limited ways of finding out what is actually happening in classrooms. Conversely, strong internal accountability might manifest itself in high agreement among teachers on what good instructional practice looks like, high agreement
on the aims of the school in influencing student learning, and visible norms and practices for monitoring the work of teachers and students. It is, however, possible to have high internal accountability around low expectations for student learning. These schools meet the conditions of coherence and alignment of individual responsibility, collective expectations, and accountability structures, and they are therefore more tightly aligned internally, but they may also have achieved this agreement by reducing their expectations for their own and their students’ learning. Nonetheless, the theory predicts, and the evidence suggests, that schools with higher internal accountability are more likely to be responsive to external pressure for performance than those with low internal accountability. (Abelmann, Elmore, et al.)

Another parallel construction of what powerful normative cultures look like in schools is the idea of “trust”. In this formulation, the level of trust in schools is a compound of respect, listening to and valuing the views of others; personal regard, intimate and sustained personal relationships that undergird professional relationships; competence, the capacity to produce desired results in relationships with others; and personal integrity, truthfulness and honesty in relationships. These “discernments” that individuals in and around schools make of each others’ behavior and intentions develop into networks of social exchange among key actors—teachers with principals, teachers with other teachers, professionals with parents, teachers with students, etc. At the aggregate or organizational level, high levels of trust occur when there are high levels of agreement—or synchrony—around the specific norms that shape interpersonal exchanges. Higher levels of relational trust, nor surprisingly, predict higher levels of individual and organizational agency, and in turn, predict higher levels student performance. (Bryk and Schneider 2002, 122-144)

Both of these theories stress convergence, alignment, or agreement among individuals (students, teachers, administrators, parents) views that lead to powerful, binding collective norms that govern the organization as a whole. Norms of internal accountability or trust are evident in the work of people in the organization and their behavior vis a vis each other, not just in the purposes to which people subscribe. More importantly, both theories portray strong normative cultures in schools as the result of active construction—purposeful, explicit work, work that
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stresses strong interpersonal connections and skills, and work that pushes in powerful ways against the prevailing culture of isolation and autonomy around teaching in schools. In this sense, then, both theories are counter-cultural. These theories also lead to a particular normative view of accountability that a strong normative culture precedes and shapes a school’s response to external pressures for performance, that there is no necessary contradiction between the presence of a strong normative culture internal to a school and that school’s responsiveness to external pressure for performance, and that accountability can be an occasion for powerful learning about what makes schools successful in promoting students’ learning.

Running parallel with these ideas of internal accountability and trust in schools is a broader discussion of trust in public institutions generally. This discussion centers on such questions as how are issues of trust resolved in interactions among individuals in everyday life, how are they resolved in political relationships, and how does trust or distrust in public or governmental institutions arise?

In general, issues of trust in political life are complicated by the need to reconcile self-interested behavior with the necessity for cooperation in order to secure the benefits of collective action. One solution to the problem of trust at both the individual and institutional level is the idea that trust is “encapsulated self-interest.” (Hardin 1998) In this view, one does not have to posit that humans are altruistic in some way in order to think them capable of trust, or of inspiring trustworthiness. At the individual level, trust can occur when I conclude that you will take my interests into account in your own behavior because you have an interest in maintaining our relationship. Hence, “my trust in you is... encapsulated in your interest in fulfilling my trust.” (Ibid. 12) At the institutional level, organizations create incentives for people to act in concert with each other; they direct and moderate individual interests for collective ends. If encapsulated self-interest is possible in relations among individuals, it is possible among individuals within organizations. And, to the degree that individuals internalize the interests of others (teachers of students, students of students, teachers of teachers) in the interest of maintaining stable and predictable relations with each other, the institution itself becomes trustworthy. (Ibid.
Trustworthiness is defined as being stable, predictable, and transparent in the degree to which the organization encapsulates the interests of members and clients. (My inference from Hardin’s argument.)

