

Unpacking “Everyone”:
The assemblage of accountors to whom principals are accountable

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Abstract

This paper presents findings related to different elements of the wide educational community who act as accountors for school principals face (i.e., those to whom they are responsible), drawn from an empirical larger study into the multiple accountabilities experienced by public high school principals. This study found 30 different categories of accountors, grouped into seven super-categories. Interpersonal-relationships are a key driver of accountee status. Principals are co-creators of their accountabilities, rather than merely subject to them. *The Principle of Reciprocity* is shown not to apply to the American high school principalship.

Keywords: accountability, high school, principals, policy

Though the No Child Left Behind Act may be viewed as the epitome of the accountability movement in American education policy, it is merely the most visible element of that policy (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2013). As seen in NCLB, the term *accountability* has been narrowed to the point that it almost always refers to one thing – a standardized testing and sanctions regime. Unfortunately, reactions against this paradigm have tended to address it on its own terms. For example, critics focus on the inadequacy of the tests (Koretz, 2008; Popham, 2003), the inappropriateness of testing/sanctions as levers for school improvement (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001; Kornhaber, 2004) and unrealistic expectations for improvement (Janerette, 2008; Linn, 2005). More promisingly, there has been criticism of test-based accountability (TBA) for its narrowing of the concept of *accountability*. For example, Darling-Hammond (1989, 2004) pointed to interpersonal and professional accountability as alternative paradigms for accountability – paradigms that she suggest offer a better chance for school improvement because they provide a more effective impetus *and* mechanisms for reforms. All the while, school principals are increasingly being held accountable for various aspects of their schools (Medina, 2010), accountabilities that come with greater consequences than before (Harris, 2009).

However, there has been rather little attention given to the wider accountability context in which schools and school leaders operate. Figure 1.1 shows the incredible increase in usage of the term *accountability* in print in the last 25 years, which followed shortly after a previously unprecedented increase in the early 1970s. It is clear that that the concept of *accountability*, and growing use of the word, go far beyond the kinds of test-based accountability (TBA) that has received so much attention in the last 15 years. In fact, school principals face multiple accountabilities, of which NCLB-style accountability and professional accountability are just two examples. Given the surfeit of accountabilities that schools and school leaders face, and the muddle (Page, 1999) that could result, there are important questions to ask about their full accountability landscape and their abilities to meet their myriad responsibilities.

Figure 1. Google Ngram Viewer for *Accountability*, 1800-2013



Richard Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity (1997, 2000, 2005, 2008) (i.e. *For every unit of performance I require of you, I owe you a unit of capacity to produce that result*) points out that the *accountor* is a key role in accountability, not just the *accountee*. But instead of systemic

examination of school leaders’ accountors and how these leaders respond to them, the literature instead makes reference to *stakeholders*, usually prescriptive lists of those invested in education or schooling (Cadora, 2006; Flower, 2011; Lubman & Sutherland, 2004). These lists, and guidelines as to how to assemble these lists, focus on those who might care about the schools, rather than those who might actually have influence on them. *Accountors* (who may be stakeholders, as well), have specific relationships with schools and their leaders, perhaps even with specific demands (i.e., *accountances*). But even those lists of stakeholders are usually cursory, rather than fully developed.

The findings presented herein will be drawn from a larger study, the objective of which is to build a theory that further develops Richard Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity in the context of multiple accountabilities to which public high school principals are subject. The larger study examines the both the accountabilities (i.e., considering both the questions “*For what?*” and “*To whom?*”) and the leadership capacities (i.e. both internal and external) that form the foundation of the high school principalship. This paper presents the findings related to different elements of the wide educational community who act as accountors that principals face (i.e., those *to whom* they are responsible).

Thus, the purposes of this paper are as follows:

- To reveal the range of accountors for public high school principals.
- To recognize the multi-faceted nature of the extended community of a public school by acknowledging the different elements and roles within it who are accountors for principals.
- To inform school leadership educators so that they may better prepare and support school principals for the responsibilities they face.
- To join and enhance the broader conversation of how formal and informal education policy can more effectively work in the context of the reality of the multiple accountabilities that schools and school leaders face.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based primarily on the juxtaposition between Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity (1997, 2000, 2005, 2008), *For every unit of accountability I demand of you, I must supply you with one unit of capacity to get the job done* and the idea of multiple accountabilities for schools (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Firestone & Shippo, 2005). The Principle of Reciprocity suggests a dual identity for accountors as builders/suppliers/supporters of capacity. This dual identity is problematized by the existence of multiple accountabilities, which suggests that capacity provision might not be directly matched with accountabilities. This makes it important to understand the web of actual connections between accountors and sources of leadership capacity. This, in turn, calls for empirical work to map out the array of accountances that fall to school leaders, as revealed in this paper.

There has not been a great deal of work regarding the nature of the multiple accountabilities that school leaders face. Though in both common and professional parlance, “accountability” has become associated almost exclusively with the sort of testing regime backed by sanctions that NCLB has epitomized (Ahearn, 2000; Fuhman, 2003), some have looked more closely at various forms of accountability in education. Darling-Hammond (1989) offered five classes of accountability: political, bureaucratic, market, professional and moral. Firestone & Shippo (2005) further extended this framework, in the context of others’ scholarship. Leithwood (2003) – refining the work of Wagner (1989) – recognized that accountabilities in

education are made up of component parts, including the issues of *To whom? For what? and What form?*

However, all of these systems for classifying accountabilities neglect to address the role that the individual plays within these larger systems, either as accountor or accountee. They all describe various sorts of accountabilities from a wide or systemic view, without considering the point of view of various actors within these systems. Even Firestone and Shipps – who do acknowledge that “felt obligation” (2005, p. 83) is an important aspect of accountability – do not really consider the point of view of the accountable individual (e.g. school leader). In contrast, Hupe and Hill (2007) consider this when writing about accountability for street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), a group that clearly includes school principals. Hupe and Hill acknowledge that accountors can differ at least in *action scale* (i.e., accountors may be systems, organizations or individuals) in addition to the dimensions that other scholars typically address. Hupe and Hill’s approach complements that taken by others, providing an additional dimension that Darling-Hammond’s more traditional approach does not acknowledge.

In addition, what all of these systems for classifying accountabilities have in common is their lack of ties to the actual varied work of school leaders. Firestone & Shipps themselves cautioned there has been only “limited empirical work,” (p. 93) themselves focusing on district leaders. They all describe various sorts of accountabilities from a wide or systemic view, without considering the point of view of various actors within these systems. Even Firestone and Shipps – who do acknowledge that “felt obligation” (p. 83) is an important aspect of accountability – do not really consider the point of view of the individually accountable school leader.

Data Sources & Methods

This is a qualitative interview-based grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which utilized Seidman’s (2005) three part interview protocol.

I employed a purposeful maximum variation sampling plan (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Kiao, 2006; Creswell, 2002) to identify twelve participants to represent a broad array of “typical” public high school leaders. They were drawn from two states to represent different policy environments, including one that requires collective bargaining by teachers and one that does not. All principals had at least 3 years’ experience as principals, and none were in their first year at the current schools or within 3 years of a planned retirement.

