

Unpacking “Everything”:

The array of accountances for which principals are accountable.

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings related to the vast variety of the multiple accountances that principals face (i.e., that for which they are responsible), drawn from a larger empirical study into the multiple accountabilities experienced by public high school principals. This study found 45 different categories of accountors, grouped into 11 super-categories. This range of accountances is far more varied than the set of roles usually ascribed to principals would predict, and the most important accountance category was not *Academics* or even in the *Student Outcomes* super-category. A new *Principle of Variety* is discussed.

Keywords: accountability, high school, principals, policy

Accountability has been the watchword in education in the early 21st century, and in the world of education policy, it has overwhelmingly referred to one thing – a standardized testing and sanctions regime, as exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2013). Most criticisms of this paradigm have addressed 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). Some, however, have criticized the paradigm for its too limited conception of accountability, pointing instead to professional accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1991, 2004) as an alternative form of accountability with the potential to lead to meaningful school improvement, because it provides a more effective impetus *and* mechanisms for improvement. Meanwhile, school principals are being held responsible for more and more aspects of their schools (Medina, 2009), and with far greater consequences (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 the 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 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



Accountability is no one thing, and no simple thing. Understanding the nature of American high school principalship in this age of accountability requires understanding the *multiple accountabilities* (Firestone & Shippis, 2005) to which principals can be subject. This requires working with practicing principals to understand the real, multi-dimensional accountability landscape that they live and work in every day.

Purpose

The findings presented herein are drawn from a larger study, the objective of which is to build a theory that develops Richard Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity (i.e. “For every unit of performance I require of you, I owe you a unit of capacity to produce that result.”) in the context of school leaders’ multiple accountabilities. This larger study examined 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 the vast variety of the multiple accountances that principals face (i.e., the things *for which* they are responsible).

Thus, the purposes of this paper are as follows:

- To reveal the range of accountances that fall on high school principals.
- To recognize the multi-faceted nature of the extended school community by acknowledging the variation in accountances that come from different elements of that community.
- 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 was originally based on the juxtaposition between Elmore’s Principle of Reciprocity (2000, 2005, 2008) and the idea of multiple accountabilities for schools (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Firestone & Shipps, 2005). The Principle of Reciprocity suggested an exchange of accountability for capacity between an accountor and an accountee. Empirically identifying the *accountances* (i.e. those things for which the accountee is accountable) was critical to understanding how the Principle of Reciprocity might actually apply in practice.

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, legal, bureaucratic, professional and market. Firestone & Shipps (2005) used a similar framework (i.e., rolling legal accountability into political accountability and adding moral accountability) to classify various scholarly work in this larger conception of accountability. 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?* on which this study focused¹.

However, what all of these systems for classifying accountabilities have in common is their lack of resemblance to the actual varied work of school leaders. Firestone & Shipps themselves cautioned there has been only “limited empirical work,” (p. 93) and their own work focused 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.

¹ Leithwood’s other dimension asked about the identity of the accountee, the level of accountability and the consequences of the accountability.

Even Firestone and Shipp – 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, though Leithwood does acknowledge that accountee identity is a key dimension of accountability.

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. Their schools varied by SES, size, region, spending levels and district size. The substantive portions of the interviews totaled 59 hours and 36 minutes. All interviews were electronically recorded, and transcribed verbatim (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2005).

Note: To inhibit undue focus on NCLB-style bureaucratic accountability, I avoided using the word “accountability” with participants until the middle of data collection.

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 outcomes, processes, relationships 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). 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.

Of course, the care I took in my data collection introduces some intrinsic limitations. I did not offer principals lists of to select from or agree with when learning about their capacities, accountors or accountances. Rather, I was careful to let them offer and volunteer ideas, following up as necessary to reveal more about what they had suggested or implied. This means that each of the semi-structured interviews developed in a unique way. Thus, because of organic variations in the flow of conversations, principals had different opportunities to mention different ideas. For example, very few principals mentioned *student learning* as an accountance, and yet I am confident that if I had specifically asked them about that, they would have agreed. This study simply was not designed to produce agreement or popularity rates. Instead, it was designed to produce the maximum variation in responses that I could collect, to best understand the scope and breadth of the accountability landscape for high school principals.

Of course, as a study based upon qualitative interviews, my own biases and expectations played a role in the development of these conversations. Another researcher might not have followed up with the meaning of *supporting staff* as much as I did, or have done a better job of following up with implications that they are accountable “to God” for their work. Therefore, the numbers reported below should all be read skeptically. Given more follow up and prompting,

many (most?) of the listed accountances would have been mentioned by far more of these principals.

Findings

This study presents two major findings. The first is a typology of the accountances which the participants shared with me. This typology is based entirely on the nature of the accountances, rather than the mechanisms for accountability, as both Darling-Hammond’s and Firestone & Shipp’s typologies are. It is grounded quite firmly in particular responsibilities that principals face. The second major finding focuses on the relative important of different accountances, particularly on the place of academics. Although the word *accountability* usually refers to formal curricular learning (or the test scores which are supposed to be a proxy for curricular learning), academics does not seem to be the most important accountability to these principals. In fact, if one considers *academics* to be the degree of student learning of the content defined in the curriculum (and standards), it almost certainly is *not* the most important accountability – in spite of the fact that it is the increasingly narrow target of our so-called accountability policies.

