

Accountability: The Case of Accreditation of British Columbia's Public Schools

T. W. Maxwell

university of new england, australia

Post-industrial governments are demanding higher levels of accountability, not least in the education sector. Accountability in British Columbia's schools was initially based upon inspectors' reports. It evolved into an accreditation process. This article analyzes the British Columbia public school accreditation process using an expanded model of accountability based on Lundgren (1990). The main subjects of discussion are the difficulty of accreditation serving two audiences, and the nature of the accreditation manual.

Les gouvernements post-industriels exigent une responsabilisation accrue, y compris et surtout dans le secteur de l'éducation. L'obligation de rendre compte dans les écoles de la Colombie-Britannique a d'abord été fondée sur les rapports des inspecteurs, puis a progressivement donné lieu à un processus d'agrément. Cet article analyse le processus d'agrément des écoles publiques de la Colombie-Britannique en faisant appel à un modèle élargi de responsabilité issu de Lundgren (1990). Les principaux thèmes abordés sont la difficulté de l'agrément en présence de deux auditoires ainsi que la nature du manuel d'agrément.

Post-industrial governments have been characterized as managerialist (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Many embrace a "new right" discourse (Angus, 1992; Apple, 1993; Dale & Ozga, 1993). In either description, accountability "down the line" is a *sine qua non*. Accountability can be seen as a top-down means to ensure efficient and effective services in "hard times." Kogan (1986), however, has defined accountability as an institutionalized form of responsibility backed by authority in a power relationship (p. 30). In this article I examine the contrast between the central political perspective and the local professional one in the accountability of school systems in British Columbia.¹ This contrast is developed mainly through exploratory analysis of a few recent school accreditation reports as well as an analysis of objectives in the centrally (i.e., provincial Ministry of Education) developed accreditation manual.

Accountability within a system is complex. It is essentially a reciprocal relational responsibility. The authority requires a justification of what has been done usually in return for its financial investment. This justification provides the basis for dominance in the relationship. Furthermore, the evidence required in the education sector is often difficult to produce. The emphasis in accountability can be on finding out who is responsible for problems and then "fixing" them. Sometimes this sharp edge of accountability, felt as blame, misconstrues the

complex nature of the human enterprise. It is the context of effects that makes determination of effect by cause(s) problematic (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In a similar vein, the tendency to construe accountability in education solely in tangible output terms is to misconstrue the nature of education and so what it is to be human. Nevertheless, as Cronbach et al. (1980) have pointed out, accountability has a legitimate and historic role (pp. 133–141).

Lundgren (1990) conceptualizes accountability as consisting of two dimensions, the local/central and the political/professional (pp. 30–31). Combining these in a 2x2 matrix, it is relatively easy to explore the possible variants of accountability. In the case of education, accountability could be exercised through the political centre (e.g., the provincial bureaucracy), perhaps in a form of managerialism, or through the professional centre (e.g., professional subject associations, the teachers' union). Alternatively, it might be exercised through the local political group (e.g., a local parent group like the Parents Advisory Council), or through a local professional group (e.g., the school teaching staff), as a form of collegial professionalism. Or accountability may consist of some combination of these. The latter is most likely, given the complexity of the school context, especially when such things as media scrutiny and formal and informal contacts between teachers and community members, teachers, and Board officers are taken into account.

Consideration of accountability's formal and informal dimensions is useful because it highlights accountability's human face. The distinction is largely relational and to some extent procedural. Formal relations are exhibited in established procedures recognized in statutes and practices that form the basis of relations — in, for example, meeting procedures, formal reporting, the disciplinary interview. Formal relations tend to be official and rule bound, perhaps to circumvent the affective side of relations but certainly in many cases to use authority structures. They are also the mechanisms through which reciprocal responsibilities are fought out or negotiated, as when increased resources are required of the authority. Informal relations exist where the relations are not set out or recorded. In contrast to the formal, the informal tends to take advantage of affect, for example in lobbying or in an appeal to friendship. It is the quality of the relationship that is important here. The power of the formal/informal dimension is exercised in relation to other dimensions. For instance, informal, professional power can be exercised more effectively on a teacher at the local as opposed to the central level, simply because of the proximity and the day-to-day business that needs to get done, and through the quality of relationships that can develop over time. In Kogan's (1990) terms, the formal/informal dimension takes the affect into account.