Another key idea that links individual interests to trust in public institutions is “contingent consent,” a corollary of encapsulated self-interest. (Levi 1998) Individuals will trust a public institution “to the extent that they believe it will act in their interests, that its procedures are fair, and that their trust of the [institution] and of others is reciprocated.” (Ibid. 88) The important principles here are those of fairness and reciprocity. Fairness matters because it allows individuals to sustain their commitment to an institution, and to others in the institution, even in those instances where the institution operates against their self-interest of the individual. That is, individuals are willing to suspend their self-interest in some instances if they are assured that norms of procedural fairness have been followed in reaching decisions, and that, over the long run, the institution encapsulates their interests. In addition, individuals calculate whether the trust that put in the institution is reciprocated, that is, whether their interests are encapsulated in the behavior of others and in the norms, rules, and procedures of institutional life.

Hence, the principle of reciprocity, so powerful in relations between teachers and students around instruction, is also present at the next level of aggregation in relations among individuals and institutions. So too is the principle of transfer of agency. Life in organizations involves a series of negotiations between the individual and the collective over the degree to which the individual agrees to adjust her interests to the expectations of others. This is a peculiarly modern problem. “Trust . . . which emerges as a function of negotiation. . . . is also predicated on human agency. Without the idea of agency, any notion of negotiation would itself be severely limited.” “[T]he idea of the individual. . . .emerges as a locus of moral value in the same period that the idea of trust begins to take on its very modern characteristics.” (Seligman 1997, 55) In order for trust to work, in other words, individuals have to be seen to exercise human agency over the expectations of others. In order for my interest to be encapsulated in yours, I must assume agency and responsibility for acting on my interest in relation to you.
Trust is a fragile commodity, hard to construct, easy to destroy. (Levi 1998, 81, quoting Dasgupta 1988, 50) For a variety of reasons, public schools have not been exemplars of trust in action. The fact that we can identify trust as an exceptional variable in determining school performance (Bryk and Schneider 2002) means that it is in short supply. The very processes by which trust, or internal accountability, are created in schools—building up the connective tissue of relationships around instructional work—are easily reversible. At any point, for any reason, individuals may revoke their consent to have their interests encapsulated in others. The causes might entail factional disagreements over the work itself, failures to incorporate learning into the work of improvement and accountability, leaders who equate success with their own visibility and influence, or simply failure to master difficult challenges in the work itself. The creation of high levels of trust and learning in schools is fundamentally counter-cultural work. By definition, most of the people working in public education did not sign on for the kind of work they are currently being asked to do. New entrants to the sector are generally ill-prepared, however well-motivated and positively predisposed they might be, for the high levels of learning and collaboration required to created high levels of trust and internal accountability in schools. And, most importantly, as we shall see next, there is scant evidence that policy makers understand the human and institutional entailment of performance-based accountability systems.

Moving the Herd Roughly Northeast: Agency and Reciprocity in Systems

Problems of accountability in classrooms and schools can be solved largely through face-to-face relationships; as we move from the organizational to the system level, the power of face-to-face relationships attenuates. At a certain scale, accountability begins to become impersonal. The force of law and regulation begins to displace the force of interpersonal influence and consent as a determinant of collective action. Agency and reciprocity recur as fundamental issues of accountability, but in different forms.

