

Understanding the Difference Between Authentic Accountability and Pseudo Accountability¹

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Professional education accountability has a basic, commonsense meaning that indicates educators as being held responsible for the appropriateness, conduct, and effectiveness of professional practice. The idea of ensuring professional responsibility is the function of any educational accountability system and, as educators, we welcome accountability. However, we need to be very vigilant that we have a system of *authentic accountability* as opposed to a system of *pseudo accountability*. Within this distinction lies the problem for Ohio's educators.

For the system to have integrity, professional accountability must insure that those being held accountable have control over those aspects and conditions in their professional practice that they are being held responsible for. In most simple terms, accountability means being held responsible for professional decision making and professional actions within the context of professional practice. To hold someone accountable for anything beyond their control would be absurd at best and would not be authentic accountability.

For a simple example, if the state or federal government were to hold local news weather reporters accountable for each day's weather, we would think that to be unfair and uninformed accountability. The weather reporters *have no control over the meteorological conditions they encounter* because they can only control their forecasts. *Authentic accountability would focus on the accuracy of the forecasts, and pseudo accountability would focus on the weather itself.* Therefore, to be fair and to generate valid and credible accountability reports to stakeholders, it is only right and proper to hold the practitioner responsible for only those things within their decision latitude—for only those things over which practitioners clearly have professional control and the power to affect.

My two research studies of Ohio's testing performance across all Ohio's school districts resoundingly confirmed what every experienced teacher knows intuitively—*student academic performance is primarily a function of the student's living conditions (family, neighborhood, health, nutrition, opportunity) outside school.* The research studies revealed that the more advantaged and enriched the life experience of the child, the better the performance on the achievement tests. The findings of the studies showed this to be the case to an extremely high level of significance².

Given the reality of the research showing that all Ohio's K-12 standardized achievement test performance is almost exclusively determined by the lived experience of the test taker and not what goes on in classrooms and schools, holding teachers or administrators responsible for achievement test scores is not authentic accountability. Indeed, *holding educators responsible for the living conditions of their students is pseudo accountability* at its worst simply because educators do not have any control whatsoever over the lives of their students outside of school.

From well established scientifically-based research within the fields of parametric statistics, psychometrics, and educational research tells us that the high-stakes standardized testing assumptions are dangerously wrong, we can begin to understand why the accountability systems mandated by Ohio, NCLB requirements as well as Race to the Top represent systems based entirely on pseudo accountability.

The mandated use of pseudo accountability systems by the federal and state governments is analogous to holding a meteorologist professionally accountable for the actual weather rather than the accuracy of the forecast, something even the most ardent education reformer would find outrageous. Similarly, the accountability situation for the students is problematic because the most significant factor affecting their test performance is their lived experience. This is true regardless of the quality of life of the student. *Lived experience is just as powerful a predictor for upper- and middle-class students' test performance as it is for lower- and under-class students.* Pseudo accountability is not a phenomenon restricted to students and educators in the more economically disadvantaged schools. Because the standardized tests are equally invalid across all socio-economic levels, *educators in high-performing schools are no more responsible for their student performance on the achievement tests than are the educators in low-performing schools.*

However, if professional accountability is to be understood by its application to professional practice, then we can quickly understand the fallacy of its use by the politicians, corporate special interest groups, and wing-nut extremists who have adopted it as a slogan to hold children and educators hostage to proficiency testing and local school report cards. Nowhere is the political box-and-block better exemplified than in NCLB where the lead slogan of the legislation itself, "No Child Left Behind," is used to legitimize pseudo accountability. But the slogan "No excuses!" is the most egregious political mantra used to preempt any questioning of the fairness, validity, or credibility of the pseudo accountability system. Sound educational research is not excuse making; it produces warranted explanations (reasons) through good science. "No excuses" is a calculated political ploy to prevent the truth of bad metrics from being made public and to keep teachers quiet.

To accept that teachers are 100% responsible for student achievement test scores is to reject scientific reality and, worse, a monumental moral outrage. Teachers are *not* the most important influence on student achievement. No legitimate educational research has ever found that they are. Teachers do have an impact on achievement, but all forces and factors in a child's life considered, the impact is far, far less than we are led to believe. Teachers have no control over the backgrounds of students they encounter—no control over the living conditions, the poverty or wealth, the advantages or disadvantages, the intellectual gifts or deficits, or the developmental readiness each child brings to school. The time has come to stop holding teachers responsible for these critical life variables!

Teacher advocacy means we must demand the standard of authentic accountability in every aspect of school accountability, especially teacher evaluation. The time for equity and justice for Ohio's teachers is too long overdue.

¹ This essay is a synthesis of the following:

Hoover, R. (2004). *(Re)understanding educator accountability: Pseudo vs. authentic accountability*. Retrieved from <http://people.ysu.edu/~rlhoover/OAT-OGT/index.html>

Hoover, R. (In press). The pseudo accountability of school reform: Injustice by (false) proxy. In Thomas, P. L. et al. *Social context reform: Equity and opportunity—not accountability in education reform*. NY: Peter Lang.

Hoover, R. (In press). The neoliberal metrics of the false proxy and pseudoaccountability. In Carr, P. & Porfilio, B. (Eds.), *The phenomenon of Obama and the agenda for education: Can hope audaciously trump neoliberalism?* (2nd Edition) Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

² $r = 0.80$