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Short on Power, Long on Responsibility

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Abstract
Few education issues have received more attention in recent times than the problem of ensuring that all elementary and secondary classrooms are staffed with high-quality teachers. This concern with teacher quality is not surprising. Mandatory elementary and secondary schooling in the United States places children in the care of teachers for a significant portion of their lives. The quality of teachers and teaching is undoubtedly an important factor in shaping students' growth and learning.

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For the Success of Each Learner

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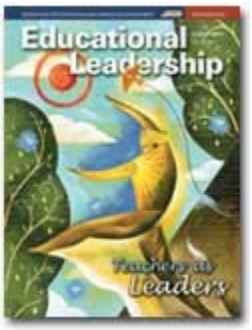
Short on Power, Long on Responsibility

Richard M. Ingersoll

To upgrade teacher quality, schools need to go beyond just holding teachers more accountable. They need to give teachers more control.



September 2007

Few education issues have received more attention in recent times than the problem of ensuring that all elementary and secondary classrooms are staffed with high-quality teachers. This concern with teacher quality is not surprising. Mandatory elementary and secondary schooling in the United States places children in the care of teachers for a significant portion of their lives. The quality of teachers and teaching is undoubtedly an important factor in shaping students' growth and learning.

Since the seminal *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, a seemingly endless stream of studies, commissions, and national reports have targeted low teacher quality as one of the central problems facing schools. Critics have blamed the performance of teachers for a myriad of societal ills: the erosion of U.S. economic competitiveness and productivity, the decline in student academic achievement, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and crime, the coarsening of our everyday discourse and culture, a decline in morals, gender and racial discrimination, and so on. As a result, in recent years, reformers at the federal, state, and local levels have pushed a host of initiatives and programs seeking to upgrade teacher quality.

Teacher Quality: The Teacher's Problem?

One of the most popular—but flawed—perspectives on the problem of ensuring teacher quality has to do with the control and accountability of the teaching force. According to this view, schools are marked by low standards, incoherence, poor management, and a lack of effort to ensure adequate control, especially in regard to their primary activity—the work of teachers with students. Schools don't hold teachers accountable; teachers simply do what they want behind the closed doors of their classrooms. The predictable result, this view holds, is low-quality performance on the part of teachers and students. Underlying this perspective is the assumption that the primary source of the teacher-quality problem lies in deficits in teachers themselves—in their preparation, knowledge, commitment, engagement, effort, and ability.

According to those who subscribe to this perspective, the obvious antidote to the ills of the education system is to increase the centralized control of schools and hold teachers more accountable—in short, to “tighten the ship.” Proponents of this view typically advocate standardized curriculums, teacher licensing examinations, merit-pay programs, and explicit performance standards coupled with more rigorous teacher and school evaluations. Many of these accountability mechanisms have been put in place with the implementation of No Child Left Behind.

Over the past two decades, I have undertaken extensive research on power, control, and accountability in schools. My research involves analyses of a wide array of data: international

data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, data from my own field interviews in schools, and national data. The latter have primarily come from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)[1] conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the data-collection arm of the U.S. Department of Education. The Schools and Staffing Survey is the largest and most comprehensive source of information on teachers available.

I have come to the conclusion that the accountability movement often involves wrong diagnoses of, and wrong prescriptions for, problems of teacher quality. (For an in-depth look at my research, see *Who Controls Teachers' Work? Power and Accountability in America's Schools*, Harvard University Press, 2003.) Accountability in schools is reasonable and necessary; the public has a right and, indeed, an obligation to be concerned with teacher performance. And there is no question that some teachers perform poorly and are inadequate for the job. However, the accountability perspective often overlooks how schools themselves contribute to the teacher-quality problem, especially in terms of their management and organization. The tighten-the-ship perspective often underestimates some of a school's most important sources and forms of organizational control and accountability, and as a result, its prescriptions can backfire.

Little Input, No Say

Although the education system in the United States is relatively decentralized, schools themselves are not. Most public and private secondary schools are highly centralized internally. Data from my research show that although school principals and governing boards often have substantial control over many key decisions in schools, teachers usually do not. For instance, teachers often have little influence over schoolwide decisions that shape the instructional program, such as establishing the overall school curriculum, conceiving changes and innovations to the curriculum, and even choosing their own course textbooks. Teachers often have little input in decisions concerned with their course schedules and class sizes, the office and classroom space they will use, and the use of school discretionary funds for classroom materials. On average, teachers have limited control over which courses they are assigned to teach and which students will be enrolled in their courses.

