Remembering “Who Counts” in English Education

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Accountability is a red herring used to cover up real problems such as tax inequities; the exploitation of schools for jobs, markets, and votes; the strengthening of Federal centralization and Presidential control; and the diversion of public money into such powerfully lobbied private sectors as the defense industry.

—James Moffett, “Who Counts?”

Forty-five years ago, one of the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) most influential figures unleashed a scathing critique of educational accountability reforms that Richard Nixon’s administration launched with the support of corporate America. Writing on behalf of NCTE’s commission on “The Teacher and Accountability,” James Moffett listed more than two dozen reasons why NCTE opposed policies to hold teachers “accountable” for student performance measures. English Journal published Moffett’s provocative essay with NCTE’s 1971 “Resolution on Accountability” to elaborate on NCTE’s opposition to the teacher accountability movement.

Moffett’s commissioned article played with the double meaning of its title, “Who Counts?” On one hand, Moffett argued that English teachers did not “count” because English could not be reduced to countable or observable measures, such as learning objectives, outcomes, and competencies. On the other hand, he believed the English education profession would no longer “count”—professionally or politically—if government and corporate leaders ever gained control over their field of professional judgment. In his view, any meaningful reform of education would not increase accountability, but protect teaching and learning from its “already disastrous effects” (Moffett 573).

Moffett’s rejection of teacher accountability drew from a series of NCTE resolutions that opposed learning objectives, standardized testing, and any curriculum or accountability structures that failed to involve students, teachers, and the public in the governance of public education. Today, however, NCTE has shifted its positions on teacher accountability and “partnered” with the federal government, venture philanthropy, and the private sector in education reform. In the interest of “speaking truth to power,” this column revives Moffett’s forgotten article on teacher accountability to highlight how NCTE’s recent policy positions constitute radical shifts in NCTE’s political agenda. In doing so, I also hope to spur debate within the broader NCTE community about “who counts” in English education.

Who Counts?

As accountability reforms emerged in the 1970s, Moffett and the NCTE discussion group declared it was fundamentally unfair to hold administrators or teachers accountable for student performance measures: “No administrator or teacher can possibly exert enough control over learning results to be held truly accountable for them” (Moffett 571). Moreover, any “statements of specific objectives and performance criteria for ringing a bell when they have been reached are pointless and can only impede” the teaching and learning of English (572).

Moffett noted that accountability measures impeded reading and writing development by forcing students to demonstrate prespecified performance criteria. The focus on student performance measures obscured the intrinsic pleasures and social nature of reading and writing; it also led to punitive teaching and assessment practices that sabotaged learning and engagement by triggering “the negative set of feelings and attitudes induced in learners by the
constant quizzing, testing, grading, criticizing, prodding, and, in effect, punishing, that occurs every time they attempt to read or write” (Moffett 574; italics in original).

Accountability measures also narrowed English teachers’ already limited control over their work. It placed a “hampering burden” on good teachers and encouraged “obsessive” surveillance and management in schools (Moffett 572). Indeed, Moffett predicted, if schools would fully implement the emerging standards and accountability agenda, it would take only three to five years “for most students, and probably teachers too, to abandon schools in revulsion to this final turn of the screw” (572–73).

In Moffett’s view, teacher accountability also violated the first rule of educational assessment. Any system to hold teachers accountable for measures of student performance would, “of necessity . . . make the accountability system the determiner of school activities rather than the measure of them”—an obvious misuse of assessment (572; italics in original). Standardized assessments also served the commercial interests of the for-profit education industry by priming the education market for prepackaged materials aligned with standards and accountability measures: “it is no random freak that . . . the logical end of fiscal accountability so closely resembles the programmed materials that the education industry is trying hard to plug into schools” (Moffett 573).

For Moffett, the increased commercialization and outsourcing of teaching and assessment under the accountability model was part of a broader attack on teachers, teacher unions, and socially progressive approaches to teaching English. If educators paid any attention to politics, Moffett explained, “it is difficult not to see in the job accountability trend a goodly measure of management retaliation against recently organized labor” (Moffett 572; italics in original). He also lamented how accountability spawned “a technocratic organization stretching from Washington, D.C. to local school districts” that worked against progressive, humanistic, and radical approaches to English (573). Lastly, if academic achievement correlated with a student’s socioeconomic status more than with any school factors, the logical target of reform was not schools, but social and economic inequalities (Moffett). Thus, English teachers had compelling reasons to resist reforms that held them accountable for student performance measures and that shifted educational authority to the federal government and corporate America.

**NCTE’s Present Agenda**

Many of Moffett’s fears concerning educational measurement, the private sector, and federal policy have been realized through standards and accountability reforms supported by the Bush and Obama administrations. At the same time, NCTE’s political agenda has shifted from the oppositional positions it drafted in the 1970s and held into the 2000s. The organization’s shifting positions on “who counts” in English education become obvious when juxtaposing its recent positions on teacher evaluation, the Common Core, and federal-corporate partnerships in English education with its 1970s opposition to teacher accountability.