As can be seen in Table 1¹, the participating principals worked in districts which varied 30,000 to 150,000 students. Annual per-pupil spending varied from \$8,000 to \$14,000, with the Southern districts all spending at least 25% less per pupil, per year. While district size was closely related to the number of high schools in each district, there were great differences between districts in the ratio of total number of students to the number of high schools (i.e., from ~3,000 to ~7500). Their schools varied by SES, size, region, spending levels and district size.

¹ All district, state and principals’ names are pseudonyms, and the numbers in Table 1-3 are rounded to additionally protect participants’ identities.

Table 1: Districts

District (Pseudonym)	Region	# of Students	Per-Pupil Spending	# of High Schools	Teacher Collective Bargaining
Vista County	South	30,000	\$8,000	5	Illegal
Bledsoe County	South	40,000	\$8,000	10	Illegal
Graham County	Mid-Atlantic	75,000	\$12,000	10	Legally Required
Putnam City	Mid-Atlantic	90,000	\$14,000	30	Legally Required
Lander County	Mid-Atlantic	125,000	\$14,000	25	Legally Required
Bayfield County	South	150,000	\$9,000	20	Illegal

Data drawn from each district’s website.

Table 2 shows that there were an equal number of men and women, and an equal number of White/Caucasian and minority principals, with all minority principals being African-American. They varied in age, from their 30’s to their 60’s. Before becoming administrators, they had taught for as a few as five years and as many as 17 years. Five had been principals of another high school and five had previously led a middle or elementary school (with one in both of those groups). All had been in their current positions at least three years, and none more than nine years.

Table 2: Participating Principals

Name (Pseudonym)	Region	Years in Current Position	Previous Principal Positions (non-HS/HS)	Previous Years in Ed (Teacher/Admin)	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Interview Lengths		
								#1	#2	#3
Kelsey	M	5	0/1	5/3	40’s	F	A	2:18	1:31	2:32
Art	M	6	1/0	/10	50’s	M	A	2:02	1:14	2:20
Walter	M	7	-	7/7	40’s	M	A	1:32	1:20	2:34
Christie	M	6	0/1	15/4	40’s	F	W	1:42	0:57	0:59
Maurice	M	6	0/2	2/33	60’s	M	W	1:48	1:32	2:07
Rosa	M	9	1/0	17/12	60’s	F	A	1:44	1:46	2:30
Valerie	S	6	1/0	15/11	50’s	F	A	1:00	-	-
Patricia	S	5	-	18/6	50’s	F	W	1:31	1:22	1:11
Jim	S	4	-	5/10	40’s	M	W	1:38	1:46	1:49
Lewis	S	3	0/1	16/6	40’s	M	W	1:31	2:07	1:24
Jamie	S	6	1/1	16/8	50’s	M	W	1:53	1:23	1:23
Cindy	S	6	1/0	6/5	40’s	F	W	2:20	2:51	1:59

Race/Ethnicity: A=African-American; W = White/Caucasian

Table 3 shows the differences between the schools led by these principals. They varied in size (from 500 students to 3500 students), urbanicity and student demographics. The student

bodies were from 15% to 100% minority students, and between 10% and 85% of the students qualified for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch program.

Table 3: Schools

School (Pseudonym)	Principal (Pseudonym)	Students (#)	Non- Hispanic White (%)	Minority (%)	FRLP (%)	Urbanicity
Lafayette	Kelsey	1200	-	100%	45%	U
Medgar Evers	Art	1100	5%	95%	30%	U
Essex	Walter	1800	10%	90%	50%	U
Dover	Christie	1300	80%	20%	25%	S
Falling Rock	Maurice	2200	85%	15%	10%	S
John Marshall	Rosa	500	-	100%	85%	U
Longfellow	Valerie	1900	15%	85%	40%	U
Holtville	Patricia	3500	60%	40%	12%	U
East Bayfield	Jim	3400	60%	40%	14%	U/S
Middle Rock	Lewis	1100	15%	85%	45%	S
Greatview	Jamie	1600	75%	25%	22%	S
East Whittier	Cindy	2100	75%	25%	25%	S

Urban: S=Suburban; U = Urban

I used a three part interview protocol for this study, based upon Seidman’s (2006) three part structure. As can be seen in Table 2, the substantive portions of the interviews totaled 59 hours and 36 minutes, with individual interviews varying from one to three hours. This study draws primarily from the second round of interviews, but is not limited to that data. Additional data comes from the third round of interviews, in which participants had the opportunity to comment on other’s answers and answer questions about their own previous responses. All interviews were electronically recorded, and transcribed verbatim (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2005).

Data analysis included coding data for central concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), organizing theoretical and emic codes (Geertz, 1974) into thematic matrices, and creating narrative summaries (Maxwell, 2005). I employed a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) while incorporating various literatures into analysis. I analyzed transcripts and identified themes including accountors’ formal roles, relationships, respect and reputation. I explored patterns across these categories by writing analytic memos (Maxwell, 2005) and creating displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I examined data for both confirming and disconfirming instances of themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This yielded 298 unique accountabilities (i.e., an accountor-accountee-accountance triad) named by participants, totaling nearly 700 full described accountabilities. Within- and cross-case analyses (memos and matrices) enabled me to compare and contrast patterns and develop a typology or organizational structure for the accountances, accountance categories and accountance super-categories I discovered.

Because this study is limited with respect to sample size, it generates a grounded theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Strauss & Corbin 1995) that will have to be tested (Weick, 1995) with further work. Great care has been taken throughout the analytic process to ensure that inherently qualitative data is not treated as quantitative data, and therefore this study is unable to draw the

kinds of findings that require the sample size, sampling strategy and protocol design of a rigorous quantitative study.

Findings

There are two kinds of findings from this study. First, I organized the participants’ responses concerning the identities of their accountors into a typology – consisting of 30 categories organized into seven super-categories. Second, I drew out broader analytical findings about the role of accountors in principals’ accountabilities. These include the overriding role of personal relationships in accountability and principals’ own role as creators of their own accountabilities.

These findings are *far* more than simply a list of stakeholders in education. Such lists can include any person, group or organization who cares about or is impacted by our schools. This study is grounded in the perspective of high school principals, and therefore provides insight into those who have some influence on those principals, of whom they are aware as accountors, and even helps us to understand how school leaders view or understand these various accountors or stakeholders. For example, it is one thing to say that school boards are stakeholders, but quite another to – as this paper does –share how principals view the difference between the school board acting in concert and an individual school board member, or what contributes to principals’ different views of different individual school board members.

Typology

The principals in this study shared a large number of accountors (i.e., those to whom they are accountable) with me. Through my analysis, I found thirty different categories of accountors, which I was able to group together into seven super-categories. Table 4.3 shows these groupings and the number of principals who mentioned accountors in each of the categories. While four of the six super-categories contain categories mentioned by all eleven principals who participated in this portion of the study (i.e., the second and third interviews), only 7 of the 30 categories were mentioned by all of them. Obviously, I could have merged categories to create more unanimity, but I believe that the principals usually drew distinctions between them – or at least spoke of them differently.

