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Making accountability work in basic education: reforms, challenges and the role of the government

Yifei Yan 

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Accountability has been increasingly emphasized as a key to improving the quality and inclusiveness of basic education. However, reforms around the world inspired by this line of thinking have only generated lackluster results. The paper examines the gaps between theoretical expectations and the actual practices of individual accountability measures, and explores ways to bridge them. It argues that the more fundamental shortcomings of these reforms are the result of a partial understanding of the concept of accountability, in which the role of the government is either neglected or very narrowly emphasized. It concludes that government stewardship is vital in tackling these informational, incentive, and capacity challenges facing the sector and making education accountability reforms more coherent, coordinated, and practical.

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Education accountability; governance; public sector management reforms; government stewardship

1. Introduction: why accountability matters in education

The importance of basic education in economic and human development has been widely recognized in both policy research and practice. However, it was not until the 1990s that the importance of accountability in education began to be highlighted. With impressive progress in universalizing basic (especially primary) education achieved under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), focus gradually shifted to quality and inclusiveness, as reflected in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4). The emphasis on inclusiveness targets those who are still left behind in the school system despite remarkable overall improvements in terms of the accessibility of basic education. More fundamentally, keeping children at school would be meaningful only when the quality aspects are looked after as well. In other words, schooling has to facilitate learning. Indeed, schools are the primary places in which students are educated into responsible citizens, employable labor force, and skilled and knowledgeable individuals. While the details vary, the overall goal of basic education is now widely accepted as promoting student learning in an inclusive manner.

CONTACT Yifei Yan  yifei.yan@u.nus.edu  Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Oei Tiong Ham Building, 469C Bukit Timah Road, 259772 Singapore, Singapore

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In light of the changed emphasis in the goal, input-based interventions that traditionally worked well for access expansion and enrollment increase can no longer be relied upon primarily to promote quality and inclusiveness in education. More important now is how efficiently and effectively are fiscal, physical and human resources managed and utilized; i.e. how governance of basic education is organized. Accountability is especially underlined as an integral component of governance, as reflected both in recent conceptualization (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000) and in reports by international organizations (e.g. World Bank 2003).

2. Education accountability reforms: theory and practice

Acknowledging that accountability is of high importance to the governance of basic education, numerous education reforms targeted at strengthening accountability have been launched in many parts of the world. Yet instead of having any consensual definition over what education accountability is across the extant literature that emerges out of these reforms, the word “accountability” is often used quite loosely and sometimes even taken for granted. Having said so, these reforms do expect a variety of actors in the education sector to give certain types of information (or “account”) to other relevant parties, to which feedback is given in the forms of sanctions, punishments, reward and so on.

In general, the reforms touch upon four broad themes: choice and competition, autonomy and participation, threat-induced improvements, and rewards and support. Theoretical justifications for each of these aspects as well as the actual reform practices are abundantly scrutinized in the literature and summarized in systematic reviews and syntheses of evidence (e.g. Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011; Mbiti 2016; Evans and Popova 2016 etc.) They are surveyed in the rest of this section to illustrate that when viewed against the experience of both developing and developed countries, it is far from clear that the reforms have lived up to the expectations of enhancing student learning in spite of enthusiastic hypes and large investments.

2.1 Accountability through choice and competition

Education reforms are launched primarily in the hope of boosting the lackluster performance of government schools. One solution widely advocated by the economists since Friedman (1962) is the use of vouchers. Later on, full privatization of education service provision is also encouraged in the advent of New Public Management reforms. The private sector is generally believed by the advocates here to be accountability-enhancing given closer pay-performance link within the sector. Introducing it as an alternative education provider will, therefore, exert pressure on government schools to improve their performance. In that case, all that is needed is to give parents information and choices, so that they can trigger such pressure by exiting underperforming (government) schools.

