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Journal article

**Navigating school improvement : School leaders balancing system accountability and responsibility for equity and inclusion**  
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**Navigating school improvement: School leaders balancing system  
accountability and responsibility for equity and inclusion** Authors: Megan  
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Influenced by neoliberal thinking, many governments have reformed education to enhance accountability for student learning through school improvement initiatives. While acknowledging accountability has various interpretations, in this paper, accountability is understood as audit and school improvement relates to a school's actions to build staff capacity to increase students' "learning outcomes". In Australia, school reviews are an important part of school improvement efforts. Prior research highlights how education leaders work with accountability systems in different ways, with some school leaders seeking methods to balance their system accountability (audit, transparency, performance) with their professional responsibility (moral, accountability, responsibility to school community, serving the public good, etc.). It is suggested in this paper, where educational leaders (principals, deputy principals, system leaders) have been guided by neoliberalism, accountability as responsibility might be replaced with accountability as audit. Here, accountability is narrowed to accounting practices, which are applied to people and organisations. In such a situation equity (fair and impartial treatment of students, along with equity in outcomes for individuals and for groups) and inclusion (all students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, ability, etc., are welcomed and encouraged to be active participants in the school and classroom) could be diminished. This situation has implications for how leaders progress equity and inclusion, because it creates the potential for leaders' attention to be directed towards accountability, ahead of equity and inclusion. It is suggested that balancing system accountability and responsibility can provide school leaders with a way to navigate school improvement to enhance equity and inclusion in their school community.

**Keywords:** Accountability, responsibility, audit, school improvement, Australia

## Introduction

Accountability is central to the functioning of democratic societies. Yet understandings of accountability vary across time and across political ideologies. In this paper the focus is systems of representative and responsible parliamentary government such as Australia's. While accountability has various interpretations, in this paper, accountability entails a public official's behaviour being scrutinised by an outside authority (Mulgan, 2000). School improvement relates to a school's actions to build staff capacity to increase students' "learning outcomes" (Hallinger & Heck, 2011, pp. 1, 15). Over the past three decades many government reforms to schooling in Australia have been influenced by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a political ideology whose advocates promote individualism and the free market. Some of the thinking underpinning neoliberalism comes from economists such as Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1951; Kimber & Ehrich, 2011, 2015, 2021; Kimber & Maddox, 2003).

Multiple reforms in education can be understood as neoliberal in that they are built on market-based logics of competition and comparison, and because they are characterised by managerial practice. These policy reforms have been premised on enhancing accountability for student learning through initiatives such as National Assessment Plan — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), MySchool, and school improvement. Accountability, in this sense, has come to be viewed as occurring "through transparency" (Australian Government, 2016). For example, in Australia, school reviews conducted in part via a standardised tool such as that endorsed by the Council for Australian Governments, have been used as an accountability mechanism for monitoring school performance, including students' learning outcomes (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016).

Drawing on literature investigating school improvement, we suggest, where governments and educational leaders have been guided by neoliberal thinking, there has been an attempt to replace understandings of accountability as responsibility with understanding of accountability as audit. Responsibility refers to the moral and professional responsibilities of school leaders to teachers, students, and the wider school community. Such responsibility includes promoting equity and inclusion, which we contend are important dimensions of democracy. The different ways in which educational leaders work with accountability systems, therefore, influences how they promote equity and inclusion. It is suggested educational leaders might

seek to balance system accountability and school community responsibilities as a way to manage competing demands of policies based on neoliberalism and policies promoting democratic purposes of schooling, including equity and inclusion.

To explore this suggestion, this paper is organised into three sections. First background understanding of how accountability has been understood in systems of representative and responsible parliamentary government, such as Australia's political system is provided. Second, neoliberalism and audit are discussed. Salient points from the sources considered for this paper are connected back to questions of equity and inclusion in section three. The understanding of accountability outlined below influences the actions of public sector officials such as those who work in schools.

### **Responsible government**

It has been well documented that the federal nature of Australia's political system has meant, constitutionally, that schools have been a state and territory responsibility, with governments of different political persuasions at Commonwealth and state levels sometimes impacting the extent of education reform. Similarly, the centralisation of schooling reform has also been well documented (Cranston et al., 2010; Thompson, 2021). This push and pull of federalism combines with the principles of representative and responsible parliamentary government that define the Australian political system, including the roles and responsibilities of public officials such as teachers and school leaders. One principle of responsible government is individual ministerial responsibility (Maddox, 2004; Singleton et al., 2013).<sup>1</sup> Australian public schools are part of state and territory education departments. It might be argued, therefore, teachers are accountable to their leadership team, which is accountable to the regional director who is accountable to the head of department, who is accountable to the minister. Federalism and representative and responsible parliamentary government principles influence the policies and reform measures school leaders are required to implement. These can compete (such as performance versus equity) and can be influenced by the ideological persuasion of governments at different levels of the political structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Public sector employees are accountable through their department head to the minister, who is accountable to parliament, which is accountable to the people. This system enables provision of apolitical advice (Maddox, 2004; Singleton et al., 2013).

