

Responsibility is a curious concept, insofar as it is predicated on other social constructs such as integrity, character, obligation, ownership, reliability, trustworthiness and accountability. In fact, many of the aforementioned words are often used as synonyms for responsibility. Yet the means by which the term *responsible* is employed can change the connotation greatly. For example, being “responsible *for*” someone is very different from being “responsible *to*” someone. The former implies a sense of active ownership, whereas the latter implies a sense of passive, submissive accountability. With such a significant difference in meaning, it is quite important that the two never be confused. For this reason, answering the question, “To whom are educators, educational institutions, and learners responsible?” requires a careful approach that must hinge on *accountability*. The three aforementioned entities (educators, institutions and learners) form a circle of causality - or as Senge (1994) calls it, a “reinforcing circle” (p.82) - that can easily be interpreted as a direct representation of the means by which American education holds itself accountable. In order to understand this reinforcing circle, however, one must first come to know the two paradigms that provide the impetus for such interdependency.

One could argue that education functions in two very different worlds. The first is the world of idealism, where romanticism regarding the possibilities of education can lead to inequality just as often as it can lead to equality. The second is the world of reality, where pragmatism puts the brakes on the utopian view of schooling and reminds us that there are indeed problems in education that cannot be ignored, though it is fully possible that such problems may never be solved. The foundation of American education, therefore, has both romantic and realistic moorings, which act like tectonic plates and are constantly shifting. As a result, educators, institutions and learners are often asked to straddle the divide of idealism and reality, as well as bridge the ever-widening gap between the two.

Evidence of the romantic and idealistic re-bar that permeates the foundation of the educational system in American is ample. In describing the idealistic assumptions inherent in American academics, educational historian Ravitch (2010) tells us that education was, and still is “a primary mechanism through which a democratic society gives its citizens the opportunity to attain literacy and social mobility” (p.6). This notion of social mobility, it seems, has historically been on the tip of every idealistic tongue that sought to romanticize education as a means of attaining the ever-elusive *American Dream*. This is evident in such mantras as, “Education is opening the paths for people, and that’s what our system of public education has done” (Edwards, 2000, p.4). Additionally, from the very early days of public education in America, pioneers and reformers in the field of academics implied a significant connection between democracy and education, citing such foundational ideologies as “a free vote cries aloud for free education” (Kennedy, Cohen & Bailey, 2002, p.325). In doing so, it is also implied that another idealistic and romantic purpose of education is to prepare individuals “for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a complex society” (Ravitch, 2010, p.13). If this is accurate, then educators, educational institutions, and learners are all responsible to democracy itself; they are held accountable by a quixotic yet transcendent political ideology.

Meanwhile, the more pragmatic paradigm (the world of realism) offers a slightly darker and disturbing perspective. When the republic was young, the wealthy did not need the assistance of public schools, and therefore the necessity of such institutions was questioned. However, a shift occurred in the early nineteenth century as middle and upper class Americans realized that if the poor were not educated, they might become “a dangerous, ignorant rabble – armed with the vote” (Kennedy, Cohen & Bailey, 2002, p.325). Quickly, taxation for the purpose of education became “an insurance premium that the wealthy paid for stability”

(Kennedy, Cohen & Bailey, 2002, p.325). This was especially significant considering the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe at that time, many of which had a penchant for socialism (Kennedy, Cohen & Bailey, 2002). Therefore, free-market-loving individuals felt “a desperate need to instill civilized values in these alien newcomers...to preserve American democracy and morals” (Edwards, 2000, p.5). Such selfish-ambition on the part of the wealthy to control the proletariat of this country is significant because, if such claims are true, then educators, educational institutions, and learners are all responsible to a self-serving elite. Otherwise stated, educators, educational institutions, and learners are being held captive by a minority that seeks only to use education as a way of ensuring their own prosperity.

The information presented above is polarizing and inflammatory. It depicts the concepts of responsibility and accountability as transcendent of the educators, educational institutions, and learners themselves. Furthermore, it implies that idealism and reality are incompatible and, therefore, cannot coexist. In summation, it does not adequately represent the current state of affairs in American education. However, when the concept of responsibility is considered a part of the interdependent chemistry of educators, educational institutions, and learners (and not external to them), a more definitive and lucid circle of causality emerges. This circle clearly explains the means by which the historical influences of educational idealism and reality have come to influence the answer to the question on which this paper centers.

Figure 1 represents the reinforcing circle diagram for *responsibility* in the system of American education, as imagined for the purposes of exposition on this question: To whom are educators, educational institutions, and learners responsible? According to Senge (1994), reinforcing circles represent causal relationships in systems with multiple variables. In this sense, Senge (1994) tells us, “every circle tells a story (p.75) and “by tracing the flows of

influence, you can see patterns that repeat themselves” (p.75). *Figure 1* assumes that the concept of responsibility is a part of the education system itself, rather than something demanded by an external variable such as democracy or a wealthy, elite minority. As depicted in the diagram, educators are responsible *to* the academic institutions, the institutions are responsible *to* the learners, and the learners are responsible *to* the educators.

