
Educational Accountability: High and Low Points of Its Implementation and Challenges for Latin America

Accountability educacional: luces y sombras en su implementación y desafíos para América Latina

LUIS FELIPE DE LA VEGA RODRÍGUEZ

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
ldelaveg@uc.cl

Resumen: Este trabajo busca avanzar en esta discusión existente respecto del aporte del mecanismo de *accountability* educacional al desarrollo de procesos de mejoramiento escolar. Para ello, se realizó una revisión de estudios de implementación de políticas educativas que incorporan *accountability*, preguntándose qué elementos de éste favorecen o dificultan el mejoramiento escolar, enfatizando la relación de estos hallazgos con los contextos en que se han aplicado estas políticas. Al final del trabajo, se incluye una discusión de los resultados de la revisión y proyecciones para el análisis de este fenómeno en América Latina.

Palabras clave: *accountability* educacional; mejoramiento escolar; implementación de políticas educativas; educación en América Latina.

Abstract: This work is intended to propel forward the current discussion regarding the contribution of the educational accountability mechanism to the development of school improvement processes. A literature review of a set of implementation studies of educational policies that incorporate educational accountability was conducted to discover what elements of this mechanism help or hinder educational improvement in the specific contexts in which they are applied. A discussion of the results of this review and projections for Latin America are presented at the end of the paper.

Keywords: educational accountability; educational improvement; educational policies implementation; Latin American education.

BACKGROUND

The last decades have been characterized by the proliferation of educational reforms in the world. Many of them seek to improve the learning achievement of students or other results (Mourshed, Chijioke, y Barber, 2010; Ariagada, 2002). One of the most common result-oriented mechanisms is educational accountability. This is a control strategy that highlights the government's obligation to take responsibility and answer for its actions to society (Ackerman, 2005; CLAD, 2000). Accountability has acquired renewed importance in association with the New Public Management paradigm (Ramió, 2005), which for its part is connected with neo-liberalism and its influence on public policies and reforms to the state (Gewirtz, 2002; Hopmann, 2008).

In the educational field, accountability aims to put pressure on schools to promote educational improvement. This term has several different meanings (McBeath, 2011). Nevertheless, there is consensus about school improvement: it is a process that requires the implementation of a theory of action directed to the achievement of goals related to teaching and learning and the conditions under which this process occurs (Bellei et al., 2010; Elmore, 2010). Transformations of school performance and the dynamics of core pedagogical work on improving as well have a sustainability condition, or continuous improvement (Hargreaves y Fink, 2006). Additionally, Murillo and Krichesky (2012) argue that the literature on school improvement has consolidated the idea that the improvement occurs through nonlinear phases because these decisions in some cases help to advance, while in others, cause setbacks in the process.

McMeekin (2006) states that there are six components in an educational accountability system: standards, information, consequences, authority, capacity building, and communication of the objectives and benefits of accountability. Also, four major stakeholders are involved in this mechanism. First, citizens or educational service users. Then, politicians and policy makers, who define and measure objectives and actions for improvement. Third, the organizational providers who deliver educational services. Finally, teachers, or "direct service providers".

Educational accountability can be organized in different ways, depending on the objectives emphasized for each educational system. The most common form is *performance accountability* -described above- which is primarily aimed at improving educational outcomes (Müller y Hernandez, 2010). This type has also been referred to as *market-oriented* (Darling-Hammond, 2004), due to its status of tool which facilitates parents' choice of schools based on academic results.

Other types of educational accountability are *bureaucratic accountability* (oriented by the challenge of equality, which requires that all educational stakeholders ensure that norms, educational programs, and other practices are fulfilled for all students) and *professional accountability* (which seeks that schools and teachers take responsibility for providing learning experiences that account for their students' expectations and offer them more development opportunities) (Darling-Hammond y Asher, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 2004).

This article will especially emphasize performative accountability, due to the fact that it is the type that is most often present in the debate about educational policies, as described below. However, the attempt will be made to approach accountability in a way that makes it possible to recognize the other typologies.

EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A CONTROVERSIAL STRATEGY FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

The history and analysis of educational accountability as an educational improvement strategy is controversial. It is possible to say that there is no consensus concerning its advisability in this area (Hopkins, 2008; McBeath, 2011). There is tension between different positions, which can be arranged on a continuum that starts with a defense of accountability and ends with a profound critique. The camp defending accountability highlights its effectiveness in the “mobilization of educational systems and actors” (Mourshed et al., 2010) and gives special importance to the standardized test score gains of educational systems that have implemented accountability as a central policy, such as England (Barber, 2004) and some U.S. states (Carnoy y Loeb, 2002; Figlio y Loeb, 2011). This group states that positive changes are presumably caused by the greater clarity of the roles of the entities that participate in the system and the effect of different incentives for action.

The critical camp in this discussion opposes the meaning, processes, and results of accountability, especially when standardized tests are the main information source for evaluating improvement. It has been stated that accountability draws attention away from the teaching-learning process, because exaggerated energies are spent on trying to succeed in these measurements (Hargreaves, 2012, Hargreaves y Fink, 2006). In addition, some studies have found negative effects which include bad practices of stakeholders, systemic vices (cheating to achieve high educational outcomes), and problems to develop learning opportunities for students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hargreaves, 2012). From a theoretical and political point of view, criticism of market-based accountability states that its logic affects the nature of educational work, the subjectivity and the professional identity of the partici-

pants involved (Apple, 2003). Ball (2003) emphasizes the concept of performativity, which he defines as an expectation of control concealed under the guise of fostering school and teacher autonomy. Achievement parameters are defined that show what is valuable and what is not, thus orienting participants' actions.

Finally, intermediate positions have been developed, which aim to harmonize the need for accountability with the role of the school in defining its own goals (Bogotch, Miron, y Biesta, 2007; Espinola y Claro, 2010; Hopkins, 2008, 2010). These positions promote the articulation between the demand for achievements and objectives in the whole system, and the strengthening of professionalism and responsibility-taking in the school. Proposals in this direction have been labeled "positive pressure" (Fullan, 2010) or "intelligent accountability" (Sahlberg, 2010).

The differences between the positions described do not make it possible to clearly establish whether accountability fosters or hinders educational improvement. It is necessary to describe cases in more detail and conduct more specific studies to advance the analysis of this phenomenon.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES TO THE REFINEMENT OF THE ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

After several years of discussion about the issue, it is still not possible to state that consensus has been reached. Analysis remains highly polarized, and there is no end in sight for this controversy.

A large part of the research about this mechanism is based on the discussion about the relationship between accountability and the achievement of high scores in standardized tests (Carnoy y Loeb, 2003; Loeb, 2007; Yaekyoung, 2008). A major reason for this phenomenon is the relevance of emblematic policies which have included this strategy, such as No Child Left Behind in the United States. This article proposes that the analysis of such achievements does not contribute to the detailed identification of the beneficial or harmful effects of the educational accountability mechanism, nor does it indicate in which contexts these effects occur. For this reason, the analysis must be refined and linked with its context through the study of the implementation of educational policies. This phenomenon is understood as the moment in which a State initiative is carried out in a certain given context or environment (Durlak y Dupré, 2010). When this happens, usually not all processes occur as planned, due to associated complexities such as the social context, stakeholders, unforeseen circumstances, etc. (Parsons, 2007). In the case of accountability, experts seem to agree that these mechanisms should not have the same characteristics or operate in the same way in different realities in which they

are implemented. The McKinsey Report (2010) notes that this mechanism should be designed in accordance with the level of educational development of educational systems. Also, from a more critical point of view, it privileges the explanatory power of external factors in its analysis of educational phenomena. Historically, socioeconomic status and cultural capital have been regarded as contextual elements that affect educational processes (Bogotch et al., 2007). For these reasons, context is a key variable in the analysis of the suitability of educational accountability, because it helps to explain the success or failure of a strategy in a specific territory.