They are evident in decisions made by intergovernmental bodies such as the former Council of Australian Governments.

Extending this view of accountability are notions of wider public accountability or responsibility that could connect with “democratic purposes” of schooling (Cranston, 2013; Cranston et al., 2010; Labaree, 1997; Holloway & Larsen Hedegaard, 2021). Educators consider how they might support students to become responsible citizens who value the environment, de-colonisation, social cohesion, and justice. Riddle and Apple (2019) argue there are increasing numbers of educators who have adopted broader notions of responsibility and are actively engaged with teaching that will lead to a fairer, more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable future. These views about schooling as and for democracy position educators and students as active, critical citizens with responsibilities to their communities, and to future generations (Apple et al., 2022). A democratic accountability structure would therefore be built on strong relations between schools, students, and communities. It would complement existing system-based accountability structures (Aly et al., 2022). For school leaders, this responsibility might mean leading for equity and inclusion by acting with integrity, honesty, courage, and prudence (Carrington & Kimber, 2020; Cranston et al., 2014). Adopting this broader conception of responsibility requires educators to attend to injustices in a way that extends beyond the understanding of accountability as audit. It goes beyond the concept of “equality of opportunity” outlined in the Mpwarnte Declaration and also beyond the National School Reform Agenda (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2022).

### **Neoliberalism and audit**

Proponents of neoliberalism view accountability as market “responsiveness”, “transparency”, “quality”, “and performance” (Kimber & Ehrich, 2015, pp. 87-88; Koyama & Kania, 2014; Shore, 2008, p. 278) — which are elements of “an “audit culture” (Kimber & Ehrich, 2015, pp. 87-88; Shore, 2008, p. 278)” (in Kimber, 2020, p. 4). In an “audit culture” accountability is narrowed to accounting practices, which are applied to people and organisations (Shore & Wright, 2015). “Performance” is measured, ranked, and audited (Shore & Wright, 2015, p. 421). Audit can alter practices through establishing “objectives” and using “... ‘standardized forms ...’” (Rose, 1999, p. 154 cited in Hardy, 2021). Numbers make decisions “knowable” and provide for “comparison”, with “such practices [establishing] an air of objectivity”

while simultaneously diminishing “professional judgement and autonomy” (Hardy, 2021, p. 3). Such objectivity could include use of value-added methods of measuring teacher effectiveness to hold teachers to account, as has occurred to some extent in the United States as opposed, for example, to the use of peer observation of classroom teaching (Amrein-Bardsley & Holloway, 2019; Amrein-Bardsley et al., 2020; Coe et al., 2014; Holloway, 2019; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Muijjs et al., 2018). As noted earlier, this neoliberal understanding of accountability comes from beliefs in the freedom of the individual and in the free market. Transparency can be seen as “openness in operations ... producing particular kinds of information tailored to specific audiences” (Koyama & Kania, 2014, p. 144). Standardisation and quantification have enabled comparison and competition among schools through the publication of NAPLAN data on MySchool (Spina, 2021; Koyama & Kania, 2014). Standardised audit tools such as the NSIT might be considered another example of a policy that involves, to varying extents, a focus on performance through measures that are standardised and quantified. Results from NAPLAN and also from school reviews using the NSIT could invite comparison among schools and schools perceived to be performing better than other schools are believed to attract parents, particularly when information is published on *MySchool* (Gorur, 2013; Hardy, 2021; Kimber, 2020; Thompson, 2013).

Those who advance neoliberal thinking argue use of private sector practices in public sector organisations makes them more “accountable” (Kimber, 2020). In view of this change, some writers call for a re-privileging of responsibility (Cranston, 2013) or balancing of competing bureaucratic, professional, performance, and market accountabilities (Pollock & Winton, 2016). As Cranston (2013) argues:

the expected answer to the question, *school leadership, for what and about what is student learning*; which is now typically defined as narrow aspects of the academic curriculum and which can be measured by national and international testing programs. However, educators, especially school leaders, know or should know that schooling is about much more than that. (pp. 129-130. Emphasis in original)

We consider the move from responsibility, including equity, to audit as the understanding of system accountability in school improvement in Australia. We also

consider the ways in which school leaders do or do not seek to balance system accountability requirements with professional responsibilities to their school community. First, school improvement tools and NAPLAN can be viewed as accountability devices as they can be used to hold schools and teachers to account based on the performance of their students in tests via standardised instruments (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016; Kimber, 2020). Second, researchers investigating school reform generally or school improvement specifically draw attention to perceived tension between system accountability and school level responsibilities including inclusion (Cranston, 2013; Gobby, 2013; Gobby et al., 2018; Keddie et al., 2018; Spina, 2021; Wilkins et al., 2021). Here, accountability is increasingly perceived by some educators and some researchers as an audit of school (and teacher) performance. It is important to note that some principals consider school improvement findings in conjunction with broader school agendas and contexts.