Table 4: High School Principals’ Accountors

<u>Everyone</u>	<u>Customers</u>	<u>Personal Life</u>
• Everyone	• Students	• Family
<u>Organization and Government</u>	• Parents of Students	• Friends
• Chain of Supervision	• Community	• God
• District Offices	• Boosters	<u>Miscellaneous</u>
• Board Members	• Alumni	• Anyone Involved in the Situation
• School Board	• Local Business	• Anyone the Student Might Encounter
• Elected Officials	<u>Other Education Professionals</u>	• Mass Media
• State Government	• Staff	• Anyone Who Recommends You
• Federal Government	• Peers	
• Sheriff’s Department	• Program Providers	
	• Professional Past	

• Own Teachers	<u>Self</u>
• Union	• Self
• Professional Associations	

The principals began to share these accountors with me in response to my question, “Who places professional demands upon you?” In this study, I intentionally delayed my use of the word *accountability* for as long as I could in each of these conversations, to avoid getting trapped in the idea of test-based accountability (TBA). Follow up and probing questions included:

- To whom do you feel responsible, as the principal of this school, in this community, in this district, in this state, in this country?
- Is there anyone who thinks you are responsible to them, or tries to place demands on you, that you do not in fact, feel responsible to?
- Is there anyone to whom you do feel responsible, even though they might not think you are responsible to them?

Having exhausted the accountors that they offered without specific prompting, I then asked them about:

- Other individuals in their work lives
- Other individuals in their private lives
- Individual from their past work or private lives
- Groups of people
- Formal association or organizations
- Agencies, groups or entities
- Anyone else

Though I do not believe that I uncovered every possible accountor, these principals shared a large number with me. Thus, even the individual entries listed in Table 4 represent whole categories. Each of those will be briefly described below.

Note that one of the principals only participated in the first round of interviews, and therefore the discussion of accountors that follows is based primarily on the second round interviews with the remaining 11 principals (totaling nearly 18 hours), with additional data from the third round.

Accountor Super-Category: Everyone

Seven of the principals immediately answered my first accountor question by mentioning “Everyone.” This answer was so unlike the others that I have put it in its own super-category.

Some principals said that virtually everyone thinks the principal is accountable to them, and not all of them had a problem with that. While they did not say that they owe everyone what they want or expect, there was often something they *did* owe them. Most often, that was a minute of their time and/or effective communication.

Accountor Super-Category: Organizations & Government

Though I did not specifically ask the principals to focus on the official organizational or legal lines of authority above them, asking them about who places professional demands upon them and to whom they are accountable generated a lot of the discussion of those areas. This broad area was addressed by each of the 11 principals who took part in the second round of

interviews. Every principal mentioned the *Chain of Supervision* above them (i.e., from their direct supervisor up to their district’s superintendent). Many mentioned various *District Offices*, individual *Board Members*, the *School Board* collectively, and other *Elected Officials*. They discussed both the *State Government* and the *Federal Government*. Two even mentioned their local *Sheriff’s Department*. I group these accountant types together, and they are obviously potential accountors for political and/or bureaucratic accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989, 2004). They are discussed below roughly in order of closeness to the principals, at least by rough examination.

Chain of Supervision.

Perhaps the most obvious accountant type for principals is their supervisors, whose specific position varies from district to district. In the smallest districts, it could be the superintendent himself or herself. It could be an assistant or associate superintendent, or some other senior district official. In fact, three of the six districts in which participants work either underwent or initiated a change in structure during the period between my first and last interviews in that district. These new structures changed who directly supervised high school principals in each district. In all three cases, the changes resulted in fewer principals reporting to each direct supervisor. Not surprisingly, all 11 principals offered that they are accountable to their supervisors.

District Offices.

Seven of the principals brought up specific offices and departments in their districts’ central offices to which they are accountable. Though these offices do not supervise principals or quite have authority over them, the principals are accountable to these offices. As we went through these offices, the principals sometimes explained specifically what they were accountable for. They shared how each district office (e.g., Assessment, HR, Special Education Payroll, etc.) often held the principal responsible for each school’s compliance with their rules and for whatever paperwork or reporting might be due to that office. A handful of the principals even gave me a partial list of examples.

Board Members.

Individual board members was one of the most controversial categories. Three of the principals said that they *are* accountable to individual board members, especially to particular board members. The local board member, or those board members whom they respect, are more likely to generate recognized accountability. However, two other principals were very clear that they are not accountable to individual board members. With these board members not being their supervisors or having individual authority, these principals quickly described individual board members as falsely believing that principals are accountable to them.

School Board.

On the other hand, the school board itself clearly *is* a key accountant. Eight principals reported being accountable to the school board as a group (as opposed to individual board members). However, some of the principals were clearly frustrated with their current or past school boards. Two principals explained that boards can lose their credibility and therefore their status as meaningful accountors though their actions and decisions. While principals said that they are accountable to their school boards, they usually offered this accountant in the context of

the other accountors within their chain of supervision, or – and perhaps I am merely inferring this – in the sense that it is the board who officially hired them and pays them.

Elected Officials.

In addition to the elected members of the school boards, six principals also discussed other elected officials (e.g. mayor, state legislators, etc.) – even though none of the participating principals are in districts with mayoral control (i.e., districts in which the school board members are appointed by other elected officials). However, the principals generally did not say anything about these officials until I asked about them as a category. As with school board members, elected officials’ status as accountors can be dependent upon the respect that principals have for them.

Even when principals *did* speak of being accountable to elected officials, it was for accountances for which they are already primarily accountable to others. When they did mention the President, their governors, their elected state superintendents, their mayors, or legislative representatives, they rarely did so in strong positive terms. Instead, they usually either grudgingly admitted some small amount of accountability, or denied it entirely.

State Government.

In addition to looking for elected officials, I also coded what principals said about state government. I was intentionally looking to see what kind of accountabilities they connected to government beyond their local municipalities and school districts. Nine principals acknowledged that they are accountable to their state government. This included their state department of education, officials within the state DOE and state elected officials (who were coded as both state government and elected officials) in the legislative and executive branches.

Federal Government.

Originally, I coded state and federal government together, as they were both non-local government. However, I came to realize that principals spoke of the federal government quite differently. While four principals shared that they are accountable to their state for various things, when speaking of accountability to federal government, it was always a grudging admission, at best. While the federal government has, no doubt, shaped some of principals’ accountabilities, none of the principals volunteered that they think of their responsibility to the federal level in the course of their work.

Sheriff's Department.

Quite unexpectedly, two principals said that they are accountable to local law enforcement. Cindy said that she has to report truancy to the sheriff’s department and Art said that he is professionally accountable for cooperating with them. He explained that they work together sometimes, and he is accountable to them for that.