This article will analyze the results described in studies of the implementation of accountability policies around the world, seeking to identify positive and negative effects or practices generated within the framework of said policies, and intending to establish a link between these findings and relevant elements of the educational context in which the policies analyzed are implemented. More specifically, it will seek to detect the presence of positive or negative effects which occur relatively independently from contexts. In addition, it will analyze if social and educational contexts are associated with a specific type of accountability. Using these elements, the study will attempt to offer information and analyses about strengths, weaknesses, and options to consider regarding the incorporation of educational accountability to contexts where it has not been widely applied, such as Latin America.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: METHODOLOGY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

We conducted a review of articles published in scientific journals that presented results on the implementation of educational policies based on the presence of accountability. The Web of Science database was used in the first stage of this search, considering the period between 2002 and 2012. The search criteria included the terms “educational policy”, “accountability”, and “educational accountability”. The articles included concerned eminently empirical studies. Studies focused on other stages of these policies (design and outcome evaluation), were excluded, as were non-empirical studies. 72 articles were initially identified, 13 of which were selected.

Based on the initial results obtained, we decided to extend the review to other studies. We considered those that were mentioned in the selected articles. A third specific search was carried out including the journals which had published the largest number of selected articles. All their publications in the last five years (2007-2012) were reviewed. Finally, due to the fact that there are only a few journals in Spanish indexed in Web of Science, a final review was made of the most influential

education journals indexed in the Scielo database. The expansion of the search made it possible to extend the corpus to include a total of 37 articles.

RESULTS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

A summary table (Table 1) was developed to identify and synthesize relevant elements of the papers that were part of the analysis.

The first element that must be highlighted is that the implementation studies found through the search above refer to processes that took place outside Latin America. Apart from being a relevant element for analysis, this involved the need to study in more detail the social and educational contexts of the systems that were analyzed in the articles chosen. As a result, we defined them as procedures that, based on an adequate knowledge of the characteristics of the territories where a certain policy was applied, could shed light on the situation in other places such as Latin America.

Table 1. Synthesis of the literature review

AUTHOR	DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY
Hatch, 2013	Describes the implementation of accountability in Norway
CEP, 2007	Follow-up and evaluation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act
CEP, 2009	Describes of the implementation of the NCLB act in two states
Collins, Reis & Stobart, 2010	Study of 6th grade science lessons, comparing accountability policies in England with those of Wales.
Daly & Finnigan, 2009	Study on the social relationships constructed to deal with reforms, especially accountability
Ehren & Swaborn, 2012	Study on the cheating strategies related with accountability
Fernandes, 2009	Analysis of the educational and evaluation system in Portugal
Hay & Macdonald, 2008	Study of how Standards are interpreted in schools
Hayward, 2007	Describes the Scottish educational system, specifying its evaluation and accountability

AUTHOR	DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY
Vazquez & Darling-Hammond, 2008	Studies the results of Texas in the context of the NCLB and what happens with the minorities.
Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012	Analysis of the uncertainties of implementing a high-stakes accountability system in Australia
CEP, 2008	Describes how classroom time distribution has changed under the NCLB
CEP, 2007	Describes the Supplemental Educational Services offered under NCLB
CEP, 2007	Describes the work of State educational agencies under NCLB
Muller & Hernandez, 2010	Analyzes the implications of different types of accountability in Europe
Strunk & Mac Eaching, 2011	Analyzes whether improvement contracts under NCLB foster the attainment of goals in schools
CEP,	Analysis of the effects of the Reading First program
CEP, 2009	Describes the effects of NCLB on curricular implementation in 3 states.
CEP, 2009	Analyzes the implementation of accountability in Washington DC
Taylor, 2009	Analyzes the effects of accountability in South Africa
CEP, 2008	Analyzes the implementation of the NCLB in rural schools
World Bank, 2011	Describes evidence from accountability policies with positive effects
Barrera, Fasih; Patrinos, 2009	Analyzes the characteristics of SBM
Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007	Compares the practices of schools with different scores in tests used for accountability
Anderson (2011)	State of the art of research on perceptions about accountability
Lipman (2002)	Analyzes the effects of an accountability-based reform in Chicago
Loeb (2007)	Evaluates the effect of local control on the accountability implementation

AUTHOR	DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY
MacDermontt (2007)	Analyzes the implementation of 4 cases of reforms which include accountability
Maier (2009)	Comparative study of 2 German states which use assessment for accountability.
Yaekyung, 2008	Meta-analysis of research on accountability
Waiman (2006)	Use of data for improvement in an accountability context
Seashore (2005)	Study about teachers ´ meaning regarding to accountability
Palmer (2010)	Analyzes the effect of accountability on the lessons taught
Valli (2007)	Studies how accountability policies have modified teachers´ tasks
Finnigan (2007)	Analyzes the effect of accountability policies on teachers
Booher-Jennings, J. (2005).	Analyzes one accountability policy, observing the institutional theory

DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXTS

The articles analyzed studied processes experienced in ten countries. In order to enrich the study with general information about the context where the educational accountability policies analyzed were implemented, the following classification was generated, in which these territories were classified according to their social and educational context, considering relevant and comparable indicators (Table 2). Social and educational contextual categories were chosen because, as noted above, experts agree on the relevance of the context in the analysis of educational accountability. Therefore, the study sought to characterize the national contexts in which the articles analyzed are situated, considering their educational and social status, and then generated a classification upon the basis of these variables. The methodology used is described below.

Two possible categories were considered to classify the social and educational realities of these territories. First, it was established that a *Top* social reality existed when a territory obtained one of the top places according to the Human Devel-

opment Index (UNDP, 2012) and the Gini coefficient (UNICEF, 2012). If these results were not among the top 25 places, the territory was grouped under the second category: *below the top*. In the case of educational information, a country was classified under *Top* educational reality when its located between the first countries in the index of Pearson Learning Curve (2012). In contrast, if index were lower than top countries, the average, they were grouped under the *below the top category*. It was an analytical exercise to distinguish that group of countries with high scores on social and educational issues (also considering their status as *models* for the study of success), with respect to other countries, as a way of analyzing different contexts.

This classification will be employed in an in-depth study of the results of the analysis of the literature review. As the table shows, no countries with a *less high* social reality and a *high* educational reality were found.

Table 2. Countries analyzed in the literature review, and their socio-educational contexts

TOP SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL REALITY	TOP SOCIAL REALITY AND BELOW DE TOP EDUCATIONAL REALITY	BELOW THE TOP SOCIAL REALITY AND TOP EDUCATIONAL REALITY	BELOW THE TOP SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL REALITIES
England	United States		Portugal
The Netherlands	Spain		South Africa
Australia	Germany		
Scotland	Norway		

Centers of attention of educational accountability research

The first part of this chapter will describe what is emphasized by the articles analyzed, as an expression of scientific interest in the implementation of educational accountability. First, we analyzed the types of educational accountability that are most frequently covered in the articles studied. As pointed out at the beginning of this study, the mechanism analyzed can acquire a range of structures and characteristics. A strong interest in “performative accountability” was observed. In addition, it was noted that, in contrast with performative accountability, the other analyzed systems combine elements from different systems (See summary table). This means that the only “pure” type of accountability mechanism covered in the analysis was performative accountability. This finding can be linked with the existence of a clearer discourse and literature about this model compared to others.

A second element concerns the characteristics of the educational systems in which the articles analyzed study educational accountability. Upon the basis of the characterization of each system performed in the articles, they were classified according to their closeness to the accountability typologies described in the literature review. The review again reveals that scientific interest tends to focus on educational systems that use accountability as a mechanism to exert pressure on the participants of the educational process in order to attain better academic results, normally in terms of external learning measurements. Regarding the types of accountability which prompt less scientific interest, it can be observed that they fundamentally combine efforts aimed at objectives such as performance in terms of results with other criteria associated with concern for teacher diversity or autonomy.

Complementing the previous result, a specific study was conducted on whether the analysis of the articles included references to the notion of accountability as a democratic instrument, that is, as a strategy aimed at bringing citizens closer to the actions executed in the public sphere. This element was considered because accountability began life as an effort to allow citizens to get closer to and control public action. Despite this, authors such as Ydesen (2014) point out that assessment, as part of performative accountability, may be detrimental to the strengthening of democracy, given that standardized tests are highly specialized instruments which inhibit criticism or dissenting positions in the educational field.

In order to conduct this analysis, the texts were reviewed in an attempt to identify whether this aspect was considered in the analysis of accountability systems. The results obtained in this case were similar to the one previously described, because few mentions of these aspects were observed.

This, the most relevant absence from such an analysis of accountability, makes it possible to hypothesize that discussion on this mechanism is more technical-educational than political in nature. This is mentioned not only due to the explicit lack of political or democratic concepts in the analysis, but also because of the limited presence of studies on the links between accountability and objectives other than academic achievement.

