Accountability in education is indeed a welcome theme for the 2017 Global Education Monitoring Report given the centrality of accountability in educational conversations and reforms in many settings across the globe. As a professor and researcher who has studied the globalization of accountability practices it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to offer input to the GEM Report Team. In the following short response I will highlight two elements that seem to be present in the Consultation Request and Concept Note, but perhaps warrant more attention. First, I will offer a brief suggestion to better emphasize the relational nature of accountability. And second, at greater length, I will discuss the governmental and performative nature of accountability systems and practices in education, suggesting that this calls for greater analytic attention to be paid to the consequences of accountability for schools and school systems.

One great danger in both implementing and researching accountability in education is to collapse “accountability” merely into sets of technical procedures and systems (Sobe 2006, 2012). This move obscures the semantic and philosophical/political core of the concept which alludes to relationships—to someone or something being held accountable to someone else / something else. It is thus welcome to see on the very first page of the GEM concept paper a clear claim that accountability exists because of relationships. Indeed, the various types of accountability laid out in the concept paper (financial, regulatory, participatory etc.) speak to an emphasis on the relationality of accountability. However, I would posit that the 2017 GEM Report could make an invaluable contribution by devoting more resources toward uncovering the actuality of accountability relationships in education systems around the globe. Rather than simply establishing what kinds of financial, regulatory, participatory etc. accountability systems are in place in various settings, questions about the nature of accountability relationships should be placed in the foreground. Relationality is so essential to accountability that a priori assumptions about a categorized typology are insufficient. Questions on to whom are accounts presented? and by whom are accounts demanded? should carry across the analysis within the different thematic areas to be explored and not merely define a given thematic area in the first place.

On my read, the 2017 GEM Report could also benefit from a deeper analysis of the popularity and functioning of accountability mechanisms in our present moment. Let me begin with the observation that accountability systems operate socially as distinctly patterned sets of cultural practices where a diverse set of elements gains meaning and significance in particular social spheres of activity. Michael Power (1994) has offered a well-known and useful analysis of the explosion of audit practices in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, which he describes as the spread of a particular mentality of administrative control. Power (1997) recommends that we approach audit culture as an anthropologist might, as a series of rituals of verification. Analogously, it is important to place “accountability” within a particular cultural frame and understand that we are dealing with a set of social practices related to verification, legitimization and performance (Shore and Wright 2000)–as is elegantly discussed in Andrew Kipnis’ (2008, 2011) observations on Chinese school inspection visits.

There is also a significant line of comparative education scholarship that provides insights into the rise of accountability through an argument rooted in neo-institutionalist sociology on the spread of “world cultural” models (Kamens & McNeely, 2010; Smith 2016). If there is widespread agreement internationally about the desired outcomes of education, then this would legitimate international efforts
to make mass education more accountable to societies around the globe. The enshrinement of Western scientific rationality and wide acceptance of the idea that societies are entities to be managed helps to empower a wide variety of actors to make both public and private institutions more accountable and effective. While in and of itself this is an argument more diagnostic than normative, this perspective offers a useful reading of why accountability has become such an object of affection in so many places in our present moment.

A number of scholars have pointed out that accountability can be seen as a technology of governance that is closely tied to neoliberal political thought and practices (Rose 1996; Lindblad, Ozga, and Zambeta 2002; Ranson 2003; Hursh 2005; Ozga 2009). Governmentality analyses allow us to better understand how domains that were previously subject to more direct forms of regulation are increasingly being regulated in seemingly less direct ways (Hindess 2004). All of this leads to the observation that we are witnessing a consequential global trend towards increased self-organizing reflexivity in the self-description and self-observation that school systems are called to engage in (Sobe 2015, Sobe & Boven 2014).

The key implication of this for the design of a 2017 GEM Report focusing on accountability and education is that adequate attention be given to the production of accounts. The GEM concept paper alludes to the importance of investigating the consequences of producing an account. And indeed there is a wealth of existing critical contemporary education scholarship that carefully details the ways that accountability systems are significantly transforming—and not necessarily for the better—the work of schools and teachers, as well as the classroom learning experiences of children and youth around the globe (see, inter alia, Au 2015, Lingard et al. 2015, Lipman 2013ab, Hursh 2013, Ozga 2013). It would seem necessary for the 2017 GEM to grapple with this squarely and include, as a substantive part of the report, discussion of the unintended, negative consequences of accountability practices world-wide.

And, at the same time as we consider the significant consequences of accountability (good and bad), the performative nature of accountability in education also demands attention. Here, the research challenge is to understand how practices of verification and self-observation are operating in schools and school systems around the globe today. In another publication (Sobe 2012) I have proposed that using the work of German systems theorist Niklas Luhmann to conceptualize accountability systems as self-referential social systems helps to explain a number of features of accountability in education. For example, accountability procedures are frequently critiqued for reductively simplifying the complexity of education; however, in Luhmann’s schema reducing complexity is exactly the tactic that a social system uses to translate information to other social systems. Luhmann’s formulations also help us gain some insights into the ways that schools and school systems sometimes appear simply to “do accountability” in a performative manner (Webb 2005, 2006). Luhmann’s suggestion that the education system be considered a “function system” means that the creation of “accounts” or simplified narratives that can be put into circulation and used outside of education would provide an explanation for why educators sometimes view accountability as a distraction from the “real” purposes of schooling. Nonetheless, there is clear empirical evidence that in multiple sites the “real” business of schooling is changing as leadership, teaching and learning are increasingly being designed to be monitorable and calculable (Taubman 2009, Maroy 2015, Kotthoff & Klerides 2016). This stands as an important reminder that accountability practices are not simply passive acts of observation. The production of accounts shapes standards of performance, and beyond this contributes to constructing the very contexts in which schools operate. For multiple reasons then, interrogating the role of accountability in changing the contexts of education world-wide seems to be an essential and important task of the 2017 GEM Report.
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