

8

(4a)

J8

✓

ACCOUNTABILITY, STANDARDS, AND THE PROCESS OF SCHOOLING

BARRY MACDONALD

CENTRE FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

This paper was commissioned by the Educational Research Board of  
the Social Sciences Research Council.

January 1978

Accountability, Standards, and the Process of Schooling

Barry MacDonald\*

Centre for Applied Research in Education

"But don't you think Headmaster, that your standards are out of date!"

"Of course they are! They wouldn't be standards otherwise!"

Alan Bennett, 'Forty Years On.'<sup>1</sup>

New forms of accountability for the educational service are overdue and should, if they are sensible and fair, be welcomed. The service has been too secretive for too long, frustrating legitimate critique. Whether we have in mind Elizabeth House, City Hall, or our local school, it is clear that the current level and quality of public knowledge about educational institutions is inadequate as a basis of either public opinion or public policy.

This deficiency has always been apparent, particularly to those disadvantaged by it, but the impulse to reform has not hitherto been widely enough shared to constitute an effective force for remediation. By and large, the educational system has enjoyed a measure of public confidence sufficient to maintain the established boundaries of information flow and access for accountability purposes. In any case, secretiveness is inherently difficult to break down; the very ignorance it fosters is typically invoked as a justification for its continuing practice. Thus parents, for instance, may be denied information about the schooling of their children on the grounds that they are too uninformed to make reasonable use of it while, at the administrative and advisory levels of the system, those who suspect that secrecy may exclude constructive influence or even cloak incompetence find it hard to substantiate their fears.

That we have lived so long with such an astonishingly closed organisation, even at times congratulating ourselves upon its 'professionalism', seems now remarkable in view of the haste with which the accountability movement has passed from tub-thumping incantation to procedural mechanics. One reason may be that ours is a conservative

\* The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Stephen Kemmis in the preparation of this chapter.

society, with an embedded sense of collective merit that has embraced virtue and defect alike within a petrifying clasp. Perhaps nothing less than the trauma of threatened economic collapse could have engendered the kind of basic overhaul of our institutions that appears to have begun.

Whatever the reasons, for past inaction as well as for present initiative, we now have an unusual opportunity to redefine the means by which the school system at least can be made more accessible to public judgement and more helpful to policy formulation. A wide range of interest groups, some inside and others outside the professional organisation of schooling, have successfully made common cause against the insulation of the teacher and established the case for some kind of performance review. The notion of such a review at the national level is strongly advocated by the Department of Education and Science, itself under pressure both to raise consciousness of the economic role of schooling and to produce evidence of effective teaching in industrially relevant skills; at the local level too, education departments, particularly those operating within corporate management structures, increasingly recognise the need for more competitive data if they are to win the struggle for keenly contested resources; even the teaching profession, weakened by a bewildering succession of policy blows and dismayed by the exposure of William Tyndale,<sup>2</sup> is persuaded of the need to keep schooling under review. Add to these the voices of the politicians, the employers, and all the organised consumer groups which now sense the opportunity for influence, and it would be difficult to resist the proposition that we have entered an era of explicit educational evaluation.

Evaluative intent is everywhere in evidence, and the opportunity to translate intent into practice will not be missed. Unfortunately, I believe that the opportunity is being, and will be, abused in ways which will damage the work of teachers and expend uselessly millions of pounds of public money. Most of the developing schemes for monitoring schools under the banner of accountability are certainly not sensible in conception, and are unlikely to be fair in operation. These schemes fall into two categories. The first comprises all those new procedures which implicitly or explicitly define a production function for schools and seek to quantify their output in terms of critical student learnings. The work of the

Assessment of Performance Unit in monitoring national standards is one such form of educational engineering, one moreover whose instruments and methods are seen by some to furnish the means by which the model can be replicated at the local level. Authorities such as Lancashire and Avon are already planning accountability schemes with this resource in mind.

A renaissance of large-scale testing seems assured, a dismal prospect indeed indeed to those of us in the business of school evaluation who long ago concluded that the appreciation of learning calls for more sensitivity and subtlety than the best of psychometricians can yet embody in their artefacts. But the urge to quantify is presently restrained by neither prudence nor educative responsibility; the national ministry has recently made awards totalling more than one million pounds<sup>3</sup> for preliminary test development in mathematics and science, and this is a mere fraction of what it would cost to fully arm the national monitoring team to carry out an exercise of dubious utility and questionable validity. The American experience of national monitoring of this type, now ten years on, provides seemingly conclusive evidence that the information it yields is too narrow to support judgements of merit and insufficiently comparative to influence policy.<sup>4</sup>

The second category of accountability schemes is concerned with external audit of individual schools. Such schemes involve apparently minor role modifications among existing system personnel, but the impact of these changes could be both profound and destructive. Some authorities plan to use their advisory service as school evaluators carrying out performance reviews in much the manner of the traditional HMI inspection, a function that the Inspectorate, burdened with new responsibilities, is anxious to devolve. In one sense school advisors have always had this task of course; they are, after all, the 'eyes and ears' of City Hall. But it has been characteristically the underplayed and implicit face of their duality, overlain by the day-to-day practical support role which defines the best of them as collaborators in the work of schools rather auditors. Current proposals, which envisage the advisor rendering evaluative summaries of institutional performance to school governing boards or to City Hall, cannot function credibly as external audits without severely curtailing (to put it mildly) the collaborative role of the advisor. It is a heavy price to pay for accountability.