Finding #1: Typology of Accountances

Table 1. Accountance Categories and Super-Categories

<u>Everything (11)</u>	<u>Students & Safety (11)</u>	<u>Branch Administration (10)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everything (11) • Help Lift the School System (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students (6) • Relationship with Students (5) • Safety/Discipline (11) • Students Off School Grounds (7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget (7) • Purchasing (6) • Miscellaneous To District Offices (1) • Physical Plant (6) • Cafeteria & Transportation (3) • Leave a Smooth Operation Behind (1)
<u>School Offerings (11)</u>	<u>Teachers and Staff (11)</u>	<u>Classic Leadership (10)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality Education (10) • Academics (9) • Athletics (7) • High School Experience (8) • Character/Affective Education (10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing (9) • Support Staff (11) • Instruction (6) • Supervision (6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture/ Environment (9) • Good/Fair Decisions (7)
<u>Student Outcomes (11)</u>	<u>Community (9)</u>	<u>Interpersonal Leadership (9)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test Scores (11) • Graduation Rate (3) • College Application Process (2) • System-Wide Goals (1) • Learning (3) • Prepare for Future/Skills (7) • Students' Futures (3) • Guilt (8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be Part of Community (7) • Help Parents (6) • Public Relations (4) • Support PTA Growth (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep People Out of Trouble (1) • Vision (6)
	<u>Organizational Context (11)</u>	<u>Moral (11)</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Context (10) • Relationship w/ Supervisor (8) • Relationship w/Peers (9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own Character (11) • Pay It Forward (4) • Representing (10)
		<u>Owe an Accounting (11)</u>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owe an Accounting (11)

The principals in this study shared a large number of accountances (i.e., that for which they are accountable) with me. Through my analysis, I found 45 different categories of accountances, which I was able to group together into 11 super-categories – eight of which were mentioned by all eleven principals who took part in the second and third interviews. Six of the individual categories were volunteered by all of the principals, one being *Owe an Accounting*, which doubles as its own super-category. Table 17 shows these accountability categories and the number of principals who mentioned each of them.

I learned of these accountances after asking these principals about their accountors (i.e., those who hold them professionally responsible, or those to whom they are professionally responsible). After developing their list of accountors, we went through the accountances they linked to each accountor. (They usually listed some of these accountances as we developed the accountor lists, as well.) By this time, I was using the terms “accountable” and “professionally responsible for” more or less interchangeably. Follow up and probing questions included:

- Is there anything else he/she/they/it holds you accountable for?
- Is there anything that anyone holds you accountable for that you do not agree you are accountable for?
- Is there anything you believe you are accountable to anyone for that he/she/they/it does not think you are accountable for?

Thus, these accountability categories are not merely lists of responsibilities and duties. Rather, each was specifically linked to at least one accountor. That is, the principals shared that they are accountable to someone in particular (or multiple someones) for each of them.

Note that one of the 12 principals only participated in the first round of interviews, and therefore this discussion of accountances that follows is based on interviews with the remaining 11 principals. The relevant interviews (i.e., second and third round interviews) totaled more than 38 hours.

Accountance Super-Category: Everything

All of the principals said that they are accountable for *Everything*, the vaguest and most general possible answer. In fact, many offered this answer at the very beginning of the interview, while I was still setting up my first question about accountors. I found three different forms of that answer that I grouped into an *Everything* category, and one quite different form (i.e., *Help Lift the School System*) which is in the *Everything* super-category, but as its own category.

Everything

While all of the principals spoke of being accountable for everything, they did so in three different ways. First, every principal spoke of being accountable for doing the best they could. That is, they are accountable for maximizing their own results. Usually, they used some form of the phrase, “the best I can.” Second, seven of the principals literally said they are held accountable for “everything.” Third, eight of the principals reported that they are accountable for “being good at [my]” job, in some form.

Help Lift the School System

One principal explicitly spoke of being responsible for schools beyond her own. She said that she is accountable for the entire system, though it was not clear whether she was speaking of her own school district or the larger system of public education in this country.

Accountance Super-Category: School Offerings

Of course, all 11 of the principals reported that they are accountable for the typical offerings that many expect from an American public high school, including an overall *Quality Education*. No doubt, this includes the *Academic* and *Athletic* programs. It also includes the rest of the *High School Experience* (i.e., a music program, clubs, events, extra-curricular programs, etc.) and *Character Education*.

Quality Education

The most general form in which the principals reported this accountance, raised by 10 of the principals, was being responsible for the education they offered/provided to students, without specifics or details. Though this might appear to refer to student outcomes, I do not think that that is what the principals meant. Principals had different ways to refer to students' states when they leave their schools that are clearly outcomes. The “quality education” for which they reported being accountable – often with just that phrase – is in the offerings and programs available in their schools.

