

# Reimagining Accountability: A Practitioner's Perspective

**Sherri Harwell**

East Texas A&M University

## Abstract

*Practitioners are involved in the stakeholder feedback process with the Texas Education Agency and the State Board for Educator Certification, potentially impacting rules for educator program accountability. An understanding and analysis of accountability systems supports our participation in that important space where our voices can be heard. This reflective essay shares a practitioner's lens on teacher preparation program accountability in response to reading Cochran-Smith et al.'s (2018) book *Reclaiming Accountability for Teacher Education*. Through critical examination, can we begin to imagine new possibilities for program accountability?*

Keywords: *teacher preparation, accountability, democracy, neoliberalism*

Practitioners are involved in the stakeholder feedback process with the Texas Education Agency and the State Board for Educator Certification, potentially impacting rules for educator program accountability. An understanding and analysis of accountability systems supports our participation in that important space where our voices can be heard. As a university staff member focused on compliance and accreditation for an educator preparation program (EPP), it is difficult to find time to critically examine an accountability system and simultaneously try to meet its expectations. I am relatively new to the field of teacher education, beginning my current role near the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple changes to Texas Administrative Code have occurred in recent years (Sands, 2024), and the need to ensure compliance can easily take priority in the structuring of my professional activities. In professional organization meetings, at conferences, and in the halls of higher education I witness and participate in a multitude of conversations about programmatic adjustments to new rules. Yet, who can blame us? As staff, faculty, and administrators in teacher education, we have urgent responsibilities and limited time.

Nonetheless, Maxine Greene (1985) would remind us that imagining what could be involves critical engagement with what currently exists and how we arrived here. I recently read *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education* (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) and although the book was

published several years ago, it remains relevant to reflective practitioners engaged in teacher education. Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) noted that accountability systems for teacher education are based on values, beliefs, and theories that inform what is measured and influence the discourses surrounding them. The purpose of this article is to share a practitioner's reflective perspective on the ideas I found most thought provoking regarding the accountability system for teacher preparation programs in Texas.

## What is the Accountability System for Educator Preparation?

In 1998, Texas became the first state, "to implement an accountability system for entities that prepare educators," (San Miguel, 2001, p. 207). The Accountability System for Educator Preparation, commonly referred to by the acronym ASEP, began evaluating educator certification programs based at institutions of higher education (IHEs), and programs affiliated with organizations outside of IHEs (San Miguel, 2001). The stated purpose of the indicators and the ASEP system is, "to assure that each EPP is held accountable for the readiness for certification of candidates completing the programs," (§229.1, 2025, p. 1). In other words, the evaluation is meant to assess the quality of teacher candidates produced by programs and their readiness for the field. Our social definition of teacher quality is not static. Mitchell (2001) noted the historical and cultural influences on changing definitions of teacher quality over time, citing the initial conception of teacher quality as a measure of virtue and morality, moving to a

focus on personalities that would foster appropriate cultural values in youth, followed by the rise of process-product thinking about learning, and landing at a modern definition where educators, “foster academic learning for all students,” (p. 22) within a context of diversity.

As part of the current form of ASEP, teacher education programs are evaluated annually on multiple indicators (§229.4, 2025). These indicators include teacher candidate performance on licensure exams, the duration and frequency of formal observations during clinical experiences, survey data from teacher candidates and administrators about quality of preparation, and teacher candidate surveys of field supervision quality (§229.4, 2025). Student growth scores on state accountability assessments are the newest published indicator (§229.4, 2025). At the September 2025 meeting, the State Board for Educator Certification adopted an initial threshold of 60% of teachers meeting their growth score goals for program accountability during the 2024-2025 academic year, with the rate increasing to 70% by 2027-2028 (State Board for Educator Certification, 2025). This collection of multiple measures of program performance reflects recommendations from the Committee on Assessment and Teacher Quality to the U.S. Department of Education in the early 2000s, which included incorporating varied evidence relying on, “a comprehensive but parsimonious set of high-quality indicators,” (Mitchell, 2001, p. 4).

On the surface, ASEP measures represent a “common sense” approach to holding preparation programs accountable for both the implicit and explicit values surrounding education in our state. However, Maxine Greene (1985) stated that values not measured are, “submerged in discussions of achievement and excellence,” (p. 4). What are the values we are measuring with ASEP? What values are we not measuring? What assumptions about evidence and the purpose of education are we potentially taking for granted?

