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Response to "Redesigning Systems of School Accountability": Addressing Underlying Inequities

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Response to "Redesigning Systems of School Accountability": Addressing Underlying Inequities

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Citation: Gil, E. & Kim, T. (2018). Response to "Redesigning Systems of School Accountability": Addressing underlying inequities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 26*(9). http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3438 This article is part of the special issue, *Redesigning Assessment and Accountability for Meaningful Student Learning*, guest edited by Soung Bae, Jon Snyder, and Elizabeth Leisy Stosich.

Abstract: As Bae (2018) suggests, one way to fill gaps between a holistic view of student learning and accountability policy implementation is to use multiple measures that reflect diverse perspectives of learning. The purpose of this commentary is to provide a discussion of issues, which need to be considered in order to achieve the desired outcomes of greater equity and transparency through these broader accountability efforts. In this commentary, we address equity issues related to Bae's argument and propose that taking action regarding existing inequities in terms of access to resources, and including traditionally excluded voices are crucial to ensuring that new accountability systems meet their intended goal of shared responsibility for deeper learning and continuous improvement.

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Comentario sobre la "Reestructuración de los sistemas de responsabilidad escolar": Abordando las inequidades subyacentes

Resumen: Como sugiere Bae (2018), una manera de acortar las distancias entre una visión holística del aprendizaje y la implementación de pólizas de rendición de cuentas es usar medidas múltiples que reflejen las diversas perspectivas del aprendizaje. Estos asuntos deben ser considerados para lograr los resultados deseados de una mayor equidad y transparencia a través de esfuerzos más amplios de rendición de cuentas. En este comentario, abordamos cuestiones de equidad relacionadas con el argumento de Bae y proponemos que tomar medidas con respecto a las inequidades existentes relacionadas al acceso de recursos e incluir voces que tradicionalmente son excluidas, es vital para garantizar que los nuevos sistemas de rendición de cuentas cumplan su objetivo de responsabilidad para un aprendizaje más profundo y para el proceso de mejora continua.
Palabras clave: responsabilidad; equidad; voces de padres; desigualdad de recursos; iniciativas basadas en la comunidad

Comente sobre "Reestruturação dos sistemas de responsabilidade escolar": Abordando as desigualdades subjacentes

Resumo: Como sugere Bae (2018), uma maneira de reduzir o fosso entre uma visão holística da aprendizagem e a implementação de políticas de responsabilização é usar múltiplas medidas que refletem as diversas perspectivas de aprendizagem. Essas questões devem ser consideradas para alcançar os resultados desejados de maior equidade e transparência através de esforços de responsabilização mais amplos. Neste comentário, abordamos questões de equidade relacionadas ao argumento de Bae e propomos que tomar medidas em relação a desigualdades existentes relacionadas ao acesso a recursos e incluindo vozes tradicionalmente excluídas é vital para garantir que os novos sistemas de responsabilidade cumprir seu objetivo de responsabilidade para uma aprendizagem mais profunda e para o processo de melhoria contínua.
Palavras-chave: responsabilidade; equidade; vozes dos pais; desigualdade de recursos; iniciativas comunitárias

Introduction

While scholars have expanded conceptions of learning (e.g., Dewey, 1902; Gardner, 2011) and undermined the binary of cognitive and non-cognitive skills (e.g., Immordino-Yang, 2016; Sawyer, 2005), test-based accountability policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have narrowed the meaning of student achievement to test scores. As Bae (2018) suggests, one way to fill gaps between a holistic view of student learning and accountability policy implementation is to use multiple measures that reflect diverse perspectives of learning. The purpose of this commentary is to provide a discussion of issues, which need to be considered in order to achieve the desired outcomes of greater equity and transparency through these broader accountability efforts. In this commentary, we address equity issues related to Bae's argument and propose that taking action regarding existing inequities in terms of access to resources, and including traditionally excluded voices are crucial to ensuring that new accountability systems meet their intended goal of shared responsibility for deeper learning and continuous improvement. While we agree with the importance of multiple measures that can "help stakeholders make valid inferences about school quality...and resource equity" (Bae, 2018, p. 5), we are concerned with the suggestion that everyone can equally make informed

decisions by employing stakeholder engagement and transparency. There appears to be an underlying assumption that there is equity of access to resources in terms of infrastructure, information, and skills required to fully implement accountability systems that require the use of technology (e.g., data dashboards) in order to participate in seeing what is being measured and how. However, research has shown that different levels of accessibility to resources result in issues of inequity.

Depending on school demographics, access to technology to implement accountability systems can differ. Lack of infrastructures and skills for using technology in under-resourced schools may result in difficulties of technology utilization. Literature has shown that the capacity for maintaining infrastructure is critical to support technology use in schools (Howley & Howley, 2008). For example, underfunded rural districts cannot provide human resources who deal with technical issues even though schools have required infrastructure, whereas more affluent districts can maintain technology equipment (Howley, Wood, & Hough, 2011). In addition to obtaining technology, skills for using technology is a key issue when accountability policies require new database systems. Park, Sinha, and Chong (2007) indicated that federal and state policies (programs) can promote access to technologies in rural schools, but training teachers and handling software remained the responsibility of individual schools. Therefore, effective training for staff who deal with data dashboards for accountability should be also considered with regard to resource equity to utilization of technology and information.

