

Understanding and Improving Accountability in Education: A Conceptual Framework and Guideposts from Three Decentralization Reform Experiences in Latin America

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Summary. — Many countries have emphasized hierarchical control or different exit and voice mechanisms to increase accountability of educational systems. We build a framework for understanding accountability reforms and develop three illustrative Latin American cases representing distinct approaches (Chile, Nicaragua, and Bogotá, Colombia). We highlight the complexity of institutional change and the value of flexible reform models. Using an institutional perspective we examine the components of accountability; their complex interrelationships; and the importance of design details, implementation, and monitoring. We argue for balancing clear and efficient top-down monitoring and enforcement with other, less punitive accountability mechanisms including strong local quality support systems.
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Key words — education, accountability, governance, decentralization, implementation, Latin America, school reform

“It’s looking at process rather than outcomes. Too many people make decisions based on outcomes rather than process.”

Paul DePodesta, former Assistant to the General Manager of The Oakland Athletics¹

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper develops and applies a framework outlining actors and relationships that are important to understanding how accountability functions in education service provision, highlighting the challenges associated with accountability as a policy lever for school improvement. We adapt the World Bank’s (2003) well-known and influential accountability framework for service provision that distinguishes the accountability relationships embedded in the political, bureaucratic, and institutional arrangements that govern the provision of educational services. Following Hirschman (1970) we pay attention to exit and voice: Exit alternatives attempt to introduce competition between different providers, while voice alternatives allow parents to express preferences and opinions around education service delivery. Using this framework, we examine three case study reforms that attempted to strengthen quality incentives through a combination of voice, exit, and other institutional mechanisms. We describe the characteristics of the reforms and explore their potential effects on practice and outcomes, focusing on aspects of voice- and exit-related

mechanisms and other accountability factors. We take an institutional perspective in our analysis, paying careful attention to implementation challenges in each of our cases.

The case studies were drawn from three Latin American countries. The region has a long, deep, and varied history of education governance reforms that have influenced similar reforms in the developing world. The first case traces the history of administrative reforms in Chile, which started in 1981 and

* Alec Gershberg acknowledges that he developed some of the concepts in this study during his research and production of a paper for Chemonics International for review by the United States Agency for International Development as well as the institutional support of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya’s Internet Interdisciplinary Institute. Pablo González acknowledges support from the Project “Implementación e Instrumentación de Políticas Públicas en su Dimensión Regional y Local,” SOC-08, 2o Concurso Anillos de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales, Innovación de Políticas Públicas, CONICYT, and CONICYT-PIA Project CIE-05. We are grateful for insights from Ariel Fiszbein, Brian Levy, Michel Welmond, April Harding, Lant Pritchett, Luis Crouch, Robert Kaestner, Emet Mohr, John Gilles, Beth King, Manny Jimenez and Don Winkler. We thank the four anonymous referees for excellent, thorough, challenging, and original contributions. The authors’ expressed views are their own and do not reflect the views of, nor have they been approved by, any company, institution, or government. The authors as individuals are solely responsible for all statements, interpretations, and errors. Final revision accepted: September 27, 2011.

have been fine tuned over a period of three decades, allowing sufficient time for assessment and attempts to modify perceived shortcomings. The Nicaraguan “autonomous schools” reform took place during the 1990s and early 2000s and had a “beginning, middle and end,” so to speak, as it was dismantled in 2007 after the socialist Sandinista government took office. Concession schools in Bogotá, Colombia, provide an example of reforms that emphasized strong regulation and oversight and a favorable institutional context. While not national in scope, the reform is connected broadly to decentralization reforms that were initiated in the late 1990s. Aside from the academic literature we draw on other secondary sources such as government communications and newspapers, as well as our extensive study of the reforms, personal communications, and interviews with key actors of the reforms. All three cases received sufficient attention in the literature to provide some medium term (if not quite ‘historical’) perspective. In addition, all three cases could be considered “system-wide” reforms. That is, they sought over a long period of time to change fundamentally the nature of service provision and touched upon nearly every aspect of the education sector and system—reforms that are difficult if not impossible to evaluate in terms of their impact on outcomes. In this sense, these reforms are quite different from many of the accountability reforms that have been analyzed recently using randomized controls, which most often examine a discrete intervention (e.g., cameras in classrooms to combat teacher absenteeism, informational campaigns, parental involvement in school management, etc). We conclude the paper by examining how the conceptual framework aligned with the findings from the three cases, discussing how implementation challenges altered the reforms, and assessing the value of our conceptual framework for educational accountability.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C’EST LA MÊME CHOSE?