### **Exploring the Roots of Our Accountability**

From a young age as a Texas student, I participated in standardized tests and became a teacher long after the implementation of licensure exams. Other than overhearing an occasional sigh from a more seasoned colleague about how things used to be, I know nothing of a world prior to

standardization and accountability. Professionals of my generation and those who follow may be tempted to think that accountability as we conceive of it today has always existed. Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) introduced me to human capital theory, which until that point was a concept I had taken for granted within discourses about education. Is education truly a service within a democratic society, worth what it costs, or do we expect a human return on investment?

### ***The Value of a Person***

Human capital theory emerged during the 1950s and 1960s and, “is defined by economists as the stock of knowledge and skills possessed by the labor force that increases its productivity,” (Engel, 2000, p. 24). During the early 1960s, the idea of using education as an investment to increase human capital for national economic gain became popularized. A subtle shift occurred, repositioning education from a public service expenditure to an investment in need of economic returns. Engel (2000) cited concerns about using human capital theory to advance educational arguments, including centering the value of education on boosting the economic capacity of students to the exclusion of other values like democracy. This perspective on human capital occurred in conjunction with criticisms of the educational system in the United States, with many during the same historical timeframe charging that the education provided to students was mediocre and lacking rigor (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Labaree (1997) provided context on this tension between democracy and human capital by describing them as differing purposes for education altogether. Democratic equality, he argued, was driven by the need to prepare a populous capable of democratic participation in a burgeoning nation (Labaree, 1997). The evolving needs of the United States led to the rise of social efficiency, or the concept that education should serve vocational preparation purposes driven by the human capital needs of the country (Labaree, 1997). However, viewing educational funding as an investment shifts education from a public good worthy of the cost to an enterprise that must justify itself economically (Engel, 2000).

Despite the detractions levied by Engel (2000) and Labaree’s (1997) identification of tensions, human capital

theory influenced education. Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) referenced human capital theory in their argument that the current dominant rationales for accountability in the United States are grounded in neoliberal capitalism and market ideology. Human capital theory laid the groundwork for *A Nation at Risk* (Engel, 2000), which is an example of neoliberal capitalism influencing education policy.

### ***Producing Individuals for Economic Dominance***

The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* is often cited as an important document for understanding the national shift in ideas about the goals of education in the United States (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Greene, 1985; Mehta, 2013; San Miguel, 2001; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). *A Nation at Risk* exemplifies the neoliberal capitalist arguments that:

*Educational success is central to national, state, and individual economic success; that American schools across the board are substantially underperforming and in need of reform; that schools rather than social forces should be held responsible for academic outcomes; and that success should be measured by externally verifiable tests. (Mehta, 2013, p. 285).*

Control of teachers is paramount within the neoliberal conception of education because teachers directly influence the economic value of their students (Attick, 2017). The neoliberal perspective communicates that learning is a measurable product evidenced by summative testing results (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018).

Following *A Nation at Risk*, the standards movement took hold in the 1990s and led to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 (Mehta, 2013). In addition to requiring testing for students, No Child Left Behind created requirements for teachers to be highly qualified (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Low test scores were equated with failing schools needing oversight and overhauls in efficiency, and the narrative of failing schools became pervasive across political landscapes and the media (Hlavacik & Schneider, 2024). A subsequent shift from focusing on teacher qualifications to focusing on teacher effectiveness as measured by student test scores occurred and No Child Left Behind was replaced with initiatives originating from both sides of the political aisle founded on the same principles (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Testing

for accountability impacted practices in schools, sparking debate about whether the effects are positive or negative (Mehta, 2013).

As Stone (2012) noted, one person's efficiency is another's inefficiency if they conceive of competing purposes. Defining the goal as student test scores means that other goals for education will not be prioritized during the assessment of processes for achieving desired outcomes. Constant monitoring for efficiency gave rise to what Michael Apple (2005) called audit culture, which he claimed, "crowd out other conceptions of effectiveness and democracy," (p. 15) by infiltrating our conceptions of common sense. To the extent that policy makers and others can frame the conversation of efficiency to silence other competing goals, they dominate the discussion in a way that discounts deeper reflection and questioning.

The neoliberal capitalist premise for the purpose of education, the proposed need for control and reform, and the statistical measurement of students to maintain the viability and primacy of the nation reminds me of Michel Foucault's (2015) concept of biopower. Within biopower, populations are the focus of power for a government that seeks to preserve itself. Biopower works to regulate populations for optimum societal outcomes by controlling life, the functions within life, and the formation of individuals (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). The statistics used for measurement within biopower create norms for reference from which individuals within the population can be labeled, compared, and classified (Foucault, 2015). With the emergence of economic control through the production of individuals in education narratives came the infusion of a related economic concept. Market ideology is a concept closely paired with neoliberal capitalism in accountability (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018).