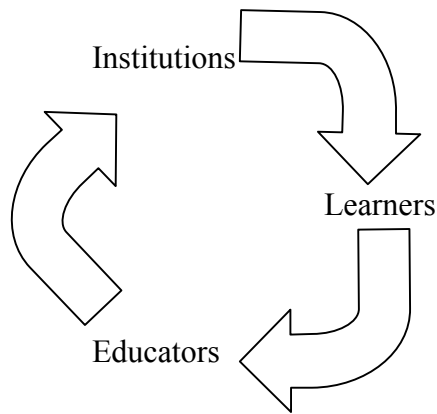


Figure 1: Reinforcing circle diagram depicting *to* whom educators, educational institutions, and learners are responsible in American education (i.e. the learners are responsible *to* the educators).

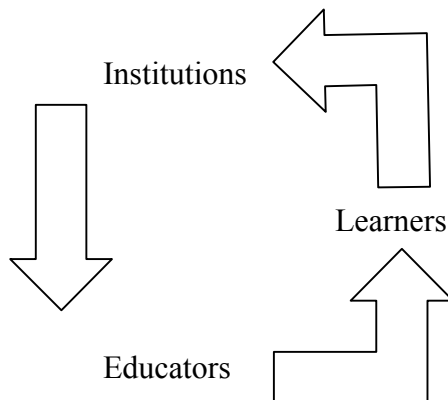


Figure 2: Reinforcing circle diagram depicting accountability in the American education system (i.e. the learners hold the institutions accountable).

If one desired to speak in terms of *accountability* rather than *responsibility*, only a slight adjustment needs to be made, as illustrated in *Figure 2*. In terms of accountability, then, the institutions hold the educators accountable, the learners hold the institutions accountable, and the educators hold the learners accountable. Regardless of which term is employed (*responsibility* or *accountability*), the theory behind this envisioning of the reinforcing circle is precisely the same. Therefore, the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of this paper.

It is worth noting that such an envisioning of the education system has its roots in history as well as the modern day reform movements. Additionally, this circle of causality has also been challenged and even rearranged by progressive movements in American education throughout the last two centuries.

In discussing historical examples of learners being responsible to educators, one need look no further than the traditional role of teachers in the public school, where “recitation, memorization and drill” (Edwards, 2000, p.94) have been, and in some places continue to be, the norm. Historically, it was through such methods that the teacher held the learner accountable for their studies. Other examples of learner accountability via educators include the tracking and life adjustments movements, both of which were aimed at providing practical education for “American youths whom educators assumed were not fit for either college or technical careers” (Edwards, 2000, p.8). In this sense, accountability can take the form of lower expectations for those students deemed to possess lower-ability.

As an educator, I hold students accountable everyday as I check homework, provide formative and summative assessments, and discipline students because of their behavior. While it is difficult to definitively conclude that such actions alone elicit responsible behavior in students, research on the expectations of teachers has found that the average student generally strives to

meet the accountability measures and benchmarks of their instructors (Jussim & Eccles, 1995). This alone is significant evidence that learners are indeed responsible to educators on some fundamental level.

Likewise, historical examples of the means by which institutions are responsible to the learners are just as easy to come by. Researchers and historians note that learners (and their parents, especially) often bring “a demanding, consumer-oriented attitude to their relationship with the public schools” (Edwards, 2000, p.12). Ravitch (2010) notes that this is manifest in the modern-day proliferation of charter schools. And while the demands of the learner on the institution can be equal parts selfish and trivial, learners can also hold the institutions accountable in very powerful and selfless ways. No demand epitomizes this more so than that for racial equality and desegregation in the 1960s, as evident in court case after court case brought to the justice system by the learners themselves (Edwards, 2000).

In my experience as a teacher at a private school, perhaps the best example of this particular accountability dynamic is demonstrated through enrollment. Learners and their families hold the institution accountable by pulling students and money out of the school, or threatening to do so if their demands and expectations are not met.

Finally, historical examples of the relationship between educators and educational institutions depict the myriad methods utilized by institutions to hold educators accountable. In general, accountability seems to center itself throughout American educational history on the theory that teachers are ultimately responsible for the success and failure in their classrooms. As such, educational institutions hold educators accountable today in ways similar to those in the past. Ravitch (2010) reveals that these include using “shame and humiliation...to spur improvement” (p.87), “punishing them for noncompliance” (p.66), “carefully observing the

performance of probationary teachers” (p.177), and even “firing the teachers whose students get low scores” (p.171). I have personally observed all of the above during my time in education.

Certainly, it would be convenient if the reinforcing circle described earlier were as neat and simple as it is depicted on paper. The truth, however, must by nature be more complicated; counter-examples are plentiful. As Edwards (2000) explains, the proliferation of teachers unions and their often paralyzing, yet concurrently noble, demands is an excellent illustration of the means by which educators can, and do, hold institutions accountable – a reversal of the accountability diagram from *Figure 2*. Additionally, there are plenty of examples indicative of educators being responsible to the learners, including the very progressive open education and democratic education movements (Edwards, 2000). It is only appropriate, therefore, to concede the fact that exceptions abound.

Regardless of agreement or disagreement with the order of the reinforcing circle diagram originally presented, the truth is that three components of the education system (educators, institutions and learners) are interconnected through a sometimes clear and sometimes tangled web of responsibility and accountability. And while it is tempting to inject a fourth, transcendent variable into this equation (such as democracy or the wealthy elite), Senge (1994) reminds us that “systems thinking shows us that there is no outside; that you and the cause of your problems are part of a single system” (p.67). Hopefully, this also means that the solutions to many of America’s educational problems are also already a part of that very same system.

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