Despite the emergence of privatization and even the mushrooming of the so-called “low-cost private schools”, the majority of the socio-economically disadvantaged in many developing countries still have to rely mostly on government schools. In that

case, even when the traditionally privileged private schools still outperform a majority of government schools (i.e. when the logic of choice and competition is sound for those who have switched to private education), if the former's positive experience does not generate wider implications for the entire system, then the existing gaps between these schools and the rest may further be enlarged. Indeed, most well-performing schools in the private sector do not necessarily have the incentive to share or diffuse their good practice system-wide in the first place. As for the "low-cost private schools", whether they have achieved the goal of improving student learning overall as an accountability mechanism remains much less clear, despite their valuable role in expanding the access to basic education (e.g. Tooley 2009).

Compared with the scale of privatization in general, the adoption of vouchers is limited to fewer countries. Even in cases where the performance of government schools is found to have improved under competition pressure, the results are uneven as voucher schools may "cream skim" the most advantaged or motivated students (Epple, Romano, and Urquiola 2017). It is further observed that reports that are supposed to guide parental choices are often designed in a way that barely contains comprehensible and digestible information (Bell 2005; Garcia 2011). This mixed evidence and practical difficulties, therefore, make it questionable whether resorting to market forces can indeed justify the marginalization of the government in these reforms, not to mention the complete substitution of its involvement.

2.2 Accountability through autonomy and participation

Compared with privatization and voucher programs, decentralization and school-based management (SBM) reforms have been more popular with both scholars across various disciplines and development practitioners from international organizations and donor agencies. Accordingly, these reforms have been adopted on a larger scale over a longer time period.

Despite a similar distrust on government as the traditional service provider, the exact ways in which government is marginalized in decentralization reforms are markedly different from those in privatization reforms mentioned above. Unlike the latter which put considerable trust on the force of the market, decentralization and SBM reforms emphasize more on parental and community participation to holding schools accountable, while also granting schools and local governments more autonomy, so that their "local knowledge" can be better harnessed.

Similar to how privatization and voucher reforms have fared so far, results of decentralization appear to be uneven as they tend to help countries or regions with abundant resources get better at the cost of the least advantaged population. This polarizing effect is found in both cross-country studies (e.g. Hanushek, Link, and Woessman 2013) and within-country analyses (e.g. Galiani, Gertler, and Schargrotsky 2008). While the post-decentralization increase of education expenditure is sometimes labeled as pro-poor (e.g. Faguet and Sanchez 2008) and is found to be accompanied by an improvement in enrollment and literacy, its impact on quality and inclusiveness of education remains less investigated. Impact of decentralization and SBM reforms is

further conditioned on the type of decentralization being studied (e.g. fiscal or political) and the extent of actual autonomy enjoyed by local government or the schools.

2.3 Accountability through threat

While government schools are increasingly facing horizontal competition from other (private) schools and parental scrutiny through privatization and decentralization reforms, some forms of control from the government still remain. These schools are thus accountable to government authorities mainly through the latter's threat of sanctions based on school inspections and the performance of its students in standardized high-stake exams.

The practices are common in the United States under the mandate of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, but positive findings on threat-induced improvements overall are often shadowed by the strategic behaviors of the schools (De Wolf and Janssens 2007). For instance, "education triage" refers to the phenomenon in which schools divert resources to students with a higher chance of marginal pass from those already well below or above the threshold (Lauen and Gaddis 2016). Other study found that students may even be discouraged from taking the high-stake exams (known as the "reshaping of the test pool" in Figlio and Getzler 2006). In Europe, inspections are also found to be accompanied by side effects from "teaching to the test" to the discouragement from innovative pedagogy (Jones et al. 2017).

By contrast, inspections are far rarer in developing countries where information, infrastructural and personnel prerequisites are more difficult to be met (Gershberg, Meade, and Andersson 2009; World Bank 2018). When happened against all these odds, they are usually reduced to mechanically checking register maintenance and collecting enrollment information. Aspects that are really related to student learning often remain off the radar. Such exercise poses burdens not only to teachers and to principals at the receiving end, but also on inadequately-supported local officials implementing them. In sum, it may seem that the government is still fulfilling its role in education governance and ensuring school accountability here. However, existing evidence suggests that if such a role is exercised through threatening measures only, without adequate support or clear understanding on local situations in the first place, inspections will be accompanied by many undesirable side effects at best and be counterproductive at worst.

