

On Accountability and Accreditation in Teacher Education:
A Plea for Alternatives¹

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In this paper, I propose that a choice in approaches to specialized accreditation may benefit teacher education. This choice is currently represented by two different organizations for the accreditation of teacher education programs, NCATE² and TEAC.³ These two organizations represent substantial differences in approaches to accreditation, and thus serve as good examples of the kind of choice I advocate here. Others may argue that alternative approaches to accountability and accreditation will do harm to teacher education. The voices for this position are usually heard in defense of NCATE, the older and more senior of the two accreditation approaches. In contrast to these voices, I will argue that given the present course of educational reform in the United States, an alternative conception of accreditation holds considerable appeal to those whose vision of a democratic, civil society is at odds with the vision implied by the current reform movement.

In her seminal work, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt says that her task in that work is "nothing more than to think what we are doing."⁴ What I would ask us all to do as we engage in supporting or defending one scheme of accountability over another is to think what we are doing. As I think about what we are doing in the currently dominant schemes for the professionalization of teaching and the accountability of educational institutions, I am concerned. Indeed, more than concerned. I am deeply troubled.

What troubles me is the extent to which the authority for setting the criteria and standards of our work as educators, for envisioning the good and proper outcomes of our labors, is moving so relentlessly upward. When I say upward, I am referring to levels of government as well as spheres of influence in state and national associations. The shift that is occurring today is away from sites where the actual work takes place, away from schools and neighborhoods, campuses and communities, to state or federal governments and to national organizations and associations.

The reform movements that impel this transfer of power and authority are those that press for common subject matter standards⁵, statewide or national assessments, statewide or national tests, national goals, national curricula, standardized performance outcomes, and the various provisions associated with the current teacher professionalization movement.⁶ Much of what presently characterizes our conceptions of accountability and accreditation in teacher education is closely linked to these reform initiatives. I want to pose the possibility that these initiatives are leading us in a direction that is ultimately alien to our most noble and prized conceptions of education and democracy.

When I think of what we are doing in these current reform endeavors, two different, though related, consequences come to mind. The first is that we are diminishing the demands on all participants to the educational process to act with the highest levels of intelligence in the execution of their work. Instead we are forming intellectual elites that act on behalf of others, rather than enabling others to act on their own behalf. The second thing we are doing is weakening the “networks of civic engagement”⁷ that produce the social capital essential to a healthy democracy. I hope that I can make myself clear on each of these points.

On the matter of intelligence and whether our current approach to accountability in teacher education distributes its exercise more broadly or concentrates it among the few, one could have no better guide than John Dewey. Listen to his wonderful summary to chapter 8 of *Democracy and Education*, where he is engaged in describing the nature of an aim and how important it is for each of us to formulate the aims for our actions. An aim, says Dewey, “signifies that an activity has become intelligent.”⁸

A true aim is thus opposed at every point to an aim which is imposed upon a process of action from without. The latter is fixed and rigid; it is not a stimulus to intelligence in the given situation, but is an externally dictated order to do such and such things. Instead of connecting directly with present activities, it is remote, divorced from the means by which it is to be reached. Instead of suggesting a freer and better balanced activity, it is a limit set to activity. In education, the currency of these externally imposed aims is

responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish.⁹

With these words, Dewey leaves no doubt where he stands on initiatives that “decenter” teachers and their learners while “centering” small elites that formulate aims, as well as standards, processes, and procedures, then pass these “down” the hierarchies of government or related organizations to site-level actors. It is fascinating to note a similar line of reasoning in no less an authority than John Stuart Mill, who in his essay, “On Liberty,” wrote:

Though individuals may not do the particular things so well, on the average, as the officers of government, it is nevertheless desirable that it should be done by them, rather than by the government, as a means to their own mental education—a mode of strengthening their active faculties, exercising their judgment, and giving them familiar knowledge of the subjects with which they are thus left to deal.¹⁰

I believe that good systems of educational accountability should be conceived in ways that make maximum demands on the intelligence of teachers, teacher educators, school administrators, and district governing authorities.¹¹ Educational policies that foster such systems of accountability are what Richard Elmore called “capacity enhancing,” rather than “compliance-effecting.”¹² Compliance-effecting policies are regulatory in character. Although such policies are occasionally necessary, they carry a tremendous cost inasmuch as they typically divert resources to surveillance and compliance assessment, and away from problem-solving and inventive application. In contrast, capacity-enhancing policy downshifts complexity and control to the site level, where it serves to promote and sustain dialogue and deliberation, and thereby, as Mill says, “strengthen the active faculties” of those who are most closely engaged in the work of educating teachers and children.

