

2015

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Two Models of Teacher Accountability: Toward an Explanation for the Disappointing Results of Some Market-based School Reforms

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Abstract

Accountability is a pivotal concern of applied social science. This paper asserts that in many situations a full explanation of the sources of accountability requires the application of concepts from sociology and management science, in addition to those from the market-based approaches inspired by economics. The paper describes the market-based approach to accountability exemplified by agency theory, applies it to school reform and derives several predictions about the likely success of market-based approaches to school reform, and documents the lack of evidence supporting the contention that programs for school choice will markedly improve teacher work effort and performance (as measured by student test scores). The social actor approach, rooted in sociological and management theories, is introduced and used to describe the pressures and norms operating in the public schools that foster accountability even in the absence of competition between schools for students. The paper concludes with some implications for practice and research on public sector accountability.

Two Models of Teacher Accountability: Toward an Explanation for the Disappointing Results of Some Market-based School Reforms

One of the pivotal concerns of applied social science in general and public administrations in particular is the concept of accountability and the conditions and practices that increase the accountability of government workers to a wide-array of stakeholders (e.g., service recipients, elected officials, voters, and taxpayers) (Dubnick, 2005). In fact, accountability has been referred to as a world-wide icon of good governance (Dubnick & Justice, 2004). In recent decades, public administration theorists, in an effort to make government more accountable to citizens and service recipients, have developed a new approach to public management—dubbed the new public management or NPM. It calls for extensive contracting with the private sector to provide a traditional government service (Hill & Lynn 2008). In the NPM government managers are encouraged to act as principals who hire agents to provide a service (Lane, 2000). Competition between the agent-providers for the contract will lead to more efficient provision, increasing accountability.

Many of the current efforts at school reform are inspired by the principles of the NPM in that they are designed to expose teachers to competition from other schools. This can be viewed as a market-based approach to increasing teacher accountability. Indeed, over the past few decades, many school systems in the United States have engaged in an experiment in school reform inspired by market theories of individual work effort and accountability. This has involved the creation of programs of school choice through voucher programs and charter schools, which are intended to increase teacher effort and perhaps generate more productive teaching methods by instilling fear of lost resources along with a sense of employment insecurity. Presumably, such fear and insecurity increase when parents have the ability to choose

an alternative school for their children and can do so without incurring the trouble and expense of moving to a new school district or paying the tuition at a private school.

The market-based approaches assume that teachers are profit-maximizing individuals who will devote themselves more diligently to the task of teaching when they have increased reasons to fear sanctions for inadequate student performance. In this paper, we describe the market theory of work effort and document its failure to produce the predicted results. We then offer an explanation for its weak effects on student achievement by presenting an alternative approach to teacher accountability and work effort rooted in a sociological approach to accountability—a social actor approach that places greater emphasis on normative expectations and social pressures. We describe the structure of accountability operating in the schools that appears to produce accountability even in the absence of competition and the greater fear of termination introduced by programs that create school choice. We conclude with some implications for the practice of (and research on) accountability.

The Market-based Approach: Accountability through Competition and the Fear of Contract Termination

In line with microeconomic theory, the market-based approach views individuals as profit seekers whose goal is to maximize reward. It also assumes that individuals prefer leisure over work and must be closely monitored in one way or another to ensure the optimum level of work effort. There is then an inherent conflict of interest between the parties to a contract to perform a task (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Scott, 1995). In the schools, the conflict of interest pits teachers and administrators against parents and taxpayers.

Many of the advocates of the market-based approach to accountability subscribe to agency theory—perhaps the most forthright and parsimonious formulation of the market

approach (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Donahue, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Kettl, 1993; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Van Slyke, 2006). “An agency relation,” Kiser writes, “is one in which a ‘principal’ delegates authority to an ‘agent’ to perform some service for the principal” (1999, p. 146). Such delegation gives rise to issues of control and much writing in the agency theory tradition addresses efforts of employers to control the actions of employees (Petersen, 1993; Williamson, 1985). A core theme in agency theory is the methods principals can use to mitigate the control problem that arises from the possibility that employees can benefit by concealing from employers their level of ability, work effort, and integrity. The utility of monitoring subordinates has several functions in addition to enforcing sufficient work effort, for example ensuring proper work technique or resolving differences in values. In this paper, however, we focus, on work effort, as it is mentioned frequently in the agency theory literature and is commonly mentioned by the critics of American education (Ravitch, 2010). Moreover, all versions of agency theory emphasize the need to monitor the work of agents.[1]

Implicit in a market-based approach is the idea that people work more diligently when they have more reason to fear a loss of income from any failure to perform as expected (Chubb & Moe, 1990). In agency theory, it is axiomatic that the agent—the employee or contractor—must be closely monitored by the principal, because, presumably, the agent is inclined to shirk whenever free of the watchful eye of the principal (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Kiewet & McCubbins, 1991; Scott, 1995; Williamson, 1975).

The primary responsibility of the principal, therefore, is to monitor the agent’s actions to ensure they match the terms of the contract. The well-designed contract specifies the agent’s actions in great detail, thereby limiting the agent’s discretion. In this way the principal is able to more readily control the actions of the contractor and prevent poor performance and other forms

of opportunistic behavior, often referred to as rent-seeking. Accountability in the market approach is a function of close monitoring, competition between the providers of a service, and carefully drawn contracts with termination of the relationship or some other sanction a consequence of any failure to fulfill the terms of the contract. If the agent fails to perform as desired, the agent faces a loss of income and/or suffers damages to his or her reputation for trustworthiness.