All such schemes, in my view, miss the point as well as the opportunity.

They are tunnels to dystopia, a dystopia of narrow preoccupations and combative relationships, where only those educative acts that lead to gross behaviour modification are sure to be recognised. That is a harsh statement, perhaps an unreasonable one. Let us see whether, by a more detailed analysis of a central issue in the contemporary debate, we can lend it more credibility. The issue is 'standards'.

Standards in Education

There seems to be a widely shared concern about standards of learning in schools; this concern is the most persistent theme of those who seek new forms of accountability. Standards are slipping (typically, it is alleged, due to regressive or slipshod innovation) or, alternatively, they are not improving fast enough to meet the requirements of a society beset by industrial imperatives. In either case, children are not learning enough of the most important things. Standards must be raised; the issue is one of determining the best means of achieving this unimpeachable goal.

The argument has a historical familiarity that masks its conceptual slipperiness. The educational prospect seldom pleases, even when the system is stable and the economy thrives, and it is easy to demonstrate, as some observer never fails to do, that the same concerns about standards have been expressed before in circumstances other than those to which contemporary decline is attributed. It may be, as my introductory quotation from Alan Bennett might support, that when we 'invent' the past, especially the lived past, we serve our self-esteem by creating an idealised image of our experience, healing it in our heads until it yields measures of virtue. Certainly, most people seem to feel they were helped by their educational experience, even those whose life chances would appear to have been impoverished by it. Such beliefs are threatened by change, or the suspicion of change, and the concept of 'standards' as a distillation of the past functions as a powerful deterrent to variety and development in schools. By such standards schools will always be seen to be doing a poorer job than they used to. Thus it could be said, facetiously, that only illiteracy prevents more people writing to the press to complain about the decline in the teaching of reading. Thus too, we might understand why, when all but one of a number of reading surveys suggest the maintenance or improvement of attainment, that one exception appears to be more credible to the interested public than the sum of the others.

Such perceptual predispositions draw strength from lengthening dole queues and a more pervasive sense of living in a failing society. All institutions come under scrutiny, but none more so than those responsible for producing (or failing to produce) the generation of skilled and dedicated gentlefolk that the nation feels entitled to expect. Try as they may to redirect the finger of blame elsewhere, at parents, employers or the media of popular entertainment, teachers cannot escape ascription of the prime responsibility, however unfair this may be.

The link between this notion of standards, which is often invoked to attack almost any form of disapproved behaviour, and the more technical concept of standards as levels of achievement by which the success or failure of educational provision may reasonably be judged, is a tenuous one. Politically, of course, the conviction that standards are declining provides the impetus and the rationale for the setting of approved standards in order to ensure quality control, but they are not in any simple sense stages of the one process. The setting of standards, at least in this country, is a professional response to a lay concern, but a response which, while maintaining terminological continuity with the concern, involves conceptual transformation.

Technically, the problem of accounting for standards within the kind of production model of schooling referred to earlier, involves two prerequisites. The first is agreement about which, of all the things students learn in schools, are the most critical learnings. It is important to be sure that the learnings so chosen are critical, because their selection for assessment will ensure that particular attention is paid to them at the expense of other learnings deemed to be less critical. Although it may be argued that the 'light sampling' of the Assessment of Performance Unit is sufficiently de-institutionalised to minimise the dangers of teachers responding prudentially rather than intellectually to its values, such dangers would become very real if this light sampling led to saturation testing by Local Authorities with a view to making judgements of institutional effectiveness or as a basis of resource allocation.

The second prerequisite is agreement about what levels of attainment on these dimensions of learning should be expected from pupils at different stages of schooling. Here first guesses, even by seasoned professionals, are likely to be modified in the light of actual performance by the national samples.

The acceptability of such standards as emerge from this process has two aspects. On the one hand the standards achieved by schools may or may not be deemed acceptable in terms of the opportunities and resources available to them - we may call this the acceptability of school performance. On the other hand the standards achieved by schools may or may not be deemed acceptable in terms of the needs of pupils or the needs of society - this we may call the acceptability of school provision. If this distinction is valid, it follows that 'Assessment of Performance Unit' is a misnomer. The rhetoric of the Unit emphasizes its relevance to policy decisions about resource allocation and its inadequacy as a basis for judgements of institutional merit. Assessment of provision is its function, and one can't help wondering whether a more carefully chosen title might have forestalled the currently widespread conviction that the technology it has sponsored can be harnessed to local accountability goals. Perhaps, of course, the title was carefully chosen. The language we choose has profound implications for how the problems we address come to be structured.

#### Critical Learnings

The predefinition of those dimensions of learning that have greatest value is the first step in constructing a test-based technology of accountability. Is 'reading' more important than 'interpersonal skill', is 'humanity' more important than 'confidence', is 'artistic sensitivity' more worthwhile than the ability to count? The list can be extended almost infinitely from the goal statements of educators, and choices have to be made. There is a strict limit to the number of dimensions of learning that a viable product model can accommodate, yet it depends totally upon that choice.