Accountor Super-Category: Customers

One of the things that I do not like about applying business models to schools (i.e., analogizing schools or districts to businesses) is the lack of clarity around who the “customers” are. The participating principals raised various candidates for that role as accountors. Three of these categories (i.e., *Students*, *Parents of Students* and the *Community*) were mentioned by all 11 principals. Three of the principals actually used the term “customers” to refer to students. The principals also listed *Boosters*, *Alumni*, and *Local Businesses* as potential accountors. I group

these accountant types together, and they are all obviously potential accountors for market accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989, 2004).

Students.

All of the principals reported being accountable to students in their second interviews, and it was clear that students are possibly their most important accountant. They confirmed this in their third interviews and I asked them what that meant. That is, I asked what it meant to be accountable *to* students, and what that might look like. They explained that the importance to students and students’ futures of what occurs in school gives them that authority. Principals explained that students confront them about issues, from the quality of the food in the cafeteria to the quality of instruction in classrooms. The principals reported that they welcome this feedback, making themselves available for it (e.g., by “doing cafeteria duty”). They also shared the formal mechanisms they set up, including student government, formal “school climate surveys” and even regular focus groups with different elements of the student body.

Maurice pointed out that students have the ultimate power because a school depends on their cooperation. If they – as a group – really refuse to go along (e.g., “staging a walkout”), the school cannot function.

The conviction with which the principals reported that they are accountable to students surprised me. None of them expressed any doubt.

Parents of Students.

All 11 principals said that they are accountable to parents, and they linked this accountant category to the most accountances (i.e., 38 of the 46 accountances). Interestingly, principals also were more clear about when they are *not* accountable to parents than to any other category. Particularly, they were quite emphatic that they are *not* accountable to any parent for “other people’s children” or for information about those children. Some also reported that they were not necessarily as accountable to parents as parents would have them be (e.g., for timeliness), and might be less accountable to parents who contributed less (i.e., efforts) to the school and/or took less responsibility for their children.

I was quite surprised that none of the principals ever said “parent or guardian” or mentioned any guardian *other* than students’ parents (e.g., grandparents). Across all 34 interviews, these principals in their various communities all spoke only of the students’ parents as the adults responsible for them.

Community.

All 11 principals said that they are accountable to “the community” or to “the local community.” This was among the most elastic terms that they used. When I asked them to unpack the term, their answers included “parents,” “local businesses,” “boosters,” “alumni,” local leaders and even other area residents who do not have children in school. However, different principals included different elements from that list. Sometimes principals broke this down on their own, and at other times the term was used in a more holistic sense and I had to prompt them to unpack it for me. Sometimes principals might refer to “anyone from the community,” as Ed did.

Principals in each state spoke of formal local school committees (by one name or another), which are made up of parents and local business people. These representatives from the community – though not elected – are a structure through which the principals reported that they are accountable to their communities.

While mentions of “the community” were not infrequent, they were not made in strong terms. Perhaps this is an idea that they have not thought about very much, but I think it is more likely that the accountabilities are more easily understood by looking at the different elements that make up *Community*.

Boosters.

Three principals spoke of being accountable to boosters (i.e., sport-, club- and/or activity-specific fundraising groups). Somewhat interestingly, the only principals to do so are in the Southern state. However, they did not position them as a major accountant such that this is a significant difference between states. I suspect that schools in the southern state are more dependent upon booster organizations to pay for extra-curricular activities than schools in the Mid-Atlantic state, but investigating that is beyond the scope of this study.

Alumni.

One principal, Art, said that he is responsible to his school’s alumni. He explained that there are decades of alumni in his school’s community, and they still are proud of their connection to the school. They charge him with keeping the school strong, so that they can remain proud.

Local Business.

Eight principals spoke of being accountable to local businesses. Most often, this was in the form of the local Chamber of Commerce (i.e., a private association of businesses working to further business interests). When they spoke of this accountant category, they usually explained that it was because of the support that local businesses gave their schools. However, the principals were clear that their accountability to local business is quite limited, and contrasted it with the greater strength of other accountors (e.g., parents).

Accountor Super-Category: Other Educational Professionals

All 11 principals spoke of many accountors who are elements of their professional lives and/or histories, yet do not have any claim for organizational or legal authority over them. I group these accountant types together, as they are all elements of a principal’s professional network and are obviously potential accountors for professional accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989, 2004). The most broadly mentioned accountant types in this super-category are the *Staff* of each principal’s own school and their *Peers* (i.e., other principals). Most principals also discussed leaders and superiors in their *Professional Past* and their *Own Teachers* from their own school days. Some principals said they are accountable to *Professional Associations*, and some said *Unions* are an accountant. Two principals said that they are accountable to private groups who are *Program Providers* for their schools.

Staff.

The principals all spoke of being accountable to their staffs and generally they were clear that they owe the administrative and non-certified staff the same things they owe the teachers. Only Patricia said that she is more accountable to the teachers than to the rest of the staff. She said that the administrative and non-certified staff – including herself – were there to “support the teachers’ work,” and therefore the teachers come first.

This is not to suggest that the other principals said they are equally accountable to all members of their staffs. Rather, it is to say that they do not differentiate by *position*. Instead, they were clear that they are more accountable to those who demonstrate commitment to the students.

As with students and parents as accountors, I specifically asked the principals what it meant for their staffs to hold them accountable, given that their staffs are officially accountable to them as their supervisors. Their answers mirrored their answers to how students hold them accountable. Teachers will “approach” their principals about “issues,” the principals try to “make [themselves] available for teachers” and they even set up formal structure/mechanisms to get their feedback. Maurice, the principal who spoke of student walkouts, suggested that teachers can engage in a sort of passive resistance if they do not support his decisions or what he is doing.

Peers.

Ten principals said that they are accountable to other principals, particularly to the other high school principals in their districts. They explained that their peers understand the demands on them like no one else, and their own actions can impact the reputations of their peers. Therefore returning their phone calls is an “absolute priority.” Being sloppy with policies and exceptions can make their peers’ lives more difficult when parents cite their decisions to another principal, adding more weight to these accountors.

Two of the principals said they had had been elected by their peers to represent them, and feel additionally accountable to them for that, both because of their formal positions as representatives and because of the personal trust that their peers had shown in them.

Professional Past.

Nine principals spoke of former mentors and supervisors as accountors – including principals, APs and coaches they had worked under. In fact, virtually all of the principals could name at least one specific person who has supported their professional growth and advancement who was *still* an accountor – even if they probably would not ever come into contact again. They still think about how that old mentor would view them or their decisions when they have a dilemma in front of them. They also feel that they owe it to those old mentors to provide similar support to those they now lead.

In some cases, these accountors from the principal’s professional past *are* in their current professional lives. Some of their former mentors and supervisors remain organizationally superior to them, but the principals reported that it is their old relationships that are the primary source of their feelings of accountability (i.e. rather than the current relative positions). Others are now peers, or even on a principal’s current staff. Their historical roles as mentors and promoters, however, continue to invest them with accountor authority of one sort or another.

Own Teachers.

As with their professional past, principals spoke of former teachers to whom they still feel accountable. No doubt this is true for people in all professions, and one could argue that for educators their former teachers *are* part of their professional pasts (i.e., as their earliest professional models and even mentors). However, there is an additional element to some of these accountabilities that make them different than those I’ve put in the *Professional Past* category.

