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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Caught between educational accountability reforms, compliancy and political interference: perspectives of school principals in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the tension between external educational accountability demands and other [political] forces of interest and possible ways to ensure that schools can still succeed in performing their daily duties and achieving educational goals. We draw from interviews undertaken with school principals in South Africa. Our analysis suggests that the current education accountabilities in South Africa, as a constitutional prescript are not out of place with the rest of the world. However, the approach to these accountability reforms is questionable, riddled with political interference and has mostly led to compliancy at the schools' own peril. We conclude that education reforms must be accompanied by strong legal accountability, that is balanced with the capacity to improve and better the system that would yield desired results.

KEYWORDS

Educational accountability; accountability reforms; compliancy; school principals; political interference

Introduction

The past few decades have seen a relentless global wave of education accountability reforms occurring amid political turmoil and changes as well as global educational competition concurrently (Darling-Hammond 2004; Kim 2004; Anderson 2005; Figlio and Loeb 2011; Verger and Parcerisa 2017). This unsettledness and accountability rhetoric has been speedily growing and has kept education systems on their toes. Education accountability has become a buzz word among various stakeholders and has undoubtedly, put schools, principals, and teachers under enormous pressure (Bush 2009), forcing schools to

'perform in ways that are measurable and thus are rendered visible to all' (Perry and McWilliam 2007, 33). Although these pressures have clearly put school principals in the spotlight, for right or wrong reasons, the role of school leadership in managing these policy shifts has not always received the research attention it deserves. As seen by some, accountability pressures have often focused on student achievement, influencing classroom instruction at the expense of other school organisational factors which are just as critical to understanding the implementation of educational reform policies (Spillane and Kenney 2012; Constantinides 2022). Others view school leadership as a prescript for successful reform implementation (Brundrett and Rhodes 2011; Bryant, Ko, and Walker 2018), which brings the latter to the heart of dialogue on educational accountability and successful implementation of educational policy whether externally driven or internally initiated.

Perry and McWilliam (2007) contended that accountability in schooling is itself not a new phenomenon. However, what has 'changed quite dramatically over the last three decades are the nature, scope and purpose of accountability regimes in schools' (34). In responding to these accountability regimes, schools often contend with their own internal demands, and it is the bridging of these external pressures and the schools' own internal agendas that have been subject to much debate on the accountability platform (Seashore Louis and Robinson 2012; Constantinides 2022). In their findings on how school leaders perceive of the conflict between external mandates and their own values, Seashore Louis and Robinson (2012) found that when aligned with school-driven accountabilities and preferences, external accountability pressures have a chance to positively influence school leadership behaviours, yet, where there is no alignment, school leadership is not likely to provide the much-needed bridge between the state and the school. These authors were confirming Elmore's (2004) earlier assertion that [genuine] education reform starts bottom up, with teachers and school leaders first taking responsibility for learning to occur and not with external mandates. However, much of the literature places emphasis on the dilemma faced by schools in managing the shifting external legitimacy and their own internal integrity (Perry and McWilliam 2007; Knapp and Feldman 2012; Spillane and Kenney 2012; Armstrong, Ko, and Bryant 2018). The authors argue that while external pressure has continuously put schools under pressure to adapt their agendas in meeting these endless external demands, the latter also ought to meet their own internal responsibilities and maintain their own value-driven practices (also Gu, Day, Walker and Leithwood 2018).

Although many other countries have experienced educational reforms in recent times, South Africa has particularly seen an unprecedented influx of reform initiatives, as an attempt to address the imbalances of the past (Fleisch 2006; Bantwini and Letseka 2016). Accountability on educational outcomes is therefore critical for the South African context where it not only

serves to ensure transparency, but also where social justice and redress demand equitable access to quality education and improved educational outcomes particularly for the previously marginalised people and their communities (UNESCO 2014). In this context, and in defense of the schools' own integrity, Bantwini (2010) argued that it is teachers' professional responsibility to question new initiatives, so that they can understand them and take ownership. He cautioned it would be irrational and naive to expect teachers to just accept educational reforms without scrutiny. However, teachers' agency and critical engagement with policy in the South African context has been questioned (see Bantwini and Letseka 2016). It is against this backdrop that in this paper, we examine the tension between the schools' external accountability pressures and their own internal responsibilities.

Our discussion is guided by the following questions: (1) what are the views of school principals regarding accountability and the accountability demands that confront schools? (2) What external pressures do schools have to contend with amid these accountability demands? (3) How do schools maintain a balance between external pressures and their day-to-day responsibilities? (4) What kind of support is required to ensure that implementation of accountability reforms succeed to the benefit of the schools, despite political pressure? This introduction is followed by a review of global literature, background literature from the local South African context and a theoretical framework. Methodology is then presented followed by a presentation of findings and discussion. The paper ends by drawing implications for school leadership in the local context, which may be applicable to the global community regarding educational accountability.