There are further questions. How much more important is 'reading' than 'interpersonal skill', i.e. what drop in 'interpersonal skill' are we willing to countenance in return for what level of gain in 'reading'? And are some reading skills more important than others? Is the least important reading skill more valuable than the most important interpersonal skill? Such questions must be resolved before comprehensive test development can begin.

At least two fundamental issues bedevil the aspirations of this approach. The first is whether in our society there is sufficient consensus about learning priorities to sustain and justify the use of the

approach for accountability purposes. The second issue is whether we have the technological capacity to measure those learnings we most value. The answer to both questions is, I suspect, in the negative.

The assessment of Performance Unit, seeking the widest possible consensus for its activities, has set up an interlinked network of consultative committees and working groups in six conventionally defined areas of learning - Language, Mathematics, Science, Personal and Social Development, Aesthetic Development, and Physical development. It is the purpose of these groups, which are broadly based at the consultative level and more specialised at the working level, to reach agreement about critical learnings within these areas with due regard to different stages of schooling, and to advise on methods of assessment. Their provisional conclusions are widely circulated for comment, and finalised before being handed over to commissioned teams of technologists for conversion into tests and other assessment procedures.

We should note several features of this process. Although it involves widespread consultation the process is one largely characterised by pre-emptive decisionmaking (the setting up of the Assessment of Performance Unit, the division of school learning into six stipulated areas, the generative structures) and after-the-fact consultation. By the time the proposals of the working groups are offered for comment and critique to the profession whose values and priorities they claim to embody, it would require a Herculean effort by any individual or group to hold up the process or fundamentally reverse decisions already taken.

Another feature of the process is that, despite the aspiration to span the learning experience of the pupil, it looks like a six horse race to implementation in which three of the starters have fallen at the first fence. While production goes ahead in Language, Mathematics and Science, the remaining areas have been redefined as 'exploratory' following difficulties or disagreements at the initial stage. The pattern is a familiar one, leading to 'basic skills' only assessment.

Not that 'basic skills' is a fair description of the aspirations of the working groups which currently lead the field. One reason why the provisional statements of intent issued by the groups are unlikely to attract much criticism is that they are comprehensive, educationally aware, and sensitive to the complexity and variety of learning outcomes and

processes. This sensitivity may be illustrated by the following extract from a consultative paper of the Science Working Group. Under "Methods of Assessment" they include

"Talking with a child so as to allow him to express things in his own way, and questioning him about his responses may be the most effective way of revealing certain of his ideas. Where this is found to be the case the interview would be recorded, transcribed and the assessment made using previously worked out criteria. In this case .... it would be necessary to demonstrate that independent assessors agree in their judgements." 6

The question is, what happens to these aspirations in the hands of the technologists who have the task of devising instruments and procedures for the monitoring team? Under the requirement of mass implementation aims must be translated into objectives and objectives into key questions or test items, a process which typically imposes increasing strain upon the consensus reached at the goal-generation stage. What happens is that the constraints of the technology rapidly become predominant, the process of item or criterion preparation becomes decreasingly subject to endorsement by the system-representative groups, and the gap between the initial aspirations and the products of the technologists widens alarmingly. In terms of the quotation cited earlier from the Science Working Group, compare that with the following statement from a report by two leading A.P.U. figures on the current problems of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, its American counterpart, with all the wealth and expertise of that technologically-advanced nation:

"... financial constraints are similarly forcing the next cycle of assessment in Science to include a predominance of group-administered multiple-choice exercises, which are markedly cheaper both to produce and to process than are individually-administered or open-ended exercises." 7

But financial constraints are still not the major restriction upon the model of assessment. This year the thirty million dollar Follow Through evaluation of twenty American early childhood programmes, which set out to measure all the intended learning outcomes of a spectrum of teaching approaches with varying goals and priorities, finished by comparing thirteen of the programmes on the basis of pupil scores on a small number of heavily biased tests. One of the main reasons given for the reductionism evident in the evaluation process was that measurement technology was not yet sophisticated enough to devise instruments which could assess more than a narrow range of behaviourally-gross outcomes.

'Tunnels to dystopia' seems not too strong a term to apply to those emergent forms of accountability which rest their faith on the false promise of this variety of educational scientism. The difficulties of gaining consensus on the range of significant learnings forces them to adopt a process of consultation that is closer in effect to the manufacture of consensus than to its discovery, while the limitations of psychometric capability ensure that even this artefact will not survive technological conversion without further distortion.

Add to these critical deficiencies the inherent conservatism of measurement (particularly in a climate of accountability) which, as Friedenberq observes,

"cannot usually muster either the imagination or the sponsorship needed to search out and legitimate new conceptions of excellence which might threaten the hegemony of existing elites".<sup>9</sup>

Whatever happened to the problem of curriculum obsolescence?, one is tempted to ask. Are we now, following sixteen years of national curriculum development programmes, trying to stem the tide of innovation?

There is no case for a renaissance in large scale testing. It tells us too little about what students learn. It tells us nothing about how to remedy deficiency. It requires more standardisation of provision than is compatible with legitimate diversity or professional discretion, more stability of provision than is consistent with the promotion of curriculum development. It understates educational purposes, is expensive to develop, hard to interpret, open to abuse, biased, obsolescent, coercive, and authority-based. It tells us nothing about the competence of the schools individually or collectively, so it is inadequate for accountability purposes. Above all, the output measurement paradigm is disconnected from the learning process.