Accountability in large-scale systems can be constructed as simple problem of regulatory control. A principal (not the kind who runs a school, but someone in a general position of authority) finds it necessary to form a relationship with an agent (someone with knowledge and skill that the principal needs) in order to accomplish
something the principal desires. The problem the principal faces is how to control the agent, where the agent has interests of his own and possesses information or knowledge that the principal may not have. These "information asymmetries" require the principal to create incentives that structure and direct the agent's behavior in the desired direction, and they also require the principal to assume the costs of oversight and enforcement in order to make the incentives work. (See, Moe 2002, citing Pratt and Zeckhauser 1985, Bender 1988, and Prendergast 1999) In educational accountability, the principal-agent problem boils down to finding the right combination of standards, performance measures, rewards and sanctions that will induce schools to improve. The underlying bet in accountability systems is that schools, and the people in them, will respond to these incentive structures by using their knowledge and skill in the service of the principals, in this case policymakers. Skeptics argue that the accumulated residue of school culture, the limited competence of people in the system, the limits of measurement, and the unreliability of rewards and sanctions make it difficult to imagine that accountability systems could actually accomplish their intended purposes. (Moe 2002) In addition, principals or policymakers face daunting strategic problems of oversight and enforcement. If they set standards too high, they produce extremely high monitoring and enforcement costs. Rewards and sanctions are only as effective as the probability that they will be enforced; high standards with low enforcement are, in effect, low standards. But high standards carry high enforcement costs. So regulatory theory suggests that principals will "optimize;" that is, they will set standards to match the resources they have available for enforcement, thereby creating the maximum level of compliance possible within a given level resources. (Zeckhauser and Viscusi) An optimal regulatory system is one in which a rational agent will meet the principal's expectations based on his calculation that the costs of non-compliance exceed the benefits.

This model of accountability has a few advantages and many disadvantages. Its main advantages are that it focuses attention on the likelihood, within a given level of resources for oversight and compliance, that schools will actually act in accordance with the aims of accountability policies and it suggests that the interests of people who work in schools will drive the results of
accountability systems unless there are countervailing forces that move schools in another direction.

Among the disadvantages of the simple principal-agent model are the following: The model is static with regard to the knowledge and expertise that the principal requires of the agent. It assumes that the agent knows what he needs to know in order to meet the expectations of the principal. Accountability problems, especially those in education, require changes in knowledge and expertise, that in turn require investments in human knowledge and skill in order for the systems to work. These investments in knowledge and skill can act as rewards, in and of themselves, and can alter the relationship between the principal and the agent. Educators may value the additional knowledge and skill they acquire as a consequence of having to meet higher expectations, and this value may act as a positive incentive to meet those expectations. The model is also quite schematic in its assumptions about how organizations, as opposed to individuals, respond to incentives. The theory extrapolates from the individual to the organizational level and assumes that bureaucratic organizations maximize the interests of those who work in them. In the absence of external controls, public institutions cannot be trusted to take account of broader societal interests. What this view ignores is that public institutions operate under mixed incentives. In addition to acting on their own interests, they have to encapsulate the interests of their clients, and they have to be responsive to the broader society in order to sustain their legitimacy. So while institutional self-interest may be the default mode for public institutions—and may, in fact, be a sign of institutional failure—it is certainly not the only factor that explains institutional behavior. The simple principal-agent model also underspecifies the nature of the relationship between principal and agent, at least in those situations where the agent has to accomplish high-level tasks. The model describes the relationship as simple problem of contractual compliance. I agree to do something for you in return for some reward, and you set up the incentive structure that assures that I will do what you desire. In fact, most relationships that involve high levels of knowledge and skill are much more complex than this. The agent often has to teach the principal what to ask for, or what it is reasonable to ask for. Think of an architect trying to convince a client that that cantilevered structure perched precariously over the river is not such a good idea, but that you could get just as
good a result by redefining the roofline. In addition, the principal and the agent often have to acknowledge that neither of them knows what to do, but they nonetheless have to proceed on the assumption that they will learn. What actually is a reasonable rate for reading and mathematics performance to improve, and how long will it actually take? No one really knows the answer to these questions, but accountability systems require a tentative answer that can be revised over time. In these situations, principals and agents are heavily dependent on each other in ways that a simple contractual relationship does not describe.

We should not lose sight, as the simple principal-agent model argues, that individuals and institutions act in self interested ways and that their behavior can be influenced by external incentive structures. But like most simple insights, this one crosses the boundary between simple and simplistic.