Another form of threat-induced improvement is expected from the teachers. In many developing countries facing chronic teacher shortages, hiring contract teachers is championed as a cost-effective solution that also enhances accountability through job insecurity and closer pay-performance link. In other words, it is believed that having to perform in order to renew contract will stimulate efforts from contract teachers.

Some randomized-control trial (RCT) evaluations did confirm the cost-effectiveness of these practices (e.g. Muralidharan and Sundararaman 2013). However, the absolute effort level of contract teachers often remains low (Goyal and Pandey 2013). More importantly, competition and pressure that this measure brings is exclusive to contract teachers only; regular teachers are largely unaffected, although the workload between the two may not see substantial differences.

In terms of the recruitment of these teachers, the task has been delegated to local bodies as a part of the larger decentralization initiative in some cases. In others (Delhi, India for instance), candidates for guest teacher posts still need to go through eligibility tests organized by the state government. While the latter practice bears no substantial differences from the recruitment of regular teachers, contract teachers are usually excluded from welfare, training and promotion prospects enjoyed by regular teachers. These limitations summarized above, therefore, have raised serious concerns that in the long run, such practice may dampen rather than strengthen their motivations.

2.4 Accountability, reward and support

To improve and restore the motivations of teachers and school management, it is gradually recognized that reward and support, especially from the government, are also needed alongside threats, pressure, and sanctions. The most common reward studied in the literature is performance pay. It is expected to strengthen teacher and school accountability as the payment is, by definition, made on the basis of teacher performance in facilitating student learning. Short-run motivational effects may be further joined by the selection effects over time, as performance pay is hoped to attract and retain capable teachers in the profession while pushing out the underperforming ones.

Notwithstanding the cogent arguments, how “performance” can be best measured remains a practical difficulty for most performance pay programs. Operationalizing teacher performance with student exam scores, albeit the most commonly used method worldwide, is not without criticisms. And even when the “performance indicators” are chosen, how the “pay” is designed may also lead to substantial differences as for the strength of motivational and selection effects. Payment based on individual teacher performance has seen more success than group-based incentives which have a larger scope for free-riding. Yet even the former cannot guarantee improved student outcomes unfailingly. Different formats of payment (e.g. “pay for percentile”, “pay for score gains” etc.) and whether such criteria are transparent to and well understood by teachers may also have varying impacts. On the other hand, too high-powered incentives may divert teacher efforts into “teaching to the test” or causing grade inflation.

Incentives and capacity of teachers and school administrators can also be enhanced through organizational support such as in-service training. However, its relevance in improving accountability has not been sufficiently explored in the existing literature. More success seems to be found in individual training programs in developed countries (e.g. Angrist and Lavy 2001) than in developing countries (e.g. Zhang et al. 2013). Evidence also suggests that how training is actually implemented is also important for its effectiveness. How various structural factors matter exactly is less clear though.

3. Between promises and performance: three key challenges

Beyond the various deficits of individual accountability reforms as summarized above, a more fundamental problem that lies between the promises and performance of the reforms is a partial understanding of the very concept of accountability.

As mentioned in the beginning of the last section, accountability in basic education is comprised of a set of relationships between different pairs of stakeholders (e.g. government and schools, parents and schools, parents and government, schools and teachers etc.) which contain both the “account-giving” of the latter and feedback of the former. It is, therefore, worth highlighting that for most reforms to be effective, a set of key information is indispensable. Reforms should also be incentive-compatible with both the targets of accountability measures and their implementers. Finally, a certain threshold of capacity will be needed to turn the theoretical expectations into reality.