The force of these ideas, as I understand them, is that a central, moral obligation of those who are entrusted with accountability for the education of children and their teachers is to ensure a policy environment that promotes the exercise of intelligence at the “bottom”

of our tables of organization, where teacher candidates and teacher educators, and teachers and this nation's children, are engaged in the work of education. It is, in my view, questionable whether this central, moral obligation is met by the imposition of performance measures, standards and outcomes, accompanied by "high stakes" assessment, all of these impelled forward by national agencies and associations earnestly seeking to join forces with the juridical powers of the state, so that together they might lead us all to education's mythical Elysian Fields.

There is another way to think about what we are doing, another way to create accountability to good means and good ends. It is a system of accountability that says something like this to the site-level actors: You will be held accountable for what you believe it is right and proper for you to do; we who serve as your external reviewers will audit your performance to ascertain whether you have set forth clearly stated and carefully grounded aims, whether you have acted on them in good faith, and whether you have independent evidence of the success or failure of your efforts. We are not responsible, however, for supplying you with aims, or demanding that you comply with aims obtained elsewhere. As rational, intelligent agents, you must take these steps. Our task is to assure ourselves that you have indeed taken these steps, that you have done so in fiduciary relationship to those you serve, and that you have established ways to keep from deceiving yourselves and those you serve about the consequences of your work.¹³

Were I to give a name to this form of accountability, I would call it apple accountability. No typo here; it is indeed "apple." The allusion here is to the apple that Eve plucked from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. You may recall that eating this apple introduced evil to humankind, but it was also what gave the species free will and independent intelligence.¹⁴ Apple accountability calls on all participants to the educational endeavor to bite into the apple of knowledge, thereby becoming responsible for the exercise of intelligence as part and parcel with the formation of aims, as Dewey would put it, and the exercise of judgment, as Mill would put it. Having gone this far, I would take the corresponding step of referring to the contrasting form of accountability as crown accountability. The name comes from the fact that those held accountable are subject to the aims and judgments of the crown, or an authority similar to a crown, wherein it is presumed that we are

sufficiently sure of what is right and good that a few are entitled to hold all others accountable to it.

There are times and circumstances when crown accountability is justified, even in free societies. However, as already noted, it carries large penalties for the cultivation of knowledge and judgment by those subject to it. This loss of opportunity to expand understanding and enhance discernment is not the only cost. There is another, one that takes us directly to the democratic context for public education.

We all know that democracy, of the kind evident in the United States, requires education. All of us are familiar with the eloquent arguments on this subject by Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey, as well as more recently by such scholars as Benjamin Barber,¹⁵ John Goodlad,¹⁶ and Kenneth Strike.¹⁷ What may be less evident to many of us is that our democracy also requires associative communities, also sometimes referred to as networks of civic engagement. These associative communities or networks arise to deliberate and act on matters of common interest. They are formed around such things as neighborhoods, religious convictions, public service, artistic endeavors, mutual aid societies, philanthropy, educational specialties, occupational categories, and a myriad of other factors in our society. These associations are almost always voluntary, and are not a part of the governing apparatus of a community, state, or nation.¹⁸ One of the major values of these associations is that they serve as sources of what Thomas Green has called "strong normation,"¹⁹ which is basis for the formation of virtuous character and high conscience.

Among the most profound and critical occasions for the formation of associative communities in U. S. society is the dialogue and deliberation around education. To the extent that this dialogue and deliberation remains centered at the sites where education take place, sites where children and teachers are taught, to that extent dialogue and deliberation contribute to and sustain networks of civic engagement. If this dialogue and deliberation is "up-shifted" to higher levels of government, to state and national arenas, to organizations whose centers of power are far from the sites of teaching and learning, dialogue and deliberation at local sites become correspondingly unnecessary. As dialogue and deliberation decline, so does associative

community. As associative community declines, so does strong normation. In that decline is the decline of what we have come to know as social capital. Without rich enclaves for the production of social capital, democracy itself is endangered. If you have any doubt of this result, you need only consult Robert Putnam's brilliant study of civic traditions in modern Italy to see what happens to democracy when networks of civic engagement atrophy.²⁰

Systems of accountability and accreditation can be designed to foster the growth of networks of civic engagement by ensuring that sites where the work of education takes place are encouraged to meet, deliberate, decide, act and judge. These systems must be at pains to "downshift" to local sites the burdens of discourse, the resolution of differences, the formation of aims, and the determination of the consequences for the choices made. In so doing, these systems will enable associative communities to arise and to flourish. Moreover, this approach is the one most likely to cultivate the intelligence and the judgment of the site-level actors. What could more devoutly be wished for than this conception of educational accountability that is itself educative?

The current wave of reform, as well as the current manifestations of accountability and accreditation in teacher education that follow this wave of reform, are, in my view, tilted too far towards the crown. Taking Arendt's advice, and thinking what we are doing, I would rather eat the apple than wear the crown. That may not be your preference. The issue here, however, is not what you or I prefer, but whether there are sufficient merits in either approach to justify making a choice available. In that regard, I hope I have offered a worthy argument on behalf of the apple.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1997 Meeting of the Midwest Philosophy of Education Society. The paper was subsequently revised for presentation at a major symposium of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education annual meeting, held on February 27, 1998, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Additional, but modest, revisions have been made for this latest version, to be published in the Proceedings of the Midwest Philosophy of Education Society. The author welcomes comments by email addressed to gfenster@umich.edu.