Agency theory can contribute in several important ways to the creation of more accountability in public institutions. It reminds us of the centrality of self-interest and incentives in the employer-employee relationship. It highlights the importance of information and the need to invest in systems for acquiring information to reduce opportunism (Eisenhardt, 1989). It also reminds us that both the agent and the principal are exposed to risk of loss or inadequate return in many situations. A strength of agency theory is that it offers predictions about the rational behavior of principals and agents as each tries to maximize utility in a particular setting (Wright, Mukherji, & Kroll, 2001). In pursuing their self-interest principals can be expected to write contracts, structure incentives, and create monitoring systems to ensure effective agent performance. Agents, for their part, are expected to seek more reward while providing less than maximum effort.

The recommendations of agency theory seem most applicable in situations where the task is easily defined and monitored, and the relationship between principle and agent is clear. Simon (1997:164) identified another critical element: "...how pleasant or unpleasant workers find the job and its physical and social environments." Poor conditions—including social isolation or interpersonal conflict—will intensify the need for close monitoring or the advisability of other inducements to labor.

Besley and Ghatak (2003) point to the challenges of applying the principal-agent framework in more complex situations with the presence of multiple principals and tasks that are difficult to specify and measure. Many work settings, including the public schools, have open negotiation of tasks, and multiple principals and multiple agents, some of whom have differing, even conflicting, priorities and concerns. Agency theory lacks a method for incorporating such complexity into its models (Kiser, 1999). This is one of the common criticisms of agency theory, in that it assumes individuals and organizations are driven solely by maximization of self-interest, and ignores the intricacies of intrinsic motivation and the complexities of organizational life (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997; Perrow, 1986). In fact, the effect on agency costs and shirking of multiple actors in a situation is subject to debate. Alchian and Demsetz (1972) suggest that as the number of group members rises the potential for shirking will also rise as it becomes more difficult for the principal to evaluate the work effort of each worker in a group. However, it is also possible that the members of the group will sanction each other for poor performance. This seems especially likely when they work as a team and the collective product is evaluated (Wright et al., 2001). Also, agency theory underplays the possibility of agent commitment to the goals of the principal or the interests of the people served by the government agency. Shared goals can reduce conflict between principals and their agents (Waterman & Meier, 1998). Like systems for monitoring, these too can motivate work effort and they can do so without the costs associated with close supervision, record-keeping, and procedural rigidity.[2]

The Market-Based Approach to Accountability in the Schools

In regard to America's K-12 public schools, parents can be thought of as the principals who hire the school system (and its teachers) to serve as their agent. The parent-principals expect

the teacher-agents to labor diligently at the task of educating the children. But, according to the assumptions of the market approach to accountability, the agents will be tempted to slack off in the absence of effective monitoring and the threat of termination. Without the spur of competition, teachers and administrators will be less accountable to parents for educating students and will not work as effectively or as diligently as possible. Chubb and Moe (1990) have developed a detailed institutional assessment of the relationships between agents and principals in the school system. Despite their inclusion of additional institutional actors—politicians, teachers unions, or central office administrators—Chubb and Moe are in the principal agent tradition of market theory in that they view accountability as a product of principal control of the agent through the former’s capacity to sanction the agent or terminate the relationship. As control goes down, the agent, in this case the school system, will shirk its responsibility to the principal—the taxpaying parents who want the best education possible for their children.

Public schools are subject to political forces that leave teachers and administrators less accountable to parents and their children and too often protected from contract termination by politicians and teachers’ unions (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Under situations where this protection does not exist, such as in the case of nonunion schools, agency theory and the market-based approach would posit greater teacher accountability and improved student performance.

Private schools are said to be more accountable to parents and students. That is, confronted by an institutional environment similar to a business in a competitive market, private schools will respond to competition and parental choice by providing a superior product. Among the putative advantages of private schools are: clarity of mission, leadership, and teacher professionalism (Chubb & Moe, 1990). These advantages are presumably less present in the

public schools. Students in private schools, therefore, are expected to perform significantly better than students in public schools.

Advocates of school voucher programs and charter schools view competition and the threat of termination as key to establishing parental control (Garcia, 2008), thereby facilitating the meeting of parental (and student) needs (Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2006; Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002). Thus, competition will produce schools in which parents can more effectively execute the role of principal. Presumably, they can use test scores and other indicators to judge the quality of school administrator and teacher performance. Competition between schools for students will induce the administrators to more effectively monitor the performance of individual teachers. Competition will also stimulate the creation of innovative programs and teaching methods. Under fear of termination, all school employees will work more diligently and effectively, which will force student achievement levels to rise (Besley & Ghatak, 2005). Students in voucher programs or in charter schools, then, are expected to perform better. And charter schools may have other advantages. Many charter schools have a specific cultural or normative focus to attract students (Roch & Pitts, 2012) and are more likely to recruit teachers from the more selective undergraduate schools (Baker & Dickerson, 2006).

To summarize, four predictions can be derived from the market-based approach to education reform:

1. Students in nonunion schools will outperform students in union schools.
2. Students in private schools will outperform students in public schools.
3. Students given school vouchers will outperform those who stay in public schools.
4. Students in charter schools will outperform those in regular public schools.

