

Decentering the State: The Normalizing Power of Educational Accountability

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In her thoughtful paper, “School Accountability Measures: Foundations of a Penal System,” Martha Perez-Mugg enumerates the multiple ways that state accountability systems measure, compare, rank, and punish school districts and schools, and—by extension—teachers, families, and students. The costs of this high-stakes system are disproportionately directed towards lower-income communities of color. These communities, and their schools, have borne the consequences of these reforms, in terms of narrowed curricula, loss of funding, and the reconstitution, closure and loss of many beloved neighborhood schools. Perez-Mugg draws on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* to describe and analyze three key features of this “punitive system:” hierarchical surveillance, normalizing judgment, and assessment. All three features, she argues, are powerful components of educational accountability systems, and work to “exert power over schools, and subsequently, the communities that they serve.”¹

Perez-Mugg illustrates her analysis by looking more closely at the features of Colorado’s educational accountability system. Much like other states, this system uses standardized measures of achievement to compare and rank schools, and school districts, and mandate certain corrective actions, including additional surveillance, state-mandated supports, loss of autonomy and accreditation, as well as the reorganization—and external take-over—of schools or districts. Such systems have broadly reshaped educational practice and governance but have more radically reshaped schools in many lower-income communities of color. Notably, as she argues, punitive accountability systems perpetuate inequality by blaming disenfranchised communities for inequitable funding for public education, decades of urban disinvestment, and other structural sources of inequality.

I appreciate and am broadly in agreement with Perez-Mugg’s analysis of the harms of high-stakes accountability systems. If anything, I think we often fail to appreciate the fundamental ways that our school systems—and our very

ideas about schools—have been re-shaped by the accountability reforms of the last several decades. Perez-Mugg powerfully casts this problem in moral terms, asking, “Is it morally just to place the burden of student performance on schools when this performance has been impacted by decades of poor investments into schools and communities themselves?” The answer, I think, is clearly no. Yet, I wonder who we might hold accountable for such injustice? And how we might go about resisting and reshaping approaches to educational accountability?

Here, I agree that Foucault is a helpful resource. Perez-Mugg opens her paper by noting that, “Foucault lays out the systematic and intentional mechanisms present within our society to exert power and control over the populace.” We should indeed be concerned about the “systematic and intentional mechanisms” of state accountability systems, and how those mechanisms often exacerbate, rather than mitigate, educational inequalities. Yet, Foucault’s analysis of power, I think, reaches beyond systematic, intentional, and state-sponsored mechanisms. In effect, the power of accountability systems lies not *solely* (nor even *primarily*) in their overt power *over* districts, schools, teachers, and students. Foucault draws our attention to how such systems work covertly, to normalize particular ideas about accountability, test-taking, and measurement. In effect, the power of such systems can be seen in our broad, uncritical acceptance of the value of comparative measures of student learning, and the necessity of such information for holding schools accountable for certain public goals.

In the remainder of my brief response, I’ll aim to offer a friendly amendment to (or perhaps an extension of) Perez-Mugg’s analysis of accountability. I argue, in effect, that we should de-center “the state,” to more fully incorporate Foucault’s insights about the less visible ways that state power operates by enlisting us all in its continual operation. For Foucault, power is less about *someone* having power *over* another. Rather, power is diffuse, and largely invisible, a machine-like apparatus that operationalizes and normalizes particular conditions. As he notes, “power is not totally entrusted to someone who would exercise it alone, over others, in an absolute fashion; rather, this machine is one in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power as well as those who are subjected to it.”² Foucault’s aim, in his analysis of concepts like madness, disease, delinquency and sexuality, was to show how such concepts come to shape and constrain our

practices, behavior, even our beliefs. For Foucault, it was:

neither a question of showing how these objects were natural and could be simply discovered by proper scientific methods, nor of showing how they were nothing but illusions or ideological products. It was, rather, a question of showing how they were established as scientific objects in a set of historical practices and thus became part of our experience of reality.³

In this reading, concepts like academic achievement, or adequate yearly progress, are not just ideas imposed on schools, by particular state officials, but ones that developed over time, in concert with various political and technical processes. Their power, Foucault might argue, comes not just from their use in particular accountability frameworks, but in how widely they are accepted, and how they come to shape the daily practices of teaching and learning. Management techniques thus, as Foucault notes, define “power relations in terms of the everyday life of men.”⁴

The state—or at least various state actors and agencies—certainly play a role in the operationalization of such concepts. But Foucault—especially as his thinking evolved—became even more suspicious of efforts to center the state as an agent of power. Rather than theorizing the state, or government, for instance, he coined the term ‘governmentality’ underscoring how the state is a historical and divergent series of practices and technologies of power. As Foucault argues, “the state is not a universal nor in itself an autonomous source of power ... the state is nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities.”⁵ In effect, Foucault wants to decenter our analysis—moving away from the state, as a repressive political actor—to focus on understanding governmental practices.

