

**Accountability and Reality:
Who should do what, and who should be accountable?**

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Introduction

One of the notable outcomes of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) is in the area of assessment and accountability. Tied to assessment and accountability are incentives and flexible guidelines on how we might conduct the business of education. It has made us in the Pacific rethink how we perceive assessment, in terms of accountability systems being aligned to high standards. Noting our continuing dependence on federal aid from the United States, we have begun to view assessment and accountability more seriously in terms of results and potentially serious consequences of not meeting those results. For the past 6 years, in many of our school systems, NCLB initiatives have become the central focus of classroom instruction, teacher preparation, and goal setting toward high student achievement.

The intent behind NCLB is to provide high quality education, especially to disadvantaged students. High quality education is understood to mean high academic standards. High academic standards should be based on proven education practices taught by high-quality teachers. Accountability systems with a common measure that show improved annual progress toward achievement by all students 12 years after 2001–2002 are

important indicators of success in meeting the intent of NCLB legislation.

To determine accountability, each state must have a rigorous academic assessment that, at minimum, includes math, reading or language arts, and science (in 2007–2008) aligned with challenging academic content and student academic achievement standards.

Accountability in NCLB requires school districts to inform parents of their children’s attainment of these standards. NCLB’s rationale is based on a logical and ideal assumption that a coherent, rigorous, and data-driven accountability system naturally follows a coherent, rigorous, and data-driven academic program in all schools receiving NCLB funds. And, that this would be accomplished within a specified timeline. This is where accountability becomes problematic.

Words like rigor, high-quality, challenging academic content, accountability, proficiency, alignment, valid and reliable, and even flexibility occur frequently throughout NCLB. It is an initiative with good intentions, but fraught with controversial assumptions and implications that have polarized various levels of the education community, policy makers, and politicians, especially in the United States. A major source of contention is how progress is to be measured and the consequences of NCLB’s accountability mandate.

With that as introduction, I would like to offer some perspectives on contextualizing NCLB-like initiatives, such as accountability and assessment for our region. Micronesia

consists of clusters of culturally different groups of islands that have adopted United States educational systems, for the most part. In particular, since the islands are still very much dependent on educational assistance from the United States, federal initiatives tend to be adopted “as is” in the islands, as well. Federal grants initiatives in and of themselves, such as NCLB, are well-intentioned, but generally do not take into account the needs and realities in the islands, much less how to measure success in addressing those needs.

If the islands are to sustain or institutionalize the initiatives after funding expires, they need to be crafted in a way that is more responsive to the islands. I hope that my perspectives encourage some discussions on the potential of contextualizing NCLB-like initiatives, such as accountability and assessment, to better fit our situation. From the start, I approach the notion of accountability and assessment as ongoing practices in our educational systems, even before the formality surrounding accountability under NCLB today. During the Trust Territory administration and henceforth, all entities in Micronesia have adopted accountability systems and initiated large-scale assessments using standardized, norm-referenced measures, as well as criterion-referenced tests.

I begin with a background and history, followed by suggestions on the potential to infuse NCLB-like accountability system or systems that may be more realistic and relevant to the Pacific. Next, I discuss, in general terms, possible assessment options with culture and language as integral parts in accountability systems. I also raise possible research ideas to be conducted by Pacific researchers and educators.

Background

Since the introduction of formal, western-type education in the Pacific, governments and religious groups assumed responsibility in providing education for our children. Parents and communities divided their roles in caring for their children before and after school hours. During colonial administrations, governments, and to some extent religious organizations, decided how, when, why, what, and where students should be instructed. The rights of parents or the community were irrelevant. This shifted during the United States (U.S.) administration, prior to political status change in Micronesia.

Even during these periods, there were accountability systems in place. During colonial administrations, assessments in the form of different types of tests, including performance or projects, were part of accountability systems. To date, some survivors of WWII can recall their experiences under the Japanese mandated dual education system. Students were expected to meet teacher expectations or face immediate, and sometimes unpleasant, consequences. High achievement was also recognized with due ceremony and honor. Consequences, both positive and negative, affected not only the students but also their families. Parents were strictly held accountable for their children’s preparedness in certain areas. Pacific Islanders contributed to their children’s education by making sure the children went to school and by helping them do well in their studies. Obedience on the part of the students, as well as the parents, was expected. The system of education was straightforward and less complex when colonial governments solely determined the priorities and policies. I am not

advocating a return to this simplicity. I am merely stating that this is the way it was.