Especially in hard times, teachers face extra political pressures to be accountable. At the same time, they continue to see the necessity of improving classroom and school practices from a professional and/or a social justice perspective. Yet it can also be argued that improvement is also a responsibility of the political

centre. Here policy and/or structural initiatives are likely. In broad terms, improvement forms the third major focus of accountability, along with efficiency and effectiveness (Taylor & Hill, 1993).

In reviewing the accountability practices, Taylor and Hill (1993) distinguish between what they see as two basic types of accountability, quality assurance (QA) and total quality management (TQM). This distinction is useful for my purposes. QA has two objectives: efficiency and effectiveness (nicely aligned with new right management thinking). On the other hand, improvement, together with efficiency and effectiveness, is central to TQM. QA processes generate justificatory information that can then flow from the subordinate to the higher level of power. Such information is likely to be general in nature. QA as a form of accountability becomes a centralized, political approach in which formal relations play an important part. In contrast, TQM information essentially remains within the organization and is specific and context bound. TQM is thus an approach to accountability that is localized, has a professional orientation, and may well depend more heavily on informal relations.

In this article I consider the place of formal, central, political demands alongside local, professional needs. I offer a case study of a government system's process of state school accreditation in British Columbia. I contrast the immediacy of local improvement efforts with the framing of the central accountability questions. In the analysis that follows, I show that the most recent form of accreditation in B.C. schools can be viewed as a study of self-evaluation linked to accountability. Kogan (1986) has identified such studies as necessary (p. 141).

BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Although the accreditation model of evaluation has been criticized as "too lenient" and "rarely result[ing] in recommendations for reduced [resources]" (House, 1993, pp. 67–68) as well as typically emphasizing the "intrinsic and not the outcome criteria of education" (Stufflebeam & Webster, 1983, p. 32), accreditation in British Columbia has evolved to minimize some of these criticisms. A brief history of school accreditation in B.C., which evolved from the inspection model, provides background essential to understanding the present accreditation process.

Accountability in school education in British Columbia, a concern especially in times of economic adversity (Fleming, 1978), first became a concern in British Columbia's schools in the middle of the last century. A centrally determined, formal, political system was developed, based on efforts of peripatetic inspectors. Their qualitative judgments on the nature of teachers' work and their workplaces were the means by which the central authority hoped to ensure effective and efficient schools. Whether schools were effective and efficient was judged partly on the faithfulness of the use of centrally prescribed curriculum content. This content and prescribed teaching practices were found, and are still found, in such

documents as the *Manual of School Law* (see, for instance, Province of British Columbia, 1893, and Ministry of Education, 1991). The central authority was to be provided with data about teachers and about schools. Such an accountability mechanism prevailed until about the middle of the present century.

The Putman and Weir Report (1925) reasserted the importance of principals' supervision of teachers and introduced the notion of school accreditation for the purpose of pupil promotion. Internal and external reporting for accreditation purposes were introduced. Standards were often evaluated through consideration of graduation class results. In the 1940s and 1950s, inspection retained the flavour of reporting on individual teachers. The inspector had always been both inspector and administrator but by this time, the focus of the inspector's early work as an agent of the provincial government had altered; the inspector was more district oriented than before. At about that same time, the teaching profession was finding its voice. Eventually, in 1958, the inspectorate for public schools disappeared. By the 1970s teachers were made accountable to local officials, though the central authority still set the curriculum (Maxwell, 1993).

The post-World War II boom in school population and the burgeoning economy allowed the B.C. school system to develop. Schools were increasingly seen as places for the development of human capital or for sorting by ability (Lundgren, 1990, p. 24). Liberalizing influences of the 1960s and early 1970s included the cessation of provincial examinations at grade 12 and decreased specification of curricula. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) strengthened, perhaps consistent with the governing New Democratic Party's decentralization policy, in the period 1973–1976.

Accreditation had become the process in which graduation schools were required to participate to earn the "right to recommend." With abolition of the external examination system in the 1970s, the purpose of accreditation for examination at grade 12, the "right to recommend" disappeared. Yet accreditation continued (Gray, 1989, p. 41) and there were two clear audiences for the reports: the central political and the local professional.

