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POSSIBLE EFFECTS
ON INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS

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I think the first thing that needs to be said about accountability from the point of view of the teacher is that the concept is very much feared. It is feared because accountability in its recent thrust to prominence has had at least three separate meanings.

The first meaning is associated with the schools where the parents say, "You, the teachers, are paid to teach. Our children have been going to school year after year and they are falling further and further behind. We demand that you be accountable to us. If the children don't learn we demand the right to remove you." So, in the first sense, accountability views the teacher as a hired hand, or a hired mind -- or both -- of a group of parents. Thus, accountability essentially means the right of that group to pick and choose, to retain or get rid of those whom it wants to; whether on the basis of adequate or inadequate information, knowledge, or judgment.

The second meaning derives from the great desire to control educational expenditures. How is the school accounting for the dollars that we are spending for education? How do we know we are getting our money's worth?

The third meaning of accountability deals with the development of professional standards. For example, there is a body of agreement in other fields, such as medicine and law, as to what constitutes competence and incompetence.

The fears of teachers, then, are dependent upon which of these three meanings is used in a given accountability effort, and the manner in which the objective associated with that meaning is achieved.

Teachers are also deeply concerned about the concept of innovation, which is so frequently associated with accountability. They have learned through years of experience -- and rather bitter experience -- that educational innovation in the American public schools has nothing to do with the improvement of education.

It is, instead, a kind of public relations device whereby the reigning political power -- whether it's a school board, or the principal or school superintendent trying to convince the community that he or she is a bright, shiny individual doing all sorts of new and creative things -- brings out all kinds of ideas which force teachers and children and others to march in different directions. A year later, that lot are dropped as a new set of innovations are produced like rabbits from a hat. These innovations, rather than being honest attempts at educational improvement, are really public relations efforts.

Further, there is a great discrepancy between, on the one hand, the educational change and innovation expected by the educational establishment and the New Left critics, and, on the other hand, what is actually expected from teachers in the classroom. Namely, that the teachers are expected to maintain a rather high degree of order in a rather unusual situation. That is, you place 30 youngsters in their seats at 8:30 a.m., and the teacher's prime responsibility is to keep them relatively quiet, relatively immobile for a long period of time.

Research has shown that this expected degree of order is based on a series of sanctions which the teacher has developed. And the students, in turn, have developed understandings with the teacher. They know, for example, that if they are not too disruptive, if they whisper quietly, the teacher will agree to ignore them, to withhold

the sanction. Such a relationship can only be maintained if there is a relative amount of stability and continuity in what goes on in the classroom.

Unfortunately, change and innovation upset these understandings, with an ensuing risk of chaos and disruption in the school. We must remember that when an observer -- be he parent, principal, or school board member -- walks through the school, he rarely notices the wonderful innovations. But he's sure to notice how many kids are yelling and running around! It will not then be a satisfactory answer to say, "I was trying to innovate today, but it didn't work out. The kids didn't quite understand."

So, the teacher risks something with innovation. He risks those very understandings and relationships which tend to maintain the orderliness and quietness that parents seem to want.

Teachers are also disturbed by the frequent association of accountability with something called "teacher motivation," a doctrine which holds that many teachers fail to reach the children because they don't really want to. These teachers are accused of just being job holders -- not really trying and not really wanting to do anything productive. Hence the calls for an individual system of punishments and rewards, geared to the children's progress.

This view of accountability poses a great threat, because, to be honest, most teachers aren't doing the best they can. And for a very simple reason: they don't know any other way of doing things. They are the victims, if you like, of a system that has seen eight thousand new teachers move into New York, for example, every year for the past twenty years. These new teachers, drawn from many different colleges and universities, are a remarkably diverse group: Catholics and Protestants, Jews and nonbelievers, blacks and whites, liberals and conservatives. Yet, after four weeks of teaching in New York City it is almost impossible to distinguish the newcomers from those they replaced. Which leads to a rather obvious conclusion: With the exception of the few outstanding figures who somehow operate on an individual basis, the overwhelming majority of teachers do what the school as a system compels them to do.