Academics

Nine of the principals mentioned being accountable for “academics,” again often using that particular term. In other instances, principals spoke of course offerings (from special education to AP), and academic supports for students. This accountance often overlapped with other accountances, such as when principals mentioned instructional quality and ensuring that teachers have the materials they need for their curricula.

Athletics

The principals shared that their athletic programs are one of their most common public accountances, one mentioned by seven of the principals. All of these principals limited their own accountability for athletics to having and supporting the programs, and to properly staffing them. None said they feel responsible for athletic outcomes, team records or students' playing time.

High School Experience

In addition to academics and athletics, eight principals said that they are accountable for the myriad of things that make up “the high school experience.” This includes major school events (e.g., prom), arts programs, and numerous extra-curricular programs. Providing these opportunities for students is at the heart of this accountance.

Character/Affective Education

Ten of the 11 principals reported feeling strongly accountable for the character or affective education of students. This is one of the widest-ranging accountance categories, as it includes values, morals, decision-making, sense of responsibility and many other elements.

Accountance Super-Category: Student Outcomes

All 11 of the principals reported that they feel responsible for various student outcomes. Not surprisingly – given NCLB and this age of so-called *Accountability* – the single most widely mentioned outcome accountance was *Test Scores*. The measurable outcomes also went beyond test scores, including *Graduation Rates* and other local *System-Wide Goals*. Student outcome accountances also included *Learning*, *Preparing Students* for their futures, and *Students' Futures*

themselves. Last, they included a category that I have labeled *Guilt* – indicating that no matter the outcomes, the principals feel deeply, deeply responsible for them.

Test Scores

Obviously, test scores are the most obvious and public student outcome for which principals reported being accountable, and it was brought up by all 11 of the principals. While it includes state tests, it also includes other standardized tests such as the AP exams and the SATs.

Graduation Rate

Graduation rate, one of the oldest measures of schools, is another accountance for principals, mentioned by three principals.

College Application Process

Only two principals offered that they are accountable for college application process itself, and just one mentioned college acceptance rates. (I expect that if asked, other principals would have signaled that they were accountable for this. But I did not bring up college applications with them.)

System-Wide Goals

One principal said he is accountable for other measurable goals established for all schools in his district by his superintendent and other senior district leaders. These included student participation in the AP program, taking the SATs and school-wide GPA goals. While these may appear to students to be process or intermediate goals, for this principal, getting students to the point where they can do these things is a key outcome of much prior work by his teams.

Learning

Sadly, only three principals mentioned being accountable for students' *learning*, in and of itself, as its own accountance. This category illustrates some of the intrinsic problems with this methodological approach.

Prepare for Future/Skills

While only three of the principals reported that generic learning itself is among their accountances, seven said that they are responsible for preparing students for their next steps and their futures. This included preparing them for college, preparing them for jobs/careers, and just generically preparing them “for the future.”

Students' Futures

Three principals went beyond preparing students for their futures, and actually said that they are accountable for the shapes of those futures, that they are responsible for outcomes long after their students leave their schools. However, one volunteered that she is *not* responsible for all of her students' futures, because there are “too many other forces” acting on students for that.

Guilt

Eight of these principals reported that at the end of the day, or the end of a child's time in high school, they view themselves as responsible for that student's success. I call this category *Guilt* because of the way that principals spoke about it. That is, it nags at them, particularly with

their least successful students. Principals spoke of having to “look in the mirror” or “staying awake at night,” asking themselves if they had really done everything they could for a student.

Accountance Super-Category: Students & Safety

The principals’ overall highest priority accountance was *Safety*. In fact, all but one listed *Safety* as his or her top priority (see finding #2, below), and all 11 of them raised it in some form as an accountance. Though they also reported that the safety of their staff is important, I believe that this accountance category fits best in the super-category of responsibility for the students. It begins with just that (i.e., *Students*), and includes their *Relationship with Students*, *Safety/Discipline*, and *Students Off School Grounds* – the most contested accountance.

Students

In addition to being responsible *to* students (see Hoffman, 2013), six principals also reported being responsible *for* students. They said that they are responsible for acting in their students’ interests. This accountance can drive their relationship with their supervisors, either to support those whom the principals believe make decisions in the interest of the students, or to work around those who do not.

Relationship with Students

Five of the principals said that they are responsible for their relationships with students. This includes understanding their emotional needs and being a steady and/or available presence in their lives.

Safety/Discipline

While some principals immediately said that they were responsible for *everything*, most jumped to safety, first. It was such a strong recurring theme (raised by all 11 principals) that when I asked principals to prioritize some of their accountances (i.e., in the third interviews), most affirmatively looked for “Safety” on the list, even before reading it to see what I was asking about.

Students Off School Grounds

There is no question that the most contested accountance category is *Students Off School Grounds*, discussed by seven of the principals. Some of them were quite clear that their responsibility for students extends beyond the limits of own campuses. Others responded, when asked about what others might think they are accountable for that they do not agree with, that their responsibility for students was limited to times and places that students were actually under the supervision of their school. In the extreme, one principal indicated that this meant that a student who set one foot off school grounds – even during the school day – was not her responsibility.