The idea of school self-improvement had been developing, facilitated by the central authority's internal assessment booklet (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 1979). The booklet was to assist schools to develop internal reports, which would complement the external team's report. Both reports were written for the school, trustees, and the Ministry (Gray, 1989, p. 41). The basis of the booklet was the central authority's conception of the nature of education for B.C.'s schools. Successful schools were granted accredited status of one to six years (six years implied a clean bill of health, two was a source of major concern for those involved). This process was well received although there was some uncertainty about between-school variation in status conferred (Gray, 1989, p. 42). Accreditation developed in this way can be seen as a new, technological control of the schools (Fleming, 1989, p. 68ff). As Fleming (1989) argued, it

consisted of policy formulation and the technical procedures to take the place of “men in the field” (the inspectors). The information obtained via accreditation was additional to the Ministry’s required gathering of data concerning a range of school characteristics and reported in the statistical supplements to the annual reports.

THE PRESENT ACCREDITATION PROCESS FOR SCHOOLS

For various reasons, near the end of the 1980s a review of accreditation was initiated and the emphasis on the internal (insider) and the external (outsider) reports was maintained. The review group recommended the following principles: ongoing school improvement; systematic data collection; and systematic accountability through measurable goal attainment. In developing the central authority’s guide, the notion of the school growth plan, the effective schools literature, and retaining the outsider element of the process were also considered important (Gray, 1989, p. 43). A conceptual framework, based on Ingram (1986, in Gray, 1989) and including “administrative leadership, professional attributes, learning experiences and community relations” (Ingram, 1986, in Gray, 1989, p. 43) as well as school culture, was central to the guide, since these focussed on the school’s work. The review group adopted an essentially rational approach to constructing the report: school growth plans were tied to the evaluation. These plans guided self-improvement. Efficiency and effectiveness were not emphasized. Attributes of public schools (accessibility, relevance, equity, quality, and accountability) were also considered important but their status in relation to the Ingram conceptualization is unclear. Also, secondary schools were required to be accredited once every six years.

The *Guide to the British Columbia Secondary Schools Accreditation Process* (Ministry of Education, 1988) retained the secondary school subject department focus found in the 1979 manual (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 1979). The manual in the 1988 *Guide*, together with a number of support documents and training, formed the backbone of the accreditation process. The manual is completed as a form of self evaluation; its structure follows the Ingram categories of evaluation. Each category is divided into objectives (criteria). These objectives were developed in a highly participative process in which representatives of teachers and the BCTF as well as Ministry officials took a central role. There are opportunities to include additional criteria.

It takes a year or so for school communities to undertake accreditation. A school community needs to develop an understanding of the criteria, gather data, and make judgments that are incorporated into the internal report. These judgments take the form of levels of satisfaction measured against the criteria using a Likert scale. More than a dozen steps are involved in this process, which is demanding and time consuming. Often the process makes use of occasional

professional development days. Once the internal report, together with the school growth plan, is complete, an external panel of peers “validates” the internal findings, analyzes the former’s growth plans, and writes its own report. It is an intensive week’s work.

The internal and external reports are sent to the Board and the Ministry. Once the reports are approved, schools may apply for funds to undertake activities associated with the school growth plans. Funds are provided according to a formula based on school size. The money buys time for teachers to work on concerns that they have determined and cannot be used for salaries, plant upgrading, or similar purposes (Gray, 1993). This availability of funds is a most important development in recent times to support school growth plans. For large schools these funds can be in the order of tens of thousands of dollars. Although primary schools have not been subject to external accountability since the 1970s, they have been able to volunteer for inclusion in the accreditation program since 1988 (Lim, 1989). They were likely to volunteer since there were development funds available. Funding tied to improvement efforts is a crucial addition to a process actively seeking self-improvement.

The most recent version of the intermediate and secondary accreditation process (Ministry of Education, 1992b) has some changes. Central is an idea of what it means to be educated (Ministry of Education, 1989b; Ministry of Education, 1992b, p. ix). A centrally determined process is advocated, largely based on school departments as the functional unit. In a trial, however, interested schools were invited to complete the report without the benefit of going through subject departments, thereby allowing a focus on whole school concerns. This change to a more holistic perspective in the 1992 transitional document was to bring the *Graduation School Manual* in line with the *Primary-Intermediate Manual*. This would appear to indicate increased interest in the school as the functional unit, where an holistic view of the work of the school is apparently preferred over subject department perspectives (Ministry of Education, 1993a).