In these circumstances, it obviously makes little sense to talk in terms of individual rewards and punishments. So it is a threat to say you are going to apply individual rewards and punishments when the individual has no freedom to change his ways. It is exactly for this reason that writers like Holt, Goodman, and others are rejected by teachers. They are rejected because of the arrogance of the writing. Essentially, these New Left critics are behaving like a star of the Metropolitan Opera who criticizes his audience for being unable to sing as well as he does. Many of these books are written by self-proclaimed star performers for no other purpose than to say, "Look at all those lowly characters out there who are not as artistic as I am!" That, of course, is not very helpful to the ordinary practitioner.

Another difficulty with accountability lies in our present failure to use such knowledge as we already possess in a few vital areas. I will cite just two examples. The first concerns the findings of Benjamin Bloom, and others, that a major part of intellectual development occurs between the ages of two and five. Despite almost universal agreement on this point, there is practically no movement on the part of government -- federal, state, or local -- to develop an education program at that level. The second example concerns junior high schools. We've had junior high schools for about fifty years, yet it is tragic to reflect that, even today, ninety-nine percent of the students who enter junior high school without knowing how to read, write, or count, leave in the same plight. School, for one of these youngsters, represents a context of failure, and in consequence, he does one of two things: He either drops out internally by just sitting in the back of the room, and will leave you alone if you leave him alone; or, he lashes out and becomes the violent and disruptive youngster that we see every day. This we know only too well, but over all these years nothing has been done to create an alternative model of education for such youngsters to identify with. We know, but we do not act.

With all these problems arrayed against it, how does one get teachers to accept this odd notion of accountability? To begin

with, the first two conceptions of accountability that I mentioned must be firmly opposed. I think it is quite clear that teachers are going to reject the notion that they are just hired hands. Secondly, they are not overly concerned with arguments about budgets. Teachers will react negatively to statements that they must change their ways either because few or many dollars are being spent.

The third concept of accountability as being the development, with other groups, of common objectives is, I believe, acceptable to teachers, because strictly speaking it is not for teachers alone to determine what the objectives of education are. Nor are teachers as intractable on the subject as might be supposed, for they have already moved in this direction. In June 1969, the United Federation of Teachers in New York City became, I believe, the first organization in the country with a contract clause stating that the Federation and the Board of Education would work together to develop objective standards of professional accountability, in cooperation with parent groups, community boards, universities, and other interested parties. There have been a number of meetings to this end, and, believe it or not, these groups which had been on opposite sides of the barricade in 1968 -- and which are still not friendly to each other -- these same groups reached unanimous agreement on what they wanted.

The proposal has two parts. The first follows a management-by-objectives approach, with teachers, parents, students, community boards, the Board of Education, and supervisors at all levels developing agreed-upon objectives. Objectives which are not so narrow as to turn children into machines, but also not so broad as to make measurement impossible.

The second part of the program is perhaps the largest research design ever put together. Its aim will be to identify the districts within the city, the schools, the programs, the materials -- the individual, even -- that are doing something to reach the objectives. And, more important perhaps, it will also try to identify the factors which have nothing to do with the objectives, which are neutral; and those which are dysfunctional. This part of the program will include

social, family, economic, and educational information in a form unlike anything seen hitherto.

The ambitious, far-reaching nature of this proposal suggests an important principle that is, perhaps, not too well understood as yet. But we must all come to understand it, eventually, if we are to make any progress with accountability. Simply stated, the principle is this: Where accountability is concerned, no man is an island.

Teachers do not work in a vacuum, a controlled environment with all random factors controlled. So it is impossible to develop a design that will tell you what the teacher should be doing, or which practices are good and which bad, without considering those random factors, or outside influences, that limit the performance of even the best of teachers. The individual student, his family, his socioeconomic background, and the school system itself, must all be held accountable in degrees yet to be determined for everyone involved.

When this principle is clearly understood and freely accepted it will be easier for teachers to believe that a system of professional accountability does not, necessarily, imply an individual threat. For the inevitable effect of such a system will be changes in the structure of the school and of the school system in which it operates. Changes that will break the vicious circle in which each year, for twenty years, those eight thousand new teachers have found themselves. Changes that will bring about change. Simultaneously, large numbers of teachers will be persuaded to behave differently, because different demands will be placed on them.

