

Accountability Axe, Activator or Anachronism

Imagine after returning from this conference that your newly inspired School Council, in an endeavour to improve student learning decided to tie teacher pay to student performance. What would your reaction be? A recent article in Weekend Australian (Graham, Sept 16-18, Recruitment p 8) entitled 'US teachers tie pay to results' discusses the agreement of the Denver Teachers' Union to do just that. Would it be worthwhile as part of our future charter to tie teacher and administrator salaries to student performance? Would it make any difference? Would student learning improve? An alternative approach for improving student learning has been to use accountability processes through the reporting of student data to the community. The stated aim of these approaches was to provide opportunity for better parent choice through the provision of objective data. Successful schools would attract students and survive, whilst unsuccessful schools would die.

Inherent in both of these approaches is the assumption that by encouraging teachers to try harder, student learning will improve. Accountability is seen as the mechanism to drive teachers to do better. Formal accountability measures employing the use of student data and reporting have been in place in the United States over the past twenty years and in other countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand for shorter periods of time. Many systems in Australia are also embarking on this road. What role should accountability play within Lutheran schools? In answering this question outcomes of international research into the success of these approaches are worth considering.

For the purposes of this paper we will work with a simple definition of accountability as that of 'being answerable' (Webster Dictionary 1976). Within this definition there is a clear indication of the need to report to someone in a position of power. Accountability is not just about data collection it is about relationships and who has the power within those relationships. Three alternate views of accountability have been characterised as the technical, client and professional perspectives by Elmore and Associates (1990 in Macpherson 1996a, 141).

The technical perspective takes the viewpoint that quality education involves quantifiable, and identifiable outcomes that can be scientifically measured and compared. Accountability is 'accomplished by being clear on purposes, defining performance indicators, and then collecting objective data (Elmore and Associates 1990, in Macpherson 1996, 141). Individuals or schools are rewarded or punished on the basis of their achievement of these goals. Power is attributed to an authority figure outside of the classroom and sometimes even the school.

The client perspective sees schools improving through accounting directly to parents, students and members of the community and involving them in planning and management. Accountability is accomplished 'through political, market and managerial mechanisms' (Elmore and Associates 1990, in Macpherson 1996, 141). Parents have the power.

The professional perspective sees schools improving when educators have greater control over the process, work collegially to deconstruct schooling, employ collaborative planning in response to discovered areas of weakness and involves cooperative teaching and learning (Elmore and Associates 1990, in Macpherson 1996, 142). Teachers have the power.

In examining the effects of accountability processes within twenty four restructuring schools in the United States of America, Newmann, King and Rigdon 1997 (46-47) found that external accountability mechanisms based on matching performance to District and National norms did not of their own accord produce improvements in student learning. Interestingly neither did many of the other panaceas currently in vogue within Australian schools. They state

neither the promulgation of external standards of school performance, new curriculum and assessment practices, additional staff development, provision of advanced technology, nor site based management necessarily generated consensus and collaboration for a common mission (Newmann, King and Rigdon 1997, 47).

Contrasting this they found that schools that had strong internal accountability informed by external measures had greater levels of cohesion and as such a greater likelihood of improving student learning

(Newmann, King and Rigdon 1997, 48). They were places where there was strong peer pressure to perform. Within the accountability processes teachers established their own standards, collected data both externally and internally generated, jointly reviewed it and planned for future action. A culture of seeking more professional knowledge was evident.

In his study of the effects of accountability processes on school improvement in Canadian schools, Fullan (1995, 205) also noted the importance of matching school accountability processes with teacher empowerment and collaboration. A constant theme throughout Fullan's (1995) *The New Meaning For Educational Change* is the need for both pressure and support to drive change and thereby improve student learning. Accountability to various groups is an important and necessary stimulus for change action but a culture of professional accountability involving dialogue between teachers is necessary if improvement is to occur. Maxwell (1996, 19) notes that accountability can be both formal and informal. Formal accountability processes 'tend to be rule bound' and reduce the value of relationships, while informal processes are relationship dependent and involve groups of teachers discussing (Maxwell 1996, 19).

