

The Discussion of Public Accountability and Incentives in *The Road Not Traveled*

The hypothesis put forward in *The Road Not Traveled* is that the *engineering* approach adopted to develop school systems in the MENA region, which may have once been suited to the needs of the countries, is no longer effective in producing the kind of educational outcomes required today. Instead, what is needed is a greater focus on *incentives* and *public accountability* in order to promote behavioral changes in schools as organizations and among teachers, school head-masters, administrators and education authorities. Indeed, the more successful educational systems of the Region seem to exhibit a good mix of these.

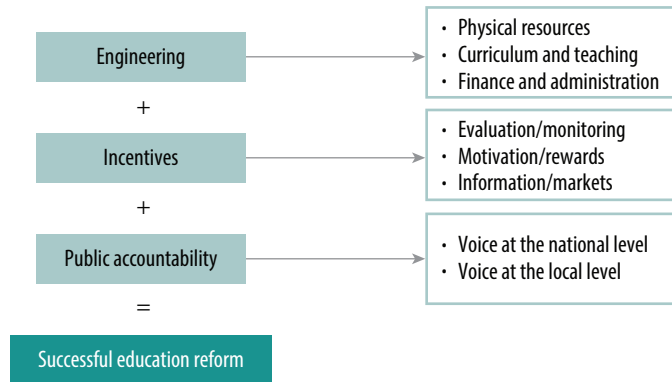
If engineering approaches have helped to improve equitable access to education and to build national identity, with time they have shown their limits in ensuring that good quality education is provided to all children regardless of socioeconomic conditions, gender, ethnicity or beliefs. While MENA reform programs have exhibited modest shifts from engineering toward incentives and public accountability, the Flagship report contends that this change has not gone far enough.

The proposal in the Flagship Report is that successful education reform requires better *engineering* of education, better *incentives*, and improved *public accountability*, as Figure 5 reveals. But what exactly do these terms, ‘engineering,’ ‘incentives,’ and ‘public accountability,’ mean in this context?

Engineering

“The *engineering* of education is equivalent to viewing the provision of education like the production function of any firm” (World Bank, 2008). Simply put, a mix of *inputs*, like classrooms, teachers, textbooks, and so on are needed to create *outputs*, that is, educated students. In this view, it is

FIGURE 5

The Analytical Framework from the *Road Not Traveled*

Source: World Bank, 2008, p.123.

the quantity, quality, and combination of these inputs that determines the outputs. While this model has its virtues—inputs are indeed necessary—inputs alone may not be sufficient. They may not account for instance for the motivation of the actors in that system.

Incentives

Incentives are commonly used by individuals and organizations to promote behavioral change and to motivate performance improvement of service providers. The research literature reveals that different kinds of incentive programs have been experimented with in education, targeting student learning performance (Fryer, 2010), student drop out (Allen et al., 2011), family participation (in the form of Conditional Cash Transfers; Schultz, 2001), teacher performance (Lavy, 2007; Springer, 2009; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2009), teacher attendance (Banerjee et al., 2005) and school performance (Figlio and Lucas, 2004).

In the Flagship report, the discussion on incentives primarily revolves around the principal-agent dilemma where the principal (education authority) is interested on a particular outcome to be achieved through agents (schools) upon which it might have authority but regardless of this it has limited control of their final actions. The agents might not only have different objective functions but also they have an informational advantage of what happens inside the classrooms and schools (information rent). This dilemma can be tackled by designing implicit or explicit contracts with provisions to align the incentives of the agents with those of the principal.

Accountability

The importance of public accountability for better delivery of education services is well established in the literature. The research is thorough, reaching back more than thirty years (see Kogan, 1986; Frymier, 1996; Lavy, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2010; DuFlo, 2010; Bruns et al. 2011).

Accountability essentially means that the interests, priorities and preferences of stakeholders should dictate the content, production and evolution of the education system; and that those responsible for these outcomes would suffer consequences if they are not delivered or will be rewarded if successful. *The Road Not Traveled* emphasizes different approaches (and their effectiveness) to achieve accountability—engineering (command and control), incentives (principal-agent) and public accountability. However, public accountability is a special term: on the one hand, the *Road Not Traveled* refers to a specific stakeholder—the parents and students; on the other, it refers to notion of choice, management oversight, or political pressure. Every education system must serve a variety of stakeholders that are not always aligned. This is usually the key problematic in any education system.

The potential for public accountability in the education sector is determined to a great extent by the overall governance environment existing within a country. There is growing consensus that establishing and maintaining an effective education governance system raises quality by establishing strategies to measure and hold individual and institutional stakeholders accountable for their performance and by defining the roles each stakeholder (i.e., students, teachers, parents, administrators, etc.) should play in that context.

Educators work adhering to one (or more) systems of accountability—though they may not realize it.¹ The *first* system demands compliance with statutes and regulations. Anchored in an industrial model of education, these systems consider that educators are accountable for adherence to rules and accountable to the bureaucracy. The *second* system is based upon adherence to professional norms. Although neither mandated nor required, the impact of widespread agreement on certain principles and practices can do much to elevate the education as a profession, as has been shown in many countries where teachers and school heads often become members of teaching associations or councils. Within this system, educators are accountable for adherence to standards and accountable to their peers. This is what Firestone² refers to as ‘professional accountability.’ The *third* accountability system is based upon results, with results defined in terms of student learning. The ‘No Child Left Behind’ requirements in the United States and the Australian National Education

Transparency through access to information is an essential element in this form of accountability

Performance Monitoring Task Force, the ‘league tables’ Ofsted reports in the UK, etc. are examples of results-based systems. In these systems educators are accountable for student learning and accountable to the general public. A *fourth* is based upon school choice where children or parents are customers who choose schools and can shop for the one that best reflects their preferences and capacity to pay (this is one form of ‘consumer accountability’). The discipline of market competition—or market accountability—induces schools and educators to be responsive to parent and student preferences. Transparency through access to information is an essential element in this form of accountability.