### ***Learners as Consumers in the Free Market***

Market ideology is grounded in several assumptions including the relative uniformity of human nature, the self-serving and material motivations of individuals' choices, the formation of society through the combined choices of all individuals, and the imperative of preserving freedom of choice within social organizations (Engel, 2000). This means that consumers with free choice behave in rationally consistent ways, shaping the market for greater material

benefit to consumers. Market ideology impacts the cost-benefit analysis of school funding, framing the calculation of society's investment in education as a function of the economic benefits reaped at the individual and collective levels (Engel, 2000). In this way, market ideology supports the neoliberal capitalist narrative that educational success and economic success are synonymous within society.

Labaree (1997) calls this self-serving purpose of education the social mobility argument, because students and their families are consumers who see education as a commodity. The never-ending pursuit of greater credentials in a hierarchy designed to stratify us all leads to the problems of credential inflation and students who would rather collect high grades than meaningfully learn anything (Larabee, 1997). Social mobility, although sometimes presented in conjunction with social efficiency or democratic equality ideals, is a dominant driver of political arguments in education policy (Larabee, 1997). An example of treating learning as consuming would be the use of publicly available school ratings for choosing where to live; education for all may be a stated value, but better education for one's own children becomes the driver of action (Labaree, 1997).

The state's use of ASEP accountability results reflects themes from market ideology. Accreditation results published online through the Texas Education Agency website are intended to support consumers of teacher preparation programs in making informed choices (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2025). Additionally, EPPs rated as Accredited-Warning or Accredited-Probationary must post the accreditation status on their website (§229.5, 2025). Publishing accountability results to inform consumer choice assumes that consumers always act in rational and predictable ways, that poorly rated programs will be punished within the market of teacher preparation, and that highly rated programs will be rewarded (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). I could not find research on the influence of published ASEP accountability ratings on the choices of consumers seeking teacher certification in Texas.

When faced with a similar lack of data to evaluate the market-based rationale of the National Council on Teacher Quality, Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) reviewed evidence

available from *U.S. News & World Report* rankings to see if those published ratings could point to evidence for claims about impact. They concluded that, "although external ratings of programs and institutions may encourage them to manipulate the system to boost their ratings, these changes are unlikely to make sense educationally or lead to meaningful improvement in the quality of programs offered," (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 106). As a practitioner concerned with ASEP results and evidence-driven policies, I believe data specific to our accountability system is needed prior to drawing firm conclusions. A systematic review of data relating program applications or admissions to published ASEP ratings is an area of research that could support or challenge the assumption that published results impact consumer choices.

### ***Links to ASEP***

Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) point out that the influence of neoliberal capitalism is so pervasive now that we take its fundamental arguments for granted. For example, the argument that the teacher is the primary influence on student learning can be used by policymakers and the public to ignore other economic and social reforms that might greatly impact the lives and opportunities of students (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). The use of standardized exam scores to measure the success of educational endeavors and student learning is perhaps the most obvious link between neoliberal capitalism and ASEP. The results of licensure exam scores for preservice teachers are the first ASEP indicators listed in Texas Administrative Code (§229.4, 2025). The requirement for disaggregated subpopulations (§229.4, 2025) to meet passing thresholds without regard to social forces reflects Cochran-Smith et al.'s (2018) charge that neoliberalism is used to relieve policymakers of responsibility for social change. The addition of student growth scores to the calculation of ASEP results is another metric tied to exams, reinforcing the overall emphasis on the responsibility of the teacher (in EC-12 and higher education as applicable) over the responsibility of society. Indeed, Larabee (1997) might argue that the resulting stratification in school designations is the very point itself, as consumers want to be able to pick between ranked choices and those with higher power want the ability to sort themselves into better places.