Yet instead of seeing education accountability as a comprehensive and multi-stakeholder complex and giving due recognition to the importance of information, incentives and capacity involved in the process, reforms under different themes so far tend to have specific and often-times quite narrow focus. Notably, the government is either relegated to the margins in some reforms; or when it is not, there tends to be an unbalanced emphasis on discipline and control over support and reward. When the role of the government is partially understood and inadequately fulfilled, three fundamental challenges are likely to constrain reforms taken in piecemeal manners from reaching full potentials. As will be illustrated below, some reform practices have substantially weakened the reform efforts by making information difficult to comprehend, frustrating stakeholder incentives and enlarging the capacity vacuum in the process.

3.1 The challenges of information and its delivery

Undoubtedly, nearly all accountability reforms require certain types of information inputs. For instance, both school inspections and performance pay programs are supposedly based on a set of criteria along various dimensions. However, such criteria are rarely made transparent to stakeholders at whom these reforms target. To be fair, some studies do evaluate the dissemination of information and, not surprisingly, have found mixed results, whether the information being provided is to students on return of schooling (Jensen 2010; c.f. Loyalka et al. 2013), to parents regarding children performance (Andrabi, Das, and Khwaja 2017; c.f. Banerjee et al. 2010), or to schools and teachers under the name of diagnostic feedback (de Hoyos, Garcia-Moreno, and Patrinos 2017; c.f. Muralidharan and Sundararaman 2010).

What seems to be ignored is that the design of information and the way it is communicated matters crucially. While transparency is generally preferable to the lack of it, useful information also has to be clear, concise and relevant. However, information supplied to parents to assist their school choice decisions is often found either too scant or overwhelmingly encyclopedic (Garcia 2011), which has especially put those parents with lower literacy into disadvantage (Delale-O’Connor 2018). On the other hand, decentralization reforms are more likely to foster fruitful ties between schools, communities, and government when information is shared in a collegial and collaborative manner, rather than government being dictating and coercive (Pradhan et al. 2014; Mangla 2015).

3.2 The challenges of incentives and motivations

Another key aspect that deserves more attention is the incentives of and situations faced by local stakeholders, especially teachers and the school management at the frontline. Whenever new accountability reforms are introduced by governments, they are rarely consulted regarding what they think about the reforms, or whether such reforms are really needed or welcomed and why.

One reason behind the dismissal of their opinions is that when they are portrayed as self-seeking “agents” who advance their own interest at the cost of that of the “principals,” their motivation is assumed to be low (World Bank 2017). Less recognition is given to the possibility that teacher absence or other presumably self-seeking behaviors may be due to practical difficulties and a lack of supportive measures to alleviate them. Nevertheless, if such important ground-level contexts continue to be ignored, reforms seeking to impose discipline and sanctions on teachers and schools may be counterproductive by dampening their motivations.

3.3 The challenges of local capacity

The concept of “capacity” in the policy or governance literature usually refers to the resources and skills, or competencies and capabilities, necessary to perform policy functions, which exist at three different levels (individual, organizational, and systemic) and contain three different types or components (analytical, operational, and political, Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015).

Unlike the literature in general which has attached great importance to this concept as a key to account for policy and governance outcomes (e.g. Howlett and Ramesh 2015), the challenge of local capacity, or rather the lack of it, is poorly addressed in education accountability reforms so far. Results of voucher programs and SBM reforms are constant reminders that not all parents, local governments or school management are well equipped to utilize their newly acquired choice and autonomy productively (Carr-Hill et al. 2018). There are similar observations that performance pay is only effective when teachers are capable of knowing “what knowledge and pedagogical skills are needed to improve student learning” (Vegas and Umansky 2005). This is in sharp contrast with the situation of stakeholders in better-off regions who have abundant resources at their disposal and are thus less likely to suffer from capacity deficits. In that case, inequality will further be worsened both across and within regions, as alerted by the uneven results of various reforms from decentralization to vouchers and performance pay.