Conception of education accountability

Accountability in education can be viewed as a broad concept that can be addressed in many ways. As Figlio and Loeb (2011) observe, political processes can be used to assure democratic accountability, introducing market-based reforms to increase accountability to parents and children, or developing peer-based accountability systems to increase the professional accountability of teachers. Accountability can thus be defined as a process by which one party is obliged to account for their actions to another party, which may be judged against a set of established standards or regulations (Brundrett and Rhodes 2011; Spaull 2015a). Spaull (2015a) emphasised that accountability entails the state of being answerable for something to someone or having to account for one's outcomes or performance and to accept responsibility for those outcomes. While this definition appears to be universally accepted, it nonetheless assumes an unproblematic power relationship where roles are clear and legitimate.

Although the impetus behind educational accountability is the desire to ensure provision of good quality education and global recognition, Perry and McWilliam (2007) argued that accountability is inextricably linked to 'questions of power, control and authority' (39), often with consequences for non-performance. In Verger and Parcerisa's (2017) observation, accountability is being conceived of as a central policy solution to the most important problems and challenges educational systems face, both in industrialised and developing societies. Tikly and Barrett (2011) view human capital approaches as having provided policy makers with important economic rationale for a focus on education quality. This human capital goal has also directly and indirectly promoted competition among developing and developed countries, regarding the best performance in education, especially in scarce and critical skills areas. In Fitzsimons (1999) view, the significance of education and training is viewed as the key to participation in the global economy, while Darling-Hammond (2004) argues that ultimately accountability is not only about measuring student learning but also improving it. Hence, genuine accountability requires not only higher standards, but also agency and professional ownership, as well as greater support for teachers and schools so they can in turn provide support for quality teaching and learning (Brundrett and Rhodes 2011; Gu et al. 2018).

Darling-Hammond (2004) identifies different types of accountability systems that influence education policy and interact with one another in today's systems. These include: *first*, political accountability, wherein legislators and school board members, for example, must regularly stand for election and answer for their decisions. *Second*, legal accountability, in which schools are to operate in accordance with legislation and citizens can ask the courts to hear complaints about the public schools' violation of laws. *Third*, bureaucratic accountability in which federal, state and district offices promulgate rules and regulations intended to ensure that schooling takes place according to set procedures. Anderson (2005) states that this bureaucratic system involves mandatory compliance with regulations, which simply make educators accountable for adherence to rules and accountable to the bureaucracy. *Fourth*, there is professional accountability, wherein teachers and other staff members are expected to acquire specialised knowledge, meet standards for entry and uphold professional standards of practice in their works. This system is based upon adherence to professional norms in which educators are accountable for adherence to standards and accountable to their peers (Anderson 2005). *Fifth*, it is market accountability, wherein parents and students may in some cases choose the courses of schools they believe are most appropriate. This accountability system is results driven, meaning that educators are accountable for student learning and accountable to the general public. Anderson (2005) highlights that these accountability systems are not new and those teachers have worked mostly within different accountability systems, often

simultaneously, attempting to balance their requirements. However, it is noted that there is usually a conflict between compliance and results due to dissatisfaction with historic results, to which both Darling-Hammond (2004) and Anderson (2005) concur takes its toll upon teachers.

What drives the accountability movement, we believe, is a fair question to pose. Among many reasons is the fear of losing in international competition, which, Verger and Parcerisa (2017) and Apple (2005) contend, applies to both developing and developed countries. Apple (2005) notes that the perceived failure of many educational institutions, which include failure to teach real knowledge and economically useful skills, has led to declining economic productivity, unemployment, poverty, and a loss of international competitiveness. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2015) argues that in the fast-changing knowledge economies, with globalisation, heightened competition, changing labour markets and employment instability, citizens must learn skills for the jobs of today, tomorrow and the years to come. Thus, ensuring that education and training are of high quality and the education systems that are equitable can contribute to growth and progress (OECD 2015). Also concerned about education, Hershberg (1996) earlier suggested that the best strategic intervention that could be made, whose impact would be felt through the entire human capital development system, would be to establish rigorous academic standards for K-12 schools and to hold all the students accountable to them. Clearly this call did not fall on deaf ears given the rise of standards and accountability in the 1990s (Harris and Herrington 2006). The UNESCO (2014) report shows that although the international and regional assessments do not cover all countries and cannot measure all aspects of education quality, they do indicate whether children are learning the most fundamental skills. Unfortunately, these accountability reforms have direct implications on teachers as intermediaries and implementers as well as learners as recipients.