Finally, it seemed relevant to include the notion of educational improvement with which the authors of the articles analyzed this mechanism. As previously mentioned, this term has a range of meanings and connotations, depending on the variables used to describe how educational improvement occurs in a given school.

A look at the articles reveals the predominant presence of references to previously mentioned aspects; that is, they emphasize the view that educational improvement is expressed as better academic performance. However, most of the studies analyzed state that this factor is not the only sign of an improving educa-

tional space, and note that it is observed alongside improvements in the skills of the people involved in the educational process and in the mechanisms and organizations associated with it (40.5% of the articles mention this combination). Second, a large percentage of the articles studied mention the performance variable as that which most accurately expresses educational improvement (32.4%). Other articles also allude to educational improvement, which is expressed in learning assessments, both internal and internal (13.5%), while a number of them state that this process is rather a factor that leads to the development of more egalitarian societies (8.1%).

Finally, from the point of view of the socio-educational contexts of the systems analyzed, it is interesting to note that none of the articles that refer to countries with high social and educational realities mention educational improvement as an element exclusively related with performance. They present a link that concerns learning, understood as an object that can be assessed internally and externally. In addition, it is in these countries that an association can be observed between educational improvement and social equality.

The above positions suggest that there is a relevant degree of divergence in the criteria for analyzing the implementation of educational accountability, with tension being present in connection with expectations about its suitability, which are mediated by what has been labeled as the contextual factor and by the definitions of the accountability system being analyzed and its prospects of improvement.

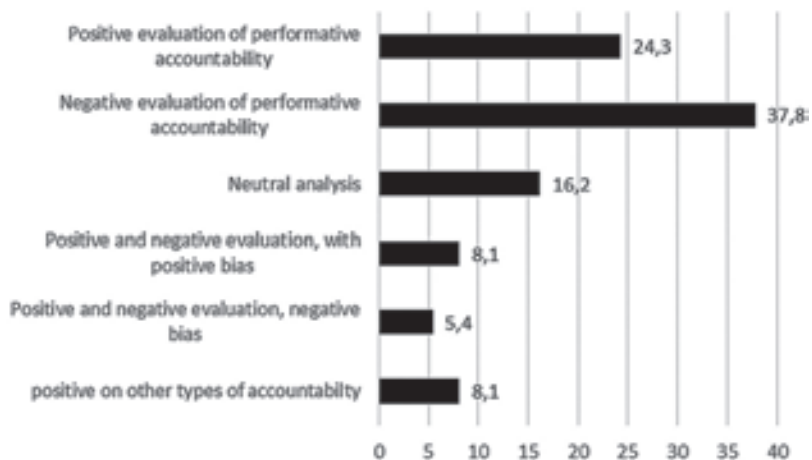
Analysis of the effects of the implementation of educational accountability

The second part of this review is specifically aimed at identifying relevant variables associated with the implementation of educational accountability and its relationship with educational improvement, recognizing which elements support its development and which limit or hinder it.

The first element to be studied will be the “tone” of the analysis, that is, whether the articles analyzed show a general opinion, either positive or negative, regarding the link between accountability and educational improvement. In order to do this, the texts were categorized considering the following possibilities about their tone: a) positive regarding performative accountability; b) negative regarding performative accountability; c) neutral (that is, without a clear valuation of the system analyzed); d) a combination of positive and negative analyses, with a positive bias regarding performative accountability; e) positive and negative analyses, with a negative bias regarding performative accountability, f) positive regarding

other types of accountability. Each text was classified considering the categories described. (Figure 1).¹

Figure 1. General analysis of educational accountability in the articles analyzed



This process reveals a mostly negative tone in the analysis of performative accountability. 43.2% of the articles express the view that the implementation of this type of accountability hinders educational improvement. In contrast, 32.4% of the articles have a positive view of performative accountability, that is, there is a clear division in the analysis of its usefulness for improving education.

Another noteworthy point is that, when other types of accountability than the performative one were mentioned, a negative “tone” was not observed, that is, these articles tend to identify the advantages of the system for educational improvement rather than its disadvantages.