2. NCATE is the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, currently the sole specialized accrediting agency for teacher education in the United States.

3. TEAC is the Teacher Education Accreditation Council, an emerging organization that seeks recognition as an accrediting agency providing an alternative approach to that currently employed by NCATE.

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), p. 5. With thanks to John Wiens, Superintendent of Seven Oaks School Division, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, for reminding me of how Arendt saw her purpose in this volume.

5. It is important to separate standards from assessment, but that is not often done in the current reform climate. If standards stood alone, as if they were models that others might voluntarily emulate after due deliberation, they would not present the kinds of difficulties that lead to the criticisms offered here. However, when standards are linked with assessments, especially assessments that imperil the prestige or remuneration of site-level actors and agencies, then they are open to the criticisms lodged here.

6. In using the expression, "the current teacher professionalization movement," I want to be careful to distinguish the desiderata that all teachers be professionals and be treated as such, a goal I strongly support, from the notion that the occupation of teaching should be professionalized in the manner of medicine or law, a goal that is, in my view, far less attractive than the first. To gain a sense of what is involved in professionalizing the occupation of teaching, one need only consult the public documents released over the last few years by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (particularly a brochure entitled, "The New Professional Teacher Project," and an article by NCATE President, Arthur Wise, entitled "The Coming Revolution in Teacher Licensure: Redefining Teacher preparation," in *Action for Teacher Education*, XVI(2), Summer, 1994, 1-13), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the September, 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future). Arguments that caution against this professionalization movement can be found in Gary D Fenstermacher, Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a Profession, and Roger Soder, The Rhetoric of Teacher Professionalization, both appearing in J. I. Goodlad, R. Soder, & K. Sirotnik, Eds., *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 130-151 and 35-86, respectively.

7. The expression is taken from Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 129.

9. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 129.
10. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government*, p. 221.
11. This point parallels a similar point made by Thomas F. Green in *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971, pp. 32-33), wherein he poses the view that "teaching is an activity primarily concerned with enlarging the manifestation of intelligence."
12. Richard F. Elmore, "Complexity and Control: What Legislators and Administrators Can Do about Implementing Public Policy," in Lee S. Shulman & Gary Sykes, Eds., *Handbook of Teaching and Policy* (New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 342-369.
13. This conception of accreditation is based on a view of collegiate accountability developed by Patricia Albjerg Graham, Richard W. Lyman, & Martin Trow, in *Accountability of Colleges and Universities: An Essay* (New York: The Trustees of Columbia University, 1995).
14. It is fascinating to listen to the concerns of those who resist placing more control in the hands of site-level actors. They are frequently heard to argue that if site-level actors are given discretionary authority, these actors may do terrible things with such freedom. Free will and free action have always carried this downside, as the Book of Genesis makes clear when noting that one does not obtain knowledge without also obtaining evil in the bargain. Perhaps the root question here is how site-level actors are to be held accountable to high standards that are well-regarded by most in the profession, if these actors are allowed the freedom to choose what they will do. This question is merely a microform of the question that vexes all liberal democracies: How does the state permit each person to construct his or her own version of the good life while holding all citizens accountable to justice and equal consideration before the law? The question is not easily answered, but it can never be set aside in a democracy merely because it is vexing. It is of more than passing interest that in American democracy we have sought resolution to this problem through mass, popular, common education, and we have, for the most part, been amazingly successful at this resolution.
15. Benjamin R. Barber. *An Aristocracy of Everyone* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).
16. John I. Goodlad, *In Praise of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997). See also John I. Goodlad & Timothy J. McMannon, Eds., *The Public Purpose of Education and Schooling* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); and Roger Soder, Ed., *Democracy, Education and the Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

17. Kenneth A. Strike, Professionalism, Democracy, and Discursive Communities: Normative Reflections on Restructuring, *American Journal of Education*, 30(2), 1993, 255-275; and Kenneth A. Strike, The Moral Role of Schooling in a Liberal Democratic Society, in Gerald Grant, Ed., *Review of Research in Education* 17 (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1991).

18. Alexis de Tocqueville made much of the distinction between political and civic associations, as noted in volume II, Part 2, Chapters 5, 6, & 7 of *Democracy in America*.

19. Thomas F. Green, *The Formation of Conscience in an Age of Technology* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University School of Education, 1984. For a much expanded discussion of normation, consult T. F. Green, *Voices*, to be published by Notre Dame Press in 1998.

20. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (see note 6 above). Another source of exceptional insight on this point is Robert A. Nisbet, *Community and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Book, 1962).