Accountance Super-Category: Teachers and Staff

Though the principals spoke most frequently of supporting *teachers*, they also spoke of various accountances related to their work with *all* of the various members of their staffs, including teachers, secretaries, custodians, guidance counselors and the members of their administrative teams. All 11 of the principals raised issues related to their staff as accountances. These include *Staffing* decisions and the various ways that principals are accountable for

supporting their members of their faculties and staffs. As their accountance around *Instruction* is tied to staffing and *Supporting Staff*, I have put that in this super-category.

Staffing

One of principals’ key accountance categories is Staffing, discussed by nine of them. This includes hiring, assignment of staff members to various roles (e.g., selection of athletic coaches), and termination – be it entirely involuntary or by joint agreement.

Supporting Staff

The most complex accountance category that I found is *Supporting Staff*, one raised by each of the 11 principals. I asked each principal about both their certified staff (i.e., the faculty, the teachers, the instructional staff) and their non-certified staff (i.e., secretaries, custodians, etc.). Most of them said that their accountances with respect to each of them are the same. It includes “removing barriers,” “being a buffer,” communicating with their staffs, professional development, understanding their challenges and managing inter-staff issues.

Instruction

While I would have hoped that these principals would describe instruction as being as strong an accountance as safety, that was not the case. But six of the principals *did* report being accountable for instruction (i.e., the pedagogy and approaches taken by their faculties in their classrooms).

Supervision

As one might expect, the principals reported that they are accountable for supervising the adults in their building, as raised by six of them. This included teacher observations and making sure that every adult in the building is doing his or her job properly – even those who are assigned to the building but report to district offices (e.g., groundskeepers).

Accountance Super-Category: Community

Each of the participating principals led a conventional comprehensive high school – as opposed to a magnet school or other school with selective enrollment. Therefore, they are based in particular communities, both geographically and for student assignment. Nine principals shared accountances related to working within these communities. These accountances were grouped as *Being a Part of Community*, *Helping Parents*, and *Support PTA Growth*.

Be Part of Community

Seven principals gave me examples of how they see themselves and their schools as part of their communities and how they have accountances that flow from that fact. They said that they are tied to the local economies, that they are responsible for “producing citizens” and that they are responsible for the communities’ pride in their schools.

Help Parents

The principals did not just report being accountable to helping the community as a whole. Six principals discussed how parents are a particular element of the community who carry accountances with them (i.e., they do not just act as accountors). These accountances include areas of communication, involvement with the schools and child rearing.

Public Relations

Four principals reported that their communication responsibilities go beyond getting information to their staffs and the parents of their students. They are also accountable for broader public relations.

Support PTA Growth

I was surprised at how little principals spoke of their PTAs. For most of them, the PTA provides opportunities for parents, but does not add a lot of accountability for principals. Only one volunteered that she was responsible for supporting her school’s PTA.

Accountance Super-Category: Organizational Context

As the leaders of traditional public schools, these principals operate in larger organizational contexts. They are branch managers within their school districts, which themselves exist under larger state and federal regulations. These included their relationships to their *Policy Context*, their *Relationship with their Supervisor*, and their *Relationships with their Peers*. Each of the 11 principals spoke of accountances related to their organizational contexts.

Policy Context

I was somewhat surprised at the degree to which the principals reported that they are rule followers. Ten of them brought up that they are accountable for following district and state policy. Some of those even said that they are responsible for speaking up when they feel that policy needs to change.

Relationship with Supervisor

Eight principals said they are accountable for various aspects of their relationships with their supervisors. It was striking how frequently they told me that they are accountable for keeping things “off the plates” of people above them, a phrase many of them used.

Relationship with Peers

The principals reported being accountable for supporting their peers, but they also reported being competitive with their peers – some even reported being accountable to their peers for this competition. In all, nine principals discussed accountability for some aspect of their relationships with their peers. This included their peers within their districts and – more so for those in smaller districts – certain peers outside of their districts.

Accountance Super-Category: Branch Administration

Ten of the principals reported that they, as branch managers, are administratively responsible for their buildings. They are accountable for money, both in keeping track of the *Budget*, and for *Purchasing* decisions. They are responsible for *Cafeteria* operations and the *Physical Plant*. They have operations accountances to the central office (*Miscellaneous to District Offices*) and even are responsible for *Leaving a Smooth Operation* when they eventually move on from their schools.

Budget

Seven principals were quite clear that one of their major accountances is keeping track of the finances of their schools, from budgeting, to spending, to following proper procedures and standards for accounting.

Purchasing

Principals’ accountability for money does not end with raising and tracking it. Six also said that they are accountable for *how* it is spent.

Physical Plant

Six of the principals spoke of being accountable for the basic facilities of their schools. This included HVAC, electrical, plumbing, grounds and the physical state of the building(s).

