Exploring Teachers’ Accountability for Student Success

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Abstract

This paper explores teachers’ accountability for their students’ success. The goal of this paper was to determine the key components that contribute to the accountability of a student, not just the teachers’ efforts towards their lesson plans and instruction. Three articles were examined to explore professionals’ experiences with the accountability of students. These articles included results from the authors personal experiences in schools and their corresponding opinions during these experiences. Throughout the articles, it was discovered that there was one key component that contributes negatively to the accountability of a student. The use of formal testing to determine students’ progress as well as teachers’ way of administering formal tests. It was also determined that smaller schools provide better accountability for their students, which in turn leads to better grades. This is the key positive effect of an accountable education system.

Exploring Teachers’ Accountability for Student Success

 In the first article, “Accountability Alarms” by R.J. Ferrera (2005) the author explains subtle ‘alarms’ that influence students’ assessments in which educators are accountable for. In the beginning of the article it is mentioned that assessment is necessary, but educators must be aware of the following contributors to an assessment; quality of instruction, professional development and ethical behaviour of a student. To start each explanation of these factors, Ferrera poses several questions to get the reader thinking. The traditional way of giving instructions is not the only way to teach, but it seems to be the easiest to plan for which results in a lack of change from teachers. In addition to traditional teaching, traditional tests are inaccurately showing student’s progress in certain areas: “’The ability to make effective oral arguments and conduct significant research projects are considered essential skills by both employers and postsecondary educators ... these skills are very difficult to measure on a paper-and-pencil test" (Ferrera, 2005, p.25). Also, professional development meetings do not focus enough on how teachers can learn from the students’ assessments. According to Lawrence (2005), professional development meetings should discuss why some schools are more successful than others and how to improve learning. Finally, the stress of tests leads to cheating and inaccurate test results. Educators are accountable for students’ success and must notice the accountability alarms.

 Although I agree with this article, I think it fails to suggest how to assess a student differently if formal testing is not appropriate. I agree that the quality of instruction significantly impacts a student’s assessment, but I also think that a student needs to be able to cope with poor instructions. This is a life skill, not every person is going to be ideal to work with and we must deal with it accordingly. In school, student’s have very little control over who their teacher(s) will be. I have never attended a professional development activity but I could have predicted that, as the article said, the activities focus on the content more than the learning process because school is largely centered around ensuring the curriculum is taught. Also, it is shocking that teachers do not learn a lot from their student’s assessments; tests should not only be for the student’s benefit, I think, but also for the teachers’.

In the second article, “No Child Left Behind? To Whom Are We Accountable?” by Stergious Botzakis (2004), the author discusses personal experiences to examine how educators evaluate their students and the responsibilities and consequences that come with doing so. The beginning of the article tells a story of a boy whom the author was “warned” (Botzakis, 2005, p.7) about because he is “labeled [as] a student in need of special education services” (p.7). Because he was significantly below grade level, he received extra help but was not given enough time to improve. While questioning this approach, it is suggested that teachers should question their “techniques of teaching” (p.8); inevitably, this includes assessing a student’s ability with formal testing. There is a downside to formal testing; Botzakis (2005) noticed that students feel pressured to be tested because tests are viewed as an accurate depiction of students’ progress. This skews the assessment results. In conclusion, this article identifies that educational accountability is when schools are responsible for producing proper education, which includes the alteration or replacing of formal testing to ensure the best education for students.

I related to the author’s story about a little boy who was dismissed because he required extra assistance. On the first day of my field experience at St. Peter Elementary School, there was a kindergarten girl who did not speak English very well; she misunderstood small sentences and often replied in another language. It did not take me long to notice the teacher’s frustration. Knowing it would be very easy and wrong to dismiss the child, I showed her the patience that she deserves, because I was partially accountable for her education, as well as to relieve the teacher for the meantime. I understand the students’ stress towards taking tests, which leads them to do poorly. I think we need to document students’ progress somehow, but I do not think that paper and pen tests are the best way to do so because often a student knows much more than he/she can write down on paper. I also agree that testing is sometimes not the best option because it takes away from class instructions. As Botzakis said, “[formal testing] would take up most of the morning and would affect the normal school schedule for a few days that week” (p.10). Educators need to ensure that all students are receiving the best possible education and instruction, and losing instruction time for formal testing is not the best option.