In addition, teachers generally have little input into schoolwide behavioral and disciplinary policies and rarely have the authority to have disruptive students removed from their classrooms, even temporarily. Likewise, teachers often have little say about what kind of ability grouping their school uses or about student placement in those groups. They typically have little influence over decisions concerning whether to promote particular students or hold them back. They usually have little input into hiring, firing, and budgetary decisions; the means and criteria by which they or the school administrators are evaluated; and the content of their own on-the-job development and inservice training programs.

Power and the Professions

The degree of power and control that practitioners hold over workplace decisions is one of the most important criteria distinguishing the degree of professionalization and the status of a particular occupation or line of work (Freidson, 1986). When it comes to organizational decisions surrounding their work, professionalized employees usually have control and autonomy approaching that of senior management. For example, academics often have equal or greater control than university administrators over the content of their teaching or research; the hiring of new colleagues; and, through the institution of peer review, the evaluation and promotion of members. They therefore have influence over the ongoing content and character of their profession. In contrast, members of lower-status occupations usually have little say over their work. The data show that, compared with people in traditional professions, teachers have limited power or control over key decisions that influence their work.

This hierarchy in schools is both understandable and consequential, given the nature of teachers' work. Schools are not simply formal organizational entities engineered to deliver academic instruction; they do not simply teach children reading, writing, and arithmetic. Schools are one of the major mechanisms for the socialization of children and youth—a process captured in the contemporary concept of social capital. The task of deciding which behavior and values are proper

and best for the young is neither trivial, neutral, nor value free. Hence, it is no surprise that those who do this work—teachers—and how they go about it are matters of intense concern. Indeed, underlying the accountability movement is the understandable assumption that education is far too important to be solely left up to educators.

As a result, teaching is an occupation beset by tension and imbalance between responsibilities and power. On the one hand, the work of teaching—helping to prepare, instruct, and rear the next generation of children—is both important and complex. But on the other hand, those entrusted with the training of this next generation are not entrusted with much control over many of the key decisions concerned with this crucial work.

The Teacher in the Middle

Control and accountability in schools can be exerted in a wide range of ways. These are not necessarily direct and obvious mechanisms, such as rules and regulations, “sticks and carrots.” Indeed, organizational analysts have long held that the most effective mechanisms for controlling employees and holding them accountable are often embedded in the day-to-day culture of the workplace and, hence, are often taken for granted and are invisible to insiders and outsiders alike (Perrow, 1986).

This is reflected in the role of teachers in schools. Teachers are akin to men or women in the middle. A useful analogy is that of supervisors, or foremen, caught between the contradictory demands and needs of two groups: their superordinates—school administrators—and their subordinates—students. Teachers are not part of management, and they are not the workers. They are in charge of, and responsible for, the workers, their students. Like other middlemen and middlewomen, teachers usually work alone and may have much latitude in seeing that their students carry out the assigned tasks. This responsibility and latitude can easily be mistaken for a kind of professional autonomy, especially in regard to tasks within classrooms. A close look at the organization of the teaching job shows, however, that although it involves much responsibility, it involves little real power.

A little recognized but telling indicator of this mixture of great responsibility and little power is the widespread practice among teachers of spending their own money to purchase classroom materials. For example, the 2000–01 Survey on the Status of the American Public School Teacher, conducted by the National Education Association, found that public school teachers spent, on average, about $443 of their own money that year for curriculum materials and classroom supplies. This amount represents approximately 1 percent of the average public school teacher's salary that year. This would be roughly equivalent to university professors spending $600 that year on their students, lawyers spending $900 that year on their clients, and doctors spending $1,200 that year on their patients.

These data suggest that in 2000–01, a public teacher workforce numbering about 3 million mostly female teachers donated a total of well over $1 billion of education materials to schools. These out-of-pocket expenditures illustrate a remarkable responsibility, commitment, and accountability on the part of individuals in the face of a remarkable lack of responsibility, commitment, and accountability on the part of the organizations that employ them.

The Effects of Teacher Control

From the public's viewpoint, a safe and harmonious environment in schools is as important as academic achievement. A “good” school is characterized by well-behaved students, a collegial and committed staff, and a general sense of cooperation, communication, and community. Likewise, a “bad” school is characterized by conflict, distrust, and turmoil among students, teachers, and administrators. To evaluate some of the consequences of teacher power and influence, I undertook a series of advanced statistical analyses of the data, looking at the effects of teacher control on a series of outcomes. These included the amount of student behavioral problems; teachers' sense of commitment, efficacy, and engagement; the degree of collegiality and cooperation among faculty and between faculty and administrators; and the levels of teacher retention and turnover.