Cafeteria & Transportation

Among the things that make principals’ accountances so varied are the various aspects of what principals called “daily operations.” In addition to responsibility for any number of aspects of their jobs that are easily linked to students’ education, there are a wide range of accountances for entirely different fields, principally transportation (e.g., buses) and cafeteria (e.g., food, cafeteria workers).

Leave a Smooth Operation Behind

One principal – who had previously spent 5 years leading each of two other schools in his district – said that he is responsible for the smooth functioning of his school when he leaves, so that his successor does not “have to clean up after [him].”

Miscellaneous To District Offices

When I asked one principal for what she is accountable to the district offices – which she, like others, had earlier listed as an accountant – she began to list particular offices and specialists there, and to explain what they held her to account for, in terms of reports, compliance, investigation and prevention. She was the only principal who got so specific.

Accountance Super-Category: Classic Leadership

In addition to formal responsibilities for administration, staffing, outcomes and many other aspects of their schools, the principals spoke of being accountable for various aspects of traditional leadership, particularly around leading people. These included accountability for the *Culture/Environment* in their school, for making *Good/Fair Decisions*, aspects of *Interpersonal Leadership*, responsibility for *Keeping People Out of Trouble* and for the *Vision* in their schools. Ten of the principals spoke of accountances in these areas.

Culture/ Environment

Nine of the principals raised their school’s culture or environment in these discussions. They said that a better school culture can make other accountances easier for them to manage. While many of them explicitly spoke of the culture among the adults in the building, the primary focus for most of them was the environment for the students and the culture that those students are a part of during their school days.

Good/Fair Decisions

The principals did not speak much of the burden of being a decision-maker, but seven did say that they are accountable for the quality and fairness of their decisions. This was more particularly focused on students (i.e., decisions about students and in the view of students), whereas *Culture/Environment* was more evenly focused on both students *and* the adults who work in their buildings.

Interpersonal Leadership

Nine principals discussed aspects of leadership that I have grouped into *Interpersonal Leadership*. They are accountable for being available to those they lead, for listening and for respect. They said they have to be available to students, and they also said that they have to be available to their staff members. “Listening” was a *very* common theme, something they have to do with students, staff members, parents and even political leaders and community representatives. Making sure that students feel respected came up repeatedly, and principals also mentioned that making sure that those who help the school (e.g., boosters) feel respected is among their accountances.

Keep People Out of Trouble

One of my last questions to each principal during the second round of interviews was, “Is there anything else you are accountable for?” One principal said that he feels responsible for supporting everyone. That is, due to his seniority within his district, he believes that he is accountable for making sure that people throughout the district avoid making mistakes and stay “out of trouble.” He feels responsible for this when he is called upon for help, and also any time that he sees issues brewing.

Vision

As the leaders of their buildings, six principals reported, they are accountable for having a vision of what their schools should be and for leading the effort to fulfill it. This included making plans for how their schools could improve, communicating their visions to their teams and building support for these visions among the communities they serve.

Accountance Super-Category: Moral

The penultimate super-category contains accountances that I believed were not inherently based in education, leadership or anything specifically about the nature of the role of principal. Rather, these are accountances for which these principals could feel responsible regardless of their position in education, and to which they probably would still feel bound if they worked in some other field. And yet, all 11 principals offered these accountances when I asked them about their “professional responsibilities” and what they are “professionally accountable for.” They include their *Own Character*, *Paying It Forward*, and their obligations to *Represent* others.

Own Character

All the principals were clear that they are responsible for, as one put it, “Being a professional, being ethical.” Some of that is about how they carry themselves and their decisions, and some is about how they treat others. They are responsible for how they carry themselves, how they behave and for being role models.

Pay It Forward

Four of the principals agreed said they are accountable to those who taught them and mentored them for what they do today, and that they are accountable to those in their past for what they do today. They said they are responsible for continuing the tradition of those who supported them in their own lives, as children, as students, and along their professional paths.

Representing

It emerged during the interviews that the principals strongly associate the idea of accountability with “representing” others, an accountance raised by 10 of them. Some principals specifically said that they were *not* accountable to various groups because they did not feel they represent them (e.g., USDOE, professional associations). Though all but one of the principals spoke of the importance of representing others, they had different ideas about who they are responsible for representing.

Accountance Super-Category: Owe An Accounting

During the first of the second round interviews, I realized that a principal was raising the issue of accountability as *owing an accounting* to an accountant. This resonated with Leithwood’s (2003) writing about the components of accountability, posing the question of the *level* of an account. He wrote that “providing an accounting” or a “justification” for events can be “the highest level of accountability” (p. 82). With this in mind, I specifically listened for this with other principals. All 11 principals discussed this type of accountance with me.

Not Accountances

Ten of the principals shared at least once that they are *not* accountable for something, or at least not as accountable as potential accountors would have them be. For example, though the principals generally feel accountable for the educational outcomes of their students, some described limits to this accountance. For these principals, their own responsibility is tempered by the investment of students and/or their families in the students’ education. Some principals specifically volunteered that they are *not* accountable to their past mentors for everything they do, or even owing them an accounting at any time they might ask.