There was also another rationale for accountability at the time. The people were educated primarily so that they could understand the colonial language, be productive workers, and be loyal subjects. The language of instruction was predetermined, and so was the language used in assessment of learning. Accountability was simple. The connection between expectation, performance, and consequence was clear, and consequence was immediate.

Times have changed. Today we have choices, as well as responsibilities. We are also more accountable for those choices. At the same time, we recognize the reality of our situation in the context of resources, relevance, and sustainability of programs and initiatives that we adopt for one reason or another. Too often, however, we jump at opportunities without the benefit or the means to foresee the implications of our choices and actions. At times, we do not fully analyze the philosophical rationale of these grants and their consequences (Sanga, 2005).

Over the years, rarely do we reflect on the long-term implications for much of the programs that we have adopted and subsequently abandoned along the way due to federal funding ended or upon availability of new education program funding and initiatives intended for U.S. students. Heine and Chutaró (2005) from the Republic of the Marshall Islands suggest that understanding the mindset of donors, their expectations of program design and implementation, are

“critically needed if external educational aid is to be successfully used for local benefits” (p. 146). In certain areas, educational aid has benefited some, but not the majority of the people. Niroa (2005) from Vanuatu suggests that conflicting ideas, tensions and issues surrounding aid in his country have been unresolved or ignored. He states,

Political agendas are not reconciled with educational rationales. Development goals are not balanced with competing economic ones. Experimentation of new ideas relating to “best practice” elsewhere is not balanced adequately with locally proven experiences. (p. 288)

Niroa concludes that mistakes are repeated, and much needed resources are not adequately used or are wasted when these issues are neglected. This situation is reflected in Micronesia, as well. The comments by Kabini, Niroa, Heine, and Chutaró point to the critical need for Pacific Islanders to help find a balance in the relationships and interpretation of program intent and expectations from both the donor and the recipient. Accountability is an important means toward meeting this objective. An underlying rationale for accountability is the proper use of funds, as well as fidelity in program implementation. Our perspective as Pacific Islanders and our knowledge and practices in carrying out initiatives, such as NCLB accountability, need to be communicated strongly and effectively to the grantor agency. This is critical, especially at this time.

Today, most federal grants are more restrictive, accountability and sustainability driven, and based on someone else's proven practices. Their continuation depends on variables, most of which are beyond our ability to control or sustain at the level expected. Yet, we are still heavily dependent on them. To maximize federal grants opportunities, we must contextualize the concepts and rationale underpinning funding opportunities to make education more meaningful for our people.

Furthermore, we must place the development of programs and systems more solidly in the hands of Pacific Islanders. Pacific contextualized accountability driven initiatives will not work if not fully integrated in the mindset of the people, and if the appropriate infrastructure cannot be sustained to support its implementation. Therefore, as aptly stated by a distinguished Pacific educator, Thaman (2008), "we owe it to ourselves and our communities to once more look towards our cultures (the context in which the task of educating future generations is carried out) for clues to some of the questions that vex us" (p. 5).

Contextualizing Accountability To Benefit the Student and the Community

The infrastructure for accountability to work requires a serious rethinking, again, of our educational system, the language of instruction, as well as the resources and quality of our teachers. I propose that weak language policies, lack of culturally based materials in comparison with imported ones, and standards and assessments based on continental U.S. content are some of the confounding variables in our accountability systems at present.

The push to rethink education and infuse indigenous knowledge (IK) in educational practices has been in the forefront in the effort to promote sustainability, accountability, and meaningful and relevant education in some Pacific entities through associations and initiatives, such as the Pacific Region Initiative for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) program, and its ongoing project, Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific Peoples for Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP), the Commission on Education in Micronesia (CEM), and the Pacific Islands Bilingual Bicultural Association (PIBBA), to name a few. These initiatives aim to contextualize IK in education, while also taking global events and initiatives into account. Tied to these initiatives is the belief that indigenous peoples must take the lead in the "who," "what," "why," "how," and "when" aspects of accountability in education. Infusion of IK in curriculum and assessment, and the extension of "classroom" activities into community settings expand the horizon of accountability systems further than standardized testing and highly qualified teachers.