In 1993, 40 secondary schools (about one-sixth the total) undertook accreditation. A larger number of elementary schools voluntarily did so. In November 1993, the Ministry of Education (1993b) announced that all 1300 (approximately) elementary schools in the province would be required to undertake accreditation. This effectively doubled annual demands on those responsible for accreditation. A considerable amount of information is potentially available; some kind of computer-based technology would be needed to take advantage of it all. The Ministry analyzes the reports to determine school-level issues, and writes summaries that are used internally, for example, in annual report writing and program evaluation. From 1993, accreditation information thus supplements comparative statistical data collected by the Ministry, which is then provided to schools doing accreditation (Bennett, 1993). The Ministry, however, expects school boards to follow up on the reports from the schools and the external validating teams

(Bennett, 1993). Boards have been known to combine accreditation report data with their own data and relieve principals of their positions. This occurs despite the fact that accreditation is not intended to evaluate the principal's work.

THE NATURE OF ACCREDITATION REPORTS

To obtain a picture of the nature of recent reports presented to the Ministry, I undertook content analysis of a stratified, randomly selected sample of five internal reports completed in 1993. At the time of data collection (November 1993) the corresponding external reports for two elementary schools were also available and these were included in my analysis. The external reports of the third elementary, the junior secondary, and the graduation school were not yet available. The sample was small for two reasons. First, this was a preliminary analysis and second, insufficient time precluded a greater number being analyzed. Due to the sample being small it would be unwise to make any generalizations, yet I believe a more comprehensive analysis would verify the following observations about the reports:

1. The conceptualization of the manual largely framed the reports.
2. There was great variety in reporting the contextualization of the school and in use of centrally provided data.
3. The external validating committees in the two external reports disagreed with up to a quarter of the satisfaction levels the school expressed on the 98 objectives. Invariably, the committees downgraded the achievement by one Likert scale division. External committee comments were brief.
4. There was great variety in the school growth plans, in terms of their scope, detail, and use of professional development. One school growth plan (not externally validated) only loosely followed expressed reports about areas needing improvement.
5. It was not possible to discern the relative importance or effect of the different kinds of evidence on each objective.
6. The graduation school report was three inches thick.

Many other impressions come to mind. One school, in particular, appeared to be "going through the motions." Perhaps this could be attributed to the cynicism of busy teachers when they face a process over which they perceive they have little control. It was evident, too, that such external team comments in the reports as "frankness" and "risk taking" on the part of a school community must have referred more to the discussions than to the internal report. These impressionistic data suggest an analysis of reports and follow-up interviews would be a fruitful avenue of research into such issues as the difficulties associated with distinctions between the formal and informal dimensions of accountability, the dual nature of the purposes of accreditation, and the variety of the audiences. The "leniency" of the external team might also be explored.

Another problem concerns the reports' conceptualization. The five reports I studied varied little from the format (conceptualization) supplied. Furthermore, of all the reports completed across the province, only a handful stepped outside the conceptualization provided (Gray, 1993). Put another way, the conceptualization of the manual framed the evaluation. This is understandable since doing so maximized the formal, central, political function. Consequently, the school improvement function may be minimized, since improvement is context bound. Questions of immediate and adjacent concern need to be raised in the stakeholders' language. In the B.C. accreditation process, schools do not have their own "voice," they do not frame their own questions in their own way. This contrasts with other systems of accountability in schools (e.g., Cuttance, 1993).

Use of the single conceptualization requires it to fit all situations. Alternatives, such as a thematic approach or the use of the five attributes of effective schools (above), consistent with the desire for an holistic perspective may better suit a school's quest for improvement. The possibility of alternatives appears necessary in a devolved system such as that current in British Columbia. The practical reality is, however, that busy teachers using a participative approach would be loathe to develop their own conceptualization. The provision of a conceptualization in the manuals is thus understandable.