#### Ignorance and Instrumentation

In considering the problems raised by school accountability generally, and by the assessment of learning particularly, it may be salutary to remind ourselves of the profundity of our ignorance. The notion of 'standards', whether applied to learning, teaching, or the institutions in which they are presumed to take place, usually implies the existence of exemplary instances. Yet, we do not understand the learning process very well. We do not know for sure what causes learning, though we can be

reasonably sure that schools in some way cause some learnings and impede others. We do not know what constitutes a successful learning milieu though most schools and families try to construct one. We suspect that what students learn is the product of many social and biological forces which interact in ways we dimly apprehend but cannot quantify in even a single case, so that we are unable to isolate the contribution of the school. And we know that the conditions of social life which generate these forces are unstable and uncontrollable, so that we cannot know to whom or what we may attribute changes in the learning accomplishments of students.

Despite all this uncertainty, we are asked to believe that the way to improve schooling is to take instruments which few of us comprehend and apply them regularly to a form of social life that we do not understand. The resultant samples will, it is argued, function as indices of productivity, to guide resource allocation, curriculum policy, and the distribution of praise and blame. No need, apparently, to find out whether the schools provide humane and caring environments for the young, or whether the processes through which the young pass make sense to those who presently entertain doubts. The sample, expertly devised and expertly interpreted, will reveal all we need to know.

Well, it won't. Not just because we cannot agree about which learnings are of most importance (dimensions) or about how much of such learnings fall within our limits of acceptability (standards), although these are real difficulties. And not even because we lack the technological capability to design tests which assess only what we seek to assess, or which are free from dogmatism, although such problems are freely acknowledged by test experts. Even if we could solve these problems, by standardizing the curriculum and outspending the Americans in test development, there is no way in which the ensuing information flow would serve the evaluative intent of the enterprise. It would not distinguish, for instance, the school which has effectively minimized failure to learn from the school which has made little of a following wind. Stake (1973) has written of such accountability schemes in America:

"These plans are doomed. What they bring is more bureaucracy, more subterfuge, and more constraints on student opportunities to learn." 10

House (1973) in similar vein, concludes as follows:

"I believe such schemes are simplistic, unworkable, contrary to empirical findings, and ultimately immoral. They are likely to lead to suspicion, acrimony, inflexibility, cheating, and finally control - which I believe is their purpose." 11

House's conclusion, that the sponsors of accountability seek control of the schools, may be valid in some American contexts but would be difficult to substantiate in Britain, where curriculum power is too widely shared (and known to be) for such an aspiration to be realistically entertained. Here, the attractiveness of product models of accountability is better explained by a more pervasive and diffuse change - the rise of a technocratic ideology of managerialism at the national and local levels of social policy administration.

If this last proposition is correct, it may be politically naive to advocate as I do in the section that follows, a model of school accountability that is not conceived primarily in terms of managerial problems. If I am right, however, in thinking that the product model is doomed to costly failure, it may, even at this stage, be worthwhile to explore an alternative which lacks its assumptions.

#### Some Notes towards a Process Model of School Accountability

The performance of the school is in part a function of its circumstances and cannot fairly be assessed without detailed knowledge of those circumstances. It is the duty of the school to provide the best possible opportunities for learning consistent with its circumstances. This should be the basis of a school accountability model - a process rather than a product model. If it is reasonable to ask of a school whether it has acted intelligently and with integrity then we must look at its actions for the answer, and we are entitled to demand of the school that it make those actions open to view and responsive to critique.

A process model of school accountability could be brought about by the initiation and development of school self-reports for the local community. Whatever the merits of this or other forms of accountability, the self-report is in any case a long overdue social invention. We are accustomed to thinking that self-report has low credibility and is therefore an

unsatisfactory base for a fair and honest accountability scheme. To those outside the school who are interested in its performance, the self-report apparently invites abuse. On the one hand, it seems open to manipulation and deliberate impression management and, on the other, it seems insufficiently rigorous so that litanies of good intentions might too often replace frank self-examination. The problem of any accountability scheme based on self-report is in the invention of procedures which can embody the aspiration to accountability in a workable form.

As an instrument of professional accountability, the self-report has substantial merits:

1. It testifies to the autonomy and responsibility of the school and its professional status.
2. It locates the development of school accountability firmly in the hands of those most vulnerable to its consequences - those who live and work in the school.
3. It lets the schools themselves define what they would accept as informed criticism (though they will never have a sole right to define the terms by which they are to be judged). This is most important both strategically and in principle. The school has to provide the data base of a continuing evaluation. Failure to provide adequate information will leave the school open to uninformed abuse.
4. It offers the best possibility of coordinating information gathering for routine internal purposes with information gathering for accountability.
5. In the absence of models of institutional competence or effective instructional behaviour, it gives schools the opportunity to provide the descriptive basis from which, in time, such models might be derived. That seems a reasonable way to pursue the search for school and teacher standards.
6. It gives schools the right and the opportunity to define the accountability of their co-actors in the system - those who make policy, provide resources and services, and give advice.