In addition to the kinds of accountances that principals said they owe those key members of their professional past, some of the principals spoke of something more personal that they owe their own former teachers. Some spoke of their relationships with students and their responsibilities with regards to helping students as something they owe their old teachers.

Union.

Part of the design of this study is to include one state that requires collective bargaining by teachers (i.e., teacher union contracts) and one that forbids it (i.e., no teacher union contracts). Throughout the interviews, I kept my ears open for opportunities to clarify whether the presence or power of unions might be relevant to the matters we discussed. Four principals – obviously all among the six principals in the Mid-Atlantic state, which requires collectively bargained teacher contracts – spoke of unions as accountors, including both the teachers’ union and their own administrators’ union.

The principals’ view of the teachers union as an accountor followed from an apparently sincere belief that the unions represented and spoke for teachers, whom the principals viewed as strong accountors. It was strengthened because principals reported that they were better able to accomplish their goals by working cooperatively with the union. Similarly, they reported that they owed their own unions because that helps their peers, to whom they are already accountable. They also said that they owe it to their own union not to embarrass the union and not to do anything that would necessitate the union stepping in to defend them.

Not surprisingly, none of the principals who work in a state that forbids collective bargaining by teachers mentioned unions or teacher professional association. Years earlier, I had spoken with officials of that state’s state teachers association about their role and how the association wields influence, and was attuned for mentions of the state teachers’ association in these interviews. But none of these six principals mentioned it as an accountor.

Professional Associations.

The principals generally did not offer up any professional associations when asked about them as accountors – despite the fact that they had cited the newsletters, magazines and books that ASCD (formerly The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), NASSP (The National Association of Secondary School Principals) and others sent out as a major source of their ongoing professional development/learning. In fact, only one offered such organizations as an accountor.

However, two principals cited different sorts of professional organizations. Art cited the Masons, mainly with regard to representing them well. Cindy cited a small group of principals drawn from across the state, of which she is a member.

Program Providers.

Two principals brought up private external organizations who provide valuable programs for their students in their schools. Both of them feel accountable to these groups for treating them well and supporting their efforts.

Accountor Super-Category: Personal Life

All 11 of the principals said that they have accountors who have nothing to do with their organizations, their professional networks or their professional pasts, and yet to whom they feel responsible for their professional work. These include their *Families*, their *Friends* and *God*. They are obviously potential accountors for moral accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989, 2004).

Family.

Every principal said that they are accountable to at least one member of their family for the work that they do including parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, grandparents and even their own

children. This stemmed in part from “representing” their families or “the family name.” As with former teachers and members of their professional pasts, this accountability does not require a continued literal presence in their lives. However, some of the principals were clear that they only feel accountable to particular members of their families, and not to other members of their families.

The principals also frequently mentioned their spouses as accountors. While they did not always welcome their “questioning” in the moment, the principals did not doubt their spouse’s right to call them to account. For many of them, their spouses had the right to question every aspect of their work and their decision-making.

Friends.

Three principals said that their friends have a role as accountors for their professional lives, friends who depend on them for their professionally informed opinion on educational decisions in their families. The personal dimensions of these relationships also give these people the authority to push back against the principals and to question their decisions, especially when the friends are former colleagues.

God.

Two principals offered that they are accountable to God for the work they do, something that I did not specifically ask them about. Three others mentioned their churches, but in the context of being accountable to the community members who are fellow members. (I likely should have been more attuned to this potential response, and asked appropriate follow up questions to uncover this accountor when it might have been implied.)

Accountor Super-Category: Miscellaneous

There were four accountors that were mentioned by just a single principal each, and which I could not categorize with other accountor types. They are, *Anyone Involved in the Situation*, *Anyone the Student Might Encounter*, *Anyone Who Recommends You*, and the *Mass Media*.

Anyone Involved in the Situation.

Cindy said that she is accountable for providing an accounting to anyone (e.g., student, parent) involved in a situation. It is notable because on the one hand, this is a tightly circumscribed group, but on the other hand, potential membership in this group has no limits.

Anyone the Student Might Encounter.

Maurice spoke of the future of his community and the communities in which his students might live. He thinks about his influence on those communities and the people who live in them, through his students.

Anyone Who Recommends You.

Throughout our discussions, Art indicated that he is quite responsive to potential accountors – or even those who would not consider themselves his accountors. Remarkably, he described his accountability to people who recommend him for anything. He even said that he feels accountable to someone who suggests to a struggling or aspiring principal that he or she call Art up to seek advice, or to shadow him for some period of time, even if only not to make

them look bad for their recommendation. Remarkably, even if the recommender is someone whom he has never met, he *still* feels that tie.

Mass Media.

Though two principals mentioned the mass media, only Jim said they act as an accountant. Patricia spoke of the media in other terms. She was quite clear that she is *not* accountable to the media. The media can influence how others view her work, but is not itself an accountant.

Accountor Super-Category: Self

All of the principals indicated that they are accountable to themselves. I went into these interviews expecting to focus on *other* people, positions, groups and entities, and my interview guide did not include asking principals about being accountable to themselves. Nonetheless, our discussions revealed that principals hold themselves accountable for accountances in nearly every accountance super-category.

Not Accountors

At times, principals were quite clear that there are some people to whom they are *not* accountable. Their reasoning for this was fairly consistent. Those who are similarly committed to the wellbeing of children are accountors, and those not so committed – regardless of their official roles or positions – are not. For example, elected politicians (i.e., school board members and others) may have serious weight in the minds of these principals, but not when they demonstrate that they care more about their own careers or good press than they do about children.

The Nature of Accountability and the Accountor Role

Because of the rich and thoughtful answers that these participants shared with me, I was able to explore the nature of accountability and the role of accountors – both in my analysis of data and by directly engaging with the participants about these more conceptual issues in the third round of interviews. Below, I present three of these findings. First, interpersonal relationships are a *huge* driver of accountability, certainly to a degree that backers of organizational or bureaucratic accountability do not understand and perhaps even more than those with better knowledge of the principalship understand. Second, accountability is not simply imposed upon or recognized by principals. Rather, principals actually are often creators of their own accountabilities, empowering other to be their accountors. Third, despite the basic formula of Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity, many accountors are simply not a position to supply or support principals’ leadership capacity.

Interpersonal Relationships Drive Accountability

“Perhaps relationships is a piece of my feeling of accountability because I keep hearing relationships come up a lot in this.” - Kelsey

Despite the fact that this study took place amidst the age of test-based accountability and increased pressure on school leaders from the federal and state government, the importance of interpersonal relationships in accountability was a major theme in the principals’ answers. This can be seen both by closely examining the examples and explanations offered by these principals, and when looking at quantification of their discussions of accountors and accountances. In fact, such close examination reveals that interpersonal relationships are actually the basis of felt accountabilities that might appear from a distance to be more traditional or bureaucratic in nature.