If we take into account elements of the social and educational context in which these accountability mechanisms are implemented, it is remarkable that the articles which analyze this process in countries with high educational and social results do not consider a definition of improvement that is only based on academic performance, and, as a result, the tone of their analysis is not related to that criterion. On the other hand, countries whose social reality was classed as “high” and whose educational reality was categorized as “less high” (USA and Germany) display the

¹ This analysis was conducted considering that different countries may have different accountability mechanisms.

largest concentration of articles in which the analysis of performative accountability has a positive tone. However, in the case of the US there are more studies that provide a negative evaluation of the introduction of educational accountability.

This element confirms the divergence in the evaluation criteria used to measure the suitability of accountability in the articles analyzed. In addition, this strengthens the idea that the study of the merits of accountability involves the combination of the analysis of the model implemented with its results, with context acting as a mediating variable.

MAIN STRENGTHS OF EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ATTAINING EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Afterwards, in all the articles analyzed, we identified strengths of the accountability due to their contribution to educational improvement. In order to do this, we considered the notion of educational improvement used as a reference point in each article. The results obtained (Table 3), clearly outline two types of strengths. One set of strengths concerns the power to improve academic results. Thus, it is highlighted that their main advantage is efficacy, because they lead to better results (23.5%). Likewise, other strengths of accountability systems which researchers regard as boosters of educational improvement are the use of information that they provide and the pressure exercised to ensure that educational systems align their curriculum with national expectations.

Table 3. Strengths of accountability regarding the challenge posed by educational improvement (mentions in analyzed articles)

STRENGTHS	FREQ.	%
People become accountable for their actions, which increases professionalism	5	14.7
Helps to improve academic results	8	23.5
Improves the use of information about academic results	3	8.8
Contributes to internal assessment	1	2.9
Useful frame of reference to make improvements	3	8.8
Increases the transparency of the system	1	2.9
Increases the time available for teaching	1	2.9
Improves the control of what happens in the school	1	2.9

STRENGTHS	FREQ.	%
Is linked with good support programs	2	5.9
Increases curricular alignment	5	14.7
Fosters the pressure exerted by stakeholders	3	8.8
Fosters the increase of local authority	1	2.9
Total	34	100

Regarding these strengths, if we consider the context of the system analyzed by the articles, those that stress the efficacy of educational accountability, mostly in terms of the improvement of academic results, refer to the analysis of different socio-educational contexts—and so concern the analysis of different accountability types.

The second type of strengths concerns the notion that accountability makes systems generate more responsibility among their participants, thus promoting professionalism (14.7%); in other words, accountability fosters the development of the skills of those involved in the educational process. These strengths tended to be ascribed in the analysis of systems with high social and educational realities were those to which these strengths tended to be ascribed.

MAIN WEAKNESSES OF EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ATTAINING EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Finally, we studied the elements that, from the point of view of the articles analyzed, are identified as weaknesses of educational accountability concerning the objective of educational improvement. A relevant finding which must be initially remarked is the clear recognition of more weaknesses than strengths in these mechanisms, regardless of their structure. More weaknesses are mentioned, and more variety can be observed in their identification.

Upon the basis of the problems identified as weaknesses (Table 4), three broad groups can be established. The first refers to the notion that accountability is not necessarily accompanied by an increase in skills, which challenges the sustainability of the educational improvement generated by accountability. The second allows us to identify a set of problems associated with implementation which show that these mechanisms, for a number of reasons, cannot be put into practice exactly in the way they are designed. The third draws attention to a set of bad practices that creep into educational management and pedagogy as a result of trying to meet pre-

established goals and “fool” the system in order to satisfy its expectations. In this case, the articles mention phenomena known as *teaching to test* (devoting relevant teaching time to preparing students for a standardized test) or *cheating* (fooling the system, for instance by making students who may perform poorly not take the test).