After reviewing the research that, at best, finds only marginal support for the predictions of market-based approaches, we present the social actor approach to accountability. We then describe the accountability environment and structures in the typical public school that promote effective teaching (and student performance) even in the absence of school choice.

Research Evidence on the Impacts of the Market-based Approach to School and Teacher Accountability

While some of the research has mixed results, the preponderance of empirical research does not support the four predictions of market-based theory. In contrast, most studies find that students in non-union schools do not perform better than those in union schools, students in private or charter schools do not outperform those in the regular public schools, and students who use vouchers to attend other schools do not outperform those in the regular public schools.

1. Students in Nonunion Schools Do Not Outperform Students in Union Schools

About 35 percent of teachers belong to a union (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). As their critics note, teachers unions increase teacher wages and benefits and correlatively the cost of public education (Eberts, 2007; Hoxby 1996). But unions do not appear to depress student achievement; in fact, they may contribute to improved student performance. The more unionized states tend to have schools that produce higher test scores (Di Carlo, 2010). In fact, comparative research finds that students in unionized school districts have *higher* test scores. Steelman, Carini, and Powell (2000) found that unionized schools averaged significantly higher SAT and ACT scores. Similarly, Eberts (2007) concluded that teacher unions are associated with significantly higher test scores. These more recent findings are in line with earlier studies that found students in union school districts out-perform students in nonunion districts (Argys &

Rees, 1995; Eberts & Stone, 1987; Grimes & Register, 1991; Milkman, 1997). However, union schools may have slightly higher dropout rates (Hoxby, 1996).

Although unions may render termination more difficult, these results suggest that relatively few incompetent teachers are being protected by union rules for due process (Holloway-Libell, 2014). Indeed, even with a union, teachers must survive a 3 to 5 year probation period. Furthermore, 40 to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession in the first 5 years (Ingersoll, 2003), which suggests most school systems are weeding out teachers who fail to perform effectively.

2. Students in Private Schools Do Not Outperform Those in Public Schools

Several early studies found that students in private schools had higher test scores than students in public schools. These studies used the High School and Beyond data (Hoffer, Greeley, & Coleman, 1985), but their controls for family background and prior levels of aptitude and achievement have been challenged. Goldhaber (1996) found no difference in student learning between public and private schools after he controlled for differences in the characteristics of students. Even the presumed advantage of Catholic schools disappeared when controls for social background were included (Goldhaber, 1996). Berliner and Biddle reached this conclusion: “[W]hen one controls for student characteristics, [the] net catholic school edge becomes weak, topic dependent, and questionable” (1995, p. 119). Other studies also found no sectoral (public school vs. private school) effect (Alexander & Pallas, 1985; Figlio & Stone, 1999; Willms, 1985), particularly once a variety of socioeconomic and other background variables including race, family income, education, disability, and limited English proficiency are taken into account (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006).

3. Students Who Use Vouchers Do Not Outperform Students Who Stay in the Public Schools

There are a number of rigorous studies of school voucher programs, which on the whole find only small and statistically insignificant positive effects (Rouse & Barrow, 2009; Wolf, 2009). Krueger and Zhu (2004) reanalyzed data from New York City's voucher program and found no statistically significant difference in test scores between those who obtained vouchers and those who attended public schools. Previously, Mayer et al. (2002) had found a significant effect but they had used a restricted sample. The effect was lost when Krueger and Zhu (2004) studied all participants in the program, including those who dropped out. To be accurate evaluation studies must control for socioeconomic differences between those awarded vouchers who take them and stay in the private schools and those awarded them who fail to use them or who drop out of the voucher program in the first or subsequent years. When such differences were controlled for in an early review of Milwaukee's voucher program, what appeared to be significant gains by voucher recipients were reduced to only small gains (Rouse, 1998).

Even the most successful voucher programs have had only minor effects on achievement levels. Gray et al. (2009) found a statistically significant boost in scores for eighth grade voucher recipients in the Milwaukee voucher program; but the effect was very small—.02 to .18 standard deviations depending on the subtest. Angrist et al. (2006) found a small, statistically significant improvement in test scores in a well-designed study conducted in the South American nation of Columbia. Wolf et al. (2007) in a study of the Washington, D.C. voucher program found that while voucher students had slightly higher test scores, there were no statistically significant differences between voucher and public school students. Howell and Petersen (2002) also found no significant difference between voucher students in private schools and the control groups of public school students in Washington DC, New York City, and Dayton, Ohio. In a meta-analysis of 32 studies of the impact of voucher programs on achievement, Anderson, Guzman, and

Ringquist (2013) found a very small but positive effect. Given the fact that most voucher students move to a better school, the combined results of all the studies are disappointing.

Although mixed, the results suggest that the introduction of vouchers has thus far done little to improve student performance. When positive effects are found, they are rather small and may be temporary (Murray, 2008). After reviewing the literature, Helen F. Ladd (2002) concluded that school vouchers are unlikely to lead to overall improvements in the productivity of the U.S. K-12 education system.

