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**The Comparative and International History  
of School Accountability and Testing**

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**Towards a Comparative and International History  
of School Testing and Accountability**

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**Abstract:** The speed and extent of modern school accountability have obscured the history of testing and accountability. This brief introduction identifies central themes of historical research into educational accountability and recurring traits associated with accountability practices. We hope our colleagues and this special issue will also help to identify future research paths in this field. Some of the central themes found in the historical research on educational accountability contained in this special issue are the connections between accountability and the purposes of schooling in a specific time and place, the relationships between school accountability structures and the state, as well as accountability as a cultural phenomenon. One of the recurring traits found in accountability practices is the role of accountability as a phenomenon that cannot be

treated in isolation from society at large along with the attendant questions of power, education access, education management, and social selection. Another key trait is that accountability practices always seem to encompass a certain historically given configuration of stakeholder positions. The research paths pointing beyond the themes treated here are identified as a post-colonial perspective, differences and similarities between public and private sector accountability measures, the “engines” promoting the rise, proliferation and implementation of accountability measures, and finally the exploration of the travelling and movement of accountability ideas, knowledge and practices and how they actually impact and connect with national, regional and local practices.

**Keywords:** Accountability, testing, history of education, comparative education

### **Hacia una historia comparada e internacional de los exámenes escolares y los modelos de responsabilidad académica**

**Resumen:** La velocidad y el grado de extensión de los modelos de responsabilidad académica de la escuela moderna han oscurecido la historia de los exámenes escolares y del concepto de responsabilidad académica. Esta breve introducción identifica temas centrales de la investigación histórica sobre los modelos de responsabilidad educativa y rasgos recurrentes asociados con las prácticas de rendición de cuentas. Esperamos que nuestros colegas y este número especial también ayuden a identificar líneas de investigación futuras en este campo. Algunos de los temas centrales que se encuentran en la investigación histórica en la responsabilidad educativa contenida en este número especial son las conexiones entre la rendición de cuentas y los efectos de la escolarización en un tiempo y lugar específico, las relaciones entre las estructuras de rendición de cuentas de la escuela y el estado, así como la rendición de cuentas como un fenómeno cultural. Uno de los rasgos recurrentes que se encuentran en las prácticas de rendición de cuentas es el papel de la rendición de cuentas como un fenómeno que no puede ser tratada en forma aislada de la sociedad en general, junto con las cuestiones concomitantes de poder, acceso a la educación, la gestión de la educación, y la selección social. Otro rasgo clave es que las prácticas de rendición de cuentas siempre parecen abarcar una cierta configuración históricamente determinada de posiciones de las partes interesadas. Los caminos de investigación que apuntan más allá de los temas tratados aquí se identifican como una perspectiva post-colonial, las diferencias y similitudes entre las medidas de rendición de cuentas del sector público y privado, los "motores" que promueven el aumento, la proliferación y la aplicación de medidas de rendición de cuentas, y, finalmente, la exploración de la viajar y el movimiento de las ideas de responsabilidad, conocimientos y prácticas, y la forma en que realmente impactar y conectar con las prácticas nacionales, regionales y locales.

**Palabras clave:** rendición de cuentas, el ensayo, la historia de la educación, educación comparada

### **Rumo a uma história comparada e internacional dos exames escolares e os modelos de responsabilidade acadêmicos**

**Resumo:** A taxa e a extensão da disseminação de modelos de responsabilidade acadêmica da escola moderna escureceram a história dos testes e do conceito da responsabilidade acadêmica. Esta breve introdução identifica temas centrais da pesquisa histórica sobre modelos de responsabilização educacional e características recorrentes associados com as práticas de responsabilidade acadêmica. Esperamos que os nossos colegas neste dossiê também ajudam a identificar futuras linhas de investigação neste domínio. Alguns dos temas centrais encontrados na pesquisa histórica sobre responsabilidade educativa contida nesta dossiê são as conexões entre os modelos de responsabilidade acadêmica e o impacto da escolaridade em um tempo específico e lugar, a relação entre as estruturas de responsabilidade acadêmica da escola e do Estado, e a responsabilidade

acadêmica como um fenômeno cultural. Uma das características recorrentes encontrados nas práticas de responsabilidade acadêmica é o papel que elas tem como um fenômeno que não pode ser tratado de forma isolada da sociedade em geral, com os problemas inerentes do poder, o acesso a educação, gestão da educação, e a seleção social. Outra característica fundamental é que as práticas de responsabilidade acadêmica parecem sempre incluir algum padrão de posições das partes interessadas historicamente determinadas. Os caminhos de pesquisa apontam para além das questões discutidas aqui são identificados como uma perspectiva pós-colonial, as diferenças e semelhanças entre as medidas de responsabilidade acadêmica no sector público e privado, os "motores" que promovem o aumento da proliferação e implementação de medidas de responsabilidade acadêmica, e, finalmente, explorar o turismo e o movimento das idéias de responsabilidade, conhecimento e práticas e como elas realmente impactam e se conectam com as práticas nacionais, regionais e locais.