As described above, some principals were quite clear that they are not accountable for students off of school grounds. Almost all of them pointed out that they are not accountable to parents for students other than their own children. Principals also spoke of things that are brought to them, which they refuse because these things are so clearly beyond their control. These included student obesity and custody issues between parents.

While the principals said that they are responsible for providing opportunities, some said that they are not responsible for results. This includes both students and adults. For example, One principal pointed out that he is responsible for putting his faculty members in a position to succeed, but that he does not owe an unsuccessful teacher a job even if he has owed the teacher support along the way.

While principals accepted accountability for a vast variety of accountances, they sometimes bristled at them. At times – seemingly in frustration – they said that they are not accountable for one thing or another, only to quickly correct themselves and say that they are. This included things that they do not have official responsibility for, but oversee in a practical sense (e.g., groundskeepers who report to the central office).

Finding #2: The most significant accountances may *not* be about academics

“Safety is number one.” – Art, Cindy & Kelsey

The test-based accountability that has dominated the education policy landscape for over a decade is aimed at students’ curricular learning and academic preparation for the future. While I have serious concerns about the validity of the tests used, my chief concern has been that they are poor proxies for that learning. Others who have long questioned our standardized tests (Kohn, 2000; Ravitch, 2011) likewise have focused on their quality as proxies for learning and the

effectiveness of policies that use them in the name of furthering student achievement. Thus, the public idea that principals should focus on student learning as their most ultimate and most important accountability is rarely questioned. But while education is certainly the work of teachers and schools, it may not be as important in *principals’* accountabilities as one might expect.

During the third interview, I asked these principals to rank a short list of accountances. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2

Accountance Rankings

Area of Responsibility	Average Rank
Safety	1.2
Quality Instruction	2.9
Academic Preparation of Students	3.2
Meeting the Other [e.g., non-academic, current] Needs of Children	4.2
Non-Academic Preparation	5.0
Meeting the Needs of Adults	5.3
Test Scores	5.7
External Demands (e.g., paperwork)	7.5
Not Adding to Bosses Burden	8.7

Because of our previous conversations, I was not surprised that *Safety* was ranked first overall. All but one of the principals ranked it number one, and the outlier principal ranked it third. Just as the principals later said *Students* are their top accountor before finding it on that list, they said “Safety” before even looking at this list. This confirmed what I had heard in earlier interviews, in which the principals had linked *Safety* to over one third of the accountors. Multiple principals had said that they can be fired for problems with safety (or finance) *far* more quickly than for problems with academics or test scores.

In fact, the principals were so clear on this topic, I did not often follow up at all with further questions. They knew it was of critical importance, and none of them expressed the least doubt or ambiguity about it. They spoke of it when addressing leadership capacities, in terms of the external resources that they need (e.g., two-way radios, staff members who could focus on safety – rather than the show – at assemblies). The quote that begins this section, “Safety is number one,” communicates how straightforward this accountance is to them.

This is not to say that *Safety* is necessarily the most important accountance. Rather, it suggests that safety can be, at times and/or in some ways, the most important accountance. Certainly, it resonates quite strongly for these principals and they are quick to volunteer it. But there are other important issues, as well. A principal ranked *Meeting the Other Needs of Children* (i.e., non-academic needs) as her topmost accountance when given this list, placing safety below it. Another principal, who has each senior write a letter to the adult in the school of their choice adult in the school at graduation practice, said of these letters, “They are never about academics. Never.” While students’ academic preparation certainly is important, students’ emotional needs and personal growth are also key accountance areas for principals. There are elements of these accountances that do relate to students’ education, albeit non-academic, but also key elements that involve something else.

One of the most moving things that a principal told me came from Lewis. He explained that it falls on him to make sure that his students’ needs in their most extreme moments are met.

Lewis: We had an issue yesterday, when one of my AP, [an] ROTC guy saw what he thought he saw, just like the official that sees [the] last two steps but misses the first two steps. He made a call, reported to my AP. He made a decision and the kid throws the phone, kicks it off, cusses out his mother and storms out of the school. So, SRO and the security officer go corral him up outside somewhere. He’s crying, he fit to be tied. They do their thing and Mr. Rock said, “[Lewis], can you come out here for a second?” And I’m out, all the way to the front part of the building, in the rain, with a boy in senior high school, 17, 18 years old.

ALEX: WHO’S HAVING A BREAKDOWN.

Lewis: Who’s having a breakdown. *Because he was not heard.* He was not heard. All he wanted was somebody to let him say his peace and register it *before* they made a decision, and not make a decision on an assumption. It was that simple.

ALEX: AND YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE, *ACCOUNTABLE*, TO EVERY KID FOR PROVIDING THAT.

Lewis: Uh-hmm because if I don’t, who will?

For Lewis, this fierce kind of responsibility to his students far surpassed accountability for academics, whether measured by test scores or by some more meaningful method. In this case, there was a safety issue, and there was also an obligation to students to “make them feel heard,” as another principal put it.

