

Intelligent Accountability: Sound-Bite or Sea-Change?

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In Scottish education, as in other public services in Britain, there has been growing emphasis on performance management, quality assurance and accountability over the past two decades. However, recent policies from the Scottish Executive appear to signal a shift away from the “top-down” systems that focus on measuring and comparing attainment, to approaches that gives more scope to teachers’ professional judgement and to the assessment of pupils’ wider educational outcomes. This *Briefing* considers the implications of these recent policy developments for schools, teachers and pupils in Scotland.

- ▶ Current accountability systems place a heavy burden of performance management on schools and local authorities.
- ▶ The concept of “Intelligent Accountability” implies: trust in professionals; a focus on self-evaluation; appropriate measures that do not distort the purposes of schooling; and measures that encourage the fullest development of every pupil.
- ▶ The current over-emphasis on easily measured outcomes, especially attainment, may distort the purposes of education. Other National Priorities are also valuable but are more difficult to measure.
- ▶ A Curriculum for Excellence puts forward a vision of personalised learning – but could this be undermined by continued emphasis on performance indicators that focus on school/subject comparison?
- ▶ Formal processes of audit may create an “audit culture” rather than genuine self-evaluation. There are tensions between different models and purposes of accountability.
- ▶ If policy statements in Ambitious Excellent Schools and A Curriculum for Excellence represent a genuine “sea-change” in policy, rather than mere “sound-bites”, we expect to see a renewed focus on the professionalism of teachers.

The burden of accountability

Over the past 20 years there has been a cumulative development of audit and accountability systems in Scottish education. Schools are required to: audit their performance using the Quality Indicator methodology developed by HMIE; write a School Standards and Quality report; produce a School Development/Improvement plan; and publish a School Handbook for parents. Local authorities are required to identify and take action to continuously improve performance in their schools. These systems became statutory obligations under the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000.

Measures of pupils' attainment are a major source of evidence in the current accountability systems. For each secondary school, a set of Standard Tables and Charts (STACs) are issued each year, comparing performance in Standard Grade and National Qualifications (NQ) between schools and between subjects; STACs represent a significant investment in performance data. For primary schools measures of attainment based on National Assessments are used to monitor performance, despite their recognised limitations, and are supplemented by additional standardised tests in a number of authorities (CES Briefing No 37).

The concept of intelligent accountability

Recent policies of the Scottish Executive appear to suggest a move away from this top-down audit culture: Ambitious Excellent Schools introduces "*Systems of tough, intelligent accountability*" (Scottish Executive 2004, page 20); Assessment is for Learning focuses on processes that support learning; and a Curriculum for Excellence calls for:

"A shift away from prescription...towards more responsibility for professional judgement and creativity".

(Scottish Executive 2006, page 21)

The idea of "intelligent accountability" came to the attention of educators in 2002, when Onora O'Neill's Reith Lectures on "A Question of Trust" explored the negative effects of the accountability culture. O'Neil (2002) argued that:

"The new accountability is widely experienced not just as changing... but distorting the proper aims of professional practice and indeed as damaging professional pride and integrity."

She suggested that if we want greater accountability without damaging professional performance we need intelligent accountability, and that this requires "*more attention to good governance and fewer fantasies about total control*". She also argued that much that has to be accounted for is not

easily measured and cannot be boiled down to a set of stock performance indicators. Building on these ideas, the need for intelligent accountability in school education was explored further by the Secondary Heads Association (SHA) in England (SHA 2003).

Implications for Scottish education

In view of the focus of Ambitious Excellent Schools (AES) on "*tough, intelligent accountability*", what changes might we expect in Scottish education? Within AES the "tough, intelligent accountabilities" outlined are limited to:

- testing Scotland's performance internationally;
- integrated, proportionate inspection to support improvement and target action;
- support and challenge for local authorities to deliver continuous improvement.

But if the term is to have more substance than a political "sound bite" we suggest that there needs to be a more fundamental consideration of the links between accountability and educational purposes. Building on the work of O'Neil and the SHA we suggest that intelligent accountability would be required to be underpinned by trust in the teaching profession and include the following features:

- Measures of performance that cover appropriate outcomes of schooling – not just academic attainment - and do not end up distorting the purposes of education;
- Measures that encourage the fullest development of every pupil;
- Focus on self-evaluation, with a minimum of external inspection targeted to where it may be most needed.

Danger of focus on easily-measured targets

Currently, measurement of performance is a major emphasis of accountability systems in Scotland. But is there a danger that the focus on measurement may be diverting attention from the wider purposes of education?

It needs to be acknowledged that many people in education recognise the value of having objective, reliable measures with which they can evaluate how well their school (or their class) is performing. However, there is far greater focus on attainment targets than any other outcomes of schooling. Whether we look at efforts by local authorities to secure continuous improvement in their schools, or discussion within schools between senior management, principal teachers and classroom teachers, or inspections of schools and authorities by HMIE, the focus is strongly on attainment – at least in part because attainment is relatively easy to measure. But this may well reinforce the over-emphasis of the education system on academic attainment.