**Palavras-chave:** responsabilidade acadêmica, testes, história da educação, educação comparada.

## Introduction

In the past twenty years, countries across the globe have expanded their formal policies trying to hold schools and school systems accountable for results. Sometimes, these new accountability systems introduce league tables of elementary and secondary schools based on standardized test scores, and control systems that revolve around those tables and statistical measures; the United States is a prime example. In other cases, one sees international comparisons of school systems (as in PISA and TIMSS tests) or individual colleges and universities in various international ranking schemes. Sahlberg (2009) has described this as the modern Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM.

The speed and extent of the rise of modern school accountability have obscured the history of testing and accountability. For example, as Reese (2013) observes, testing and debates over accountability in the United States have origins at least as far back as the 1830s and 1840s. Because accountability measures are being rolled out with great speed and extent, contemporary observers often overlook the history, the antecedents that created institutional debris underlying modern practices. In other words accountability is often treated as a new phenomenon, when the roots of accountability are much deeper. This special issue of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* contains six articles focusing on the comparative and international history of accountability. We hope that this work can provide a useful corrective to more narrow national debates focused on what appear to be utilitarian needs. The collection of articles provide a broader context for current debates, explore some of the reasons why there are inherent contradictions in accountability mechanisms, and raise different types of questions than contemporary policy analysis typically answers.

## Themes

An important theme in this special issue is the connection between accountability and the purposes of schooling in a specific time and place. Ydesen and Andreasen (2014) argue that the earliest control mechanisms in Danish schools were rooted in the religious purposes of schooling and the church-involved hierarchy of the Danish state. In that earlier phase, both schoolmasters and children's families were the objects in a practice that assumed top-down control. Ydesen and Andreasen argue in the paper that the eventual development of modern accountability in Denmark was linked to the transformation of the nation-state into a democratic and what they call the modern "competitive state." The story they tell is of a transition that was messy and full of conflict (including among authorities). Baker (2014) claims that the development of test-based accountability

in the American South is rooted in a displacement of an opportunity agenda away from the obligation of the state and onto students and educators. In this displacement Baker sees a winnowing of the obligation of states. Smith's (2014) overview both argues for the development of accountability as part of a world culture of neoliberalism and contextualizes the adoption of testing and accountability regimes by circumstances; for example, Smith notes the recent pullback from what he describes as punitive regimes in Scotland and South Korea.

School accountability varies in part because of the particular purposes of formal education. It also varies by the capacity and authority of the state. In this way, there is an inherent relationship between school accountability structures and the state. In many ways, states frame or construct the potential uses of accountability. Smith's (2014) article places the logic of efficiency central in this role. Rasmussen and Zou (2014) make this point in their comparison of Chinese and Danish accountability, and Dorn (2014) sees the exercise of state power as inherent in the instrumental uses of testing. Ydesen and Andreasen (2014) make a slightly different point, seeing the roots of accountability in the budgetary notion of counting and also in the argument of New Public Management for transparency as a mechanism that is inherently democratic; although a very particular form of democracy not reconcilable with the notion of deliberative democracy.

However, not all uses of accountability is instrumental or in the service of state action. Sobe and Boven (2014) focus their article on accountability as a cultural phenomenon. To Sobe and Boven, the series of World's Fairs represent a form of comparison, a "global scopic system" that fits within the genre of travel narrative descriptions. To both Sobe and Boven and also Dorn (2014), cultural expression can be embedded in the act of a "ritual of verification," whether through displays at World's Fairs or in public "examinations" of early 19th century schools (e.g., Reese, 2013). Dorn also argues that testing can be an object of cultural expression, from Chinese novels and poems commenting on the civil service exam to modern American cinema.

When serving as an expressive act in itself, accountability incorporates comparison. As Sobe and Boven (2014) and Smith (2014) point out in different ways, accountability is a discourse framework. That framework assumes comparisons between countries or schools should be a central focus of debate over education and culture policies of societies and states, as also demonstrated by Rasmussen and Zou (2014). In this way, accountability-regime discourse serves to license cultural critique of schools more generally and also legitimates specific state action. Sobe and Boven focus on the expression of state actors on the international scene, assertions of national quality through the physical artifacts of schools. Smith focuses on what he describes as a normative culture of accountability enacted through national and international mechanisms.

