The Loss of Responsibility

Abstract: This chapter analyzes the dynamics of accountability in public government, which have largely shaped education systems in the past decades. It uncovers a vast gap between (a) the accountability concept forced on the public service due to alleged waste and impotence, and (b) the administrative practice of passing responsibility down the public service hierarchy. Ultimately, my analysis presents accountability as a systematic escape from responsibility, and consequently, as a basis for creating worthlessness for teachers and schools.

Thus far, in describing the construction of worthlessness, I’ve regarded schools and teachers as builders, as constructors of children’s worthlessness. However, this perspective is incomplete, and in a sense unfair: teachers, principals, and schools (to the extent that schools can be considered intentional beings) are merely the agents of a social paradigm, and in many aspects also its victims. For, one of the simplest and most effective ways to construct worthlessness in education is to conduct it entirely within an institution that is itself socially worthless, via teachers who are given a feeling and social status of worthlessness. Thus, we cannot fully chart the educational construction of individual worthlessness without addressing the construction of worthlessness for teachers, principals, schools, and so on. I will try to describe this construction by noting the significance of adopting accountability as a social ideal, and of the attempts to implement it within contemporary education.

In 2000, Richard Ohmann suggested an historical perspective by which the emergence of the concept of accountability in education began as a conservative backlash to the powerful social protests of the 1960s in America and Europe – a backlash that in time became a leading social ideology. The outline of Ohmann’s thesis resembles my proposed overview (in Chapter 2) of the development of neo-capitalist ideology, and corresponds to various analyses published in the 1990s of the 1960s social protest crisis. For example, Williams presented the difficulties facing feminist protest and the anti-capitalist trend, and Clarke and Newman presented the breakdown of the social contract underpinning the welfare state, as follows.

The process began in the late 1960s with the emergence of increasingly deeper “cracks” in public loyalty to government, manifested in the (Vietnam) war protests, in severe criticism of government conduct in Europe and the U.S., and in assault on the continued aggressive presence of a capitalism masked as welfare policy. Racism, discrimination, chauvinism, and needless wars – as well as cynicism, paternalism, and systematic obfuscation by the authorities – were inimical to the social-justice ethos on which the younger generations had been weaned. They led to widespread, powerful protests that the authorities found difficult to contain. The protests were centered around universities of all places: around the very institutions that enjoyed near-limitless support and resources in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the U.S. and the U.K. during the Cold War (in hopes that they might develop science and technology to help defeat the Soviets). The disappointment was great also because