Table 5: Quantified Accountor Categories

Most Mentioned	Most Widely Mentioned	Linked to Most Accountances
121 – Staff	11 – Chain of Supervision	31 – Parents of Students
120 – Parents of Students	11 – Community	28 – Students
99 – Chain of Supervision	11 – Family	24 – Chain of Supervision
85 – Students	11 – Parents of Students	22 – Community
61 – Family	11 – Self	20 – Self
57 – District Offices	11 – Staff	18 – District Offices
56 – Community	11 – Students	12 – Local Business
45 – Self	10 – Peers	11 – Family
44 – Professional Past	9 – Own Teachers	11 – State Government
40 – Peers	9 – Professional Past	10 – Peers
40 – State Government	9 – State Government	10 – Professional Past
27 – Local Business	8 – Local Business	10 – School Board
26 – Elected Officials	8 – School Board	10 – Staff
26 – Everyone	7 – District Offices	8 – Elected Officials
25 – Own Teachers	7 – Everyone	8 – Everyone
24 – School Board	6 – Elected Officials	6 – Boosters
15 – Federal Government	4 – Federal Government	6 – Own Teachers
15 – Union	4 – Professional Associations	5 – Board Members
13 – Professional Associations	4 – Union	5 – Federal Government
10 – Boosters	3 – Board Members	5 – Union
9 – Board Members	3 – Boosters	4 – Anyone the Student Might Encounter
8 – Friends	3 – Friends	4 – Professional Associations
4 – Program Providers	2 – God	4 – Program Providers
3 – Anyone the Student Might Encounter	2 – Mass Media	2 – Anyone Who Recommends You
3 – God	2 – Program Providers	2 – Friends
3 – Mass Media	2 – Sheriff's Department	1 – Alumni
3 – Sheriff's Department	1 – Alumni	1 – Anyone Involved in the Situation
2 – Anyone Who Recommends You	1 – Anyone Who Recommends You	1 – God
1 – Alumni	1 – Anyone Involved in the Situation	1 – Sheriff's Department
1 – Anyone Involved in the Situation	1 – Anyone the Student Might Encounter	0 – Mass Media
1 – Society as a Whole	1 – Society as a Whole	0 – Society as a Whole

Of course, one must be very cautious when quantifying qualitative data. Table 5 displays three different sorted lists of the accountor categories. First, it sorts them by how many times I applied the codes that make up each accountor category across the second round of interviews. Second, it sorts them by how many of the 11 principals mentioned each of them at all. Third, it sorts them by how many accountance categories the principals linked each accountor category to. The first list is the most problematic, as it is greatly influenced by my chunking strategy and tendencies (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2011), and my own interests (as my follow up questions can lead to more quotes to be coded on a topic). However, the second and third lists are

much less dependent upon the instrument (i.e., me), and more on the source (i.e., the principals). They are also less reflective of *how often* than of *whether*. That is, they reflect *whether* each principal mentioned an accountant, and *whether* any of the principals linked an accountant to an accountance (and then counts up the answers to those questions).

These sorted lists suggest that relationships play a key role in creating accountabilities. Students, their parents, and their staffs are near the top of each of these lists. Because of the traditional linking of accountant and authority, one would expect principals' chain of supervision, their state government and other elements of the *Organization and Government* accountant super-category to dominate the top of such lists. Instead, principals' chain of supervision (primarily their immediate supervisor) is the only such category that appears so prominently.

A potential alternative explanation for this is a customer-focused orientation on the part of these principals. In advocating for a place for her form of professional accountability, Darling-Hammond (1989) suggested such a possibility, “Some believe that accountability can be enacted by statutes prescribing management procedures, tests, or curricula. Unfortunately, these approaches to accountability leave the student, the parent, the teacher, and the educational process entirely out of the equation” (p. 60). However, a customer focus does not explain the prominence of the principals' staffs on these sorted lists, or their own families, or even themselves. The thick qualitative data this study collected allowed me to better understand the workings of accountability for principals, to closely examine what this kind of quantification can only suggest.

The importance of relationships can be seen in how Lewis spoke about his accountability to the Southern State. He said that he *is* accountable to the governor, but only just barely.

Lewis: Only because the governor controls the educational expectations of our State.

ALEX: SO YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE TO HIM.

Lewis: In theory. And if he could quote my name and tell me something, you know.

He echoed this reluctance when speaking about his state's Department of Education.

Lewis: I am responsible, but...[trails off]

ALEX: WELL, TECHNICALLY YOU ARE.

Lewis: Right.

ALEX: DO YOU FEEL IT?

Lewis: I wouldn't lose sleep over it.

ALEX: ARE THERE OTHERS LIKE THAT? LET'S SAY THE STATE SUPER?

Lewis: The same. You're accountable to him, but it's a different world. They're not in my foxhole. They're in the fight in a large sense, but until you're in the hole, until you're in the foxhole, you might be the problem.

Even when he acknowledged the existence of accountability to the legal and bureaucratic offices and institutions, he made clear that it had no real significance. But opportunities to work closely with state people can change this. When Lewis nominally feels some accountability to the state, it is because he has developed a working relationship with someone.

Lewis: I got some people from the state DOE, Donald Gabbay, the state appointed school improvement specialist assigned to me by the state.

ALEX: DONALD GABBAY?

Lewis: Gabbay, G-A-B-B-A-Y. I feel very accountable to him and we're on the same team, but he's in the building, he's fighting the battles, he's walking the walk, he's in my shoes. And even though he was given [i.e., assigned to my school] and I had no say in any of these, I know he's in my foxhole. I know he wants

me to be successful. He wants my kids to be successful. He wants my staff to be successful. He wants the community to recognize that. He wants the Board of Education to remove the barriers that keep that from happening and he wants the governor to make good decisions in future aspirations. I know that because he walks the fight; he’s part of the team.

When I later asked Lewis about the accountances he linked to Mr. Gabbay, he quickly rattled off the kinds of things that backers of bureaucratic accountability would approve of. “Improving the school achievement, attendance rates, discipline, teacher attendance...Wisely developing sustainable systemic [improvements].” While he holds much of the state and its formal structures at arm’s length, when it comes to accountability, he feels strongly accountable to Mr. Gabbay, rather than to the state. “I *feel* like I do yes. Because if I didn’t get any better then I feel like – I haven’t done my job, what I’ve been paid to do.”

The importance of relationships to establishing or strengthening accountability appeared over and over again. For example, most of the principals *denied* feeling accountable to organizations or even the professional organizations of which they are members (e.g., the National Association for Secondary School Principals). A couple granted that they didn’t want to embarrass their profession, but they did not feel notably accountable to the organizations. Of NASSP, Rosa said, “They’re nice but I don’t really feel accountable to them.” Patricia spoke as strongly of these large organizations (including a couple of state level equivalents) as anyone.