A key strategic issue in the construction of accountability systems is whether they are designed to produce compliance or improvement. Compliance-based systems assume that the individual or organization that is being held accountable has the knowledge, skill, and capacity to do what the principal requires, and the essential problem is how to direct the agent's resource toward the principal's ends. Improvement-based systems assume that accomplishing the principal's ends requires a change in the knowledge, skill, and capacity of the agent in order to meet the principal's ends. The difference between these two models, as we shall see, is huge in practice. Virtually all state accountability systems and the system embedded in No Child Left Behind, the federal law that now largely determines the structure of state accountability systems, are intended to foster improvement. Their basic design is to set a standard against which the performance of all schools will be measured, to measure a school's initial performance relative to that standard, and to judge a school's performance on an annual or biennial basis by the increment of performance of the school in reaching the standard. Schools are required not only to produce increments of performance in the aggregate, but they are also required to produce them for specified groups of students—low-income students, students of different racial and ethnic groups, English language learners, etc. States vary in the degree to which they allocate stakes or sanctions among schools and students, but the underlying principle is that stakes reinforce the improvement targets that are embedded in the performance standards. But while
state and federal accountability systems may be improvement-oriented in intent, they are often compliance-oriented in practice.

In order for an accountability system to be based on improvement, it has to embody an underlying theory of how schools improve their performance. Simply constructing an incentive structure of standards and testing around the expectation of steady improvements in performance is not a theory of improvement. A theory of improvement actually has to account for how people in schools learn what they need to know in order to meet the expectations of the accountability system. By this standard, no existing state or federal accountability system is improvement-oriented. That is, there is no existing accountability system that allocates or scales investments in capacity at the school level according to a theory, however primitive, of how schools improve teaching and learning to produce performance. There are, to be sure, assistance programs for low-performing schools and there are, in some jurisdictions, investments in curriculum, professional development, and teacher recruitment that are intended to foster higher capacity in schools. But these measures are not directly related to what schools are expected to do in order to improve their performance. In the absence of explicit theories of improvement connected to standards and testing, all accountability systems degrade in the direction of compliance, away from improvement.

The politics of this process are relatively straightforward. For policymakers the political rewards attached to increased school accountability accrue mostly at the initiation stage, rather than the implementation stage. Most policymakers are elected officials. Most electoral cycles run in two- and four-year terms. Any process or event that takes longer than an electoral cycle is of dubious value in generating electoral credit. Accountability systems, if they are to work, require complex institutional processes; these process are distant from and largely inscrutable to policymakers. But accountability systems do produce one thing that has value—positive or negative—for policymakers: test scores. They produce some kind of evidence on a recurring basis of how well the system is performing at an aggregate level. To the extent that accountability systems have any value at all for public officials it is to the degree that they produce evidence that can be used for political advantage. Hence, over time, other things being equal, one would expect accountability systems to evolve toward increased
reliance on testing and away from the more complex, inscrutable, and longer-term processes of improvement that produce increases in performance. The job of people in schools, then, increasingly becomes to produce gains in performance from their existing base of knowledge and skill rather than to improve performance by improving knowledge and skill. The job of school people becomes compliance.

As accountability systems degrade from improvement to compliance, so too does their authority to influence the behavior people in schools and, hence, their capacity to produce benefits for elected officials. People who are being asked to do things they don’t know how to do, and being rewarded and punished on the basis of what they don’t know, rather than what they are learning, become skilled at subverting the purposes and authority of the systems in which they work. Bad policies produce bad behavior. Bad behavior produces value for no one.

It is in no one’s interest for accountability systems to degrade in this way. But as with most interesting and powerful problems of political behavior, this one requires an acknowledgement that actors with different incentives and interests have to learn to orchestrate their behavior for mutual benefit.