The National Priorities for Education embody a wide range of educational outcomes, and represent an aspiration for the education system to have wider purposes than attainment. Initially, there were attempts to develop performance measures for each priority so that progress towards them could be evaluated. However, priorities such as “values and citizenship” and “learning for life” are more difficult to measure objectively than attainment. It appears that as a consequence they have not received the amount of attention they deserve – in fact some National Priorities have almost disappeared from view. The pressure for measurement could therefore be distorting the purposes of education, if ease of measurement leads to attainment receiving greater emphasis than the other National Priorities. We suggest that intelligent accountability should focus on appropriate outcomes of schooling not simply those which are easily measured.

School comparisons do not support personalised learning

Greater flexibility and more personalised learning are advocated by a Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) but these approaches are at odds with accountability systems that focus on evaluating school performance by comparison with other schools. How can schools respond to a CfE if they are still being compared and judged using inflexible target measures?

The current data-driven quality assurance system is preoccupied with comparison: the performance of each school is compared with that of similar schools and the performance of subject departments is compared with that of other subject departments. There is an inherent assumption that differences in the quality of teaching can be identified and addressed by these comparisons. Comparison is possible because the structure of curricular provision is common across schools.

However, new policies favour greater flexibility in provision by age and stage. In particular, a CfE is creating a focus on personalised learning according to the needs of the individual pupil. Similarly, intelligent accountability should support personalised learning by focusing on measures that encourage the fullest development of every pupil.

But, existing quality assurance systems have been growing incrementally over the past two decades and are embedded in current practice. We wonder what is needed to change the focus of the system from school and subject comparisons to evaluating personalised learning. Will schools feel confident to introduce new personalised approaches if they are still being judged using assumptions of stage-specific progress? Is there a danger that the flexibility of personalised learning may be undermined by inappropriate school/subject comparisons?

Tracking individual progress

Personalised learning will be more diverse and less easy to evaluate with existing performance management systems such as the Standard Tables and Charts (STACs) which are designed to compare school and subject performance. We suggest that a more productive use of data would be to extend the provision of pupil-level data to enable teachers to track the progress of individual pupils at all stages. At present this is not a function of STACs, yet it would support the emphasis on personalization contained within a CfE. Until now it has been left to schools and authorities to develop their own systems of tracking. It is not clear why the retrospective analysis of performance that STACs embodies, should have attracted such significant national funding, while tracking the progress of individual pupils has not. Perhaps there needs to be a change of focus.

An audit culture or genuine self-evaluation?

Intelligent accountability places emphasis on self-evaluation. At first sight, the system of self-evaluation using quality indicators developed by HMIE, and known as “How Good is Our School?” (HGIOS) appears conducive to intelligent accountability. However, it is essentially a top-down system, using prescribed indicators rather than self-chosen goals. There is a tension between this top-down model of accountability and the need for greater teacher professionalism and autonomy. For example, a study of STACs suggests that the performance indicators they provide are not necessarily useful to those who are intended to use them, and that the definition of target measures can provide perverse incentives to manipulate performance data in tactical ways to deliver apparent “improvement” (Cowie et al. 2007).

It could be argued that the HGIOS system is intended to change the culture and mind-set of schools:

“The supposed ‘self-empowerment’ of this system rests upon simultaneous imposition of external control from above and internalization of new norms so that individuals can continuously improve themselves.”

(Shore and Wright, 2000, p.61)

An underlying issue is how much autonomy over objectives and values public-service professionals should have within a democracy, and whether the answer is primarily based on principle or pragmatism. The current self-evaluation model attempts to provide a resolution of this tension by giving professionals operational autonomy while getting them to internalise objectives set nationally. However, a more negative interpretation suggests mere compliance with the audit system, and greater emphasis on “ticking boxes” than achieving educational objectives.

How might the accountability system be made more intelligent?

Over the past two decades, accountability relationships in the school system have changed considerably, with professional accountability reduced in significance. If policy statements in AES and a CfE represent a genuine “sea-change” in policy, rather than mere “sound-bites”, we expect to see a renewed focus on the professionalism of teachers. However, this would require policy makers and HMIE to share control of the accountability system.

The idea that the current accountability system can offer a quick and easy means of generating improvement is an illusion. The assumption that ‘tough’ accountability, based on private sector concepts such as quality and performance management, will improve what goes on in schools is challenged by a body evidence about how and why reform in education fails or succeeds. For example, Fullan (1991) argues that improvement is about capacity building and increasing the collective power of every level in the system to generate improvement. This involves developing relationships across the system based on trust and shared commitment.

If there is respect and trust, performance data can be used in positive ways - as a monitoring tool, as a source of evidence to inform decision-making and teaching in schools, and as a tool to look for problems and weaknesses so that they can be addressed. If, however, there is a context of distrust, cynicism, or even fear, problems may be concealed and performance data may be ignored or used in tactical ways to deliver short term “improvement” that is not sustainable and ultimately self defeating.

Models of accountability based on compliance represent the antithesis of a professional learning community because there is little scope for collaborative working or collegiate decision-making, and limited opportunity to learn from collective experience. Intelligent accountability should support an open and professional approach, and should involve the school and its community in defining the measures by which it is assessed. Accountability could then be seen in terms of the quality and robustness of the school’s self-evaluation structures and processes.

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About this study

This *Briefing* arises from a literature and policy review undertaken for a research project: “How do schools measure their own progress?” under the Applied Educational Research Scheme (www.aers.ac.uk). The issues raised here are discussed in more detail in Cowie *et al* 2007. The aim of this *Briefing* is to generate discussion – the views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of AERS or others involved in the research project.

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