
Title of the project: Towards Shared Accountability: Rethinking the Locus and Scale of Assessment and Improvement in Education

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Web page: <https://portalrecerca.uab.cat/ca/projects/towards-shared-accountability-rethinking-the-locus-and-scale-of-a-2>

Area: Education, Schools, Public Policy, Accountability, Public Management, Evaluation

What?

Accountability has emerged as a central feature of educational governance worldwide. However, the prevailing accountability approach in education, the so-called performance-based accountability (PBA), has led to adverse effects and discontent among key stakeholders in the education sector. PBA, with its focus on individual schools as primary account providers, intensifies competitive pressures, fosters institutional fragmentation, and often stigmatizes disadvantaged schools.

ACCOUNTED asserts that optimizing accountability requires not only a shift in focus but also a change in the locus of account-giving practice: from individual schools to broader school networks. This recalibration of accountability, emphasizing shared responsibility among schools within a network, holds the key to fostering meaningful and cooperative relationships, initiating sustained improvement dynamics, and mobilizing additional educational resources at the local level.

Who?

The project is led by **Antoni Verger**, Professor of Sociology at the UAB and research fellow at the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA). With a cross-disciplinary training in sociology and education studies, his research examines the relationship between governance institutions and education policy. In recent years, he has specialized in the study of public-private partnerships, school autonomy and accountability policies in education. He is one of the lead editors of the *World Yearbook of Education* and the *Journal of Education Policy*. Contact: antoni.verger@uab.cat

Why?

Performance-based accountability (PBA) has spread rapidly in educational systems in recent decades. PBA consists of holding schools accountable for students' performance. According to their achievement levels, schools may face consequences of different nature: material rewards, staff career promotion, public recognition, staff changes and even school closure. Through such policies, educational authorities want to encourage schools to align their instruction to the system's learning goals, and make teachers work

more effectively towards students' improvement (Tóth & Csapó, 2022). Some studies corroborate that PBA contributes to increasing students' learning outcomes (Chiang, 2009). Nonetheless, research also shows how performance pressure may generate numerous undesired side-effects, including narrowing the curriculum down to the assessed domains, the intensification of teacher- and test-centred pedagogies, and non-inclusive educational practices such as grouping students according to their abilities or pushing out low-performing students from tests (Cohen-Vogel, 2011; Mittleman & Jennings, 2018; Hofflinger & von Hippel, 2020). Research also shows that PBA increases the levels of competition between and within schools, and the stigmatisation of certain schools (DeMatthews & Serafini, 2021).

How?

We propose altering not only the focus, but also the locus of accountability: from individual schools to broader geographic areas. Revisiting the scale of accountability and placing shared responsibility as a core policy principle means making schools both aware of the situation of other schools in their area and committed to their improvement. In this way, education policy can better promote meaningful and cooperative relations between schools and generate enduring improvement dynamics. Informed by social contingency theory (see Lerner & Tetlock 1999), the shared accountability model (SAM) we propose is based on the general premise that actors' behaviours depend on prevailing institutional arrangements, and on related systems of incentives. Scaling up the locus of accountability will alter the structure of incentives for school actors and dispose them to embrace cooperation as a more meaningful way to advance quality education. The SAM will contribute to re-territorialize education policy and favour educational improvement dynamics at the school network level that last.

When?

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