Some researchers have investigated, with mixed results, the validity of licensure exams as predictive measures for teacher performance as measured by student test scores (Goldhaber, 2007; Goldhaber et al., 2017). Lincove et al. (2014) worked with many educator preparation programs in the state of Texas to consider value-added modeling (VAM) and explored potential accreditation results for programs in the state based on student growth scores. The decisions made in the method of VAM equation construction were highly consequential. “Each change to the base model and teacher sample resulted in reclassification of at least one teacher preparation program, with some decisions changing the status of up to 20% of programs,” (Lincove et al., 2014, p. 34). Yet, questioning the evidence and assumptions for accountability metrics often leads to the individual being criticized or discounted as someone who just does not want to meet high standards (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). If we desire accountability based on shared values and evidence, we must be able to pose questions for critical engagement and expect meaningful justifications in return.

### ***Are These Assumptions Inescapable?***

As someone who entered the teaching profession less than two decades ago, I can attest to the difficulty of mentally escaping the neoliberal narrative to imagine a reality based on greater social responsibility within our society. In the fall of 2023, I began my studies toward a doctorate degree in education with a small group of professionals. As a cohort of fledgling scholars, we frequently revisit the debate on the purpose of education in the United States. Invariably, someone will argue that preparing students for college is essential as it leads to greater economic freedom for the individual. This social efficiency argument is based on love for students because we desire the best possible future for them. Yet, it feels misguided and labels humans as primarily economic actors.

The link between increased levels of education and higher average earnings fuels the narrative that education is meant to increase the economic prosperity of individuals (Darity & Underwood, 2021). I agree with Darity and Underwood (2021), who question, “In the first place, why should any individual’s access to decent employment be contingent on their level of education?” (p. 8). Not everyone will earn a bachelor’s degree. Is there not a level of human dignity and

living wage we should demand for all citizens who engage in the varied sectors of our workforce? The neoliberal link between education and economic freedom appears to release our society from the social responsibility involved in this question. Furthermore, Labaree (1997) noted a paradox of social mobility: the more education our society achieves as a baseline expectation, the greater the education level required to pull ahead and advance economically. If 90% of individuals have a doctorate degree someday, we cannot expect 90% of the jobs available to magically have high wages that match the educational level.

I wondered when reading *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education* (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) why a challenge so eloquently levied on neoliberalism by the authors more than five years ago appears to remain a marginalized viewpoint. The authors pointed to the work of Michael Apple (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Apple (2005) noted a potential source of cognitive dissonance for those working in EPPs with compliance systems built upon neoliberal conceptions of teaching and learning. Apple (2005) aptly pointed out that middle class professionals who have accumulated expertise within an education system centered on accountability stand much to gain from the continuation of these policies and narratives. My current livelihood rests on a web of regulation and state level monitoring, without which my entire staff department would likely not exist. If I believe that our current way of holding EPPs accountable should systematically change to emphasize other values, do I risk becoming obsolete or less economically valuable? Perhaps this risk, combined with the way neoliberal capitalism has shaped discourses about education for decades (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018), is part of the reason there is difficulty in imagining other directions for accountability.

### **Considering Democracy**

Maxine Greene (1985) noted that only attending to what can be measured sidelines democratic values in education. Public discourse, debate, and consensus is the basis of what governs society in a deliberative democracy (Lefrançois & Ethier, 2010). Lefrançois and Ethier (2010) noted that within a deliberative democracy, individuals must be able to engage in, “reciprocal reasoning,” (p. 273) and the complex skills needed to arrive at community decisions must be developed through education. Participants in

deliberation acknowledge each other's equality, are informed of relevant facts, must justify their viewpoints to each other, and arrive at agreed decisions as part of "collective power," (Huttunen, 2025, p. 79). A deliberative democratic education aims to prepare individuals to converse and participate in a diverse democratic society (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). The imperative for developing deliberative skills through democratic education is evident in the current climate of political polarization in our society, which obstructs our collective ability to navigate global challenges (Huttunen, 2025).

Critics of deliberative democracy point out there are practical realities – power dynamics, acceptance of consensus, and the procedures involved in mass participation – impacting how democracy has been enacted (Lefrançois & Ethier, 2010). However, proponents would argue that the lack of perfect execution thus far is no reason to abandon the ideals that have led to improved democratic institutions, which have gradually ascended over time (Lefrançois & Ethier, 2010). The argument for continuous improvement toward more deliberative democratic societies may lend itself to the argument for democratic accountability. Perhaps we cannot fully conceive of a perfectly democratic form of accountability for education programs today, but is that a reason to abandon the ideal?