### **System accountability instruments**

The NSIT is a standardised instrument used to review schools on a cyclical basis across the same nine domains and could be used to compare schools within education departments and authorities (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016). Developed by the Australian Council of Educational Research for the Australian federal government, to be used in schools as part of a national school reform agenda (<https://www.acer.org/school-improvement/improvement-tools/national-school-improvement-tool>). In several Australian states and territories, education departments review public schools against the nine domains in the tool. Since 2015, schools have been required to have a school improvement framework that includes annual plans, reporting, and school and external evaluation against the NSIT. Schools need to “benchmark” “performance” “on a cyclical basis”. In some cases, the aim is to enhance school performance, which might be construed in terms of better student performance, whether that be on NAPLAN or on school-based tests. Analysis of PISA results indicate that equity between students from high socio-economic backgrounds and low socio-economic backgrounds has been declining (Thompson, 2021), a situation further highlighted by both the first Gonski report ( ) and by research cited by Sahlberg & Cobbold (2022). Using a different methodology to that used by the OECD, Parker et al. found “a negative relationship exists between average academic excellence

and inequality.' (Parker et al. 2018, 855). Although it is not clear if this relationship is directional, it increases the importance of conceptual understanding of what equity in education means and why it is a necessary concept in education policymaking that aims to improve the overall performance of education systems. (cited in Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2022, p. 449) . Also see Kimber, 2020; Pinto, 2016). It is important to recognise, therefore, that, in some instances, these standardised school improvement assessments can alert education departments to schools that require additional funding or access to professional development. Consequently, there is a degree of conflict between standardisation and equity in Australian school systems. Indeed, the first goal of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration is that “The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity” and “accountability and transparency” are to be supported through “meaningful measures” (Council of Australian Governments. Education Council, 2019, pp. 4, 11-12). As will be seen later, such contradiction might provide a way for educational leaders to balance accountability to the system and responsibility for equity and inclusion in their school community.

### **Balancing system accountability and professional responsibility**

The impact of using accountability structures that rely heavily on standardised measures include (1) intensification of school leaders' and teachers' work, and (2) narrowing of curriculum towards that which is measured (Gobby, 2013; Gobby et al., 2018; Gorur, 2013; Hardy, 2015; Keddie et al., 2018; Pinto, 2016; Spina, 2021; Wilkins et al., 2021). Practices emerging when systems are government by numbers are often not aligned with the goals of inclusive education. For instance, educational leaders may discourage lower achieving students—including those with disability—from enrolling as they seek to maintain strong outcomes on standardised measures (Harris et al., 2018; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2021; Spina, 2021). There is evidence schools are increasingly using standardised data to group students by ability, a practice known to exacerbate inequality (Johnson et al., 2021; Spina, 2019). The strong systemic reliance on standardised data has eroded trust families and communities have in teachers (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2021). Such accountability structures prioritise accountabilities to the system in ways that hold school leaders and teachers to account through audit-like processes.



An alternate understanding of accountability would widen to include responsibility to communities and the environment. Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests “reciprocal accountability” is required to ensure governments and education authorities are held to account for ensuring appropriate resourcing and support is provided as schools undertake this work. We argue that understanding how to rebalance accountability structures is vital given the challenges facing education systems including significant teacher shortages, burnout, and worsening inequities during the pandemic (Sahlberg, 2020; Walsh, 2022).

Inclusion and equity can be important drivers of school leaders’ actions with respect to school improvement initiatives when there might be a perceived clash among system accountability goals and school community level responsibility goals. This conflict has been evident in Independent Public Schools (IPs) in Western Australia and in Queensland, where system accountability has been defined through the process of auditing schools (Gobby, 2013; Gobby et al., 2018; Keddie et al., 2018). Some school leaders in Western Australia and Queensland believed having IP status meant they could meet the school community’s needs better. This enhancement came through stressing “student voice” and using the “confidence” IP status conferred about academic performance to pursue care for students’ academic and wellbeing needs (Gobby et al., 2018; Keddie et al., 2018). School leaders who were interviewed by Keddie et al. (2018, pp. 385, 389) believed “flexibility” in terms of finance and “staff recruitment” assisted in fulfilling their school’s “social and moral purpose” (p. 389) — a situation that may “not necessarily be the case with all IP schools” (Keddie et al., 2018, p. 390). Nonetheless, in Australia, IPs have been more regulated and there were more policies furthering public purposes including equity (Keddie, 2016, p. 267). School leaders’ personal beliefs added to this diversity, with some school leaders in Australia considering their role to be akin to a business chief executive officer (Gobby, 2013, p. 282) while other school leaders pursued community goals (Gobby, 2013, p. 281).

