

Sassi

A Modern Fable

Two friends met after work for a drink in a café. One had a beer and the other had a glass of wine.

The wine was a new vintage, which had been recommended in a consumer report. It tasted very good and the friends agreed that consumer information was useful in guiding them to the best products.

One of the friends said that her mother was to have an operation the next week to replace her hip so that she could walk well again. She was not worried because published information showed that the hospital had a high success rate for these operations. The friends agreed that information on medical matters was very useful and a good thing for patients.

A police car drove past the café with sirens screaming. This reminded the friends of a story in the newspaper showing that the police in their city were very quick to respond when something happened. The figures published also showed the rate of crime and how much the police solved. The friends agreed it was good that public services should be held accountable in this way.

Then a group of children walked past on the way home from school and the two friends fell to talking about education and schools. They were mostly happy with the schools their children went to. But they did wonder if their children should be learning more. They just did not know what was going on in the school. The friends agreed that this was a good thing. As parents, they had no need to know if their children's schools were good. They agreed they had no right to know if the children were learning well. They agreed that the government had no right to measure schools and that the public had no right to know which were good schools. Education, you must see, is not for consumers; it is different from other public services; educators know best and must be trusted.

The friends were, you see, teachers.

(cw)

The Concept of Accountability in Education: Does the Swedish School System Apply?

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Introduction

A well educated population is an important competitive tool on the post-industrialised global market. In recent years, we have seen an increased focus on improved educational quality and learning outcomes. However, in order to raise educational standards, someone has to be responsible for improving pupil learning and educational quality. Consequently, many governments have given schools increased responsibility for making sure that standards or targets are met. The underlying assumption is that all pupils can reach necessary performance levels and any failure is a failure of the school. In some systems, there are also incentives attached to this responsibility. If the school fails, it will be punished, or at least not be rewarded with as much financial means as a high performing school. Such a system is generally referred to as an accountability system. High-stakes assessments followed by incentives in terms of rewards and/or sanctions are also often presented as a core feature of an accountability system (Hamilton, Stecher, Klein, 2002).

The accountability discussion has been especially intense in recent years (see, for instance, Kleinhenz, Ingvarson, 2004; Leithworth, Earl, 2001), particularly in the U.S. where the *American No Child Left Behind Act* from 2002 has caused a heated debate (Hopmann, 2007; Linn, 2000). It is therefore easy to assume that there is a common understanding and a common international discourse on the matter of accountability. This is not necessarily the case, though. In Sweden, for example, accountability is not a concept that is com-

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