4. Students in Charter Schools Do Not Outperform Those in Regular Public Schools

According to the U.S. Department of Education, charter schools enrolled approximately 1.6 million students in 2010-11 (Aud et al., 2013). Some of the more than 5,000 charter schools, like some of the traditional public schools, produce above average test scores but most do not. Gary Miron (2010) has conducted several reviews of the research that compares the educational achievement of students in charter schools to similar students in public schools. He concluded from a review of 40 studies that students in charter schools perform at levels similar to those in the traditional public schools. Miron also concluded that: “National and multistate studies tend to have findings that are more negative. Studies that cover single schools or small numbers of schools tend to be more positive” (2010, p. 87). This suggests that local conditions or other unspecified factors are responsible for many of the reported positive effects when studies look at a small number of schools. There have been two national studies of charter schools conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). In 2009 and 2013 CREDO found that students in charter schools did not outperform students in traditional public schools on tests of math and reading (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, 2013).

The empirical results vary somewhat; but a common theme prevails—either no effects or only marginal effects from the advent of charter schools (Toma & Zimmer, 2012). Zimmer et al. (2009), for instance, found no significant improvements in educational attainment by charter students on state-administered tests. A comparison of charter to traditional public schools in Texas favored charter schools but the difference was not statistically significant (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2005). Also in Texas, Gronberg et al. (2012) concluded in their study that charter schools do not produce outcomes superior to traditional public schools. However, Witte et al. (2007) in Wisconsin found a small advantage for charter schools; but the results were mixed at the eighth grade level. Hoxby et al.'s (2009) study of charter schools in New York City reported the most positive results for charter school students. However, these results may reflect a variety of factors that advantage charter schools when the more able or motivated students remain in the charter program over several years. Two such factors have been commonly observed: (1) charter schools often enroll fewer special education students and English learner students (Finnigan et al., 2004; Welner & Howe, 2005), and (2) large numbers of students drop out of charter school programs, leaving the more motivated students who are willing to meet the charter demands for longer school days and more hours of homework (Henig, 2008).

Studies that compare charter to non-charter schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the gold standard for measuring achievement (and a test that teachers are not likely to teach to) are the most credible. Lubienski and Lubienski (2006) found no statistically significant difference between charter and public school students in the eighth grade and a significant advantage for public schools in the fourth grade. Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg (2006) reported the results of an NAEP study of educational achievement in which the

performance of the average charter school student was significantly below that of the average public school student. Similar results were found in the 2007 NAEP (Robelen, 2008).

Supporters of charter schools have been heartened by two apparent success stories—charter schools in New York City and charter schools run by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). However, neither approach to charter schools appears likely to be workable across an entire school system, as these schools make extreme demands on teachers and students and perhaps even parents. That they bolster test scores is not surprising given the steps they take to increase student time on task. We should expect students in New York City charter schools to outperform those in non-charter schools for these reasons: (1) the school year was two and a half weeks longer, (2) the schools held Saturday classes and offered after school study programs, and (3) the schools were the beneficiaries of greater funding from philanthropic foundations (Reardon, 2009). Moreover, the success of the New York charter schools may be due to differences between the students in charter schools and those in regular New York City schools, as the former had fewer special needs students and English learners (Weiss & Long, 2013). With the above in mind, Baker and Ferris (2011) concluded that, taking into account student demographics, New York City charter schools did not produce better student test scores.

Studies of the KIPP charter school program suggest that increasing time on task is the primary factor behind improved achievement. But, the KIPP program may not be suitable for most students (or most teachers and parents) in that it appears to have a predictably high student attrition rate— as much as 60 percent over a four year time period (Woodworth, 2008). The quit rate for teachers is also high. These dropout rates appear to be a function of the demands that KIPP places on students, teachers and their parents. KIPP schools have 9.5 hour school days, some classes on Saturdays, and only three weeks of summer vacation. Ravitch (2010) reports

that KIPP students spend 60 percent more time in school and KIPP schools impose strict standards of conduct and require completion of homework for continued enrollment in the program.

Taken together, the results of the various studies fail to support the predictions of market-based approaches to educational reform. Instead, the empirical record suggests that the introduction of competition with an increase in the power of parents to choose a child's school does not produce significantly superior student achievement. In the next section of the paper, we discuss the social actor approach to accountability and use it to analyze the structure of control in the typical school, a structure that appears to generate accountability despite the presence of less control by the principal over the teacher-agent's employment security.

The Social Actor Approach: Accountability through Norms and Pressures Rooted in Social Relationships

The market-based approach to accountability can be contrasted against the social actor approach which is rooted in the sociological perspective. Table 1 summarizes and compares both approaches to accountability. In the social actor approach to accountability, individual behavior is often motivated by a desire to live up to the normative expectations of other people, especially those seen on a regular basis. In the course of work and related activities, individual actors develop relationships they find rewarding or useful and labor with varying degrees of diligence to maintain relationships with co-workers, clients, customers and colleagues. To reduce conflict at work, actors consciously avoid the behaviors that would elicit disapproval from their relationship partners-- behaviors that can strain or disrupt a relationship. They generally steer clear of such disruption or strain by behaving in accordance with the norms associated with a particular social context.

[Table 1 here]

When people are not motivated by the desire to maximize reward, what explains their work effort? In reply to this question, those who view the activities of people in organizations as embedded in a web of constraining social relationships and normative prescriptions argue that employees or contractors labor diligently for a variety of reasons—among the most common, internalized commitment to the organization’s goals and to their relationships with co-workers and customers (Granovetter, 1985). Frequently, there is a moral component in the sense that workers who share the normative preferences of the principal (i.e., believe in the purpose of their work) are more likely to perform well. And in situations in which long term relationships can be established, cooperation (i.e., the abandonment of optimizing behavior) is frequently the rule not the exception (O’Connell, 1984; Ostrom, 1990).