Beginning from scratch as almost all schools will be doing, there is a long way to go, and the development of school reports should be fairly cautious, possibly planned to reach maturity over a period of ten years. The development process must proceed in stages to allow for consolidation of experience under each set of new conditions, and to allow each new set of circumstances to define appropriate procedures for the next step.

As a first stage, I suggest that the development of school self-reports should start as feasibility exercises of a purely internal nature. Schools currently have little experience of self-description and will have first to engage in a process of self-discovery before self-description can be undertaken.

The next stage, I suggest, could be reports to the school governors, who would provide the first test of the adequacy of the information for purposes beyond those of the people who live and work within the school.

Two or three years of experiment with reports for governors would be followed by the school report for parents, after which the possibility of fully public reports could be contemplated. Once the school self-report goes public then the form and content of such reports becomes open to comparison and makes possible the development of criteria of reporting.

The content, the level of specificity, and the language of such reports calls for caution too, and a slow build-up. It's all too easy to generate list after list of "critical" features of a school and its context - each will have its value and its limitations. But, as the ILEA's extensive list of questions demonstrates for school self-review,<sup>12</sup> it is far more difficult to justify exclusions than inclusions and not easy to create procedures by which the information can be routinely collected. Adding the considerable task of self-reporting for accountability to the heavy present demands of school life cannot be contemplated in the absence of practicable schemes for exhaustive information gathering.

Beginning cautiously entails beginning with what is least controversial about the school - the "facts" about it. The process of self-reporting should not begin with a search for consensus on school policy, provision or performance, but rather with a descriptive statement of what can be taken for granted as facts about the school. The time will come later for self-reflection and critique.

What, then, are the "facts" which might provide a start in the development of self-reporting procedures? If we give up the idea of critical indicators, by what principle can we decide what it is relevant for the school to record about itself and perhaps later to share with others? Experience in studying schools suggests that even facts which seem quite unproblematic about a school can generate interesting questions. If, for example, we ask for a list of the staff, we often find that there are questions to be raised

are questions to be raised about the way the boundary has been drawn which distinguishes staff from 'not on the staff' - about part-time teachers, supply teachers, administrative staff, maintenance personnel, and so on. The list of items I would suggest as a starting-place seems common place enough, and would aim to initiate the recording process at a level where controversy can be avoided about the values raised by the facts themselves. There may however be strong disagreements about the values they represent. Routine information of the following kind might be collected:

1. Names, qualifications and relevant occupational experience of the staff, and their institutional responsibilities.
2. Similar information about local advisors and HMIs in regular touch with the school.
3. Similar information about the board of governors.
4. Information about the systems of appointment for staff and governors.
5. Information about how to lodge a complaint against the school, and about the school's procedure for dealing with complaints.
6. Disciplinary policy and procedures for grievance.
7. Information about the decision-making processes of the school in relation to the distribution of responsibilities, internal forms of accountability and procedures for reviewing practice.
8. Rules for staff and pupils.
9. Information about school policy with regard to the promotion of academic attainment, social life, pastoral care, and health, indicating how these policies are reflected in the organisation of the school and the curriculum, and the allocation of resources.
10. Information about pupil assessment, pupil records and examination policy and career guidance.
11. Public examination results.
12. Information about liason with feeder schools and other schools or institutions of education which the school itself feeds.
13. Information about liason with parents.
14. Information about income and expenditure for the current year.
15. Information about staff development policy.
16. Information about extracurricular activities, links with community bodies, etc.

17. Information about provision for remedial teaching and professional qualifications of the staff responsible.
18. Information about involvement with educational experiments, innovation, etc.

This will certainly do for a start; it concerns mainly the kind of information that could quickly become routinised and merely require updating. Even so, such a basic data bank is quite sufficient to provide its recipients with levers into some fundamental issues of school management, organisation, values and priorities. They can, for instance, evaluate the extent to which the policy claims of the school are consistent with its organisational arrangements, its distribution of resources and pattern of expenditure, and its allocation of differentially qualified staff. That in itself would be an important step forward, and one which would not be difficult to accomplish.

Further steps would involve the school in compiling accounts of its instructional strategies in different knowledge areas, its choice of textbooks and other materials, its views of the learning needs of the pupils, and its processes of assessment. In these matters, responsibility for the preparation of reports should devolve to the departmental level, and reporting operate on a rota basis, each department producing an account perhaps once in three years.

As the reporting system develops it should be possible to build in the process of curriculum review, so that such reports, together with professional and public responses to them, are used by the teachers concerned to evaluate and regenerate their professional practice. This could also, in time, become a public evaluation exercise.