Because they are organizations who promote my profession, and they support and they promote. And I feel like professionally, I owe them to act in a professional [way], and act with integrity and act with honesty and carry out the duties of this position in that way. But that was the limit of accountability to professional organizations, except for Cindy. She is a member of a group of 30 principals from across the state with whom she works closely and to whom she feels accountable. They meet every other month for two intensive days of professional development and discussion. “I do, and I entered that group particularly, that group of 30 principals, because I feel like I’m a representative of them when I’m out.” Working closely with them, working with them over time, and becoming close with them created for Cindy the kinds of interpersonal relationships which – as with Lewis and Dr. Gabbay – produce truly felt accountabilities. Later, she spoke of how that accountability to the group arose from her accountability to the individuals in the group.

Well, for sharing things, for implementing the things that we discussed, for bringing things back to the table, for contributing. And then also supporting them. We do a lot where we call each other in between and ask for things or share things that have nothing to do with [the topics of the association meetings].

Other principals spoke of this dynamic with select peers, usually with those in their own districts or with whom they came up through the ranks. But Cindy shows that this dynamic is not as much about locality or the shared experiences of co-workers in the same organization. Rather, these various shared circumstances can lead to the kinds of interpersonal relationships that in turn act as a basis for real accountability.

The principals shared that they barely felt any accountability to organizations, even those to which they acknowledged being formally accountable (e.g., the state DOE). When they *did* speak of a strong feeling of accountability, it most often was tied to individuals with whom they had a personal relationship. In short, they feel much more accountable *to people* than they do *to structures*. This shows in the importance of the accountance categories of *Owe an Accounting*

and *Representing*, which came up quite often and were most strongly linked to individuals with whom the principals had interpersonal relationships.

Principals are co-creators of their accountabilities

“So you need all those checks and balances in place and I want people to be involved and be able to give input, and if they sit back and don’t say what’s bothering them, then it’s not my fault you’re not happy here and you want to go to somewhere else. I want you to be able to change things here to make it the best it could be.” – Cindy

“I tell [the staff], ‘Hold me accountable!’ I say that in meetings, I have no problem with anybody voicing their opinion, so I don’t know who would not be willing to come talk to me if they had something to get off of their chest.” - Jim

I began this study thinking of accountability as a collection of forces which act upon principals. I thought that the dynamic was one in which some large outside force had power over the high school principal, who was buffeted around by multiple accountabilities like a swimmer struggling to keep his head above water in a violent storm at sea, with winds shifting and spray blowing into his face seemingly from all directions. I expected that the strongest principals might be quite good at dealing with this dynamic, but even they would be acted upon and reactive to their accountabilities. I thought that their most active and powerful roles would be in setting up accountabilities for others (e.g., the students and staff members in their schools).

While I cannot be sure how overwhelming these principals find their multiple accountabilities, it is clear my original conception was at best incomplete. While I wrote the phrase “accountabilities to which they are subject” many times, I – like the literature – did not consider the possibility that school leaders *create accountability for themselves*.

For example, at the end of each school year, Christie creates accountability for herself in (at least) three ways. Consider what she asks herself repeatedly during each graduation ceremony.

The worst – the most stressful – time of my life was when I was shaking their hand on a stage, and I look at each one of them in the eye and I think, “Oh my God, what did we do for you? Did we do well by you?”

Even when no one else is asking her or accusing her, she creates this accountability for herself. Amidst this most formal celebration of student, family and school success, she *adds* an accountability dynamic for herself (and her school). Though it is not visible to others, she holds herself accountable for more, even as others have already accepted the job has been well done.

Christie also collects data from these students at the end of each year. She has each senior write a letter to some adult in her school who has helped him or her, and she reads each letter herself before distributing them. Obviously, such letters serve as a nourishing and replenishing fuel for educators – who work in an emotionally draining profession. But they also serve as a check for Christie, as the leader of her school. These letters help her to see the impact her school has on the children who pass through. She reads – and weeds out – the occasional negative letters, and the positive letters can act to counterbalance some of her negative opinions of a teacher. They can push her to revisit her opinion of a teacher whom she thought ineffective with students. Generally, this acts as an accountability mechanism for – shocking as it may be – *positive* accomplishments.

Christie’s third self-created accountability is an exit survey for all her seniors, a practice she brought with her from her previous principalship. At Dover High School, her likert-scale questions ask about who cared about their success, school safety, level of challenge, extra-curricular activities and whether these students feel prepared for their next destination.

Other principals also create accountability mechanisms for themselves. After Jim (like most of the other principals) listed *students* as his top accountant², I asked him how that could work. He explained that he does student surveys, though unlike Christie, he includes the entire student body. In addition to that, he puts together focus groups of students twice a year. In both the fall and late spring, he puts together six groups of students from each of the four grades in his school to hold him accountable for everything in his school. Cindy tries to entice her staff to come and hold her accountable with monthly “Coffee and Conversation.” Lewis explained that he works cafeteria duty to make himself more available to students, so they can hold him accountable for things in their school, as so many principals do.

Christie’s asking herself whether they “did right” by every graduating senior is just one example of this internally generated accountability moment. Lewis has a similar procedure with his staff.

Have I done everything in my power to remove the barriers from their being successful, to remediate them in their areas of weakness and to provide them the resources and coaching to get better? If my answer is yes, then I’ll shut my eyes and sleep over that now. If there’s a doubt, then the answer is no and I still feel obligated to keep trying. This can keep him from letting go of a staff member who has not been performing. Before he fires them, or counsels them out, this Southern State principal stops and make sure he has not himself fallen short.

These self-generated and internal sources of accountability were actually quite common. Maurice explained it in more general terms.

You have to. You don’t have answers for all these things, but the accountability lies in always re-evaluating what has been done, what is being done and what can be done. If you do that, you’ve done your job. It may not have fixed the problem.

Maurice explains that accountability is an ongoing process, not just a collection of particular accountability moments. Thus, there is no end to this accountability, even though it is intrinsically self-enforced. Interestingly, for Maurice accountability is not really about success or failure, but rather is about a constant process of improvement.

Among the very last questions I asked each principal at the end of the third interview was one about the necessity of an 18th leadership capacity³, something they had not raised previously. I asked them whether principals have to be the kind of person who steps up and volunteers to be held accountable for bigger issues. I suggested that some teachers can be quite effective and have a major impact on students while remaining entirely focused on their own classrooms and instruction, whereas others might want to step forward and be responsible and held accountable for wider issues. I asked them if effective principals have to be the sort who wants to be held accountable. All of them agree that principals need this *capacity for accountability*. Clearly, they have such a valence for accountability that they create even more of it for themselves.

The most significant accountors were *not* those with power or authority over the principals (e.g., the power to fire them), nor was it those who are most supportive of principals’ leadership capacity. Instead, it was the students, their parents and the principals’ faculties.

² During the third interview, I asked the principals to rank a list of accountors. Most of them ranked *students* at the very top, even though I had intentionally left it off the list I first gave them. In the end, only two principals did not list *students* #1, and they put them at #2.