Theorists in public administration refer to these goal commitments as public service motivation and posit that narrow self-interest or utility maximization is not the only or even the prime motive for many public sector employees (Perry, 1996; Perry & Wise, 1990). Public service motivation, according to Perry and Wise, is an individual-level “predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions” (1990, p. 5). Research finds differences in the reward motivations of public and private sector employees—with the former being less motivated by monetary gain and more concerned about helping others or contributing to society (Crewson, 1997; Durant, Kramer, Perry, Mesch, & Paarlberg, 2006; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007).

It appears to be the case that the public sector benefits from hiring workers who are committed to the goals of the employer (Crewson, 1997; Perry & Wise, 1990; Romzek, 1990). Public service motivation has been found to be a key driver of public sector employee performance. Public sector employees, such as school teachers, thus motivated to public service, are likely to

perform better and be more responsive to non-extrinsic rewards (Castaing, 2006; Houston, 2000; Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). The link between public service motivation and individual and organization performance has been studied across different levels of government, multiple public service functions, and in different national settings (Brehm & Gates, 1999; Brewer & Selden, 2000; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Naff & Crum, 1999; Petrovsky & Ritz, 2014; Vandenabeele, 2007). In the educational context, Andersen et al. (2014), in a study of Danish teachers, found that public service motivation of teachers was positively associated with student performance.

Most employees in organizations that benefit from shared values are probably aware that their co-workers have internalized a similar commitment to the employer's stated mission. This awareness will give rise to another factor that motivates work effort: the desire to live up to the expectations of fellow professionals at work. That is, most employees desire to avoid the distress that arises when coworkers indicate they are not pleased with one's work. Thus, rather than basing all decisions on a careful calibration of costs and benefits, employees (agents) frequently identify with the goals of an organization or their profession and decide on a course of action by assessing its acceptability in light of the norms and standards associated with their organizational, professional, and work relationships (March & Olsen, 1989).

In sum, the social actor approach to social control in the workplace stresses the interplay between values or norms and group pressure to conform to them. This approach has the advantage of placing the criticisms and demands of the people present in a given situation at the center of the individual's willingness to comply with norms (Douglas, 1996). Most people are very responsive to such pressure, as a failure to live up to the expectations of others at work can produce critical comments, which can induce a sense of inadequacy and the concomitant and painful emotion of shame (Goffman, 1967; Scheff, 1990). Conversely, performing well can

result in expressions of approval and produce feelings of pride and belonging. Thus, one of the keys to understanding the power of social relationships to elicit high levels of performance is the intense discomfort associated with the emotion of shame brought on by any indications of inadequacy or professional failure at work. This can produce accountability in ways difficult to explain in the terms of agency theory and other accounts inspired by economic thinking.

Observing the power of norms and relationships to guide behavior, students of public administration have developed such concepts as informal accountability (Romzek, LeRoux, & Blackmar, 2012) and emergent accountability (O'Connell, 2006) to explain these processes that produce much cooperation and conformity. Both concepts invoke norms and relationships to explain the development of accountability in the absence of a hierarchical relationship in which a principal can be said to monitor all the actions of an agent.

In general, many work environments exert control through informally enforced rules and the social pressures arising from relationships with others (Romzek, et al., 2012). This explains a common finding by many academic researchers who study organizations—a great deal of work effort in organizations cannot be explained as a function of the pursuit of self-interest (Simon 1997). From the social actor perspective, it is necessary to assess the motives, capacity to sanction, and actions of all the stakeholders as the work unfolds, especially when the service in question is complex and the government is not adequately equipped to evaluate all aspects of the specification and delivery of a particular service (Van Slyke, 2006). One implication of the social actor approach to social control and accountability is that many actors can play the part of the accountability enforcing principal—as co-workers, customers, supervisors, students, and parents.

In the social actor approach to accountability, the principal often assumes that the agent can be trusted to perform as desired. Rather than always exhibiting pervasive distrust, the

principal may even expect the agent to make decisions that are in the best interest of the principal (Davis, et al., 1997). DeHoog (1990) views this trust as giving rise to a cooperative relationship between principal and agent. Others describe the agent's commitment to goals shared with the principal as a stewardship relationship in which common goals lead the principal to build a long term relationship with the agent and grant the agent a great deal of decision-making authority (Davis, et al., 1997; Van Slyke, 2006).

Beyond monitoring, the principal's confidence in the agent often arises from trust in the agent's dedication to professional norms, commitment to shared goals, and the ongoing communication among the various parties as their relationships grow in duration. Monitoring of performance occurs, but is frequently tied less to the contract than to the emerging discussions and relationships among all the parties present in a given setting. This is quite common when the employees are professionals in situations where the means to attain goals might be uncertain (deLeon, 1998). But it is common in many private sector jobs as well, where, as Langbein (2010:12) observes, the employee-employer contract is often open and vague, for "...in complex modern organizations, tasks are complex and team-based and individual performance is hard to link to firm profits." Like school teachers, most private sector employees are salaried. There is very little direct connection between pay and performance.