We also must think of education not only in terms of relevance, but in terms of what will prepare our youths to become socially conscious and contributing members of their own community, as well as the global community (Tujan, 2004).

Possible Approaches for Contextualized Accountability Systems

Contextualizing accountability in education inadvertently, in my view, presents opportunities to rethink

education in the process. These are my recommendations toward that end:

1. The community (parents; leaders, both cultural and political in the western sense; stakeholders; and students) will articulate in the vernacular their understanding and expectations related to the concept of accountability in education with examples and underlying rationales based on local contexts and culturally accepted meanings.
2. The community will agree on realistic and culturally-based principles of accountability in education in terms of the support system, levels of responsibilities, expectations and impacts, subsequent consequences, and sustainability. Communities will define what these concepts mean and develop standards for schools; identify key players and stakeholders; and develop an infrastructure that would support the system with local leadership, resources, and expertise, as much as possible.
3. The community will address the local and wider political, social, and economic issues in relation to the purposes of education and the role of accountability in ensuring that a coherent structure, support, process, and assessments are aligned with the needs and priorities of the community.
4. The community will develop a strategy for implementation of the accountability plan with an assessment of the effectiveness of the plan on a regular basis.
5. The community will analyze the consequence(s) of implementing accountability systems within specific communities, the ownership and involvement of communities in the implementation process, and the sustainability and commitment to find solutions toward meeting accountability related challenges. A buy-in of the system from the community, leaders, parents, and students must be premised on a clear and rational understanding of the system itself and the underlying principles involved.

There are many things that could overturn accountability systems in an instant in the current situation. Landowners could close schools if their rent is not paid. School supplies are delayed due to limited transportation, high transportation costs, or not paying vendors on time. Power outages occur for hours at a time, as we have been experiencing in Saipan on a daily basis. Water outages that typically follow these power outages are disruptive to the instructional processes. Even the rising fuel crises have created a ripple effect on businesses, employment, and families with school age children.

The five basic but broad steps I outlined have the potential to prevent these kinds of overturns and work toward sustainability. They will engage the community to rethink the current understanding of the role and purpose of education in their children's lives and take more responsibility for—and more ownership in—ensuring an effective system of accountability for the schools in their community. A situational analysis that connects and relates issues, challenges, and potential solutions by the community might help reveal the multilevel concepts and dynamic nature of accountability, as

well as the resulting consequences that may not be easily implemented nor easily carried out in particular cultural settings.

Possible Assessment Options in Contextualizing Accountability

Assessment practices should be a key factor in accountability systems. The community needs to understand the rationale underlying imported norm-referenced standardized tests; standards-based or authentic assessments using a second or third language; and the impact on the child, teacher, school, and community. This is important in view of the dominance of standardized tests, and testing in general, in the discussion of accountability. Test results tend to be the main focus in education, compared to other more critical issues surrounding student learning. Expediency and lack of resources may be the reason for reliance on standardized tests and the focus on testing. Assessment *for* learning as opposed to the traditional assessment *of* learning might take on a different meaning of assessment in accountability. There is a critical need to evaluate the role of testing, particularly norm-referenced tests, in determining accountability.

Some testing experts have written and spoken about the pros and cons of standardized norm-referenced tests (Volante, 2005; Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2001). Without going into possible faulty rationale for using norm-referenced tests based on very different students from ours, I suggest that we concentrate our limited funding resources on appropriate assessments and monitoring of instructional effectiveness for

accountability purposes, as mandated by our respective stakeholders and policy makers. For example, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI) has implemented an accountability system consisting of not only standardized tests, but also standards-based assessments and school-based assessments. We may ask how much of our limited resources are spent on norm-referenced tests administration, scoring, and reporting, and the time spent to prepare the students, prepare reports to the schools and public, and the time taken away from instruction. Perhaps a critical review and analysis of time, money, and impact of standardized tests could be considered in the context of what other urgent needs we have in our schools.