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The ramification for the public systems in the MENA region is that the accountability of schools (and of principals and teachers within schools) can no longer be just to the Ministry but must also be more directly to the public—the families and students—it serves. In other words, accountability as the mere compliance with administrative regulations is not the way towards an education system where practitioners and administrators have the necessary incentives to respond to the needs and expectations of families and students.

The Flagship report proposes that the key aspects needed to make the education sector more accountable in the region will be: (i) by changing governance practices to include decentralization, school-based management, more autonomy; (ii) by strengthening service delivery through the development of professional standards for schools, teachers and the effective use of financial resources; and (iii) by establishing feedback systems to keep public authorities and users informed about results.

TABLE 1

School Accountability Type

		Bureaucratic	Professional	Result Based	Market
Accountability Holders	External	Local and regional authorities, central ministries, curriculum body, inspectorates and regulators	General teaching councils	Local, regional, central authorities, regulators, inspectorates and	Parents, civil society, students (as consumers)
	Internal	School governing bodies and school head (hierarchical)	Peers (horizontal accountability)	School governing bodies and school head	School head and owner
Accountable Actors		Teachers and school head	Teachers and school head	Teachers and school head	Teachers, school head and governing bodies (owner)
Content		National summative tests; teachers’ reports	Teaching assessment, planning	Summative tests	Summative tests and learning-employment goals
Mechanism		Inspectorate (curriculum body) reports, self-evaluation and learning outcomes	Conformity to codes of conduct and ethics	Test results	Inspectorate reports, evaluation forms, test results

Adapted from Mattei, 2012.

Information as an Essential Element of Accountability

Information is, in itself, an important contribution to accountability, as the Flagship report suggests. Very often, stakeholders within an educational system are unaware of the very state of that system; they are ‘in the dark,’ as it were. However, by promoting a culture of evaluation, where the data on the quality of education systems, schools and student learning outcomes is made publicly available to all the interested stakeholders, the ‘lights can be turned on.’ Stakeholders who now understand where they stand within that system, can act upon this information and make better informed decisions. For this to happen, the Flagship report explains that Arab countries must build on their capacity to use student assessment information for quality improvement and equity-enhancing purposes because the assessment of learning leads eventually to improving learning.

Voice

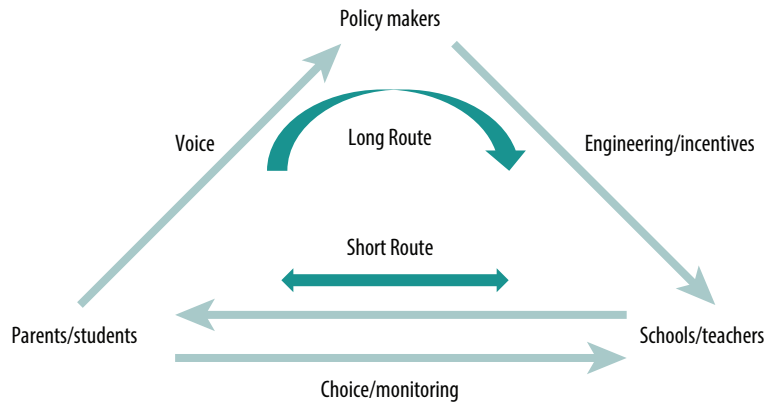
Another important idea presented in the *Road Not Traveled* within the context of public accountability is the premise that “if the majority of beneficiaries have a way of persuading policymakers to improve education policies, education outcomes will improve.” (p.121). This suggests that if better information about educational issues is made more readily available to stakeholders, this will lead to their greater understanding of these issues and will in turn encourage them to respond and act on that information. It should promote, in other words, greater voice.

This presupposes that stakeholders (1) do indeed understand the information provided to them, (2) are in a position to act upon it, (3) anticipate that their actions will in fact lead to some change, and (4) will participate in sufficient numbers to make an impact.

Three actors and three relationships are often cited in this discussion, as Figure 6 reveals. In this schema, what are called the ‘short’ and ‘long’ routes of accountability are identifiable (from the World Development Report 2004 (World Bank, 2003)). In the first, beneficiaries, that is, parents and/or students, will exercise their voice directly to the institution they are most closely in dealings with, in this case, a teacher, the school head, or perhaps the local school board, should one exist, expecting in return some form of response. Voice at this local level constitutes the short route of accountability. In the second, beneficiaries may turn to a higher level entity, a regional school board or the Ministry of Education for instance (policy makers) to have their voice heard, anticipating that this voice at a national level will in turn translate into changes eventually at their level. This constitutes the long route of accountability.

Accountability is potentially greater in the private sector precisely because of some private sector schools’ sensitivity to market competition and responsiveness to voice.

FIGURE 6

The Short and Long Routes of Accountability

Source: World Bank, 2008, p.122.

To what extent voice at a local or national level has a significant impact on the public sector is an altogether interesting question, fueled, in the MENA region, by the successes and failures of recent events. However, it has always been held that accountability is potentially greater in the private sector precisely because of some private sector schools' sensitivity to market competition and responsiveness to voice.

Endnotes

1. Anderson, 2005: see <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001409/140986e.pdf>
2. Macmillan Reference *Encyclopedia of Education*. Online. Accessed August 27, 2013.