Sources of Control and Accountability in the Public Schools

Students and employees in the public schools are subject to numerous normative expectations and interpersonal pressures. Students are sorted into grades and tracks; and each student's performance is classified with a grading system that runs from failure to excellent. The learning goals for each grade level are clearly defined, with success and failure (behaviorally as well as academically) measured with agreed-upon standards of performance. Much of the

workday is imposed—the curriculum, standards of student behavior, teacher activity, desired level of student achievement and the like.

Administrators and teachers work together within a well-articulated set of rules and values (Ingersoll, 2003). They exert pressure on each other to follow the rules and realize the values. Pressure is mounted by parents and politicians, as well (Ingersoll, 2003). One indicator of parental involvement in their child's schooling is the finding by Favero and Meier (2013) that parents can accurately assess the quality of their child's school. Clearly then, accountability in the schools has multiple sources rooted in the expectations that define the professional role of teacher. To begin, teachers are expected to exhibit a deep commitment to the welfare of their students as well as to the high value the school system places on the inculcation of knowledge and skill. Survey research shows that teachers have a public service orientation to their profession and enjoy teaching (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000; Metlife, 2009). Though not perfect, there appears to be much alignment between the interests of parents, teachers and school administrators. They all want to see the students in their schools do well. The deep professional commitment of teachers to their work explains the finding that teachers in 1996 spent, on average, \$408 of their own money on curriculum materials and classroom supplies (National Education Association, 1996).

But teachers have another goal that fosters educational success—the intrinsic reward of maintaining classroom order. A room full of rambunctious, noisy children or teenagers is a disruptive situation calling out for an immediate solution. Research confirms that learning is directly correlated with time devoted to the task of learning (Ravitch, 2010), so for example, *ceteris paribus*, the more time devoted to solving math problems, the more math the student masters. Obviously, a disorderly classroom is one in which students are not on task. Disorder is

also a clear signal to administrators, parents, and professional colleagues that the teacher is failing. A teacher who cannot control her or his students can expect repeated visits from the principal and negative remarks from fellow teachers. Over time, a failure to control the students can lead to dismissal from a teaching position. In his description of teacher's work, Ingersoll (2003) puts the regulation of student behavior on equal footing with instruction and reports that teachers routinely criticize other teachers who fail to enforce the rules of student conduct. Clearly, this disapprobation would induce feelings of shame and threaten professional identity. Difficulties experienced in classroom management probably contribute to the high rate of teacher turnover, as almost half of new teachers leave the profession in the first five years (Ingersoll, 2003). They do so despite poor alternatives in the job market, as a recent study of teachers leaving the profession found that most obtain jobs that paid less than the previous teaching position (Richwine & Biggs, 2011).

The point here is that many actors subject to the educational system's set of normative expectations and web of relationships are interested in each teacher maintaining order in the classroom and teaching effectively. The best way to maintain order is to focus the student's attention on the activity of learning (Lemov, 2010). Thus the interest of the teacher in orderly conduct leads to time on task—the root source of learning. In this respect, social control (and accountability) is built into the basic situation all teachers confront—the need to channel the energies of a classroom of young people. Again, the interests of the parties in the accountability environment are aligned: parents, teachers, and administrators benefit from order.

Schools appear to exemplify the principle that accountability can arise from multiple sources. As Bryk and his colleagues' work (2010) shows, multi-actor coordination between principals, teachers and parents, along with professional guidance on course content and

instructional method, contributes to school effectiveness. Thus, student achievement (and educational accountability) is best conceptualized as an emergent response to a cluster of factors and social actors—both inside and outside the classroom.

Table 2 summarizes the predictions of both the market-based and social actor approaches in regard to the effectiveness of programs for school choice. In contrast to the market-based approach, the social actor predicts only small or even no improvements to student outcomes—due to the presence of accountability mechanisms that produce a great deal of teacher effort even when the threat of termination or lost income is not as great as it is when parents can choose to send their children to another school. For this reason, the social actor approach predicts little increase in accountability due to school choice. Similarly, it predicts little difference in accountability between union and nonunion schools or between public and private schools. Teachers in union and public schools will work just as assiduously as their counterparts in nonunion and private schools as they are held accountable by the prevailing set of roles, norms, values, and relationships. Therefore, the social actor approach expects that market-based school reforms that reduce job and income security (of teachers) will not significantly augment work effort and student performance.

[Table 2 here]

Discussion and Implications

The accountability environment in the typical classroom inclines toward classroom order, teacher work effort, and student time-on-task. In this way, learning is a product of both the values and expectations of fellow teachers, parents, and administrators and the practical considerations of classroom management. A teacher whose students are on-task is more likely to enjoy his or her work and earn the respect of colleagues, parents and superiors. The prospect of job or financial loss is probably a distant concern when grappling with the everyday demands of handling a roomful of students. Each teacher is well aware that parents, supervisors, and fellow teachers expect to find each classroom orderly and the students heeding the teacher. These expectations foster teacher effort. They also appear to explain some of the frequently observed inability of school choice programs, private schools, and non-union schools to significantly improve teacher performance and student learning. No doubt, there are several reasons for this—one may be a lack of meaningful competition and thus little rise in the possibility of contract termination. But in the case of voucher programs and charter schools, the existence of increased teacher anxiety about job security is clear (Ravitch, 2010; Weiss & Long, 2013).