One impact is the constant downgrading of our students, in comparison to their normative group—U.S. middle class students. Norm-referenced tests are made to spread students so that comparisons can be made in terms of percentile ranks and scores. While policy makers are very much inclined to compare our students with U.S. students, perhaps the rationale and intent for doing so need to be further discussed to determine if standardized norm-referenced tests are appropriate for such comparisons. Using standardized norm-referenced tests based on external population of students is problematic. Popham (PBS, 2001) shares his views about standardized tests and the notion that many policy makers, and even educators, do not fully understand assessment concepts and their implications. As stated earlier, education systems in Micronesia have relied on norm-referenced tests for screening students for college, as well as to compare them with U.S. students. A major standardized, norm-referenced test, Micronesian Achievement

Test Series, was also developed for Micronesian students during the Trust Territory administration. This test was appropriate for the period, but was never revised or updated. Also, it is no longer used due to lack of funding and oversight when the former Trust Territory entities regained their independence or selected new political arrangements. The need to gauge student performance based on a regional norm when the Micronesian islands were under one system was no longer necessary, and the expense associated with this assessment would be extremely high.

A key concern in most of the test instruments is language. All too often, a test written in the English language is, to a large degree, a test of the language itself, especially when a very high percentage of students in Micronesia are English language learners. From early on, our children are made to believe that they must be fluent in another language to be good students. Testing, resource materials, and language of instruction further emphasize this belief. Children experience a disconnect between what they learn from their parents in their mother tongue and what they experience in the school environment, where English is the language of instruction. The school environment tends to lower, or conflict with, their self-worth and self-identity because of the language of instruction. It is like going into a whole new world for some children. I know, because I went through the same experience as a child and still experience it to this day in different settings. To a certain extent, children do surmount these subtle challenges as they progress in school, but we do not know at what cost. Would the use of vernacular languages, culturally grounded resources and

teachers, and assessment practices produce a similar or different result?

Standardized tests are a lucrative business geared toward accommodating the market in education. We must rethink how we test and what instruments we use.

I would like to offer these suggestions in terms of testing and assessment:

1. Standardized, norm-referenced tests are good in and of themselves, if used properly. If the objective is to compare our children with the rest of the world, international standardized tests, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Progress for International Literary Skills (PIRL), or any other international standardized tests suitable for our individual needs should be used. After all, part of the impetus for NCLB was to increase the competitive advantage of U.S. students in the global world. Of course, using these international tests raises other issues that may not be so different from the current standardized tests we use.
2. Develop standard-based assessment test items in both English and the vernacular, and give students the option to respond in the language of their choice. Include so called accommodations, such as allowing teachers to read the questions in both languages, if necessary. This is already being done in some areas, as I understand. Again, there are issues here and more research on the effectiveness of this method as opposed to others, may be of interest.

3. Emphasize authentic assessments, rather than the traditional multiple-choice type tests, as much as possible. This is a challenging task and will require more than the usual expertise in tests and measurements, will be more time consuming and costly, and will be subject to validity and reliability concerns among others. But, at the end of the day, this type of assessment is probably more accurate and fair in gauging student achievement, particularly in a different cultural and environmental setting, such as the islands in Micronesia. Students' meaningful, real-life experiences, knowledge, and understanding of their surroundings and how things interact could easily be integrated into an authentic assessment portfolio, instead of relying on standard imported texts and resource materials that may not address the learning styles of Pacific children. The use of vernacular words in assessment is critical to more accurately measure critical thinking skills, since words define relationships and stories that Pacific children have direct experiences with and encompass a richer and wider range of contextualized reality.

4. Performance or authentic assessment for the benefit of the students, rather than the administration or policy makers, needs to be adopted as a standard for accountability purposes. Assessments of this type rely on the expertise and knowledge of the teachers who should play a lead role in their development, scoring, interpretation, and subsequent interventions or enhancement of learning opportunities. A possible research project would be to identify and analyze existing indigenous assessment methodologies that might be appropriate for accountability purposes, as well as formative assessment efforts.