Another by-product of a comprehensive system of accountability that is attractive to teachers will be a greater sharing of ideas. Very little has been done at the teacher level to create a bank of successful techniques. It's not to be denied, of course, that we have grandiose schemes, master-of-arts degrees in teaching, and lengthy courses. But these are all a bit removed from the firing line, and, in consequence, we never hear of -- or from -- the teacher out there, somewhere. The teacher who, ordinary enough most of the time, proves to be absolutely brilliant for just three lessons a year. Three lessons in which she develops certain concepts better than anyone

else. I'd like to hear from her, and so would most other teachers. To develop better systems than we now have, we must pull together what is known out there -- and use it.

This suggests, of course, that an essential part of any system of professional accountability is the development of a model of what constitutes competent practice. Competent practice is not necessarily related to some particular performance result. It would be unwise to evaluate a doctor, for example, on the basis of the number of patients who die while in his care. If the doctor concerned is a cancer specialist -- but the difficulty is obvious. Here the question of competent practice may have more to do with whether he prolonged life for a time, or relieved pain.

So what is missing in our field of education, and must be developed in conjunction with the accountability movement, is a model of what a competent practitioner does when faced with a particular set of problems.

Speaking of problems brings to mind some that exist with three currently popular ideas. These ideas -- vouchers, performance contracting, and school decentralization -- all seem to possess either basic flaws in the reasoning that promotes them, or in the manner in which they are being promoted. Hitherto, I have been talking about accountability mainly in connection with its impact on, and concerns for, one segment of the educational community -- teachers. But the three ideas that I've just mentioned should be of concern to all of us, because they can be serious obstacles to the development of a true accountability system.

First, vouchers; which are being proposed as a national answer to providing accountability by offering a choice to the consumer -- the student or his parents. It might be more accurate to say "the semblance of choice," because no one seems to have considered the implications of a nationwide voucher system. So let us consider them, and to make things a little simpler we won't talk about the whole country, just New York City -- much simpler.

Let's suppose that just 50% of the students decided they would go to private or parochial schools in the future. That's a small matter

of 600,000 youngsters. Their decision would set off a chain of events, resembling nothing more than a child's game of "Ring Around the Rosie." With the public schools half-empty, half the teachers would be fired. Neighboring schools would be consolidated for efficiency and economy. Surplus buildings would be closed. The private institutions, besieged by 600,000 youngsters waving vouchers, would urgently need buildings, teachers, textbooks, and materials. And the only readily-available source of buildings, of 30,000 needed teachers, would be those closed public schools and surplus teachers who are out looking for jobs. We have come full circle: The same children, in the same schools, with the same teachers. The great innovative voucher program has accomplished only one thing -- it has removed responsibility from the government, because the schools are now private, not public.

Those who would drastically limit the scope of a voucher program in order to avoid these problems must necessarily turn the program into one available only to the elite few -- a program hardly worthy of national debate and national support.

So much for vouchers. On performance contracting I want to start with the statement that, in a field as complex as education, there can be no guarantee of performance. The position is similar to that in other complex fields: a doctor or a lawyer cannot guarantee performance. If they did, they'd run the risk of being jailed as quacks. Perhaps those who purport to guarantee performance in education should also be jailed for quackery.

The second problem with performance contracting was foreshadowed by my call earlier for a model of what constitutes competent practice. Performance contracting moves us away from real accountability, away from analysis of what a competent practitioner should be doing, to consideration of a specific end product -- away from the process which the competent practitioner engages in to the product, which depends on many factors not within the control of teachers or schools.

The next argument against performance contracting is that it seems to oversell an underdeveloped technology. I recommend to you a

very fine book by Anthony Oettinger. "Run Computer Run" is a thorough analysis of the state of educational technology today. Like Dr. Oettinger, I am hopeful that eventually we shall acquire very sophisticated technology. I am not against technology, we need it, and we should develop it.