I found that these outcomes are directly connected to the distribution of power and control in schools. Schools in which teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions have fewer problems with student misbehavior, show more collegiality and cooperation among teachers and administrators, have a more committed and engaged teaching staff, and do a better job of retaining their teachers.

However, I also found that the effects of teacher control and influence on these outcomes vary by the type of decision or issue involved. The data show that one of the most consequential areas of decision making has to do with school and classroom student behavior and discipline policies, and *not* with instructional issues. I found that teacher control over such issues is strongly related to teacher retention and turnover. Almost one in five teachers in schools with a low level of teacher control over student discipline issues were expected to depart, whereas only one in 20 were expected to depart from schools with a high level of teacher control over such issues.

Why is teacher control over student behavioral issues so consequential? The data indicate that, although teachers have substantial responsibility for enforcing student discipline and maintaining an orderly school and classroom, many have little input into creating or modifying these rules, which are largely conceived by others. Moreover, teachers often have little say over the kinds of penalties used to enforce these rules. For example, they rarely are allowed to remove students who disrupt their classrooms, must first obtain permission to discipline a student for an infraction, and may not be allowed to punish students who are caught cheating on tests. These limitations on teacher control can undermine their ability to be in charge of their classrooms and can lead to high turnover rates.

At the crux of the role and the success of teachers, then, as the men and women in the middle, is their level of control over the work for which they are responsible. On the one hand, if teachers have sufficient say over decisions surrounding those activities for which they are responsible, they will be more able to do the job properly, and, in turn, derive respect from administrators, colleagues, and students. On the other hand, if teacher control over school and classroom policies is not sufficient to accomplish the tasks for which they are responsible, teachers will be less able to get things done and have less credibility. Students can more easily ignore such teachers, principals can more easily neglect backing them, and peers may be more likely to shun them. This, in turn, could lessen teachers' commitment to their teaching job and a teaching career.

Power and Accountability

The accountability perspective, and many of the reforms to come out of it, commonly suffers from several problems. The first involves the accuracy of the diagnosis. The data show that the high degree of centralization in schools and lack of teacher control of their work—and not the opposite—often adversely affect how well schools function. Top-down accountability reforms may divert attention from the organizational sources of school problems.

Second, accountability reforms are sometimes unfair. Policymakers and reformers often question the caliber and quality of teachers, telling us time and again that teachers lack sufficient engagement, commitment, and accountability. However, the data suggest just the opposite—that teachers have an unusual degree of public service orientation and commitment and a relatively high “giving-to-getting” ratio, compared with those in other careers. The critics fail to appreciate the extent to which the teaching workforce is a source of human, social, and even financial capital in schools.

Third, accountability reforms often don't work. Top-down reforms draw attention to an important set of needs—for accountability on the part of those doing the work. But these kinds of reforms sometimes overlook another equally important set of needs—for autonomy and the good will of those doing the work. Too much organizational control may deny teachers the very power and flexibility they need to do the job effectively, undermine their motivation, and squander a valuable human resource—the high degree of commitment of those who enter the teaching occupation. Having little say in the terms, processes, and outcomes of their work, teachers may doubt they are doing worthwhile work—the very reason many of them came into the occupation in the first place—which may contribute to high rates of turnover. Consequently, accountability

reforms may not only fail to solve the problems they seek to address, but actually end up making things worse.

It makes no sense to hold people accountable for something they do not control or to give people control over something for which they are not held accountable. Accountability without commensurate power is unfair and can be harmful. Likewise, giving teachers more power alone is not the answer. Experts in organizational management and leadership have long held that accountability and power must go hand in hand in workplaces, that increases in one must be accompanied by increases in the other. Changes in both accountability *and* power are necessary to accomplish the larger systemic goal—ensuring that there are high-quality teachers in every classroom.

References

Freidson, E. (1986). *Professional powers: A study in the institutionalization of formal knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perrow, C. (1986). *Complex organizations: A critical essay*. New York: Random House.

Endnote

[1] Five cycles of SASS have been conducted: 1987–88, 1990–91, 1993–94, 1999–2000, and 2003–04. I used data primarily from the first four cycles.

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