4. Discussion: how government can tackle the challenges

Given these steep challenges, improvement in education outcomes cannot be achieved when accountability reforms are adopted in a piecemeal manner, even when they have strong theoretical backing, whether from economics, political science, or political economy. As such, making reforms work would not only need multiple measures to be taken, but they should be taken in a coherent and coordinated manner that synergizes with and corroborates, rather than undermines or contradicts each other (Peters

2018). In facilitating the former and avoiding the latter, government also plays a vital role in addressing the information, incentive, and capacity challenges identified above.

For instance, capacity-building for parents and school managers in the form of government-sponsored training have made their participation and contribution more meaningful in the Philippines and Niger (Khattari, Ling, and Jha 2012; Koazuka 2018). Especially in the latter case, a previous intervention of government grants without training in the same context has seen grants only utilized for items that did not improve learning (Beasley and Huillery 2017). How training has improved resource management, parental/community awareness and ultimately, student outcomes, in that case, is thus even more remarkable. In better-performing education systems such as those in Singapore and Beijing, there are also various practices in which government either induces or makes compulsory that well-performing or “leading” government schools share experiences and good practices with other schools in the system¹ (e.g. Meng, Zhang, and She 2016).

Another form of capacity-building that can be delivered by the government is the co-production of education initiatives with school committees. This also serves to reignite the motivations of the latter, as they are built into a bridge between the community and the school. Positive results on student learning are found on this intervention in Indonesia, also in contrast to the insignificant effect of grants alone (Pradhan et al. 2014).

Apart from capacity-building assistance for those with capacity deficits, the government can help restore the incentives of frontline service providers by signaling that they are not treated as unmotivated or self-seeking agents, but cherished as true professionals. Unlike performance pay and other one-shot financial incentives which work mainly on extrinsic motivations whose impact tends to diminish over time, professional development through in-service training and promotion arrangements offered by the government can further tap into and reinforce intrinsic motivations. Regular sharing and application of what is discussed in the training can foster a positive learning loop, whereas fair and timely promotion can instill respect for teaching excellence as the most valuable asset of the system. Of course, to make such institutionalized support truly helpful, it needs to be designed and delivered in such a way that matches the needs of teachers and principals, for which consultation with them is highly necessary so as to learn about their situations and perceptions.

Finally, the government also has substantial scope to act on the lesson that the design and communication of information matters. To begin with, it is increasingly recognized that dominant indicators of “education outcomes” (e.g. high-stake exam scores or regulation compliance), albeit valuable, can hardly reflect the entirety of “student learning” (World Bank 2017). Utility of such information is further constrained by the side effects it may bring, as mentioned in Section 3. If these types of information can be supplemented with lower-stake ones (i.e. not used for punishment and reward decisions), then it is more likely that frontline education providers would share frankly about the real challenges and opportunities on the ground.

Second, for a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of “teacher performance”, their professional development would be an indispensable component too.

In other words, whether teachers are able to update subject knowledge, enhance teaching skills, collaborate with and learn from peers etc. (Jensen et al. 2016) matters, in addition to the aptitude of those students that they teach. In light of the accumulating evidence that factors such as teacher certification, level of education, and years of experience can barely explain or predict their effectiveness in improving student learning (Aaronson, Barrow, and Sander 2007; Podgursky and Springer 2007; Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger 2008), boosting teacher quality through professional development would be considered even more important. Not only is this crucial for regular teachers, but contract teachers in systems that do hire them should not be neglected either. A combination of all the above-mentioned types of information, collected through both standardized methods and genuine dialogs, will thus help the government better diagnose local conditions and devise support accordingly.

Having a more holistic and in-depth understanding of the information needed to making accountability work does not mean that government should provide all such information indiscriminately to all stakeholders. Rather, to make the delivery of information more effective, the information to be disseminated to different stakeholders can also be different with varying degrees and formats of government involvement. For instance, parents are more likely to respond positively when test scores of their children are disseminated by teachers with diagnostic feedback that has a personal touch. Information given to parents by the school can include briefings on school-level performance together with district or even municipal benchmarks, or whether school infrastructure is ready to stimulate learning.