First, the NCTE Executive Committee’s 2012 position on teacher evaluation has combined two forms of accountability that Moffett considered oppositional in the 1970s: test-based accountability and professional development–based accountability. Echoing several NCTE positions of the 1970s, Moffett identified the former as a threat to the latter as teacher accountability reduced English to behavioral measures and positioned non-educators to steer educators’ work through high-stakes standardized assessments (Moffett). In contrast, NCTE’s present position on teacher evaluation “acknowledge[s] the dual purposes of evaluation of teachers—professional development and accountability”—as they now aim “to align quality assurance purposes with professional growth” and recognize performance measures that “assist school leaders in making major personnel decisions such as retention, tenure, and dismissal” (NCTE Executive Committee; italics in original).
NCTE’s 2012 position explicitly rejects “an overemphasis on accountability rooted in testing” and notes that teacher evaluation systems should consider “a wide range of evidence, including classroom observations, teacher-developed materials, student products and performances, and student feedback.” At the same time, however, NCTE’s “characteristics of a fair and effective teacher evaluation system” now validate statistical and behavioral measures that Moffett rejected as reductive and inappropriate assessments: “test-based accountability,” “clearly defined standards of teacher performance,” “effective teaching behaviors,” and “quantitative measures of student achievement” (NCTE Executive Committee). Ironically, accountability measures that Moffett dismissed as “unnecessary, ineffective, distorted, and bound to fail” (572) now constitute what the NCTE Executive Committee identifies as necessary measures of “a fair and effective teacher evaluation system.”

NCTE’s “neutral” stance on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) marks another shift from its 1970s opposition to standards and accountability. Official NCTE publications claim the organization neither endorses nor opposes the Common Core. At the same time, NCTE and its affiliated National Writing Project (NWP) have mobilized their teacher networks to support and accelerate the implementation of the CCSS—standards that philanthropic foundations, testing companies, and edu-businesses developed through a process that deliberately excluded students, teachers, and professional organizations (Williamson). NCTE has joined with the NWP and private-sector partners to produce online resources, a book series, professional development, and commercial materials to help English teachers understand and integrate key instructional shifts determined by the standards movement that excluded them (www.ncte.org/standards/common-core). This move to align English teaching with standards and accountability measures set outside of the education profession constitutes a radical shift from NCTE’s political agenda in the 1970s—when Moffett found it hard not to see standards and accountability as an attack on the teaching profession and a corporate agenda to commercialize and outsource education to the private sector.

In 2009, however, former NCTE executive director Kent Williamson announced NCTE’s commitment to “putting into practice” educational initiatives funded by federal grants, philanthropic foundations, and private sector investors. For example, NCTE strategically (and successfully) positioned itself for a share of the $110 billion that the U.S. Department of Education made available to education providers who would support the implementation of the CCSS, CCSS assessments, and data systems designed to hold teachers and teacher educators accountable for student progress on standardized tests (Williamson). Williamson conceded that these ventures posed “something of a quandary” for professional organizations, but NCTE would align itself with educational initiatives funded by the federal government, philanthropy, and private sector partners: “While we are wise to look critically at the emerging plans, it is hard to argue about the gigantic sums they are making available . . .” (Williamson).

Since 2010, NCTE and NWP press releases have promoted more than $66 million in funding from federal grant schemes, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and private-sector matching grants to develop curricula aligned with the CCSS (NWP), support implementation of the CCSS (NCTE), accelerate CCSS implementation by scaling awareness of the CCSS’s instructional shifts across their networks (NWP), and align professional development and teacher leadership with the CCSS (NWP). Moffett feared the demise of the English teaching professions if “bureaucrats and businessmen” ever steered English teachers’ work through externally defined standards and accountability measures. Today, the US Department of Education and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recognize the NCTE and NWP as official “partners” in K–12 education as they fund the organizations to align English education with a standards and accountability regime developed by entrepreneurs, testing companies, venture philanthropists, and edu-businesses.

**Democratic Accountability**

James Moffett could take for granted that the NCTE community opposed these teacher accountability reforms. NCTE’s 1971 position laid out in the “Resolution on Accountability” did not hold English teachers
accountable to externally defined performance measures, standards developed by entrepreneurs and testing companies, federal SEED and Investing in Innovation grants, or the Gates Foundation. Instead, NCTE’s 1970s leadership chose to defend a social democratic position on educational accountability:

English teachers recognize their accountability to various groups—to students, to colleagues both within and without the discipline of English, to parents, to the local community which supports the schools, and to the wider communities beyond it. However, they reject the view that their goals and objectives can be stated only in quantifiably measurable terms, describing the behavior their students will display at the completion of instruction. (NCTE)

NCTE’s 1971 position also asserted that accountability applied to students, parents, communities, and government—each of whom needed to provide financial, cultural, and social support to teachers, public schools, and the public good.

Today, however, NCTE’s political agenda has radically reconfigured “who counts” in English education. NCTE has muted its former critiques of behavioral measurement in English, aligned “accountability” and “quality assurance” measures with its externally funded “professional development” initiatives, and now partners with the federal government, philanthropy, and the private sector to align English teachers’ practice with curriculum and accountability frameworks developed outside of the education professions.

**NCTE’s political agenda has radically reconfigured “who counts” in English education.**

Moffett’s 1972 essay is timely today as it helps educators to remember and imagine a very different NCTE. At the onset of teacher accountability reforms, NCTE commissioned a prominent teacher-scholar to elaborate more than two dozen reasons to oppose the federal and corporate movement to hold English teachers “accountable” for student performance measures. With NCTE increasingly aligning itself with a political agenda that resembles and extends the accountability agendas it opposed from the 1970s into the 2000s, the broader NCTE community might engage NCTE’s past positions to evaluate how its present positions on teacher evaluation, the Common Core, Gates Foundation, and federal reforms may or may not impede the teaching and learning of English, diminish the teaching profession, extend surveillance and management in schools, elevate private sector and market interests above those of the public sector, accelerate the commercialization and privatization of education, and legitimize a “red herring” that erodes democratic accountability, the public interest, and broader struggles for social and economic justice (Moffett).

At the very least, English teachers, academics, and NCTE leaders might remember James Moffett’s timely question as they work out their positions, practices, and partners in English education: Who counts? 

**Works Cited**


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