All this assumes that the reports and presentations will be read and heard. But the school which aspires to critical self-reflection cannot make this assumption, despite reports of the rising tide of educational consumerism or the more general transformation of expectations that accountability reflects. School-initiated accountability requires the school to take responsibility for creating the conditions of response to the reports. This will not be easy, although even the partial implementation of the Taylor Committee <sup>13</sup> proposals on school governors would help. At present the interaction between schools and parents, for instance,

is typically locked into a pattern of ritualistic encounters characterised by bland authority on the part of the school and unhappy docility on the part of the parents. When I asked the headmaster, on one such occasion recently at my daughter's school, to tell us (the parents of pupils about to enter fourth year secondary) which of the subject options had Mode 3 assessment, he replied that such a question was of insufficient interest to most of those present to justify his spending time answering it. No-one in the hall contradicted him (few could have) and he went on to answer at length a question about the security and maintenance of pupils' bicycles. Many schools do better than this of course, but by and large the institutional response (individual teachers are more variable) to "educational" questions is guarded and grudging. Fear of uninformed criticism, fear of justified criticism, and the threat of diminished autonomy combine to sustain a posture which subverts the ostensible purpose of school/community transactions. There is a lot of "unlearning" to be done if the conditions for critique are to be achieved.

Critical self-reflection can only occur if the participants and audiences alike understand and respect the conditions under which it is possible. Unless they assert for instance, the necessity of both autonomy and responsibility in the accountability process, schemes for school accountability will always degenerate to bids for control by the already-powerful. If school self-reporting is to become an effective accountability scheme, it must be given a chance to operate on its own terms. Parallel accountability schemes must remain parallel - to attempt to combine self-reporting with an external review procedure must surely undermine the logic of each. Early attempts to monitor self-reporting by a local authority, for example, may jeopardise the evolution of adequate school-based accountability schemes on the process model. External audits of the school's own scheme should only be contemplated in the case of manifest failure.

Later, I will speculate further about what is to be included in the self-report accountability scheme and about the detail of how it might develop. For the moment the issue is whether such a system as this, which combines a process of self-reporting with a process of self-evaluation responsive to the comments generated by the reports, satisfies both the need for greater accountability and the need for teachers -

perhaps more properly 'Those who live and work in schools' - to retain professional control of the educational encounter. There are a number of matters, to be considered in the next section, which convince me that the process model does satisfy these needs.

### Generative principles and methods

The process model of school accountability is to be contrasted with models which assume static criteria such as we have seen enshrined in certain views of standards or in notions or consensus about educational aims. The "process" in the process model refers to the process of educational critique. In a dynamic society, educational goals may change and priorities be reordered. In consequence, the nature of educational provision and the organisation of teaching and learning may change, effecting not only quantitative but also qualitative changes in the performance of schools, teachers and pupils. Against this dynamic background, what values are to be held constant which might guide the development of accountability schemes?

The primary value is autonomy - the sine qua non of justifiable accountability. Moral responsibility for an outcome can be ascribed only to those whose choice of action is the cause of the outcome. If the resources for, say, mathematics teaching in a school are inadequate, or if curriculum policy constrains the teacher's freedom to organise mathematics teaching in the way he would prefer, then he cannot be held solely responsible for poor learning. The demand for accountability implies greater autonomy for schools, not less.

It is not, however, the contention of this chapter that only teachers have the right to decide how schooling is to be organised. Rather it is to assert that schooling can only be educational if teachers believe it to be so. The rights of others to speak on the issues must be respected, but all of us who claim such rights should keep in mind that some rights are best exercised by being reserved.

The implication of any accountability scheme, no matter how it is organised and implemented, is that schools will become more critical of their own performance. What is at issue is how this process of critique is to be organised. Earlier I argued that a major deficiency of the technocratic model of accountability is its disconnection from the

experience of the school. It is a model for managers and experts. Giving up such static systems in favour of a process model calls for some tolerance of uncertainty and considerable provisionality in planning. In actuality we must wait and see what problems and possibilities arise as a result of our first steps. There is nothing to stop us speculating, however, about potential future scenarios within such a conception.

The road to educational critique may pass through several stages. At first, it begins with gathering the descriptive information which might yield 'facts' of the kind listed earlier. Reflection on these 'facts' may suggest new insights, but further procedures are necessary for more rigorous self-examination.

From the first, "descriptive" phase, it may be possible to move to teachers' accounts of their own performance, to the collection of "critical incidents" believed by people in the school to be telling about school life and "critical examples" of success and failure in its work. This "anecdotal" stage will generate a range of new insights and a diversity of perspectives. The selection and discussion of anecdotes is particularly revealing of educational values. It is essential that during this, as for the preceding phase, those involved in the reflective enterprise be encouraged more to understand than to judge. Judgment is, of course, notoriously divisive when hasty and ill-considered, when participants respond from dogmatically-held beliefs or "pet" theories rather than from the circumstances of the case and the opportunities it presents. The conditions for genuine critique are much harder to attain.

The third and most formal stage in the organisation of self-reflection in the school concerns creating the conditions for self-criticism (where the school rather than the individual is the "self"). Here especially participants in the process must respect the autonomy and responsibility of their colleagues, and must organise the exchange of information in ways which protect both individual interests and those of the collectivity. The problem is always of how to resolve conflicts between them, and here no firm guidelines can be given - different responses are appropriate for different cases. In the stage of formal critique, the process of self-reflection may entail school conferences or 'retreats', it may involve adversarial proceedings of the kind

described by Wolf (1973),<sup>14</sup> or perhaps the kinds of adaptation of democratic evaluation (MacDonald 1976)<sup>15</sup> for school self evaluation suggested by Simons (1977).<sup>16</sup> In each case, the process of critique can only be prevented from degenerating into the imposition of the views of the already-powerful in the school upon the less-powerful by holding strictly to the value of the rational autonomy of each of the participants: the views of each are to be considered and understood as part of the self-interest of the collectivity rather than against the criteria of any one individual within it. In this final stage, it may be appropriate to conceive of self-critical communities within high walls - groups who risk enough in collective self-reflection to be spared the added risk of continuous exposure to outside observation.