In the context of testing and accountability as state action, it is important to remember that accountability is one of many state actions. Baker (2014) argues that the growth of accountability in the 1970s and since has effectively competed with desegregation as a tool to serve equal educational opportunity. Ydesen and Andreasen (2014) likewise argue that the Danish state has had a number of different options to manage education intimately connected with changing configurations of accountability stakeholders. The conflicts between church and secular authorities represent competing options for authority and control. Even within the state, accountability is a contextual choice rather than an inherent logic.

## New Directions

The research in this set of papers is circumscribed in several ways. A comprehensive international history of testing and accountability needs to include several regions not included in these papers: Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. A number of questions should arise from

broader comparative examination, including but not restricted to the following: For post-colonial nations that inherited a British form of secondary-school examinations and its use to judge/confirm elite status within a society, how have the uses of testing changed since independence? How did accountability intersect with dictatorial regimes in post-World War II Latin America? (How) has that development differed from the regime in the Singapore city-state? How has the construction of PISA samples in mainland China changed as the Chinese economy grew in the past quarter century? The sample of articles in this special issue should be considered just an initial foray into the topic.

The articles in this special issue generally focus on public-sphere school accountability. This reflects experiences of a number of countries (and academics in those countries) where accountability focuses on public education systems. Some of the articles focus on either cultural expressions or nation-state politics (Dorn, 2014; Smith, 2014; Sobe & Boven, 2014), but in this issues' articles the conclusions about accountability for school officials and systems focus on official school governance mechanisms. A number of societies have either had significant private school sectors or directed funding in at least one era to private schools; how has the history of testing and accountability proceeded in those eras and places? School accountability can and should be used as a lens through which we view the changing definition of "public" in education.

One important issue that is not addressed explicitly in these articles is Sahlberg's (2009) universalistic claims about modern accountability. Is the trend towards test-based accountability universalistic, and to what extent is the modern history contested? Smith's (2014) article constructs an argument around neoliberal discourse and governance and sides more with Sahlberg than with those who might argue that school policies and practices are highly contextual. We suspect that one useful construct here may be the idea of social repertoires, or sets of behaviors that can be copied and modified but are still highly contextual. This goes in line with the comprehensive research done by among others Jenny Ozga, Martin Lawn and Sotiria Grek arguing that a host of experts and international organizations create data which transcends national policy debates, because this data enables cultural exchanges across borders and places, creating a new type of virtual and borderless policy space (Grek 2010; Lawn, 2011; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola, 2011). Test-based accountability in the British or American sense is one type of school-governance repertoire, and certainly many countries have copied key elements of it. We are moderately skeptical that it is as hegemonic as Sahlberg implies, and we hope other historians of education explore accountability as a social repertoire in practice.

Finally, it is important to put accountability in education in a broader context of related social institutions. Neither modern accountability systems nor historical antecedents have developed in a vacuum. Instead, they have often arisen in the context of broader discussions of control and accountability in social institutions. American testing in the early 19th century (e.g., Reese, 2013) developed in an era of more social reform, and modern school accountability has proceeded at the same time as politicians and others debate social welfare policy in general. While some observers and organizations have used other systems of accountability in making national policy arguments—primarily comparing the uses of quantitative outcome measures in health and education systems (e.g., the OECD policy recommendations (Grek, 2014))—we need a broader contextualization. In this issue, Smith (2014) has the most complete effort in that direction with the argument about neoliberal discourse and it reveals a track for pursuing research into the "engines" promoting the rise, proliferation and implementation of accountability measures.

In conclusion, the papers of this special issue point to several recurring traits of accountability measures in education – traits that become visible from employing a historical approach. First and foremost, they point to the idea that accountability practices invariably contains significant cultural elements as a 'ritual of verification'. Another recurring trait is that accountability

is a technological tool that cannot be treated in isolation from society at large along with the attendant questions of power, education access, education management, and social selection. A third trait is that a particular accountability practice encompasses a certain configuration of stakeholder positions that creates some agency spaces and closes others; but this configuration is historically motivated and prone to change. And finally several of the contributions point to the wash-back effects of accountability meaning that accountability practices inevitably have strong disciplining effects.

But the special issue also points to paths for breaking new historical ground. One such path is the exploration of the travelling and movement of accountability ideas, knowledge and practices and how they actually impact and connect with national, regional and local practices. More specifically, such a research agenda would imply how we can trace the routes and impacts of educational accountability and subsequently how the changes in practice and policy instigated by accountability measures may be adequately understood. Another path is intimately connected with the issue of accountability practices being connected with questions of power, education access, education management, and social selection mentioned above. It is a critically reflective path juxtaposing various accountability practices with societal ideals such as democracy, transparency, social cohesion, equality, etc. A central question in this regard might be who is heard and who is able to participate in designing and implementing educational accountability measures?

All in all it is our hope that this special issue will serve as inspiration for further historical and comparative research into educational accountability able to throw new light on contemporary issues connected with accountability in education.

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### SPECIAL ISSUE

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