All three pieces of research highlight the importance of professionally skilled individuals jointly reviewing data and making judgments. Both Hargreaves (1997) and Fullan (1997) stress that judgment requires both head and heart. In *Links* (September 1999) it is argued that relationships and active professional dialogue based on student data are at the core of improving student learning. Effective accountability processes need to stimulate discussion, facilitate action at the classroom level and build professionalism. Professionalism involves the ability and capacity to act autonomously as individuals and as groups. The capacity to collect and act on student data both formal and informal should be a fundamental skill possessed by all professional teachers. Opportunity for information sharing is central to this.

This view of professional action and accountability fits well with Fitzgibbon's Complex Model of Schooling (Fitzgibbon 1996, 78) which sees schools as complex systems competing for survival and evolving on the basis of feedback. Schools and classrooms are never static. Schools like other complex systems have self organising units at many different levels, including the classroom 'which probably become self improving if given better data' (Fitzgibbon 1996 in Gray et al. 1996, 78). Information flow is critical within any complex system. Monitoring systems and information flow between the subunit parts emerge as essential components of the school's prosperity and survival.

What does it all mean for Lutheran schools? Certainly hierarchical structures exist within Lutheran schools where there is some degree of answerability or accountability. The degree to which teachers feel as if they are accountable, to whom and for what purposes varies between schools. The extent to which the answerability is based on real student data, leads to professional discussion or is focussed on student learning is problematic. What follows is a preliminary summary of research I conducted on the use of student data by Lutheran schools last year.

Forty five individuals from four Lutheran schools were interviewed. Participants included Heads of Schools, Council Members, Teaching Administrators and Heads of Department. One of the themes explored within this study was the use of student data for accountability processes. While no formal accountability processes based on the use of student data were in place, informal monitoring of test results, reports, and yr 12 results were used by Heads, Administrators and Heads of Department to monitor teacher performance. In some cases informal observation of teachers and students were also used to develop a picture of what was occurring. There did not appear to be any direct linkage of these informal processes to the improvement of student learning. The conveyance of student data to the School Council level was extremely limited and in many cases deemed to be unnecessary. The main form of accountability of the Head to the Council was that of bottoms on seat. A measure that could be argued to be a poor choice of indicator. By the time the bottoms are not there, it would be highly probable that the nature of learning within the school had undergone considerable decline and could require years of remedial action to repair both the reality of the learning environment and the communities perception of it.

In some schools individual efforts by Department Heads or Year Level Coordinators were used to formally track and monitor students over a period of years. There were few consistent whole school approaches to monitoring students, although in two schools results of entrance tests were used by the Administration to monitor subsequent performance. Very rarely did Heads of Department use entrance or prior performance data to monitor the effectiveness of the teaching and learning within their departments or in some cases even have access to it. A number of Heads of Department did use student data as an informal and often

unconscious means to monitor student performance and thereby the quality of their curriculum but there were a surprising number who did not. Where student data was used it was generally not cited as being for the purpose of monitoring the development of problem solving or higher order thinking skills, or the performance of particular groups of students. Rarely did schools or teachers seek student or parental opinion as a means to monitor the quality of their programs.

Importantly there was a consistent strong desire among all members of all schools to do their best for their students. Despite feeling as if they made little use of student data most of those interviewed had considerable tacit (head) knowledge of student performance within the school. Some of this was test based and alpha-numeric, while other data was more affective and experientially based. Where test based data existed teachers would filter this on the basis of their experiences or knowledge of the student. Most commented on the lack of formal time or processes to share and build on their knowledge of student performance within their curriculum areas. There were repeated instances where considerable relevant data often sat within an individual's head but was never used as a means to improve student learning. As an example information flow is summarised for one school below, with the arrow direction indicating the direction of information flow and the thickness of the arrow the density. Note the lack of flow between the Learning Support Coordinator and those most directly responsible for the teaching and learning that occurs within the classroom.

Much informal discussion within staffroom groups was described as taking place and in one school was the basis for the improvement of the curriculum offered. Sharing of information with people outside of staffrooms was often described as difficult. In some instances there was not even the opportunity to develop an informal understanding of student development within a curriculum area. Newer schools and younger staff tended to be more attuned to student data, including reflections from students and as such focussed on a range of student data to informally 'measure' the effectiveness of their teaching and programs. In some schools the flow of information to the Head was essentially single directional and stopped at that point.