“Delegating” these two types of information provision to capable frontline education service providers thus leaves the government better-positioned to disseminate the more general types of information. Examples may include general parental participation guidelines, system-level status, and progress, as well as overall budgeting and spending plans. While such information does not seem directly relevant to the accountability relationship between parents on one hand, and teachers and schools as frontline service providers on the other, its role as a benchmark and initial reference remains non-negligible. This may, in turn, facilitate vision alignment among stakeholders through the identification of system-level gaps and deliberation of improvement plans. Of course, government may need to avoid too specific forms of high-powered publicity (such as ranking) which can impose counter-productive pressure onto schools, or too complicated ones that parents may find difficult to understand (Garcia 2011).

5. Conclusion: government stewardship remains vital

In light of the indispensable role of the government, relegating it to the margin as implied in many of the reforms examined here will be practically unhelpful, although it might be understandable when looking back at the generally unfavorable record of government involvement in basic education.

Having said so, recognizing the central role of government in making accountability work does not mean that such a role should be played out in a monolithic manner of command and control. As mentioned, one advantage of consulting local

stakeholders is that it can give the government some initial ideas about local contexts that have largely been ignored by the reform initiatives so far. Accordingly, in cases where local interactions are sound and that local stakeholders are capable of delivering a task, be it hiring a contract teacher to fulfill the specific needs of the school or facilitating effective parental involvement, government would serve more as “quality assurance” by specifying a broad set of expected outcomes and standards for benchmarking references. Only when local capacity is missing may government support be given more directly.

To illustrate, schools in disadvantaged communities may not have the capacity to conduct even the most basic and standardized form of in-service teacher training. Instead of leaving these laggard schools behind in the name of decentralization and autonomy, government may need to provide such training based on teachers’ needs and difficulties faced in their day-to-day teaching and student management. For the rest, not only is school the most convenient place for training in terms of infrastructure and logistics, it is also the place where most frequent interactions between teachers and students, between school management and teachers, and even amongst teacher themselves, occur. Therefore, for schools that are capable of delivering it, they remain a natural nodal point to gather and gauge training needs and the most suitable venue for training in a format like a lesson observation and collective lesson-planning, which can especially strengthen what is called “peer accountability” (Jensen et al. 2016).

Likewise, not only is a professionally designed career advancement system compatible with the incentives and motivations of teachers and principals. When teachers promoted as such are invited to train their more junior colleagues, they are also sharing a task that traditionally falls under the government. Incorporating them in training provision as “insiders” may, in fact, be more effective than delivering all training by outsiders (e.g. university professors or experts in state authorities). Not only do they know better the needs and challenges of their fellow teachers in everyday teaching, their proposed solutions to addressing these issues also tend to be more grounded on their experience and expertise that is already accredited by the promotion system.

In sum, instead of treating as panacea any single accountability measure that so far tends to portray government as either an “outsider” or above other stakeholders, education accountability should be viewed as a complex of relationships amongst multiple stakeholders. Within this complex of accountability relationships, government’s role can be better framed as a steward that helps align stakeholders’ varying goals to the improvement of student learning and ensure they have both the incentives and capacity towards fulfilling the aligned goals. To fulfill the crucial task of providing stewardship, it needs to monitor, guide, coordinate and, if necessary, compel desired behaviors through both disciplinary and control measures on one hand, and support and reward on the other. In other words, measures from SBM to performance pay are rather distinctive instruments at the government’s disposal, the usage or combination of which should be designed to match the local contexts, most notably the needs and expectations of the local stakeholders in realizing a set of outcomes that are not narrowly confined to high-stake exams only. Picturing government’s central

role in this way helps generate a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of education accountability, which in turn is a key step to making reforms work.

Notes

1. One of the practices in Singapore school system in this regard is the Primary Education Review and Implementation Holistic Assessment. See “Primary Education Review and Implementation Holistic Assessment Project in Singapore”, <https://www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/goodpractice/holistic-assessment-to-support-student-learning-and-development-in-all-singapore-primary-schools/> accessed 2019-02-17.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Yifei Yan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2833-5972>

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