A principal – whom I shall not even identify pseudonymously – spoke of dipping into fundraising money to buy coats for students who needed them in the winter, and even giving cash to students whom the principal knew had no food at home. While this clearly violated the school’s policies for funds under the principal’s control, this principal believed that he or she had a greater accountability to ensure that students’ most basic needs were met.

But not all key non-academic priorities rise to that level of pathos. Many of them are much more mundane, such as what principals called “the high school experience.” Ten of the principals spoke of the importance of that aspect of school, which one put on a par with academics. “You have the public locally that sends their kids here, that expects their kids twofold: one, to receive a high quality education, and two to have a quality high school experience.” In fact, four of the principals volunteered that this wider high school experience – including clubs, teams, major activities and events, the social world of high school – is the reason that they were drawn to working in high schools.

Given the complexity of the multiple accountabilities to which principals are subject, including those of their own creation, it would be difficult to definitively state that any one or two of them are the most important – though *Safety* makes a very strong case for itself. But it is important to understand that academics – or even the more general accountance super-category of *Student Outcomes* – does not uniquely occupy or even dominate the most pressing, urgent or important accountabilities. Rather, these accountabilities exist alongside others of at least equal import to principals. A principal explained how she simplifies her multiple accountabilities.

Every day I think about my kids, I think about staff, I think about my community. Those are the things that are paramount in my mind. It’s making sure that my staff’s happy,

making sure that my kids are happy, and that they are achieving the way which we believe they need to achieve, and making sure that my community is happy and satisfied. Those are the three things that I most think about every single day. The other stuff, if I take care of those three things, the other stuff can take care of itself.

Though she faces a lot of pressure from the community her school serves, and her school of 3500 students has a myriad of issues and fires to put out everyday, she has a simple way of viewing her priorities. While academics certainly is a part of that, it is just one part.

It often feels like we deal with the muddled morass of accountabilities in education by picking a small handful to prioritize and pay attention to. Certainly the formal structures (i.e., bureaucratic accountability) of test-based accountability focus on academic learning – or proxies thereof. But a close empirical consideration of that morass reveals that this public focus on academics does not match the priorities of school leaders themselves – or perhaps even their communities. Other accountances can be equally important, and even more important.

Discussion and Implications

Existing accountability typologies fall short

Obviously, the dominant idea of accountability as some quantifiable measure of school output fails to capture all but the narrowest slice of the accountances that school leaders face. The previous generation of accountability policies focused more on school inputs (e.g., school funding and opportunity to learn standards), and they too included but a small slice of school leaders’ responsibilities. This problem, however, is not limited to accountability policies. Previous efforts to classify accountability in education simply do *not* capture the realities that this empirical study uncovered.

Darling-Hammond’s (1989) five models of accountability (i.e., political, legal, bureaucratic, professional and market), for example, have no place for accountances such as the *College Application Process*, *Staffing*, or *Leave a Smooth Operation Behind*. The kind of professional accountability she advocates – based upon the models of law and medicine, in which the profession control licensing and discipline of its members – seems entirely irrelevant to the accountances these principals shared. Political accountability only offers a very indirect means for principals to be held accountable, as it is their boss’s bosses (i.e., the members of the school board) who stand for elections. Others in elected office have even less direct impact on school leaders. Legal accountability can impact school leaders, but few of the accountances they shared could be the topic of a lawsuit. The accountances that fall outside the reach of the law also lie outside the bureaucratic model. Elements of the *Classic Leadership* and *Community* super-categories, for example, almost never can be regulated and ruled upon by the courts. For all the talk of market-based education policies, the public schools are a virtual monopoly in most communities and for most families. Even those who believe that “choice is a panacea” (Chubb & Moe, 1990), would not claim that these accountances have been subject to market accountability heretofore.

Similarly, the professional accountability that Firestone & Shipps (2005) describe (i.e., that there is a consensus within the field that operates largely through informal pressures) simply does not apply well at the level of school leader. These pseudo-professional standards might offer advice for principals, or act as a norming influence, but it is not clear that they have a mechanism to correct school leaders or to discipline them for going astray or falling short.

Firestone & Shipp's moral accountability seems much more powerful – though not necessarily entirely distinct from their professional accountability. But there is a certain begging of the question in ascribing every accountance mentioned by these principals to their own moral sense. To the extent that there is *any* external mechanism for an accountance, it cannot be explained simply as an example of the moral accountability model.

The typology of accountances I offered here, and of accountors that I supply elsewhere (Hoffman, 2013) do *not* supplant or replace others' work. They do not consider the mechanisms of accountability, and do not offer a theoretical view of accountability as Darling-Hammond, Firestone & Shipp or Leithwood's work do. They are descriptions of the empirical realities that principals face. While they highlight some of the shortcomings of these other classification systems, my typologies do not themselves supply the answers for how to fix them. Work remains on developing accountability classification systems that more fully map onto the realities of high school principals' accountabilities.

