ACCOUNTABILITY AND EVALUATION: CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY?

Abstract

Accountability and evaluation have become an integral part of education systems and the day-to-day practice of educators in many countries around the world. The purpose of this presentation is to share an exploration of the links among evaluation, accountability and democracy which draws on the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. It will be argued that evaluation and accountability intertwine not just as a condition for democracy and its improvement but also as a challenge for democracy. Firstly, the notion of evaluation and its relevance to accountability will be outlined. A more detailed outline of accountability will follow in order to present evaluation and accountability as “explanatory scheme” [Rancière 2010]; that is, an structure that primarily serves to explain and provide justification. To conclude, connections between accountability and democracy will be discussed and challenges posed by the former one to the latter one are explored.

Keywords: evaluation, accountability, democracy.

Introduction

Accountability and evaluation have become an integral part of education systems and the day-to-day practice of educators in many countries around the world. Practices, professionals and institutions concerned with assessment, scrutiny, audit and inspection continue to proliferate and the demand for them is widespread and mounting [Newman & Clarke 2009]. In this regard, schools are not different to other organizations and institutions today. Schools are also affected by this trend. The purpose of this presentation is to share an exploration of the links among evaluation, accountability and democracy which draws on the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. It will be argued that evaluation and accountability intertwine not just as a condition for democracy and its improvement but, maybe, also as a challenge for democracy.

This article is divided into three parts. Firstly, the notion of evaluation and its relevance to accountability will be outlined in order to highlight resemblances to
accountability. An outline of accountability will follow. In this section, a number of core features will be emphasized in order to present evaluation and accountability as an “explanatory scheme” [Rancière 2010]; that is, an structure that serves to make sense of, explain and, thus, provide justification. To conclude, connections between accountability and democracy will be discussed. After introducing the conventional account of the relationships between accountability and democracy, challenges posed by accountability to democracy are explored.

The relevance of evaluation to accountability

Accountability evokes evaluation and evaluation evokes accountability. Similarities and differences are not always made explicit, but, nevertheless, you will usually find both terms accompanying each other. Evaluation is usually assumed to serve different purposes. Accountability is often mentioned as one of them. It is not unusual to present accountability as a purpose or function of evaluation. In this view, evaluation would serve accountability and, in turn, fulfillment of this function would serve to justify evaluation [Perrin 2007]. For instance, evaluation is used to document what has been done and accomplished with the available resources in order to answer to those who fund or provide them [Mayne 2007]. If evaluation indeed serves to provide answers and justification through evidence, this use is likely to provide answers on “why evaluate” and justification to evaluation. In this way, evaluation supports accountability, although, if so, accountability will be supporting evaluation as well.

The accountability function of evaluation is fulfilled in the context of governance and policy-making [Hanberger 2011]. Usually, evaluation for accountability is deployed within this context. Therefore, accountability mechanisms may be considered to be a policy instrument [Spillane 2004] (for instance, like inducements). Evaluation constitutes a major accountability mechanism. Notice that it means that evaluation is subordinated to accountability and, hence, to policymaking and governance. Of course, this is not the sole function of evaluation in that context. Evaluation may be thought to serve other purposes such as policy improvement or legitimation. However, the fulfillment of the accountability function is likely to be related to the fulfillment of these other functions: for instance, the contribution of evaluation to accountability is likely to promote improvement or legitimation as well. In fact, the purpose of evaluation and accountability is often said to be improvement of teaching and learning [e.g. Reeves 2002].

Furthermore, it might be said that accountability and evaluation interweave dynamically and even overlap. Before concentrating on it, here is a brief introduction to accountability that will be of assistance in highlighting such connections between both notions:

First, decide what values we want individuals and organizations to uphold. Next, specify what it means to uphold these values by codifying them into very specific rules, procedures, and standards: Don’t do this. Do do that. Then create numerous reporting mechanisms