DISCUSSION

The present position of accreditation in B.C. schools appears to be transitional, but it is also problematic in some respects. From the point of view of the central authority, the desire to achieve an accountability system is understandable. Yet it is apparent from the brief few sentences under "Accreditation" in the 1988/89 *Annual Report* (Ministry of Education, 1989a) that the data available from school accreditation reports were apparently of little use, even though the annual report is a classic means of accountability reporting available to government. There was some increased awareness, however, of accreditation reports' effect on the system, as evidenced by the Ministry's most recent *Annual Report* (Ministry of Education, 1992a). Indeed, that Report suggested a much greater interest in accountability generally, since school accreditation information and Board-level information was reported more fully. Though the Ministry appears to use the data minimally, an important point should not be lost: the accreditation process gives the government certain credibility, since it can point to the process as part of its accountability profile. At the same time, schools can take advantage of the accreditation process, by turning it to their own use.

The accreditation process has two audiences: the system, for central, political accountability and the local school, for professional purposes centred on improvement. This brings to mind House's (1993) contention that "each . . . audience requires different evaluation information for purposes of accountability"

(p. 35). Not to provide such different information leads to dysfunctionality or misuse of information (House, 1990, in House, 1993, pp. 35–38).

In the accreditation reports there is much *potential* for misuse of information. Misuse could stem from information that the system has about individuals. Such information could be inappropriately used against a school, subject department, or individual. In the accreditation reports cited there was little evidence of participants' positions, although these might have been inferred; subject areas were specified. Actual misuse of information may well be apparent. I have already noted that districts have been known to use accreditation report data against individuals.

Dysfunctionality can also arise in the accreditation process and in the reports. Individual, departmental, or school fears of the consequences of disclosure could be sources of dysfunctionality; for example, non-disclosure may well deny availability of crucial, central political data. Fear of disclosure would be minimized at the local, professional level where informal relations are good. Where these relations are poor, however, non-disclosure could be expected. This latter point would form part of the rationale for external team visits for data validation. Dysfunctionality is also evident in the language of the objectives in the manual.

THE NATURE OF MANUAL OBJECTIVES

What kind of language was used in the manuals' objectives? Was the language sufficiently particular to affect teachers' work? As all the reports studied used these objectives, these are important questions. It is likely that teachers, particularly elementary school teachers, think in terms of individual students, small groups, classes, sub-groups like "the girls in Grade 9," and perhaps even cohorts. Their knowledge of, and interest in, the pupils they teach is more specific and context-bound than a collective term like "students" indicates. On the other hand, bureaucrats are interested in more general issues.

To explore the language of the objectives, I analyzed the specificity of 108 objectives from the draft *British Columbia Intermediate-Graduation Accreditation Manual (Transitional)* (Ministry of Education, 1992b). My hypothesis was that the objectives would be more general than specific in terminology, especially where they refer to people; collective nouns would not be qualified. The key collective nouns were "students" (also "learners"), "school," and "staff" (also "teachers"). These collective nouns were not qualified in, respectively, 96%, 74%, and 74% of citations. In other words, participants in the accreditation process were asked to make broad judgments about general situations, situations that may well suit accountability at the system level but are less suitable as a basis for action in a particular context. Teachers are inclined to answer questions such as "students demonstrate success in reasoning and thinking independently" in terms similar to "it depends." More colourful language is easily imaginable. Yet, one can envisage teachers fulfilling formal accreditation requirements simply

by ticking a box. At the same time, they might use the objective like a criterion on a checklist for what they think might need improvement in their particular school.

In many ways it is analysis of the objectives themselves that highlights the more important questions. For such objectives as “students demonstrate success in acquiring a lifelong appreciation of learning,” it is difficult to imagine how teachers can gather evidence about this. Or, for the very first objective, “students demonstrate success in acquiring basic learning skills,” one is forced to ask if the centre already has these kinds of data from other sources.

DISCUSSION

These latter observations suggest that the central bureaucracy is not really interested in the data, a suggestion supported by the observation that the data would not allow questions of equity, access, and the like to be addressed. Furthermore, it is difficult to see just what system-wide teacher perceptions of satisfaction, beyond some indication of teachers’ general satisfaction, could actually mean to a central bureaucrat.