What would a theory of improvement look like and how might it be used to alter the political incentives that surround accountability structures? Not surprisingly, the answers to these questions look very similar to the solutions to the puzzle of accountability at the classroom and school levels. A theory of improvement would, first and foremost, take into account the incentives that drive performance in classrooms and schools. As we have seen, these incentives derive their force from agency and reciprocity. Students and teachers derive personal agency from success in the accomplishment of higher-level tasks. These tasks construct micro-climates of accountability that model the transfer of agency for learning from teacher to student. In order for these incentives to work, there must be a high degree of reciprocity between teacher and student. That is, the student must be able to teach the teacher how to teach more effectively by providing visible evidence of performance at the same time the teacher is teaching the student how to take control of her own learning. A theory of improvement would posit that these skills around agency and reciprocity can be learned, that they are probably best learned in the context of practice in real time, and that, once learned, they become self-reinforcing. A theory of improvement would also posit that
we can make informed, collective judgments about which teachers are capable of learning practice at this level and which aren’t, as well as which teachers are capable of practice at higher levels than others. It becomes the job of policy both to assure that the capacity exists in schools to construct powerful micro-climates of instructional practice and provide administrators with the capacity to reward and de-select teachers on the basis of whether they are capable of learning these skills.

Schools work as accountable organizations to the degree that they nurture and demand from their participants—teachers, students, parents, administrators—high levels of agreement, convergence, or alignment around the conditions of powerful practice in classrooms. Powerful organizational environments require trust, embodied in the norms of respect, personal regard, competence and integrity. People within and outside public organizations form trusting relationships with those organizations to the degree that they feel that their own interests are encapsulated in the interests of the institution. This process of forming trusting relationships requires constant attention and reinforcement of the kind that occurs in powerful teaching relationships within classrooms and powerful normative environments in the organization that surrounds the classroom. The formation of trust, in other words, requires high levels of reciprocity among key actors in the organization. It is the job of leaders to provide the normative and social structure within which reciprocity takes place. These qualities of human interaction and skills of organization can be learned. People who work in schools can be expected to learn them as a condition of their employment, and we can select and de-select people based on their mastery of these skills. It becomes the job policy both to set the expectation that schools will become powerful normative environments, to reinforce the expectation that success should be visible both in classroom practice and in student performance, and to assure access to learning for adults in acquiring the skills necessary to meet these expectations.

At the system level improvement works to the degree that it explicitly acknowledges agency and reciprocity in relations among policymakers, system-level leaders, and people who work in classrooms and schools. Compliance is not reciprocity; as accountability systems degrade toward compliance, they lose their capacity to generate improvement and they create impossible problems of enforcement. The first principle of system-level design of
accountability systems should be that they are fundamentally about the transfer of agency from the system level to the school level to the classroom level. An accountability system that is working well is one in which people in schools and classrooms are doing most of the work and people at the system level are busy meeting their commitments to provide capacity and access to learning for people in schools. An efficient accountability system is one in which the enforcement costs associated with monitoring compliance are effectively zero, and the money that would have been used for enforcement is used instead for the improvement of human skill and knowledge in schools and classrooms. One approaches this optimum through the transfer of agency from system-level monitoring and compliance to school-level capacity-building.

Since schools come into the process of improvement at a variety of levels, system-level accountability systems that embody the principle of transfer of agency need well-developed strategies of differential treatment for individual schools. That is, schools should be treated as organizations that are at a particular position on an improvement path, characterized by classroom and organizational competencies, and the job of system-level people is to do whatever is necessary to move that particular school to the next level. If performance and quality are on the vertical, and time is on the horizontal, improvement means moving the herd—the entire distribution of schools in a system—roughly northeast. The other part of this bargain is that as quality of instructional practice and organizational coherence improve, system-level administrators provide less guidance and control in return for higher levels of performance. Transfer of agency consists of moving as many schools as possible out of the category of heavy supervision and control as fast as possible. Reciprocity consists of an explicit contractual agreement between system-level and school-level people that every unit of increased performance that the system demands carries with it an equal and reciprocal obligation on the part of the system to provide access to an additional unit of individual or organizational capacity, in the form of additional knowledge and skill. The job of system-level people is to add value to instructional practice and organizational coherence or to get out of the way.