5. Without relevant resources and proper learning environments and tools, assessments have no place in accountability systems. Therefore, Pacific schools need to rethink education in the context of Pacific children and their communities, and dedicate more funding, local expertise, research, and support to develop vernacular resource materials in all content areas. They should be infused with indigenous knowledge relevant to their immediate environment, as well as the global community. It has been said that if schools fail to sustain language and culture, schools will definitely kill both of them. A great deal of social interaction and learning takes place in school settings, and if indigenous language and culture are treated as non-existent, they will become so. This calls for a fundamental shift in educational philosophy from the current approach of accepting what is available and complying with donor funding requirements. The rapid decline in traditional roles in the islands calls for a new approach to educating our children outside of the home. Schools have taken over the roles of extended families in some instances, due to evolving lifestyle and values that are redefining communities and their role in raising and teaching children, and the amount of time the child is away from parents and extended families and communities during school hours.

6. Assessment should follow instructional practice supported by relevant resources and programs. NCLB does not demand specifics, but encourages NCLB schools to provide challenging, proven educational programs. There is some flexibility for local decision-making in terms of programs, assessment, and accountability. The problem lies in whether

the “proven practices” are applicable to even some of the schools in our islands. The driving force behind their adoption is sometimes their appeal, availability, and funding supporting their adoption—the mechanism in place for buy-in and implementation. We need to move away from this mentality and apply more rigorous methods for analyzing the real benefits and effects of these practices in our own schools and also recognize whether we have resources to support the program in the long run. What works elsewhere does not always work everywhere else.

Obviously, there is more to be said about assessment in terms of accountability and standardized tests, but suffice to say our education and the accompanying accountability system must be culturally sensitive, if not culturally based. They must enhance the connection, continuity, relationships, and sense of community in small islands.

As noted earlier, language is the determining factor in ensuring relevance and continuity of our people. Dr. Salusalumalo Hunkin-Finau (2008) expressed this sentiment in a powerful statement on the dire need for a balanced perspective:

Failure to change the language of instruction policy now will not only heighten the current erosion of the native language, but this failure will be the spear which will not only deliver the death blow to the values, traditions, culture, and identity of the unique community of the Samoan people, but of all indigenous peoples on this planet.

Conclusion

Accountability is a necessity in education and in our daily lives. The limited resources in education, plus the urgent need to provide the best education possible for our people, calls for measures of accomplishments and accountability systems. Accountability should be system-wide to be more realistic, sustainable, and coherent throughout the various structures and levels of government and within the community. Education alone cannot sustain an accountability system that is isolated from communities, the culture and traditions, and the resources and policy arenas that inevitably affect education. Be it public safety, utility corporations, communication corporations, public health, transportation, or communities themselves, all impact education—especially small, isolated island groups, such as Micronesia. A rethinking of education, accompanied by proper assessments and accountability to benefit students and the community as a whole will enhance the learning experiences and opportunities of Pacific peoples in their own island nations and in the world.

Finally, for those of us who are recipients of NCLB funds, we should work toward collaborating with the U.S. Department of Education to develop vernacular resource materials, including more appropriate instruments to measure adequate yearly progress. We should request support to conduct research on assessment instruments using vernacular languages based on vernacular materials in all the content areas. In essence, we should develop our own accountability systems that are, in the long-term, more relevant and meaningful for our children.

About the Author

Elizabeth Diaz Rechebei is a former education administrator with many years of experience with education federal programs, grant writing and management, and testing and evaluation projects since the Trust Territory times. She is the first president of the Commission on Education in Micronesia, a non-profit organization of indigenous Micronesians dedicated to instilling Pacific island knowledge and skills in education and promoting indigenous expertise in the region. She is the principal organizer of the first traditional medicine association in the CNMI and is active in organizing and participating in other regional and local groups and various civic organizations. Currently, Dr. Rechebei is serving as an evaluation consultant in education and a co-principal investigator for a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to revise and update the Chamorro-English dictionary. She graduated from Mt. Carmel High School in Saipan, earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Guam, her master's degree in educational psychology from the University of Hawaii, and her doctoral degree in educational leadership from the University of San Diego.

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