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***Facing Accountability in Education: Democracy and Equity at Risk.* Christine E. Sleeter (Ed.). Teachers College Press, New York. 2007. ISBN: 0807747793, 256 pp.**

Review by Paul R. Carr, Youngstown State University — May 31, 2007

Christine Sleeter has assembled an impressive group of well-known scholars to examine one of the preeminent issues in contemporary educational reforms, namely the highly contentious and politicized issue of accountability in education. Part and parcel of the rhetorical drum-beat infused into the neo-liberalization of education, emblemized by the tangled web cast by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, it has become problematic to argue, at least publicly, against accountability. Accountability is intended to encompass a range of concerns, policies, processes, practices and outcomes, yet it is a concept that is poorly understood at the mainstream level. Politically, it is inconceivable to oppose accountability in the same way that it would be foolhardy to oppose democracy. The problem, ultimately, is that the lack of consensus on what accountability means leads to disenfranchisement and marginalization, pitting groups, sectors and institutions against one another.

Facing Accountability in Education: Democracy and Equity at Risk is a welcome addition to the literature on foundations, curriculum and leadership in education because this book explores in detail the implications of accountability, offering a critical analysis on the operationalization and impact of the concept at both the school, educational system and societal levels. Somewhat surprisingly, parts of the book make the case for a more constructive engagement with the pervasive accountability standards, arguing that the over-arching framework might, given a recognition of broader cultural concerns and a flexible, social justice-oriented approach, produce positive results for minorities. However, the central focus of the book lies in a number of well-crafted, insightful arguments about the dangers of embracing NCLB-style accountability.

James Banks writes the Foreword and the Afterword, tying together the main argument of the Multicultural Education book series under his stewardship. Banks effectively points out that, without a more effective strategy and effort to reconcile diversity and difference, accountability measures are doomed to remain highly suspect. While the majority of teachers are White, the rapidly changing demography is transforming classrooms across the country. The changing racial and cultural origin of waves of immigration, combined with a heightened reality of the international context, is forcing decision-makers to re-assess normative approaches to policy and curriculum development. As Banks points out, multicultural education is a reality because of the basic human need to have some tangible connection to social justice, and this is where, as he states, without it, “democracy in nations around the world is threatened by many factors today, including the threat of terrorism, fear, and the widening gap between the rich and poor” (p. ix). As part of the context for understanding accountability, Banks outlines multicultural education as having five central components: “*content integration; knowledge*

construction process; prejudice reduction; an equity pedagogy; and an empowering school culture and social structure” (p. viii). It is striking how this multicultural education model so clearly and poignantly clashes with the main tenets buttressing NCLB.

The book contains ten chapters plus an introduction by Christine Sleeter. Most of the chapters deal directly with the social justice problematic, and whether accountability, often translated into standards and testing, is helpful for minorities, with the race variable being central. The last three chapters concentrate on the international context, specifically the United Kingdom. There seems to be less of an analysis and focus on White students, although considerable concern is placed on low performing schools, which also includes those in poor White areas. This might be understandable, given the centrality of multicultural education streaming through the book, and it is certainly a consideration when determining how schools might become more democratically engaged. However, the fundamental arguments made about social justice in relation to accountability effectively position the education reforms in a context from which a number of critical observations are made.

Sleeter, in her introduction, questions the central notion of whether NCLB “has been put forth as promoting both equity and excellence,” and places the problem squarely in context: “The standards debate hinges on whether one sees standards as a means of ensuring quality by spelling out exactly what everyone should know, or of deepening the capacity of schools to engage students at higher levels intellectually” (p. 3). She then outlines the three main concepts of the book (democracy, equity and accountability). A pivotal distinction is made about democracy: “where one stands on the relationship among individual rights, group claims and cultural identities, and shared common interest has implications for the extent to which one will view standardization of schooling and school curricula as a just and democratic means of promoting excellence for everyone” (p. 5). She further elaborates on the nefarious relationship between capitalism and democracy, which raises questions about how we *do* democracy in education, and the implications for how we approach it. Clearly, intertwined within the standards movement is an over-arching political-economic motivation, something that has been the focus of critical pedagogy (Freire, McLaren, Giroux, Shor, Kincheloe, Macedo and others) for a number of years. This poses a defining question about the motivation of formal accountability, and whether it is intended to allow for transformative change when neo-liberalism plays such a clear role in supporting it. As Sleeter highlights, the emphasis on encouraging parents to move their children out of those schools perceived to be incompatible with established standards can undermine the very notion of accountability. She summarizes the section by neatly suggesting that, “accountability need not mean top-down mandated testing. Indeed, one can argue that a top-down flow of authority conflicts with a bottom-up flow inherent in democracy. Accountability and equity raise questions about who should be holding whom accountable for what” (p. 10).