The nature of the contractual relationship between system- and school-level practitioners and policymakers is equally clear. In order to keep improvement from degrading into compliance, practitioners have to produce short-term
results that are useful as electoral credit. The reciprocity bargain here is easy to state, but more difficult to actualize. Schools have to produce visible evidence of improvements in practice and performance in the short term in order to bind policymakers to longer-term commitments to increasing the knowledge and skill that will produce improvements individual and organizational capacity. These bargains have to be explicit, and the parties have to understand the stakes involved for each of them. Policymakers have to understand that their short-term behavior creates potentially destructive incentives for people in schools. Schoolpeople have to understand that they have to produce short-term evidence of improvement in order to gain the discretion and control to engage in longer term investments in knowledge and skill. These bargains will probably involve much less reliance on annual standardized test scores as evidence of improvement and greater reliance on more proximate measures of the improvement of instructional practice and curriculum-based measures of student learning. It is the job of educators to "fill in" the measures that provide evidence of improvement over and above the standardized measures of external accountability systems. That is, accountability at the system level requires active engagement of school- and system-level people in inventing the measures on which their performance will be judged—another manifestation of the principle of reciprocity.

The cultural divide that educators and policymakers have to cross in order for this type of accountability to occur is to move from treating schools as passive receptacles of ideas about what good education is toward treating schools as active agents in the learning of children and adults. Neither educators nor policymakers are particularly well-prepared for this passage. Schools and school systems have avoided in the past the kind of explicit bargains around transfer of agency and reciprocity that would be required of them if they were to become active agents in an accountability system. Policymakers have often treated schools as ready receptacles for any random idea that an influential constituent proposes. The move toward performance-based accountability signals the possibility of a shift away from traditional patterns of interaction between policy and practice. The issue is whether the actors can find a way to orchestrate their behavior for mutual benefit.
Conclusion: Accountability and Democratic Education

I began this paper with the question of whether performance-based accountability systems could be reconciled with ideas of "democratic education," education that prepares young people to be powerful actors in the world and education that encourages the active participation and consent of educators, teachers, and parents. My answer is a provisional yes.

There are no fundamental inconsistencies between democratic views of education and performance-based accountability models of accountability, at least in principle. In fact, at the classroom, school, and system levels, the incentives that make for powerful education are identical to the incentives that would make performance-based accountability systems work. In order for learning to occur in classrooms, teachers and students have to confront the Socratic paradox: My teaching cannot affect your learning except through your exercise of agency. Your exercise of agency enhances my learning as a teacher. And so forth. In order for schools to affect teaching and learning across the organization, they have to solve the problem of collective action, which requires the development of strong normative structures and the prerequisites of trust that give those norms authority. In order for trust to occur, I have to acknowledge the my interests are embedded in yours, in much the same way that I, as a teacher, have to acknowledge your agency in my learning. In order for systems to improve, policymakers and practitioners have to make powerful, binding bargains around the exchange of performance for capacity. In order for these bargains to be binding, the actors have to acknowledge their mutual dependence in avoiding the degradation of improvement into compliance, and in creating public value. At each level, the principles of transfer of agency and reciprocity work in parallel and complementary ways.

Having said this, it is possible for performance-based accountability systems to work badly, in ways that are antithetical to the principles of democratic education. Teachers and administrators can read accountability systems as invitations to low-level teaching, matching their own low-level skills with the low-level expectations of external standards and tests, leaving few opportunities for students to exercise any agency over their own learning. Accountability systems can reinforce instability, incoherence, and atomization in schools by focusing on low-level compliance at the expense of more
challenging problems of improvement. Policymakers can push accountability systems toward compliance and away from improvement by focusing on short-term gains over longer-term benefits. The risks are substantial.

Performance-based accountability systems open up the opportunity for a fresh look at the social contract between schools and the public. The discipline of accountability can open up more powerful ideas about practice, school organization, and policy, or it can close down and narrow purposes of schools. The discipline of accountability can strengthen the authority and legitimacy of schools, as well as the trust invested in them as public institutions, or it can degrade and undermine their authority, legitimacy, and trust. As with all essentially political issues, this one requires the orchestration of people with divergent and seemingly conflicting interests. It is, at base, a fundamental problem of how we construct schools as political institutions.
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Bibliography