Here, the Colorado accountability frameworks profiled by Perez-Mugg offer a compelling example of what Foucault might call an ‘apparatus’ of power. The details of such frameworks—the cut scores, color coding schemes, and language of performance, improvement, and turnaround—offer a vivid illustration of how ideas are instantiated into daily life and become normal features of increasingly taken-for-granted practices in schools, districts, and central state offices. Such management tools, Stephen Ball reminds us, function as a “dis-

course, a system of possibility for knowledge.”⁶ Such tools have power precisely because we no longer see them. This power also comes from the fact there are no clear actors doing anything to us; we are all immersed in, and participate in perpetuating, the very practices and discourses of accountability that constrain the work of teaching and learning.

That doesn’t mean there isn’t resistance. Many teachers and students certainly recognize the harms of these systems and subvert various accountability efforts. In 2015, for instance, roughly 675,000 elementary and high school students nationwide opted out of taking state standardized tests, with particularly high numbers in New York, New Jersey, and Colorado. In at least some cases, this movement prompted change. After widespread opt-outs in Colorado, for instance, legislators called for fewer testing requirements, especially in high school, and for shifting towards “more meaningful” tests like the PSAT/SAT. These were victories, of a kind. But they were quite limited: both in terms of who they benefitted (more advantaged communities and districts, not ones facing severe accountability pressures) and in how little they challenged more fundamental ideas about accountability in education. Two small examples may illustrate these limits.

In my research on opting out in Colorado, I heard from many parents concerned about the overreach of state accountability systems. Yet those parents were also proud of the excellent ratings their neighborhood schools received from those same systems. Such accountability data is also used in other third-party ratings systems, most prominently by GreatSchools.org, whose color-coded rankings are prominently embedded in housing search engines such as Zillow, Trulia, and Redfin.⁷ School ratings, and the information that fuels them, increasingly shape our understanding of what counts as a “good school.” These discourses about school quality are then reflected in property values in many neighborhoods, and the financial decision-making of many families. This role—fueling many decisions to choose a community for its “good schools”—further cements the influence and ubiquity of school accountability measures. Such rankings have reshaped our very idea of what constitutes a “good school,” and many families—even ones vaguely opposed to standardized testing—might actually protest their absence.

Likewise, I heard from parents who were critical of standardized testing for accountability purposes, but broadly supportive of other forms of standardized testing—like Advanced Placement and college entrance exams—that might more directly benefit their children. Viewpoints like these were widely shared and contributed to Colorado’s choice to shift to recognized, “name brand” tests like the PSAT and SAT that parents were more likely to accept or see in their children’s best interest. Testing, after all works both ways: disciplining some communities, while elevating others. Accountability systems—and third-party rankings—work to recognize certain (usually more affluent) schools and districts for their performance. Such systems act as a means of disguising inequalities, in part by converting inequalities into measures of merit. Using sociologist Mitchell Stevens’ evocative phrase, such systems help families “launder privilege”: securing advantages for their children in an increasingly competitive and economically precarious landscape, while also preserving the myth of education as a meritocratic system.⁸

In both of these examples—property values and college readiness—discourses of school accountability are intimately tied to positional advantages. As David Labaree reminds us, such positional injustices reflect the steady ascendance of individual understandings, or what he terms “social mobility goals” for American public education: “Increasingly, (this goal) provides us with the language we use to talk about schools, the ideas we use to justify their existence, and the practices we mandate in promoting their reform. As a result, public education has increasingly become to be perceived as a private good that is harnessed to the pursuit of private advantage.”⁹ Understanding the true power of accountability reforms—and working to confront them—demands that we wrestle with the ways that these reforms—ostensibly about protecting certain public standards for all students—have been harnessed to the pursuit of private advantage. That is, admittedly, a harder task. But it’s perhaps a sharper (and more Foucauldian) view of how accountability reforms—while widely criticized—remain quite powerful.

1 Martha Perez-Mugg, “School Accountability Measures: Foundations of a Penal System,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).

2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977): 156.

3 Johana Oksala, “From Biopower to Governmentality,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, eds. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, and Jana Sawicki (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2013), 320-336: 324.

4 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205, quoted in Stephen J. Ball, *Foucault and Education: Disciplines and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 156.

5 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, eds. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Springer, 2008), 77.

6 Ball, *Foucault and Education*, 157-8.

7 GreatSchools.org has been criticized for how closely its rankings system correlates with the demographics of schools; schools with more lower-income students receive lower marks. Researchers have found that such third-party school rating systems have accelerated divergence in housing values and potentially fueled segregation by neighborhood. See: Sharique Hasan and Anuj Kumar, “Digitization and Divergence: Online School Ratings and Segregation in America,” (2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3265316> While GreatSchools revised its algorithm, the revised rankings are still closely correlated with school demographics. See: Matt Barnum, “GreatSchools Overhauls Ratings in Bid to Reduce Link with Race and Poverty,” *Chalkbeat*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/9/24/21453357/greatschools-overhauls-ratings-reduce-link-race-poverty>

8 Mitchell L. Stevens, *Creating a Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 248.

9 David Labaree, “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals,” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (1997): 43.