The next chapter on Navigating Accountability Pressures, by Sleeter and Jamy Stillman, examines how ten teachers in “historically underserved communities navigate pressure to teach the standards in order to enact their vision of an academically challenging,

multicultural, student-centered curriculum” (p.13). They raise important questions about the engagement of teachers and the margin that may be accorded to them if the curriculum and testing are too prescriptive, potentially trivializing the progressive and contextualized work they may undertake with marginalized students. It is clear that many good, effective and professional teachers teach in schools where the educational outcomes are below the required formal standards, and, further, that these same teachers may be penalized for not making “official” progress. This chapter provides evidence of how teachers can make strides with their students in spite of the standards. This is an important lesson for both new and experienced educators: It is critical to prioritize standards and, as Sleeter and Stillman put it, to use “standards strategically” (p. 21). Their plea to value teacher knowledge more in the educational process seems to be obvious, but, within a neo-liberal accountability framework, it is not often the first reflex. Their suggestion that administrators and policy-makers become more engaged with the teaching of diverse students is another plea that has not been blindly overlooked. Rather, the absence of social justice permeating NCLB, in particular, and educational leadership, in general, is not an innocent oversight. It could be considered that those in power have neither the inclination, nor the experience, to engage effectively with those who are not succeeding in formal education, lest they be exposed as causing the problem or, at the very least, be charged with addressing it.

The book then proceeds to present how accountability might provide some hope to minorities. Here, in the chapters by Skrla, Bell McKenzie and Scheurich, and McCombs, a few *provisos* are placed up front, such as the important connection between policy and teachers, the salience of teacher quality in improving student educational outcomes, and the need for a flexible accountability framework, one that focuses on a learner-centered model of transformation. To be clear, neither of these chapters openly embraces the present configuration of accountability, which, the authors argue, can lead to superficial, damaging and counter-productive results. In the districts studied by the first group of authors, while they stress how complex “equity consciousness” is among teachers, they also “see that elements of accountability policy can be used as tools to start and sustain individual teachers and groups of teachers on a path of growth with respect to equity consciousness” (p. 37). As they carefully outline, data gathered through accountability exercises can be used to better understand weaknesses and problems, which is a significant point about measuring change that should not be underestimated. The political context, therefore, plays a particularly significant role in determining the legitimacy of, and buy-in to, the accountability regime. If teachers are suspicious of the motivations of such standards, and are insufficiently prepared and resourced to meet the required standards, then the effect of formal accountability may be further disenfranchisement. If, on the other hand, there is a significant embracing of such standards because teachers can see how their students will benefit from them, then the chances are greatly increased that improvements will be made in educational conditions and outcomes.

McCombs focuses on the student, making the case for policy, materials, resources and teacher involvement being centralized around learning. In sum, while not supporting the present configuration of accountability in education—what McCombs characterizes as the “one-size fits all approach”—there are alternative models of accountability that could

take into consideration a broader and more relevant range of learning and teaching indicators. This is a pivotal point that could stimulate debate within the accountability movement, as those who are considered too critical of the formal policy or who do not have constructive proposals for change are often discounted from the outset. School administrators and leaders often pose the same, seemingly hopeless, question related to what they can conceivably do when they know that the accountability framework they are required to implement will most likely have a deleterious impact on the students; these chapters provide some *bone fide* arguments for a more appropriate and meaningful conceptualization of accountability.