It will be obvious, particularly in the latter part of these speculations, that 'openness' is defined as problematic. The question of what the school is to be open about, and to whom, is a question that should be approached by each institution with prudence and through experiment. Schools must remain reasonably free to get on with a difficult job, and to do so in reasonable comfort. Moreover, as knowledge about their work evolves and diffuses, schools must monitor carefully the impact of this development on the distribution of power. It is no part of my argument to suggest that output models of accountability change the balance of power over schools while process models do not. But output accountability will have effects in this respect that are clearly foreseeable, whereas the process model is less predictable. School-controlled evolution, however, provides opportunities for those most vulnerable to its consequences, to build checks and balances into the process of change.

These observations are exploratory and abstract. It seems unlikely that the formal stage of critique will be reached often by a school or that it will be sustained for long once it is achieved. It is a demanding one in terms of its requirement for tight procedural control, and it imposes burdens of democracy which will be difficult to reconcile with the conditions of schools in our society and the demands made of them.

The list of information items presented earlier suggested several tests which were possible concerning such issues as the degree to which resource allocation reflected stated curriculum policy, whether staff were distributed as their qualifications might suggest, and the like. Even

from the descriptive stage of the organisation of critique, it is possible to generate powerful questions like these. The kinds of guiding principles at each stage which might help in the organisation of critique (at least ones found useful in recent curriculum evaluation studies) concern judging matches and mismatches of these kinds:

1. What is the match between rhetoric and reality in the situation?
2. What is the match between the stated values of participants and their (self) interests?
3. What is the match between provision and performance?

Recent developments in curriculum evaluation such as Parlett and Hamilton's "illuminative evaluation"<sup>17</sup> and Stake's "responsive evaluation"<sup>18</sup> suggest that the data net of evaluation must be cast more widely than it has traditionally been. A process model of school accountability must certainly cast its net more widely than test scores and pupil performance. Relevant information must be gathered at many levels so that a picture of the work of the school can be built up. It must include data about policy, provision, the learning milieu, and student learning. To make a critique of the work of the school as a whole, all these facets must be represented since each reflects images upon the others.

These then are the arguments which convince me that a process model of school accountability is a preferable alternative to the the currently popular output model. It respects the values of autonomy and responsibility of the school; it creates the spirit of critique and suggests how the conditions for critique can be organised; and it respects the complexity of the school as an institution, casting its data net widely enough to generate new insights and understandings which may suggest how the process of schooling can be reformed. Accountability schemes which cannot demonstrate their acceptability by such criteria as these are surely indefensible.

### Conclusion

The process of schooling is dynamic, evolutionary, complex and constrained. It is, after all, a form of social life. Teachers know this, and so do we all, when pressed to desynthesise our recall of school experience and suspend, for a moment, the impulse to intervention.

For almost all of us schooling has been important in shaping our lives, the work we do, what we think of ourselves, the anxieties and hopes we have for our children. Each of us has had an experience of schooling which, however idiosyncratic in its particularities of time, place, personnel and pedagogy, however 'tacitly' it is stored, nourishes our assumptions about what goes on in its contemporary forms, biases our perceptions, and shapes our advocacies. No-one comes 'clean' to the problem of improving schools.

It may be important to remember this when we address the issue of school accountability. In this chapter we have examined critically some accountability initiatives which currently command considerable attention, resources, and support in this country. We have seen that they are technocratic in form, deterministic in educational values, and precariously dependent upon a costly and defect-ridden technology. If pressed to fulfillment they will constrain and standardise the curriculum, penalise the nonconformist teacher, eliminate experiment and decisively reinforce the schools' already well attested proneness to conservatism. Seen as a follow-up to the alleged failure of the Schools Council to solve the problem of curriculum obsolescence, the accountability movement is imbued with a painful irony.

Technocratic accountability will not make schools more open to view, a desideratum proposed at the beginning of the chapter. On the contrary, its impact will be to relieve them of such a responsibility, providing instead the alternative of the expert audit. Certainly they will be more open to judgment, but only to the judgment of the specialist and his mysterious indices of institutional health. When one considers that the biases of tests are difficult to detect, and that the unbiased test has yet to be invented, this is a prospect that must give us pause. Or must it? Kay Sumner, head of the Guidance and Assessment Service at the National Foundation for Educational Research, has these reassuring words for Local Authorities planning expansions of testing.

"Structure and presentation have been kept straightforward; thus most tests are relatively short, manuals contain only the bare essentials, scoring and conversion to standard scales is simple, and the technical matter is strictly limited."<sup>19</sup>  
Sumner (1977). Let the buyer beware.