Over the past two decades, accountability in the social sectors has been increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for effective service provision in the developing world, and there have been myriad efforts to construct conceptual frameworks, typologies, and taxonomies—some education specific. To be sure, there were many earlier efforts to develop or summarize the concept of accountability in education, especially for the developed world. For instance, in a 1974 article Henry M. Levin developed a conceptual framework containing broadly most of the components that have been included in later efforts such as the World Development Report 2004 [WDR04] (World Bank, 2003).² But if the basic concepts of educational accountability were well captured by Levin (1974) and others, we will argue that a great deal of understanding about the nature of accountability in education has come from the increasing intricacy of more recent frameworks—in particular the great attention to institutional complexity and to differentiating what the WDR04 calls “a constellation of solutions.” Still, has this better understanding of accountability facilitated clear and consistent improvements in outcomes? In this respect, Levin’s (1974) conclusions were sobering then, and even more so now that four decades of experiences have often supported them in many different country contexts—that “those who view increased educational accountability as a lever for ‘reforming’ the educational sector . . . are likely to be severely disappointed.” The reasons most often cited for the weak connection between increasing accountability and successful sectoral reforms are political and institutional in nature rather

than technical. They include (1) the difficulty in designing reforms that actually increase accountability system-wide; (2) the likelihood that reforms will not be implemented as designed³; and (3) the recognition that even successfully increasing accountability (when defined narrowly as performance on measurable outcomes, e.g., test scores) may not yield either a substantively different school system let alone improved outcomes if there are no changes in major social, economic, and political institutions.⁴ This third point in particular supports our institutional case study approach as a complement to the recent emphasis on randomized experiments that generally analyze a focused “accountability” intervention.⁵ For example, in their discussion of the replicability of a successful intervention to improve teacher attendance in India, Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan (2010) recognize that “Teachers in government schools are often more politically powerful [than those in the schools we studied]” and consequently it may prove politically difficult to institute the reforms nationwide. In this paper, we build upon and extend the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2004* (WDR04) accountability framework for providing better services to the poor. We chose this strategy for several broad reasons. First, the WDR04 framework is reasonably holistic, by which we mean that nearly any substantial educational accountability reform can be reasonably and insightfully described, examined, and/or categorized so as to facilitate applied policy analysis, program design and evaluation, and knowledge about implementation progress and challenges. Naturally, being able to apply the framework accurately requires deep understanding of both how accountability functions in administrative systems and areas of weakness—especially the differences both between policy and practice and between responsibility and power. Building such understanding is challenging and idiosyncratic across and within countries and regions. Second, such understanding requires thick description of policy and design implementation and the framework can function at levels of fine-grained detail and as broad summaries of reforms.

Third, the framework has gotten broad exposure and had some tangible impact in a wide range of countries and regions. It has also received attention in accountability-focused policy and academic literature (Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glennerster, & Khemani, 2010; Devarajan, Khemani, & Shekhar, 2007; Di Gropello, 2004; Winkler, 2004). Largely within the World Bank, but also outside it, there were several research efforts to deepen its application in the education sector (see for instance Di Gropello, 2004, 2006; Fiszbein *et al.*, 2004; Gershberg, Meade, & Andersson, 2009; Levy, 2004; Meade & Gershberg, 2008a).⁶

According to the WDR04 framework, holding service providers accountable for delivering expected results is key to successful education outcomes, and is most effective when providers simultaneously feel pressure to provide high quality services and the receive the support they need to succeed. The WDR04 accountability framework is built around three sets of actors within the service delivery chain (for our purposes, the provision of education) and is presented as a three-cornered relationship that includes citizens, politicians, and service providers (see Figure 1). The traditional framework of service provision is referred to as the “long route of accountability”: citizens elect their representative politicians who appoint or influence policy makers who, in turn, form policies taking into account the needs and preferences of citizens.

Reforms that emphasize the “short route”—like school autonomy in Nicaragua or the EDUCO schools of El Salvador—have the potential to improve quality and access for students, and poor rural populations in particular. In this case, a direct relationship is built between clients (parents and other

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