The next several chapters elucidate how social justice has been an unfortunate victim of formal accountability standards. In reviewing the development of a school in East Harlem some sixty years ago, Cherry A. McGee Banks provides an illuminating analysis of how accountability is not a new concept, nor must it be feared when it serves the right purpose. Accountability, she argues,

does not have to be framed in a punitive structure. Success and failure were not viewed as diametrically opposed at BFHS (the school of the study) Instead, accountability was framed by the school's values and goals that were embodied in school pride, inquiry, and a deep concern for students who were currently enrolled in the school as well as those who dropped out. Moreover, accountability at BFHS did not exist in a vacuum. It was broadly defined, inclusive of the community, and the individuals who were held accountable were supported with the resources necessary for them to achieve success. (p. 75)

In a seminal piece, Linda Darling-Hammond asks a fundamental question: "will standards and tests built upon a foundation of continued inequality simply certify student failure more visibly and reduce access to future education and employment?" (p. 79). The presumed need for standards is to, proverbially, level the playing field, yet there is considerable, justified concern that standards will simply endorse what we already know based on real estate values: that parental income is a factor in educational success. She effectively argues that the types of tests used to gauge educational achievement (cross-sectional as opposed to "longitudinal assessments of student gains for students who remained in a given school over a period of time" (p. 88)) are detrimental to minority populations, ultimately distorting the reality of accountability. Darling-Hammond's conclusion sums up one of the under-girding hypotheses of the book:

Ultimately, raising standards for students so that they learn what they need to know requires raising standards for the system, so that it provides the kinds of teaching and school settings students need in order to learn. Test-based grade retention and denial of diplomas as the major solutions to low achievement are merely a symbol of the failure of the system to teach successfully. (p. 111)

This revelation leads to a fundamental concern with the formal NCLB-style accountability pertaining to the implications for political leaders and society at-large when schools under-perform. It is curious that the US does so poorly on international

assessments, and yet the response for improving education for those students in most need has been an omnipresent series of standards that can lead to school closures and the privatization of education, the exact opposite of ensuring a higher functioning and, importantly, stable school system for minorities and the poor. If schools fail, which is one of the pivotal issues being crystallized through the myriad layers of accountability, who is ultimately responsible? With all of the funding, energy, resources, attention and priority placed on US military intervention abroad, how does the commitment to public education at home compare?

Robert L. Lin asks “What is proficient performance?”, highlighting that the “standards movement represented a shift from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced assessments of learning” (p. 112). Lin points out that measurement of standards and accountability is far from being a perfect science, and he skillfully presents how “schools serving initially low performing students (are) at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to schools that have student bodies that are high performing before they enter school or start the school year” (p. 112). In other words, many of the basic comparisons made, and conclusions therein drawn, are clouded with nuance, and do not serve to be valid comparisons, especially if we are to determine how a school or student body is progressing over time. Lin cautions that some schools may make significant educational gains but then, subsequently, face sanction from NCLB and the accountability oversight bodies because their progress did not meet the required level of “proficient performance.”

Jori N. Hall and Laurence Parker use critical race theory to dissect “how the deficit thinking model and compensatory programs are connected” to undermine the educational achievement of minorities (p. 132). As they point out, there is still much thinking in the design of the formal accountability framework centered around the reasons why some students do not success educationally, reinforced by nefarious and normative thinking about marginalized group behavior. By using critical race theory to examine and condemn high-stakes testing and the major tenets of NCLB, Hall and Parker echo some of the sentiments enumerated elsewhere in the book, namely that there needs to be a more inclusive understanding of culture in designing accountability, one that positions social justice at the center rather than the margins. Here, it is clear the normative perspectives of Whiteness play a role in usurping efforts to create an equal opportunity for all groups.

The last three chapters bring an international vantage point into the fold, demonstrating that the neo-liberal-inspired frenzy to produce standards and accountability is not contained within the borders of the US. The notion of competing for educational status, tethered to the employment-business silo, is forcing local and national educational systems to de-emphasize their respective, relevant social contexts in order to favor standardized learning, often diminishing the arts, languages, social studies and other important subjects to make place for mathematics and science. David Gillborn discusses the paradox in Great Britain, where race-based legislation, similar to the rhetoric infused in NCLB, has had the contrary effect on achieving social justice in education. Here, Gillborn introduces the problematic of “White supremacy” as an explanation for discounting the needs and realities of Black youths: “Despite a rhetoric of public

accountability and standards for all, education policy in England is actively involved in the defense, legitimation and extension of White supremacy” (pp. 157-158).