But I am opposed to the manner in which the technology of performance contracting is being promoted. Performance contractors are behaving and talking as if a technological answer to all problems is already available. It isn't, and these companies should admit that they are trying to develop such a technology and need the children in today's schools to do it. That it is only a try, and not a cure for today's ills. Anything less than such frankness smacks of deception.

My fourth objection concerns the special motivational devices featured in most performance contracting programs. Radios, baseball bats, and green stamps are among the goodies being used. I'm not all that "holier than thou" about such things. I tell my son that if his report improves, he can have a new bike. We all use this approach, and there's no question that such rewards play an important role in our family life and our society. So we can't say that rewards must never be used, but we must ask some serious questions -- because no one else seems to be doing so.

What happens to the student after he leaves the motivated, reward-oriented climate of the performance contract classroom and returns to a regular class? Does he refuse to learn? Does he fail to learn? Does the use of motivation in one room -- which is not available to teachers elsewhere -- create learning in one place and destroy it in another? And what happens next year, when the motivational goodies are withdrawn? I don't know the answer to these questions, and I suspect that no one else does, either. And because we don't know the answers, it is incumbent upon anyone who uses this type of reward system to build an analysis of it into the research design for his program.

Finally on performance contracting, I suggest a case of false packaging. I've already touched on the impossibility of guaranteeing a specified result, or level of performance. We are, of course, confronted with suggestions that this can and will be done. But what

we are actually presented with is a non-guarantee. That is, it's not the student's performance that is guaranteed, but the contractor's payment that is not guaranteed.

We have even been oversold on the idea that the contractor doesn't get paid if the student fails. That just isn't true in the overwhelming majority of contracts. In fact, the contractor receives a succession of payments: When he signs; when he moves the hardware in; again at the halfway point; leaving only a fairly limited amount which he does not get if the children fail to succeed. In addition, many contracts absolve the company from responsibility for youngsters who fail to show up for the program a certain number of times -- usually fairly small. So it is that we have in the Bronx a program with a tremendous amount of absenteeism, and the company stands to collect on the very students for whom the program was designed.

So the company gets paid a good amount whether or not there are results; it gets paid for the truants and dropouts; and it can also profit from a well-known characteristic of the standardized tests so commonly used today. I refer, of course, to errors of measurement. The simple fact is that if you tested a group of students today and again one month hence -- having given them a vacation -- 25% of that group would make, or appear to make, one whole year's progress in that short month of vacation. If you paid the company for that group and repeated the cycle, at the end of another month the company would again be eligible for payment on another 25% of the remaining students. Non-guaranteed payments begin to look more like a mirage, I think.

I won't spend any time on the third obstacle to accountability -- school decentralization. You all know what is suggested, and I am more concerned with calling attention to what seems to lie behind these three proposals: abdication, or evasion, of responsibility -- or should I say, accountability -- by the U.S. Government.

In the last decade, we have seen parents, teachers, administrators, labor unions, and civil rights groups marching on Washington to demand more money for education. Last year, the President suffered two major defeats when his education vetoes were overridden.

The pressures are obvious and insistent, and the Administration is seeking ways to silence these clamoring voices. So I think these three proposals represent a national strategy for reducing the accountability of the U.S. Government to our school systems, our parents, and our students. In each case, when the voices cry, "Our children are still not learning," as well they may, the Government will have a set of ready-made answers available. "You decided on the school; choose another if you don't like it." Or, "So get another performance contractor." And, of course, "It's your Board of Education; you elected them. Elect another lot."

In all, a strategy to reduce accountability by creating a phoney image of consumer choice.

In reality, a strategy designed to take a major American institution, which has led to a good deal of social mobility and equality of opportunity, and to throw it away on a series of political gimmicks. These gimmicks should be rejected, for unlike many educational experiments which can be tried and, if they fail, be rejected -- these experiments which reduce the commitment of government to education and which move the schools from the public to the private sector are, like experiments with hard drugs, irreversible. Our public schools, with all their faults, are worth keeping, and their improvement will come not from gimmicks but from the same type of slow, painful, unrestricted, free, scientific inquiry that brought other areas of human concern into the modern world.