Nor do the central authorities appear to make much use of these data. Considering first the central authority bureaucrats, it is understandable that they would not be especially interested since they have other sources of data. Also, they do not want to know about the schools themselves. This is particularly true of schools that need “fixing.” What would they know about schools? That is not their work. Few of the top 20 or so people who hold management positions in the Ministry have a background in education. Of course the information is of interest to the 74 Boards, but they already are close enough to know where trouble exists. To receive community confirmation, however, adds credibility to the Boards’ own findings. It is interesting to note that current developments are consistent with the BCTF Executive Committee’s desire for “authentic, democratic accountability systems [to] center on goals set by teachers, parents and students in the context of the school community” (BCTF, 1990, p. 5). Yet the goals, set out as objectives in the manuals, are largely those of the centre.

Procedurally, the manual adopts a rational approach; it does so conceptually as well in that many objectives are specified. With this in mind, it is reasonable to suppose that objectives set out in the manuals act as a checklist for teachers. As they participate in dialogue, they make the distinctions important to their context. It is also likely that teachers redefine the objectives or develop their own meaning for them. Thus the objectives become “goals set by teachers.” To this extent, teachers do have a degree of control. One important lesson from the critique of the objectives model, however, is the importance of unintended effects. This is only marginally attended to by the manual’s suggestion that other objectives can be added by each school. My preliminary analysis indicates this option was seldom used.

In reporting the data generated from a consideration of objectives, school communities know more than they say. This is particularly true of individuals in the school. Clearly many data concerning the nature of particular teachers' work do not find their way into the report, in contrast to other school accountability systems (e.g., Education Review Office, 1993). Such questions are not usually asked, at least formally. Part of the reason why such questions are not asked lies in the important role of the BCTF in the accreditation process and education generally—a matter that cannot be taken up here. The promise the notion “accountability” holds for the committed employee may or may not be realized. Particularly where local professional relations are poor, teachers will hope the power vested in the centralized political process will act in the local professional interest. One can understand highly professional teachers' cynicism in a process ostensibly concerned with accountability but which does not result in action related to particular teachers' and other school workers' effectiveness and efficiency.

IMPLICATIONS

My analysis suggests that a promising initiative has some difficulties. In the spirit that processes evolve over time and improvements can be made, what then might be done for the current accreditation process already established in B.C. schools?

A way forward may be through consideration of the unit of analysis. In doing so, the question of accreditation serving both audiences can be addressed. Historically, accountability of schools was exercised through the work of individual teachers and largely determined through the inspector's qualitative judgments. Some systems have used standardized tests to provide evidence of accountability. But the use of students as the formal unit of analysis is fundamentally flawed unless contextual variables are included in the analysis, and in the reporting. Particularly important contextual factors are those attributes of the students themselves and their backgrounds (see Raphael, 1993). This is not to say that student results are not appropriate sources of data. Student outcome data can be gathered carefully by using such techniques as light sampling (Kogan, 1986). Careful item selection is also important, especially in relation to class, race, and gender. Lundgren (1990) makes an important distinction about the unit of analysis for accountability when he says that standardized testing

will not tell how well a knowledge structure is covered, but how well the students differentiate in relation to knowledge. It will thus provide the relative relation between the individual students in the system and leaving the system, but not how the content has been transmitted and the goals achieved, neither will it give a basis for decisions for change linked to political means such as resource allocation and in-service training. (p. 39)

This is a crucial distinction. Calls for more standardized tests as a form of system accountability are misguided. Standardized testing can, however, act as a basis for establishing benchmarks or norms, as Kogan (1986) points out in relation to the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) in the U.K.:

Such a body as the APU is potentially tied to the authority system but is not of it. It does not exact accountability from teachers. But it may help to set the norms, to which teachers might increasingly respond and to which managers might turn as reference points when *they* hold teachers accountable. (p. 72)

Teachers' fears concerning a national testing unit can be seen as another example of the political/professional tension. In the United Kingdom such fears have been realized. A boycott occurred in 1993, following the 1988 Education and Reform Act that established national testing at ages 7, 11, 14, and 16. These tests were operationalized as a complex system of performance assessments first administered in 1991 (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1993, pp. 12, 13). The focus on the individual student (as the unit of analysis) is more in the realm of interest of teachers and parents. This is not to say that the data concerning students, teachers, and schools are unrelated. Data about the one will affect the other. The important point is that *reporting* of the data to the audience must be clear about the unit of analysis. Furthermore, it is not the students that are being paid, and they are required by law to attend. It is the teachers who accept salaries and so accept the difficult responsibility of teaching as a matter of choice. It is tempting to make them the unit of analysis in accountability. Teacher responsibility entails determination of the curriculum, its implementation, and its evaluation, including assessment of students. Questions concerning the nature of teachers' work are a prerogative that teachers' unions have jealously guarded but rarely exercised as a form of central professional accountability.