Our main assertion is not that measures to increase fear of contract or employment termination cannot induce greater effort on the part of employees or contractors. Clearly they can, but only to the extent that other sources of accountability are absent or underdeveloped. Rather, our chief contention is this: when rules of expected behavior are in place, or professional norms and standards internalized, and co-workers and other individuals present to impose pressure to abide by the rules and standards, there is less reason to expect a marked increase in effort or performance from the intensification of fear of employment or contract termination. In other words, market-based approaches to accountability may be less effective in situations

characterized by discussion and negotiation among the various stakeholders who make up the accountability environment surrounding a particular expert service (DeHoog, 1990; Kearns, 1996; O'Connell, 2005, 2006; Van Slyke, 2006).

Implications for School Reform

As the earlier discussion of the empirical results show, programs for school choice have not generated the sizable improvements in student performance predicted by the advocates of market-based approaches to school reform. Observational studies of teachers strongly suggest that competition for students will not stimulate greater teacher effort for the simple reason that most teachers have little leisure time available to begin with (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

It is possible, however, that competition and school choice may eventually contribute to better educational outcomes—not through competition but through the adoption of better teaching methods. The finding that some charters, such as KIPP, raise achievement levels is leading some economists to refocus their research in order to identify the practices associated with success. This may prove helpful; in fact, charter schools were expected to experiment with innovative teaching practices that could be transferred to traditional public schools (Allen, 2010; Manno, 2010). Thus far, however, there is little indication that school choice, by itself, has produced the requisite pedagogical breakthroughs. Weitzel and Lubienski (2010) report that charter schools tend to use traditional teaching methods and curriculums with a focus on the basics.

If competition and school choice alone have little to offer, then other approaches are needed. Consistent with the social actor approach, a recent study by Favero et al. (2014) suggests improving cooperation between teachers and school principals can increase test scores. They identify four effective elements of school management—clear goals, trust, participation in

decision-making, and feedback. The importance of clear goals may account for one study's finding that the testing regime imposed by the reform known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has produced a gain in fourth grade math scores (Dee & Jacobs, 2009). Knowing the goal is higher scores, many teachers appear to be 'teaching to the test'. However, Dee and Jacobs report that NCLB did not increase reading scores or eighth grade math scores. Perhaps, teachers found it easier to increase time on task for fourth grade math than for eighth grade math or reading at both grade levels.[3]

The work of Berliner (2013) and Riddile (2010) suggests another possible reform—focusing on the educational needs of children living in poverty. Using data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, their studies found that when students from schools in the United States with fewer than 10 percent of their students in poverty are compared to low-poverty schools in other countries, American schools had higher test scores than all other countries, including Korea and Finland. In other words the large percentage of American students living in poverty may be the core problem in need of redress, not the absence of competition. Of course, poverty is associated with a host of other factors that interfere with learning: parental absence or indifference to education; a lack of role models; the lure of street culture and drugs, chronic health issues that go untreated, and hunger and other forms of deprivation. School choice may further exacerbate the problem of poverty— Hursh (2005) asserts that choice can widen the disparity in resources between wealthier and poorer schools. Clearly, comprehensive educational reform—with or without choice programs—will need to address poverty-related factors to be successful.

Implications for Studying Accountability Structures

As Table 1 notes, agency approaches to accountability are more likely to prove effective when tasks are well-defined and observable, relationships are clearly hierarchical, and each agent is accountable to one principal. They are less likely to be effective when the tasks are open-ended and negotiated, behavior is guided by professional standards or shared values, and agents are accountable to multiple principals. At a minimum, attempts to improve accountability should begin with an inventory similar to that in Table 2 of the current structure of accountability in a specific setting in terms of the norms of expected behavior and sources of interpersonal pressures. All such norms—imposed by others in superordinate positions and/or those derived from professional values—should be identified and analyzed. The same is true for all persons in the setting who can impose pressure to conform, along with the mechanisms by which pressures and sanctions are imposed (Acer, Chao, & Yang, 2008). As we saw in the case of teachers, co-workers and parents, as well as supervisors and school boards can impose pressure, criticize performance, and enforce rules.

Implications for Accountability through Outsourcing

The NPM advocates the outsourcing of service delivery. The empirical evidence from studies of outsourcing social services (Johnston & Romzek, 1999; Klingner, Nalbandian, & Romzek, 2002; Romzek & Johnston, 1999, 2005) raises questions about the applicability of the NPM approach of increasing accountability through competition. Similar to other rational actor theories, NPM calls for a structure of incentives and sanctions that is rarely, if ever, attainable in most organizations.

At times, outsourcing can lead to greater accountability; but, contracting can pose risks to government agencies, as the contracting relationship throughout American history has had more than its share of blemishes (Durant, Girth, & Johnston, 2009; Keeney, 2007), and there are no a priori reasons to assume that outsourcing will produce cost savings or improved services. Empirical results have shown that outsourcing does not always lead to cost savings or improved service delivery (see for example Brudney, Fernandez, Ryu, & Wright, 2005; Condrey & Battaglio Jr, 2007; Hodge, 2000; Yusuf & O'Connell, 2014), and may, under some circumstances, increase costs and/or lower quality (Bendick, 1989; Sclar, 2000).