In the latter part of the chapter I have outlined an alternative to technocratic, or indeed bureaucratic accountability, a school-initiated

process model of accountability aspiring to educational critique. In its own way as ambitious as the technocratic model, it has the advantage that it does not need to be fully realised in order to yield benefit. The three stages of the process model - description, anecdotalism, and formal critique, are speculatively explored in terms of their feasibility and potential, but the structure and sequence is not intended to have stipulative force. Within a process perspective on school accountability, only the next step can be clearly foreseen. Nevertheless, the general intent and values of the process model are clear. What is envisaged is a school-monitored development towards greater openness and reflectiveness, a development characterised by increasing interaction with those who have a right, not just to be heard, but to be listened to. In this way all schools can begin, cautiously, to engage those educational constituencies which now clamour for data. Many will have to put their house in order first. That is all to the good. Some will be bolder than others - that is a matter of circumstance and confidence. A few, in time, could become part of the lived experience of those who presently camp on their doorsteps.

A final word. My newspaper this morning reports yet another proposal for bridging the "school and work gap".<sup>20</sup> This one comes from a former Minister of State for Education, who is quoted as saying that unless the problem is tackled (in this case by introducing work apprenticeship schemes into schools for the 14 plus pupils), Britain will become a tenth rate industrial nation. Much of the pressure behind the school accountability movement is imbued with this kind of concern, and it raises the issue of the function of schooling. In a crude sense, we may speak of the economic functions of schooling and we may speak of their educative functions. Accountability pressures based on the needs of industry reflect a stress on the economic functions, while teacher perspectives tend to stress the educative role of the school.

In the process model of school accountability, educational critique is likely to be central, but its concerns will embrace critique at a wider social level as well. There is little likelihood that a school will generate an economic critique from within - only as it confronts the expectations of others about the school will these elements form part of its critique. Hence, the widening focus of the process model, moving from internal to public reports, will generate new perspectives and new sources for reflection. Only in a genuine process of community self-

reflection about its schools can the accountability process reach its fullest instantiation. When committees hold themselves responsible for the nature of their schools, educational debate can become informed and responsible; until that time, a school-based accountability scheme which gives primary importance to the perspectives of teachers in the self-reporting process seems the only defensible strategy.

We must not forget that schools are only one aspect of our concern about accountability, and accountability only one of the concerns we have about schools. Should we forget that, we can look forward to the kind of techno/bureaucratic accountability schemes whose craters now pit the landscape of American education.

January, 1978

REFERENCES

1. Alan Bennett, 'Forty Years On', London Faber and Faber, 1969.
2. William Tyndale Junior and Infants Schools, subject of a public outcry and a Public Inquiry conducted by Robin Auld Q.C. which lasted for more than three months (1975/76) and resulted in the sacking of the headmaster and several of the staff. See the Auld Report, published by the Inner London Education Authority, 1976.
3. In contracts to the National Foundation for Educational Research, the Centre for Science Education at Chelsea College, and the Centre for Studies in Science Education at the University of Leeds.
4. See Burstall, C. and Kay, B. Assessment of Performance - the American Experience, a report available to those associated with the Assessment of Performance Unit. London, the Department of Education and Science, 1977.
5. The exception was the National Foundation for Educational Research report by Brian Start and Kim Wells.
6. Assessment of Scientific Development by the Science Working Group, Assessment of Performance Unit, London, the Department of Education and Science, 1977
7. Burstall, C., and Kay, B. op.cit.
8. See "No Simple Answer. Critique of the Follow Through Evaluation" House, E. R. et alia. University of Illinois (mimeo) 1977.
9. Friedenberg, F. Z. "Social Consequences of Educational Measurement" In P. H. Du Bois (ed.) Proceedings of the 1969 Conference on Testing Problems: Towards a Theory of Achievement Measurement, Princeton, N. J. Educational Testing Services, 1969.
10. Stake, R. E. "School Accountability Laws" Evaluation Comment No. 4, 1-3, 1973.
11. House, E. "The Price of Productivity: Who Pays?" University of Illinois (mimeo) 1973.
12. See "Keeping the Schools Under Review" Inner London Education Authority, 1977.
13. A committee set up in January 1975 by the Secretary of State for Education and Science to consider the management and government of schools in England and Wales. Its report 'A New Partnership for Our Schools' (HMSO, 1977) recommended new governing bodies comprising a quadrilateral partnership in equal numbers of LEA, staff, parents, and community representatives, and new powers for the governors in the design and development of the curriculum.

14. Wolf, R. L. "The Application of Select Legal Metaphors to Educational Evaluation", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1973.
15. MacDonald, B. "Evaluation and the Control of Education". In D. A. Tawney (ed.) Curriculum Evaluation Today Trends and Implications. London: Schools Council Research Studies, MacMillan, 1976
16. Simons, H. "Suggestions for a School Self-Evaluation based on Democratic Principles" University of London Institute of Education, 1977.
17. Parlett, M. and Hamilton, D. "Evaluation as Illumination: a new approach to the study of innovatory programmes." In D. H. Tawney (ed.) Curriculum Evaluation Today: Trends and Implications. London: Schools Council Research Studies, MacMillan, 1976.
18. Evaluating Arts Education: A Responsive Approach. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1975.
19. Sumner, R. "NFER Progress" in Towards Standards, published as a supplement with the 15th July, 1977 issue of Education
20. John Ezard "Bridging School and Work gap", The Guardian, January 20, 1978.