If neither students nor teachers are appropriate units for system accountability, yet data concerning them may be of interest to teachers and schools in their quest for improvement, what then might be the way forward? The normative approach Kogan (1990) adopted for development of the evaluation of the new, devolved, Norwegian education system has elements that may solve many of the difficulties. It would, of course, be dangerous to try to translate what might be appropriate for one country to another, but the conceptualization is of interest. It refers, particularly, to the central/local and political/professional dimensions of accountability. In a number of respects, elements of the approach are already evident in British Columbia's overall accountability strategy. Broadly speaking there is an interest in the functions of different levels of the education system, which in the B.C. context means the provincial, board, and school levels. My analysis indicates a differentiation of concerns at the different levels of the system, then indicates the kinds of data needed to support the functions at these different levels.

What seems to be important is the interaction between levels of the system. The level below is of interest to the level above in terms of responsibility for services including curriculum implementation. The level below is interested in the level above in terms of responsibility for resource allocation. Furthermore, concerns about improvement are also located adjacent to the level and its functions. Immediate concerns can thus be addressed to effect improvements at the level at which they arise. Data that have been collected may be used, but not necessarily for more than one purpose, as Kogan indicates. Each level is thus free to develop its interest or focus. The central authority will be concerned with knowledge and equity concerns, among others, at the provincial level. For those at the school level, the concern is practices of teachers, as individuals and in groups, as well as the effect of the whole school effort; this may well point to a need to develop school-focussed conceptual frameworks.

The work of schools, perhaps in relation to the school attributes, would be the Boards' primary interest, and Boards might well develop an alternative conceptual framework for accreditation. This would lead to the disappearance of the pre-conceptualization of the accreditation process *by the province*. Some school boards may need to investigate further ways they can affect schools as a result of their analysis of the school accreditation reports. Provincial interest in schools would be largely through the Boards, where policy matters would be the main subject of discussion. The relationship between these two levels, however, is of particular concern in British Columbia, as Boards there are elected. An elected provincial government is unlikely to make judgments about the work of another elected body in the present climate, although this has happened in the past. For instance, the Vancouver School Board's trustees were recently dismissed, in effect, for indicating to the central government that they needed more money to do the job of educating in their district. It seems that Boards are there to play the game of following the provincial government's economic dictates while at the same time being the lightning rod for local criticism. In other words, the Boards' role can be construed as deflecting criticism from the centre. If this is the intention, it is a good managerial tactic.

What then of the professional part of the professional/political dimension of accountability? For it to operate alongside the central/local political framework outlined above, professional institutions and individuals would have to accept new roles. Immediately such a normative proposition faces practical difficulties. It is easy to prescribe what others should do. The professional side of accountability would have to be strengthened, especially since in the present climate it is unlikely that political accountability processes will affect individuals' work. It is at the level of schools and teachers that professional accountability might come to the fore, although professional accountability would be evident at all levels. Common central institutional (union) assumptions concerning automatic and continued competence would have to be replaced. A conception of human

fallibility, with the possibility that individuals and groups need support to do things more effectively, could be entertained. Similarly, at the local level new forms of professional assertiveness may well need to be developed. In this view, accountability is a also professional responsibility. Whether teachers would welcome a sensitive profession-based accountability procedure is an interesting question.

In relation to the formal/informal dimension, the formal aspects appear to increase the further the local/central levels are separated, because informal contacts diminish. It is also important to maintain a degree of formality at all levels to invoke legal, ideological, and economic responsibility when needed. Two situations can illustrate this point. The difficult situation where responsibility has been determined not to have been carried out by an individual might best be addressed formally. Approaches to the level above for a resource distribution other than that provided may well benefit from being more formal. Unions, too, need their forms of formality. Conversely, the informal dimension has particular importance within and between adjacent levels, and especially in schools.