### ***What is Democratic Accountability?***

My opinion of local schools, and what I consider important for the quality of education in Texas, are parallel to many of my fellow citizens. Although national polling found a decreasing confidence in America's schools over time after intense negative messaging began in the 1950s and 1960s, this perspective was related to education in general (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). When parents with children in schools were asked about their local educational environments, they rated their specific school higher than schools in general (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). This perception is not just something from the past. The Charles Butt Foundation (2024) found that 70% of Texas parents graded their local school with an "A" or "B," and ratings from parents are consistently higher than the ratings from citizens in general. Furthermore, 84% of parents were, "very or somewhat satisfied with the education their child is receiving," (Charles Butt Foundation, 2024, p. 18).

Moving beyond general perspectives on schools, it is also possible to examine the community's desired goals for education. According to the Charles Butt Foundation (2024), Texans overwhelmingly prioritize the school helping, "students learn self-management, interpersonal skills, and decision-making," (p. 23). That was the item ranked highest at 84% when asked what was, "very or extremely important for school quality," (Charles Butt Foundation, 2024, p. 23). Behind this item was preparing for a career (78%), college preparation (60%), sense of belonging for students (57%), and preparation for civics (54%). The lowest items that Texans thought were important were test scores (40%) and preparation for the military (20%) (Charles Butt Foundation, 2024). If test scores do not appear in the top five priorities for Texans, why are we treating them as the number one priority for accountability? Perhaps the opinions of those being served by the school should count toward accountability.

Do the current ASEP indicators measure how well we prepare teachers to deliver an education that aligns to the priorities of Texans? Our current conception of accountability has, "reified test scores as the most important measure of students' learning," (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 153), and I am unconvinced that these scores and other ASEP items can translate into measures of how well students can utilize interpersonal skills, engage in civic debates with justifications, and reach agreements with others through collaborative decision making. I would argue that the qualities Texans value the most are directly aligned to the skills necessary for deliberative democracy.

Cochran-smith et al. (2018) posed the question of what accountability might look like if deliberative democratic values were translated into accountability expectations. Importantly, they take great care to emphasize that they are not proposing a lack of accountability altogether or EPPs being accountable only to themselves, just a different form of accountability that promotes democratic education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). This translates into several ideas for what teacher preparation programs should be held accountable for. They state that teacher preparation programs should be accountable for democratic education, the production of teachers who can challenge systemic inequalities, and that "democratic accountability in education is based on dialogue and participation of all

stakeholders, including external agents, those at the institutions and programs that are being held accountable, and the families and communities with whom they work,” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 154). The final part of that definition is crucial. The Charles Butt Foundation (2024) found that individuals in different regions of Texas had differing perspectives on some aspects of education. A truly democratic version of accountability would be responsive to those local priorities and work to hold teacher educators accountable for developing the teaching skills desired by the communities they serve.

Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) claimed that current accountability frameworks based on neoliberal capitalism and market ideology are performative and do not lead to true program improvement or the implementation of equity and democracy in schools. Democratic accountability relies on trust over control of teacher education programs, engaging all involved in the evaluation of complex goals for the purpose of advancing continuous improvement (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Although there is some effort to include stakeholders in the decision-making process of policy, the implementation of program accountability in Texas is conducted by reviewers external to the teacher preparation entity. Shifting the power dynamic to include equal participation for all impacted by the program’s results and those internal to the program represents a radical departure from an emphasis on external control.

Whether discussing deliberative democratic education in the context of classrooms or teacher preparation programs, authors admit that further work is needed to actualize the related goals and ideals (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Huttunen, 2025; Lefrançois & Ethier, 2010). Should the primary purpose of education be the efficient creation of productive economic actors or the strengthening of democratic participation? How can we incorporate the

priorities of our local constituents? Perhaps professionals in educator preparation have a role to play in deliberating those questions and shaping accountability in Texas accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

Individuals working in teacher preparation programs should take advantage of stakeholder engagement opportunities with the Texas Education Agency and the State Board for Educator Certification to positively influence accountability policy. To do this, we need a firm grasp of the reasoning, values, and history of the issues surrounding accountability systems and a vision for the future. As a newer professional in the realm of educator preparation, my understanding is still evolving, and I do not have all the answers to the questions I have asked. If I have piqued your interest in this topic, I recommend reading *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education* (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). I have only scratched the surface of the ideas presented by the authors and it is a good place to begin an exploration, even if you disagree with some of the viewpoints expressed. Although I still struggle to conceptualize the practical implementation of democratic accountability, I have a newfound interest in analyzing the assumptions that our current accountability system rests upon and exploring the evidence that may support or challenge it. Can you imagine the possibilities?

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