Aware of the mixed results of contracting for services, some students of public administration have conceptualized accountability as a product arising from the interaction of a variety of factors and social actors in a given setting (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2009; Dubnick & Yang, 2011; Romzek & Ingraham, 2000; Acer, et al., 2008; Dubnick & Romzek, 1993; Kearns, 1996; O'Connell, 2005, 2006). For example, Dubnick and Romzek (1993) place the concept of role expectations at the center of their work on accountability structures. The social actor approach could potentially be a useful framework for rethinking expectations of accountability for outsourced government services.

We draw this conclusion: when proposing outsourcing as a source of improved performance, its advocates need to assess the specific mechanisms through which outsourcing could improve performance. Increasing effort in response to competition is but one possible mechanism; clearly, when effort is already substantial, other mechanisms, such as new work methods, must be considered. Sometimes competition will catalyze innovation, but rarely is there good reason to assume it will.

Conclusion

As a guiding principle, reformers seeking to improve the performance of educational (as well as other governmental) organizations should begin their assessment of the presence or absence of accountability in a particular setting by identifying all the actors, pressures, and relevant norms and values that can shape the behavior of the people involved. Much as market-based approaches to accountability alert us to the self-interest of employees and other contractors, the social actor approach sensitizes us to the various interactions and negotiations among the parties involved, as they invoke incentives, impose sanctions, and comply with norms and values during the effort to accomplish their respective duties. The latter is important, as much research on public organizations has documented the complex and sometimes unforeseeable nature of the quest for accountability when multiple actors pursue one or more goals. At times the activities and concerns of the parties involved in complex settings can even work at cross purposes (Waterman & Meier, 1998).

Future research can explore the possibility that market-based approaches to improvements in accountability are more efficacious in situations in which people are *not* locked into a set of norms and relationships that induce feelings of shame, embarrassment or inadequacy when they fail to live up to the expectations present in the accountability environment. Such research, for instance, may confirm that competition between service providers contributes more to accountability when the task performance is simple and easily monitored and measured (e.g., roadside maintenance or solid waste removal) than when the task is complex and shaped by professional norms in a multi-actor accountability environment (e.g., law enforcement, K-12 education or social services).

Endnotes

1. A concern with eliciting employee effort has a long history in organization theory. McGregor (1960) labeled an approach similar to that of agency theory as ‘theory Z,’ in which employees were assumed to dislike their work and to only cooperate to avoid sanction.
2. Research inspired by the assumption of utility maximization has a tendency to be content with evidence of rational employee behavior, however exiguous, in a given problem area, rather than seeking a full explanation of employee behavior (Green & Shapiro, 1994). Yet, in study after study, there is much behavior that cannot be explained in terms of optimizing utility (Marwell, 1982; Marwell & Ames, 1981). Even in situations carefully constructed to elicit self-seeking behavior (e.g. the prisoner’s dilemma) researchers find much cooperation (Etzioni, 1988).
3. We do not include NCLB in our discussion of market-based school reform because its primary accountability mechanism is standardized testing, which encourages teachers in all kinds of schools to ‘teach to the test.’

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Table 1: Two Approaches to Teacher Accountability

	Market-based	Social Actor
Disciplinary basis	Economics	Sociology and management theory
Relationship between parties	Contract defined	Defined by social context as well as contract
Number of parties typically influencing production of outcome	Two—superordinate principal and subordinate agent	Three or more
Principal control of agent’s actions	High	Moderate to low
Market condition	Highly competitive	Limited or no competition between service providers
Basis of confidence in performance of other party(s)	Extensive monitoring for contract compliance	Ongoing discussion, professional norms, shared goals (stewardship)
Degree of agent discretion	Discretion limited by terms of contract to minimize opportunism	Discretion expected for joint contribution of parties to outcome
Contract specificity	Complete (highly specific) contracts	Incomplete contracts to allow emergent products from negotiation and cooperation among the parties
Incentives for performance	Income, reputation	Income, reputation, professional identity, goal achievement, continuation of cooperative relationships
Primary source of accountability	Principal controls subordinate through threat of contract termination	Actors negotiate and enforce norms and expectations derived from the social context and relationships
Most likely to be effective when these conditions prevail	Well-defined and observable task Hierarchical relationship Agents accountable to one principal	Open-ended or negotiated tasks Professional standards or shared values Agents accountable to multiple principals

Table 2: Comparison of Market-based Actor and Social Actor Approaches to Control and Accountability of Teachers and Administrators in the Public Schools

	Market-based	Social Actor
Factors promoting effective educational programs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parental Choice 2. Competing Schools 3. De-unionization 4. Possibility of Lost Jobs/ Income for Teachers and Administrators 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Roles and Norms 2. Shared Values 3. Strong Social Bonds and Relationships 4. Enforcement of Rules through Face-to-Face Interaction
Core assumption about accountability in the educational system	Without fear of contract termination teachers and administrators are not accountable to parents and students and will not work as effectively or diligently as possible	Teachers and administrators are currently held accountable through the prevailing web of roles, norms, values, relationship pressures, and class-room constraints, including the need to maintain classroom order
Predictions about effects of school choice (vouchers or charter schools) on student performance	Significant improvement in average student performance	Small or no improvements in school performance
Predictions about effect of choice/competition on level of accountability	Significant increase in accountability of teachers and administrators	Small or no increase in accountability of teachers and administrators