Table 4. Weaknesses of accountability regarding the challenge posed by educational improvement (% of mentions in the articles)

DISADVANTAGE	FREQ.	%
Does not develop skills / It generates pressure more than anything else	20	27.8
Preparing students for tests; cheating	7	9.7
Promotes superficial learning	1	1.4
Does not contribute to internal assessment	1	1.4
Standards perceptions are not understood	7	9.7
Too many requirements	2	2.8
Negatively affects morals	2	2.8
Restricts the curriculum	6	8.3
Problems to make it work adequately	12	16.7
Problems for evaluating academic achievement	2	2.8
It is not effective	11	15.3
It generates problems at the system level (inequality, etc.)	1	1.4
Total	72	100

If the contextual variable is considered in the analysis, we can observe that the weakness of not developing skills is not specifically associated with a specific context. This situation is relevant, inasmuch as it suggests that educational accountability may not by itself be a sustainable tool for educational improvement. Concerning bad practices, they are mostly identified in the US, one of the countries characterized by performative accountability.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The analysis described can support some conclusions, connected both to the link between educational accountability and educational improvement as well as to this implications for Latin American education policies.

First, having included the context variable can be considered a good decision, since it contributes to explaining the phenomena that take place when educational accountability is implemented. Its inclusion revealed that the discussion has been mostly about a specific type of accountability, and that it is not the type most commonly used in the highest social and educational realities. In addition, it made it easier to identify which advantages and disadvantages are shared by all accountability types and which are specific to some of them. However, despite the progress made in the analysis, we estimate that there remain more questions than answers. Some of these questions are: is performative educational accountability an indispensable requirement for less educationally developed countries?; why do countries with the highest social and educational contexts use the performative system not exclusively, but instead combine it with others, or simply do not apply it?

Second, this look at the implementation of educational accountability systems reveals that discussion on this mechanism has not progressed beyond polarization. Nevertheless, we believe that this does not invalidate the analysis of implementation, but that in fact the opposite is true. Research on the implementation of accountability (Deleon y Varda, 2009; Hill y Hupe, 2002; Barrett, 2004) has revealed the need to study this phenomenon more attentively, mostly due to the fact that the processes generated when such policies are set into motion have multiple effects and work in different directions (Datnow y Park, 2009), which forces scholars to perform exacting analyses to reach more decisive conclusions. It is clear that the isolated analysis of designs of accountability models, like the generalized study of their implementation, is insufficient to provide a full response about their suitability. Instead, we tend to believe that there will be “different suitabilities”, because the settings where education operates and the objectives of incorporating accountability are profoundly divergent.

Considering the above, it seems important to identify some reflections focused on the Latin American situation, based on the findings described. Although it is not enough to say that countries should apply the models used in the territories with the best results, it would not be advisable, either, to go to the other extreme and decide that the strategies used by countries slightly more similar to Latin American ones are the most suitable for this region.

As mentioned in previous sections, the methodology used in the literature review did not yield any articles specifically about Latin America. Nevertheless, this section will describe two different examples from this region to complement the previous analysis. The first is Colombia, where accountability is linked with a series of educational definitions and evaluations that schools conduct internally. Evaluation mechanisms at the level of the educational system have yet to be associated with consequences (MEN, 2013). The Chilean case is different, because the country has legally defined an Education Quality Assurance System which includes all the components of performative accountability. Even though the available research does not provide robust conclusions about the implementation of these examples, some studies in Chile have already replicated the above discussion concerning the advantages and disadvantages of accountability. They reveal that, in this country, the mechanism is valued due to its ability to organize basic functions in the school, but that it is also criticized due to the pressure derived from having to attain good scores on the national test, which generates distortions in the functioning of educational centers (Elaqua, 2013).

Considering the reflection conducted in this article and the aspects mentioned above, several challenges emerge for research on educational accountability and the analysis of its suitability for Latin America. First, there is a clear need to describe and analyze the implementation of the systems already in force in the region. These include cases with a mostly performative profile, such as that of Chile, and others with mixed characteristics or aims, such as that of Colombia. Paying closer attention to them would make it possible to perform a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of accountability and its links with social and educational contexts, as well as the interplay of all these factors. In addition, the experiences of Central American countries such as Nicaragua may also be relevant, because they present processes in which accountability is more directly connected with long-term social or political expectations, that is, not limited to the objective of educational effectiveness. In this way, Latin America, with fewer years of experience and less extensive research on this subject, may be able to make a contribution to central aspects for the study of accountability, which could be associated with the expectations of countries with high social and educational realities.

In brief, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about educational accountability and its contribution to educational improvement. However, the analysis conducted reveals that its usefulness in this regard, apart from the context in which it is implemented, will depend on other mechanisms or practices incorporated via educational policy and which foster capacity building in educational stakeholders and institutions.

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