Largely unrecognized variation in accountances

The typology of the high school principal's accountances begins to reveal the vast variation and complexity in school leaders' responsibilities, a complexity that is hardly ever acknowledged. Laundry lists like “curriculum coordinator, transportation manager, nurse, personnel director, disciplinarian, conflict resolution specialist, social worker, and lawyer” (Quinn, 2003, p. 18) only allude to this complexity.

The typology above organizes *categories* of accountances, not just individual accountances. Hence, the typology itself underrepresents the complexity of school leaders' responsibility. For example, the *Support Staff* accountance category (i.e., part of the *Teachers and Staff* super-category) contained many different accountances within it, reflecting the many different ways in which these principals reported being accountable for supporting their faculties and staffs. Most of the categories are built of up many different accountances, including some that were only mentioned by a single principal. Thus, the principal's accountabilities are rich and varied in depth, in addition to the breadth represented in the typology.

These principals reported a serious lack of formal preparation for these responsibilities (Hoffman, 2012), suggesting that that leadership preparation programs are less aware of the realities of the school leader's role than they should be. Certainly, our so-called *accountability* policies in education focus almost exclusively on selected accountances within categories in the *Student Outcomes* super-category. The fact that these policies have shifted so much attention from accountances that might be found in the *School Offerings* super-category has not simplified principals' jobs, but has merely shifted some accountors' attention without impacting other accountors.

Developing appropriate preparation and/or ongoing support for principals requires accurately understanding their responsibilities and accountabilities. Without knowing what principals are accountable for, we will not be able to put aspiring and current school leaders in a position to succeed. In fact, we marginalize ourselves as preparers and supporters if/when we fail to address the realities they face. It should come as no surprise that peer mentorship is a such a popular model, as it provides support from those who understand the breadth of accountabilities, without requiring those in district offices or universities to broaden their understanding of the principalship.

The Principle of Variety

My Principle of Variety says, "Any considered estimate of the relative total importance of the top N (for any constant N) elements of a complex system -- such as might be suggested by the Pareto Principle -- is biased upwards, because further examination/consideration will reveal a greater number of elements."

Fuller acknowledgement and understanding of the incredible variety of school leaders' accountabilities has some serious implications. Even without altering the relative standing of widely acknowledged accountances (e.g., test scores, college graduation, etc.), adding consideration of the multitude of *other* accountances reveals that the importance of any one – or handful of – accountance(s) is far less than we had thought. Whatever importance *Test Scores* has or ought to have relative to someone's top ten accountances, that accountance is less important relative to the whole when one considers that the whole is greater than previously thought. To put that another way, when the pond gets bigger, the same sized fish is less of a big deal.

Therefore, even if one ignores what I found about the relative importance of academic outcomes (regardless of the quality of the proxy used), the existence of so many other unacknowledged accountances makes clear that the narrow accountability focus in policy, in districts and in preparation does not represent what we have thought it did.

This does not mean that those with limited resources in time, money or attention automatically should include more in their programs. Rather, it means that all should be aware that they are talking about a less significant portion of school leaders' accountability than they had thought. Hence, they should put more attention into working with other programs, policies and efforts that do address those other accountabilities, and perhaps leave more room within their own policies, programs and efforts for individuals to address accountances they find are important within their contexts.

For too long, those who select, train, hire, support and critique school leaders have depended on the Pareto Principle (i.e., the 80-20 rule) to justify their narrow focus, whether they realize it or not. But principals' accountability has a long tail (Anderson, 2008), and the variety of accountances that make up that long tail – though each individually might be of relatively minor importance – together comprise a far more significant portion of principals' responsibilities than most anyone has realized.

I do not claim that the job of high school principal is *harder* than people realize. The difficulty – or perceived difficulty – of the role is not my point. Rather, it is the nature of that difficulty that must be paid attention. Principals' work is incredibly complex – perhaps more complex and varied than that of any other position in education. I do not know if being a principal is easier or harder than being a teacher. I do not know if it is easier or harder than being an assistant principal or a superintendent. But I am quite convinced that it is more varied than any of those other roles.

Obviously, more work is needed. Further research is needed to fill out this typology. Further research is needed to learn more about the relative importance of different accountances in different circumstances. And I cannot even begin to imagine what it will take to incorporate greater understanding of the complexity of principals' work into leadership programs, education policy and district practices.

After all of my questions were over, one of the principals in this study said to me:

But you cannot – here’s the thing: if I sit and I think about all the things that you and I talked about today and I think about all the pressures of everyone out there in the community, on the Board of Education, in the State, in the nation, whatever, they’ll put pressures on me as the local high school principal, I’d never make it in this job. You just can’t think about that stuff. You can’t. You have to put your nose to the grindstone and do what you think is right and good and true and right for kids, and put yourself, lay out your programs so that your school continues to increase in student achievement. And it is what it is. If you sit and you worry about all these people, you wouldn’t do this job. Principals have enough to do. They should not be responsible for making sense of this morass of accountability by themselves. That falls to the rest of us, those who hold them accountable, wish to influence them, and particularly those of us who hope to support them.

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