The final article entitled, “For Authentic Accountability, Think Small” by Barbara Kent Lawrence, discusses the author’s visits to small schools in the USA and reports her findings of how “small schools succeed [compared to larger schools] by holding people accountable through methods other than testing” (p.42). In the article, Lawrence focuses on six groups of people within the school system that are accountable for a student’s success: teachers, administrators, students themselves, parents, community and school boards. Each of these groups of people have a specific job towards accountability which are most effective in small schools. Teachers are given the responsibilities of a leadership role that involve making important decisions, and therefore they have diminished the role of administrators. Lawrence associates students’ accountability for themselves with the student behaviour in the school upon seeing her as a visitor. Not only are students accountable for themselves, but parents and the community are as well. Parents and community who work together play a part in the student’s success because both groups are “accountable … to live up to [their] responsibilities” (p.47) around the school. The accountability of the school board for a small school has lessened because of the combined efforts of parents and the community. In conclusion, the article claims that good relationships lead to accountability without formal testing, and, unfortunately, this is only possible in small schools.

I agree with this article that smaller schools provide more accountability for students based on my experience of attending both a large and small school. I attended École W.S. Hawrylak Elementary School in Regina from Kindergarten to grade 8, which was (and still is) the largest elementary school in the city. I had good relationships with my teachers but I do not think they held me accountable for my grades and actions any more than I did for myself. Also, my parents did not hold me accountable for my grades because I did well enough that they were not concerned. At Luther College High School, where I attended grades 9 to 12, the community, my relationships with teachers, and my own motivation were important to me. Because Luther is a fairly small high school with about 530 students, a sense of community is more possible compared to a school that has over 1000 students such as Campbell Collegiate in Regina. Because a sense of community was so attainable, it was emphasized daily. This brought students, staff and faculty together at chapel every day, at sporting events, theatrical performances, etc. Because of the strong sense of community, there were also many strong teacher-student relationships. Which leads me to my next point; I agree with Lawrence that “accountability develops through relationships” (p.41). In grade 12 I had an English teacher who I admired for her passion about the material and her true desire for me to do well. Because of her support I was more accountable for my grades. I put in the extra effort to do well because I wanted to and also because I wanted to make her proud.

As Lawrence’s article outlined, being able to produce an accountable education system for students is stressful for educators and many other groups of people that are apart of the education system. Each are held accountable, but all of these groups make the mistake of pushing students to participate in formal testing as a way to measure their progress. All three articles suggest that changes should be made to formal testing to dictate a student’s progress, because there are better ways to be accountable for students. After reading these articles it is obvious that formal testing can be done in a way that will increase accountability and benefit students, for example, in small schools. After reading these articles, it seems that the attitude of the teacher is important to the students’ views of formal tests. To me, teachers should not emphasize the importance of one test over another, instead teachers should treat each test the same. Teachers should ensure that students are not worried about receiving a certain mark but instead, focused on the learning process. All of this being said, I would suggest that formal assessment grades not be given out. Furthermore, I think that teachers play a big role in the continuation of formal testing. If teachers refuse to formally test their students, school boards will not have a choice other than to change the ways in which students are tested.

I think it is important to recognize the groups that are accountable for a good education system, but I also think that these groups need to come together to find a way to alter or replace formal testing. This will ensure an even better education system and, hopefully, will accurately show progress in all subject areas. To try to alter/replace formal testing we need to ask ourselves, are universities providing future teachers with ideas on how to do this? Are school boards providing suggestions for current teachers? Are universities training future educators how to learn from their students’ formal test results? If the results are unexpectedly low, are appropriate actions taken to help the select students improve their marks? I do not have the answers to these questions, but I hope that someday I will as I continue to broaden my knowledge of accountability. For now, I will keep these three articles for reference. As I expand my knowledge, I hope that it will benefit both myself to become a better teacher and my future students.

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