British Columbia teachers may be able to take advantage of the transitional/developmental nature of accreditation as it is presently organized in B.C. schools. For practical reasons, school communities might continue to use the Ministry manuals as the basis for their reporting to Boards, even to the centre, as well as using it as a form of checklist. In forming their views about the given objectives, teachers might make good use of the comments section of the report manual, perhaps expanding its use to develop the particular perspectives and interests of the school and the schools' relationship to the community and the society at large. Here the special character and concerns of the school could be recorded. Consideration would need to be given to unintended effects in the school, and the potential of alternative conceptions such as those that could be derived from the five school attributes. This means, of course, that there will need to be caution in the ways that comments are recorded. Meanings in the report may only touch the surface of the understandings of the people in the school context. The draft report would look quite different from the final version.

In this conceptualization of accountability, the professional unions retain some control over the nature of their members' work (through the College of Teachers?) and the central authority retains some control over the work of schools, but only through the interest of the school boards. Putting this another way, teachers would be accountable for their actions to their peers (locally and/or centrally); schools would be accountable to the Boards; Boards would be accountable to the province. Accreditation could play an important part in accountability, particularly in the formal, political side, through the report as a *product*. This is the Quality Assurance side of the process. It is in the accreditation *process* that local political and professional aspects of accountability can be brought to the fore, especially in the informal relationships that develop. These might be tested in

some form of assertiveness based upon known forms of evidence. Although in some schools such demands may be overpowering, the interest in improvement emphasizes the Total Quality Management form of accountability.

CONCLUSION

Accreditation in the schools in British Columbia has moved from an accountability idea developed in the Putman and Weir Report in 1925, for the right to recommend in some secondary schools, to a compulsory process for all schools from 1994 onwards. Now the accreditation process carries with it an accountability function that gives accountability a visibility for the government. The Ministry manuals, participatively developed by teachers and Ministry officials, frame the accreditation process and product. In this way the system, devoid of its inspectors, has a technology to contribute to the *steering* of the legal, economic, and ideological systems. In developing the manuals to support accreditation, the steering is (1) ideological, since a conception of the “educated person” from the mandate statement, as well as the objectives, frame the manuals; (2) economic, via the scrutiny of the school growth plans and generally through the overview of resources; and (3) legal, in the sense that the authority has a mandate from government to demand accountability. These same manuals support the schools’ efforts for improvement and, upon completion, allow funds to be available for schools’ improvement.

Improvement efforts derive from a consideration of objectives set out in the manuals. It is in the very looseness of these objectives that the schools are given room to develop particularized, context-specific versions of what is going on in their schools. These accounts then form the basis of their plans for school growth, using the financial support available. A slavish adherence to the form and procedure of the manuals, however, is likely to inhibit the improvement function. There are three reasons for this: the manuals’ use of a particular conceptual framework, the language of the objectives, and the lack of consideration of unintended effects.

In my foregoing analysis, the Lundgren (1990) conceptualization of political/professional and local/centre dimensions, enhanced by the addition of the informal/formal dimension, were found to be helpful. Kogan’s (1990) normative proposal was in turn suggested as a potential way forward for this important initiative in an education system. I advocated increased professional commitment, to allow action locally and at the centre. Although some important criticisms have been made of the accreditation process, there are ways forward for schools undergoing accreditation using the present system.

It is also clear that further research is needed in the area of system-supported improvement efforts accompanied by, or parallel to, effectiveness and efficiency requirements. (The relationship between QA and TQM in a large system such as

an education department may well provide interesting developments in the area of accountability.) British Columbia is not the only education system taking this path. Such questions as the apparent contradiction of centre political demands and local professional improvement efforts need to be addressed in other systems. The extent of teacher cynicism, the role of teacher union(s), the roles of key personnel (especially of the school principal), and the role of community members and students in the accountability process, including direct involvement in deliberations, are fruitful arenas for research.

NOTE

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T. W. Maxwell is in the Department of Social, Cultural and Curriculum Studies, University of New England, Armidale, N.S.W. 2351, Australia.