Sally Tomlinson continues the interrogation of what she calls “Ruthless Assessment” in the United Kingdom, emphasizing how the “new Capitalism” is diminishing the perceived meritocracy that has been upheld as a uniquely democratic virtue of the Western world. The changing welfare state, according to Tomlinson, has not generously integrated those most apt to be punished by neo-liberal re-structuring. At a time when educators and students should be intimately engaged in challenging formal constructions of knowledge and power, they are increasingly constrained and put on the defensive, having the effect of essentially reinforcing anti-democratic behavior.

Lastly, Lois Weiner shines a light on “NCLB, U.S. Education, and the World Bank,” arguing that the staunch “rhetoric of increasing educational opportunity masks another purpose: creating a privatized, fragmented system of public education that has a narrow, vocationalized curriculum enforced through use of standardized tests” (p. 159). In the post 9/11 period, there is a heightened awareness about global inter-connections, combined with the drive for profits which, together, make the need for a more holistic, democratic education all the more pressing. This book asks the fundamental pressing question of whether we are sufficiently providing the appropriate education for a new age for our youth, and whether the accountability framework pursued for the last few years is meeting the challenge of addressing social justice and democracy.

The incisive, systematic, critical analysis around diversity and equity is clearly a strength in this book. Undoubtedly, social justice is at the center of the content presented throughout the text, and there is clearly a linkage here to power and power relations. However, and this does not take away from the solid arguments about equity within the accountability focus, there is less of a compelling argument made about democracy in a broader, critical sense. The pivotal terrain of critical engagement, political literacy, action-based movements to address some of the most pressing issues of our time (the environment, military conflict, poverty, disenfranchisement, disease, and the reasons for mass migrations of people, etc.), and how to challenge authority, all of which underpin democracy and democratic education, are placed in the foreground more than on the main stage. While there is an undeniable link between social justice and democracy, this connection is often made in a more subtle and implicit manner than by forming a direct focus of the book. The important theme of patriotism, for example, is illustrative of the prickly times educators are living through, and also points to the danger of entrenched isolationism if schools do not become more open to critical democratic education, all of which could be the subject of a further examination of how accountability is infused in, and equally delegitimizes, critical engagement inside schools and through service learning. In sum, while the title is accurate in stating that democracy and equity are at risk, the shaping of the former is not as developed as the latter. One obvious example when thinking about democracy is the predominant sentiment of many in society, including many educators, that democracy starts and ends with elections and political parties, in complete abstraction to the myriad other components that are pivotal to defining a vibrant democratic citizenry. Placing the accountability template directly onto

this conceptualization of democracy, one which would surely repose on the foundation of social justice, could be a logical extension to the analysis provided in this book.

This book would be most invaluable as an advanced-level undergraduate resource or, perhaps more poignantly, at the graduate level, where there is more room to reflect on and critique the accountability framework that educators must ultimately reconcile. This book could potentially stimulate educators to take action in crafting standards and accountability measures and processes that are more appropriately aligned with the context of all students, including those who have been historically marginalized. Similarly, the book provides an analysis and significant argumentation to provide a language and context for discussing educational reforms in a broader, more inclusive manner. Educators are more than conveyors of knowledge, as in Freire's "banking" metaphor; they are also responsible, effective interlocutors involved directly in the formative stages in young people's lives, which should permit them a place at the accountability table. Teachers need to understand the utility of accountability, especially testing, in order to avoid the oft-characterized "teaching to the test" (i.e., "How do teachers teach with integrity while pressured to raise test scores?" (p. 13)), which serves to undermine educators as much as it does the students, their families and society at large.

With NCLB—along with a range of standards, testing, performance indicators, rubrics and evaluations institutionalized within public education—playing such a predominant role in the lives of current and future teachers, a book outlining how to reconcile and improve accountability is an important piece of the long-term education puzzle. This book resonates with the message that there are better ways of measuring and implementing accountability than through the present NCLB configuration, something that should be of great assistance to all educators and policy-makers. With few texts focusing directly on the meaning, operationalization and effect of accountability in education, I highly recommend this book as an indispensable, front-line resource.

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