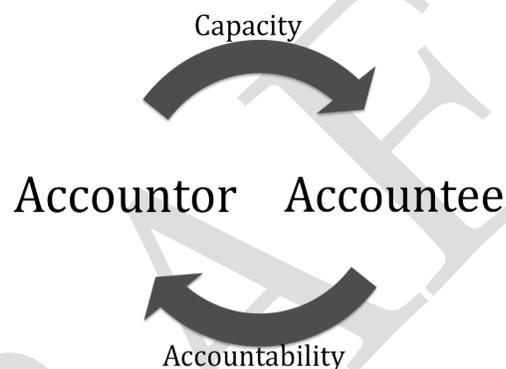
³ The typology of leadership capacities in Hoffman (2012) contains 17 categories of leadership capacity.

Professional ethics – the intersection of moral and professional accountability? – appears to be the most powerful shaper of accountability. Those who are dependent upon the moral mission of a principal’s work, and those whose work these principals are most focused on supporting, are the most critical accountors.

Key Accountors Often Cannot Supply Capacity

Elmore paints a necessary relationship between accountability and capacity building, proposing that “For every unit of performance I require of you, I owe you a unit of capacity to produce that result” (Elmore, 2006, p. 20). This formulation suggests that accountor legitimacy is dependent upon the ability to provide capacity, and comes with some sort of obligation to do so sufficiently. That is not the case for any of the principals in this study. Key accountors are simply not in a position to provide or support a school leader’s professional capacities.

Figure 2: The Principle of Reciprocity



Certainly, students are *not* providers or supporters of capacity, and yet the principals were quite clear that *Students* are a major – if not the single most important – accountor category. The principals offered students are the number one accountor, even when *Students* was not on the list I gave them. But no one would suggest that students ought to be capacity providers, or that their role as accountors is in any way diminished or compromised for their inability to support principals’ leadership capacity. Students’ position as important accountors suggests not only that there are other bases for accountor-status, but that there are other *more important* bases for accountor status.

This is not limited to students. The principals also reported that *Staff* members are key accountors, and one could hardly argue that they provide capacity. Instead, the principals cited staff members are a major category of capacity (i.e., resources critical for their own effectiveness, as leaders of schools) in another phase of this research (Hoffman, 2012). In that phase, the participants did not cite teachers or other staff members as a source of any capacity. Therefore, they do not even have a dual role as capacity and also capacity-providers.

Similarly, Kelsey offered that she feels a bit more accountable to *Parents* who are more involved with volunteering for the school, but this was not because they are providing her with additional capacity. While the Southern principals mentioned the boosters who support their clubs and teams, the boosters are a relatively minor accountor⁴. Parents are key accountors for

⁴ Principals reported owing boosters appreciation and a sense of contribution, more than anything else.

these principals, regardless of their contributions to the school. Even when local individuals do contribute to principals’ leadership capacities, major accountabilities do not result.

This is a critical blow to Elmore’s PoR, which is reflective of a larger problem. The kind of authority and or resources that enable someone to provide capacity to a school leader is just one contributor to accountor status. Yes, principals *did* cite those who offer assistance or programs for their students as accountors, and that accountability was clearly grounded in what they had done for the principals’ schools. But even those principals who cited accountors on these grounds did not speak of them as major or high priority accountors. And yet, there are many who seek to influence schools through their philanthropic efforts. These principals do not seem likely to be influenced by such efforts, even if they may welcome the additional resources.

Conclusions

The complexity of school principals’ accountabilities has received nominal respect and consideration in the past, but has not really been appreciated. Whether considering accountors , accountances (Hoffman, 2013), or the interactions between them, there is far more going on there than most realize. Rather than delving into this complexity to try to make sense of it, far too many have resorted to simply accepting that principals are accountable to *everyone*. In fact, previous efforts to classify and explain the nature of accountability in education show their shortcomings when examined in light of the perspectives of principals, themselves. Some of this may be due to an essential misunderstanding of the position of principals within their organizations (i.e., they are much more like branch managers than they are like CEOs). However, it is likely chiefly due to a lack of deeply focused empirical qualitative work – work that requires a generous commitment by the selfsame principals beset with this large set of accountances. This kind of in-depth cooperation between researchers and participant-practitioners can reveal the complexities that neither previously understood and/or were conscious of.

This research suggests that traditionally recognized accountors could be well served to understand how they fit in with other accountors. Elmore offered his Principle of Reciprocity to help explain why bureaucratic accountability systems so often fail to produce the desired results, something that experts in accountability have long recognized. This study suggests that organizational leaders and governmental officials may increase their influence –their standing relative to other accountors – and thereby principals’ responsiveness to their priorities, with a better understanding of the drivers of principals’ accountabilities. If position and authority do not yield results, perhaps they can use relationship-based accountability. Lewis’s experiences with Dr. Gabbay show that the state *can* have influence on a principal, even if the state is not recognized as a significant accountor. Investing in personnel who both support the state DOE’s (or state officials’) priorities *and* can build professional relationships with principals which the principals value could offer an mechanism to bring school leaders into alignment with state education policy and priorities.

While Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity suggests that bureaucratic accountors (e.g., supervisors, state officials, etc.) need to be mindful of matching accountability demanded and capacity provided, this research suggests a wider view. Accountors *not* in a position to offer capacity still need to be mindful of limits to the capacity that is available to their accountee school principals. Those in position to offer capacity might consider that the capacity they provide may not be solely devoted to their own accountances. Rather, they should understand that other accountances (i.e., those tied to significant accountors who cannot or do not supply

capacity) require capacity that these accountors supply. What may appear to be sufficient capacity (i.e., the corresponding match that Elmore’s PoR calls for) is not sufficient because some of it is diverted elsewhere. Thus, it may fall to accountors to supply capacities *in excess* of what their own accountances directly require, so that competing accountances do not prevent these accountances from being met.

Those who select principals or principal-candidates (e.g., school district, pre-service training and/or certification programs) should be mindful of the principal’s role within the assemblage of school leaders’ accountors. While this study is not based on studying particularly effective principals and made no effort to identify the effectiveness of the principals who participated, the fact is that most of the participating principals had been repeatedly put in charge of schools, and the length of their respective tenures suggested some degree of effectiveness. Thus, we may infer that principals’ longevity – if not effectiveness – requires not just a comfort with being held accountable by others, but actually a willingness to affirmatively empower others to hold them accountable. Screening procedures may be improved if this is taken into account. The public nature of principalship may call for a different relationship to accountors than that of assistant principals or other less public positions. Responsibility to empower others to hold oneself accountable is not an obvious duty of school principals, but it might be a necessary one.

It is possible that the principals in this study take TBA and other bureaucratic accountabilities more seriously (relative to other accountabilities) than this study revealed. Either way, these principals did not show that they have a framework that allows them to consciously consider these different sorts of accountabilities (e.g., relationship based and bureaucratic-based) together. This may lead to undesired consequences if principals are unable to effectively mediate between competing priorities. There is a role for school leadership preparation and certification programs to address this. These programs can provide principals with frameworks to make better sense of the complexities they encounter and the vocabularies to communicate their understandings. This can support principals’ own abilities to manage their multiple pressures and accountabilities, to seek support, and to provide support to other principals. In fact, leadership preparation programs are uniquely well suited for this role. However, fulfilling this need requires such programs to hold a place for what students may consider *too theoretical*, at a time when internships and school-based projects are taking up increasing portions of such programs.

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