A digital divide also remains, in terms of access to technology and existing ability to use technology, even when it is available. Initiatives have emerged in order to address issues of access that may arise as a result of the digital divide. In discussing the importance of technology skills, Machado-Casas, Ek, and Sánchez (2014) note the lower rates of computer ownership and access of Latinos, stating that "computers are a central medium for knowledge distribution, thus further marginalizing many Latinas/os without computer access at home" (p. 28). La Clase Mágica, family technology workshops provided by a university-district partnership, helped parents support their children's academic success and gain awareness of existing technologies. Similarly, Digital Home (pseudonym), a basic technology skills program, began in response to a recently-retired principal's concern that the existing digital divide she witnessed for Latino families would grow as local schools turned more to data dashboards, digital report cards, and e-mail (Gil, 2017). Along with teaching computer skills, Digital Home offered information regarding school structures and terms that might be unfamiliar to the mostly-immigrant parent participants (Gil, 2017). As a result, parents developed technology skills, but also improved their ability to maneuver around systems that would otherwise remain less accessible, and less transparent. The initiatives described here made concerted efforts to lay the groundwork for families to access the information shared by their children's school systems. Both of these examples indicate the importance of not assuming that systems of accountability, even the best-developed ones, are accessible and clear to all who are expected to be informed by them.

Whose Voices are Heard?

Additionally, we recognize that equity of voice and equally valuing all stakeholders is not a reality everywhere (Noguera, 2004; Orr & Rogers, 2010), thereby reducing the likelihood that the norms, values, and contexts of underrepresented communities are actually embedded in the development of what is counted in accountability.

According to Barry (2006), transparency in education reforms can be a tool for government entities. Research has shown that transparency in accountability measures controls knowledge by selecting which content and format are shared (Koyama & Kania, 2014, 2016). Arguing that policy

actors can utilize transparency to legitimize their political actions, Koyama and Kania (2014) revealed that use of numbers for transparency shield negative effects of NCLB for students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. In addition, Koyama and Kania (2016) suggest that under the transparency in accountability policies, stakeholder power disparity can generate different benefits for different communities as "notions of transparency illuminate, and also conceal, information" (Koyama & Kania, 2016, p. 4). Thus, we are concerned that providing transparency itself may not represent educational accountability and is not enough to support informed decisions for student learning. As Koyama and Kania (2016) show, stakeholders can be less interested in the policy itself than in using transparency to gain support and find allies.

In cases where families and communities experience a lack of transparency or accountability to them, people have come together to combat these challenges. The Community Reviewer Program (CRP) (pseudonym) in Detroit trained parents and community members to "assess and evaluate the quality of schools in the city…through...citywide school visitations and evaluations" (Johnson, 2015, p. 7). The program emphasized parent and community access to transparent information on school performance trends. Through the training program, parents' experiences as school quality reviewers, and the relationships that developed among and between urban parents, schools, and program organizers positively influenced parents' interactions with their children's schools, but did not cause schools to be held more accountable to improve (Johnson, 2015). Johnson's (2015) study of the CRP also revealed that the accountability criteria identified by parents and community members did not always align with the measures of effectiveness recognized by the Detroit school system.

Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (PJU), a grassroots organization in Denver, seeks to increase equity in education for all students by addressing "the root cause of discrimination, racism and inequity" (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, n.d.). The group's Platform for Excellent Schools identifies its own accountability criteria, including college preparatory curriculum and culture, highly effective principals and teachers "with high expectations and [who] believe in the intellectual capacity of students of color," and safe and caring schools (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, 2016). Much like in the case of the CRP, the work of PJU centers the voices of parents (and youth) in its efforts to equalize voice and fight inequity. PJU has also developed and published its own Accountability Report Card "toward ending the school-to-jail track in Denver Public Schools" (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, n.d.). Formed in 1992, PJU has had more success in playing an active role and having greater visibility in local reforms and accountability systems.

In light of instances where the accountability priorities of urban and traditionally marginalized communities may not be as closely aligned as those of the formal schools systems, the consensus building and transparency so crucial to redesigned school accountability systems that aim for "shared responsibility and continuous improvement" (Bae, 2018, p. 20) will not be actualized without acknowledging the concerns over whose voices are heard and taking action toward being inclusive of multiple perspectives and experiences.

Concluding Remarks

We acknowledge the importance of efforts to broaden measures in order to transform school accountability into a more meaningful vehicle for improving students' learning. However, without considering the realities regarding resources in different contexts and the disparity in whose voices are heard, this goal will be unfulfilled. Actions, programs, and groups such as those described above offer examples of how to promote voice and value diverse communities that have traditionally not been included in discussions about accountability. While programs, often begun outside of the school system, have empowered those who have participated, increased accountability

in school systems, on a larger scale, has been less consistent. Therefore, we need constantly to ask ourselves: Who is at the table? Whose values and norms are represented? How are all members of communities engaging with the process and the reported outcomes of any new accountability measures?

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