These actions relate to the impact of neoliberal reforms including: (1) accountability through high-stakes testing and school autonomy; and (2) measures to expand equity and inclusion. Teachers and schools are expected to be autonomous while adhering to tighter government accountability requirements at the same time, with “autonomy” potentially “withdrawn if performance targets are not met” (Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 28). Standardised assessments can aid when a school’s

strengths are recognised. They can be detrimental through promoting standardisation. This point about the contradiction within the neoliberal paradigm has been a feature of critique of this approach for some years (Kimber & Maddox, 2003).

In this sense, there has been some commodification of schooling in that economic reforms based on market practices have been used to facilitate commercialisation, a focus on performance, and competition among public schools (Hardy, 2021; Hogan & Thompson, 2018). For some researchers, many accountability requirements have been narrowed to the quantitative (Hardy, 2021; Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 32). Wilkins et al. (2021) assert this “reductive” understanding of accountability has flourished in school systems where “performativity” and “governance” have been privileged (p. 33). Such reforms can alter some school leaders’ understanding “educational equity” to occurring “through higher academic attainment” (Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 29). This altered perspective can impact wider understandings of social justice such as the role of schools in “empowering ... students from marginalised communities to develop as critically engaged citizens” (p. 30). These findings return us to the calls for re-privileging responsibility (Cranston, 2013), along with balancing competing bureaucratic, professional, performance, and market accountabilities (Pollock & Winton, 2016) to meet the demands of leading schools for democratic as well as private purposes (Labaree, 1997).

While some school leaders’ understandings of school improvement align with neoliberal thinking (Wilkins et al., 2021), other school leaders’ commitment to equity and inclusion appears to have reduced the impact of neoliberal inspired policies on their schools. In some cases, school leaders have used greater independence, for instance, to pursue the goals of their school community (Gobby, 2013; Harris et al., 2018; Kimber, 2020; Wilkins et al., 2021). In this sense, these school leaders have used neoliberal-based policy to enact a social agenda that includes democratic understandings of equity and inclusion.

Research conducted by the authors of this paper provides further evidence of the way in which school leaders seek to balance system accountability and responsibility in the context of school improvement. School leaders, particularly those who lead schools in low socio-economic communities, spoke about running what might be described as “parallel” processes. They undertook the school improvement initiatives required by the system following a review using the standardised tool, while continuing to pursue their own reform agenda that sought to

enhance equity for their diverse student population. These actions might be affirmed by teachers affirming the standardised tool and the actions of their school leadership teams. Earlier Australian research also

To further school leaders' actions to expand equity and inclusion in their schools, policies and processes that promote ethics of care, justice, critique, and community be further supported (Carrington & Kimber, 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Furnam, 2003; Starratt, 2014). Indeed, "[i]nclusive leadership is emerging as a unique and critical capability helping organisations adapt to" diversity (Bourke & Titus, 2020, paragraph 1). "Responsibility" and "trust" are further important dimensions of inclusive ethical leadership (Carrington & Kimber, 2020; Cranston, 2013; Hardy, 2021). Consequently, "when educational institutions address such public good issues as democracy... then democratic society will be strengthened through the participation of knowledgeable and caring citizens" (Shields & Hosbal, 2020, p. 5. Also see Aly et al., 2022; Apple et al., 2022). It can be asserted, therefore, that whether school and system leaders emphasise performance outcomes on standardised measures or democratic values impacts the extent to which equity and inclusion are pursued as goals of school improvement.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have considered the way in which school leaders respond to school improvement initiatives in terms of different understandings of accountability and responsibility. Through policy making underpinned by neoliberal thinking, audit has characterised system accountability. In Australia, NAPLAN and school improvement tools are important elements of this system, promoting standardisation as performance accountability, as well as inviting comparisons among schools and commodification of schooling. Alternatively, understanding accountability as teachers' and school leaders' responsibility to their school community might connect more closely with wider democratic understandings of accountability. In Australia, it could be asserted that some school leaders have sought to balance system accountability and professional responsibility. This attempt to balance these demands connects with legislation and regulations where schools are required to engage in school improvement initiatives that are seemingly measured through students obtaining higher test scores and act in accordance with human rights and anti-discrimination legislation and inclusive education policy. Consequently, how

school improvement activities are perceived and enacted can have implications for how leaders manage for equity and inclusion. Leaders' attention might be directed towards accountability as audit, ahead of equity and inclusion, or it might be directed towards responsibility to enhancing equity for a diverse student body.

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