Just as data sharing within the above school was fragmented so too were the informal accountability processes. The arrows shown in diagram 8 represent the direction of accountability commented on within the school. Strong market forces were felt to have exerted considerable pressure on the teaching staff. It could be argued that for effective peer accountability the arrows would be two way and possess a greater density. In other schools data was collected for the purpose of technical accountability which aimed at ensuring that staff were doing their jobs. In schools where this occurred there was limited use of data used for professional discussion of the quality of student learning.

In haphazard, fragmented and adhoc ways much use was made of student data in a number of schools. Informal use of student data did in many instances result in varying degrees of accountability that did through professional discussion lead directly to action focussed at the improvement of student learning. By providing greater opportunity for sharing between staff and bringing these processes more to the conscious level, greater use of the extensive tacit knowledge possessed by our teachers could be used to improve student learning. Although we would all appreciate the pay rise, of greater need within our schools is a restructuring of time to enable professional staff to do their jobs well. They have the intrinsic motivation. Structures, and processes need to be in place to facilitate purposeful discussion that incorporates the use of both formally and informally collected student data and includes the opportunity for people to discuss beyond their immediate working peers. Greater levels of internal accountability focussed on the quality of student learning across a range of measures should provide the necessary professional pressure and direction to facilitate the ongoing improvement of student learning at each subunit level and in particular the classroom. In a professional workplace intent on providing the best learning opportunities for students, School Councils should have access to a broader range of student data from a range of sources and be more intent on determining the quality of what was taking place on an ongoing basis. Two directional sharing of data provides natural processes for accountability and considerable professional development.

It would be a sad indictment on our schools if our staff were too busy to actually know what effect their teaching and learning was really having on students. At all levels of our schools we need to become more intentional about determining what is really occurring. There is no doubt that market forces and hence client accountability are driving many changes within schools including our own. Professional educators need to be ensuring that these changes are in fact addressing real student needs within their schools. Being accountable to one another, parents and students through rich purposeful dialogue which involves the honest and open examination of student development can set critical energy free to focus on the main business of schools. The time is right for Lutheran educators to critically examine practice and collectively

find better ways to do things. Professional accountability used well can be a powerful activator for better outcomes for all, including a change exhausted staff.

Bronwyn Dolling

Position Paper presented Sept 99 at ACLE Conference, Gold Coast Queensland

References

Department of Education, Community and Cultural Development, Education Planning Branch, Tasmania 1997 (published April 1997, cited 1st October 1998) 'The Essential Features' Directions for Education , <http://www.tased.edu.au/directions/>

Fitzgibbon, C. 1996, 'Monitoring school effectiveness: simplicity and complexity', in *Merging Traditions The Future of Research On School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, eds Gray, Reynolds, Fitzgibbon and Jesson, Cassell, London, pp 74 - 90.

Fullan, M. 1995, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Cassell, London.

Fullan, M. 1997 *Emotion and Hope: Constructive Concepts For Complex Times*, in *Rethinking Educational Change With Heart and Mind* , ed Hargreaves A, Association For Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia.

Hargreaves, A. 1997, *Rethinking Educational Change: Going Deeper and Wider in the Quest for Success*, in *Rethinking Educational Change With Heart and Mind* , ed Hargreaves A, Association For Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia.

Macpherson R., 1996 *Accountability, Towards Reconstructing a Politically Incorrect Policy Issue*, *Educational Management and Administration*, vol 24, no 2, 139-150

Newmann, King, Rigdon 1997. *Accountability and School performance: Implications from Restructuring Schools*, *Harvard Education Review* vol 67, no 1, pp 41-69.

Reynolds, Creemers, Nesselroft, Schaffer, Stringfield, Teddlie 1994, *Advances in School Effectiveness Research and Practice* (Elsevier Science, Oxford)

Thomas and Mortimore 1996, *Comparison of Value Added Models For Secondary School Effectiveness*, *Research papers in Education* vol 11, No 1.