While countries have been preoccupied with accountability regimes, there has been a growing criticism against accountability as a counterproductive exercise. Sahlberg (2010) openly raised concern regarding the tightened test-based accountability measures for schools, teachers and students and viewed them as possessing a potential to jeopardise the schools' effort to teach for the knowledge society and sustainable future. Aviles and Simons (2013) argued that as a form of control and power, accountability is linked with policies that seek to initiate or imitate principles of the free market (including competitiveness and consumer choice) in the public sector, and in the field of education. Adding to the discussion, Kelly et al. (2014) state that accountability systems in US education have often been viewed with scepticism, with no one method having broad support among educators, administrators and policymakers. While there has been consensus on the one hand that such systems should promote positive change in schools and classrooms, Anderson and Mundy (2014) argue that school improvement efforts around the world are strongly influenced by national and

international accountability systems that focus attention on a relatively narrow range of student learning outcomes. According to Anderson and Mundy, this narrowing of the learning agenda is even more pronounced in developing country contexts, where literacy and numeracy proficiency levels are typically low for adults as well as for children, and where academic learning in all subject areas is seen as highly dependent upon strengthening student reading, writing and mathematical skills. Referring to the South African context, Spaull (2015a) confirms the above as shown in the following section.

Education accountability reforms in South Africa

The struggle of the South African government to level the education playing field and ensure equity and quality in education has been ongoing for close to three decades. The uneven playing field originates from the injustices created by the apartheid government (Fiske and Ladd 2004), which engineered inequalities amongst South African people based on their racial background. To level the playing field, education reforms were prioritised, and South Africa adopted a top-down bureaucratic model of accountability that was intended to ensure an effective turnaround of dysfunctional schools (Fleisch 2006). These reforms are accompanied by various legislation including the South African School Act No 84 of 1996 (as amended by BELA Act 15 of 2011) and other key accountability measures such as the educator norms and standards (DoE 2000), adoption of the international standardised testing as well as regional and local testing standards. In Lewis and Pettersson's (2009) view, measuring performance is critical to establish benchmarks for efficiency, compare performance across time and providers, and assess effectiveness of public education investments. The South African constitution is unequivocal that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, background, or socio-economic status, must improve academically.

The desire to bridge the equity and equality gaps has also been promulgated in various ways including; making education the number one priority for the country and continuously increasing budget allocation to education (Department of Basic Education 2010), provision of more reform policies that intend to address the issues around teaching to learning (Bantwini and Letseka 2016), provision of teaching and learning materials, infrastructure (Department of Basic Education 2011), to mention a few. This move is aligned with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which underscores the value of education and states that 'everyone has the right to: (a) a basic education, including adult basic education; and (b) further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible' (12). Also, the National Development Plan (NDP) viewed as the guide to future for South Africa, clearly articulates that education, training and innovation are central to South Africa's long-term development as they are core elements in eliminating poverty and reducing

inequality, and the foundations of an equal society (The Presidency 2011). Education, according to the NDP, plays a critical role of empowering people to define their identity, take control of their lives, raise healthy families, confidently take part in developing a just society, and play an effective role in the politics and governance of their communities. As further indicated in The Presidency, the NDP asserts that South Africa needs knowledge that equips people for a society in constant social change.

Despite the above-highlighted government efforts, Spaull (2015a) argues that in South Africa the wholesale lack of accountability for student learning outcomes is one of the major impediments to quality education for the poor. Spaull contends that until there is an increase in both accountability and capacity, there is little reason to believe that there should be any measurable improvement in student learning outcomes in South Africa. Bantwini and Letseka (2016) argue that recognition and acknowledgment of existing realities, classroom cultures and implementation requirements should be the first step in improving education. These authors contend that most intended changes assume that teachers are ready and prepared for whatever changes introduced.

Theoretical framework

This article is premised on systems thinking theory and its emphasis on the connection between policies, processes and practices. Senge (2006) views systems thinking as a useful framework, that makes the full patterns clearer, and that helps us see how to change them effectively. He argues that systems thinking are a discipline for seeing wholes and their interrelationships rather than individual things, and for seeing patterns of change rather than static *snapshots*. Naicker and Mestry (2016) add that if the interrelationships between the elements of a system are weak, it is unlikely that a system will succeed. It is in this context that we advocate strong whole education system accountability that would ensure sustained improvement of schools, following Ranson's (2003, 459) conception of accountability as a system that 'defines a relationship of control between different parties'. Spaull (2015a) asserts that the lack of accountability and service delivery is especially acute in the basic education sector in South Africa. Hence, Senge's (2006) argument that systems thinking is needed now more than ever because we are becoming overwhelmed by complexity, is particularly appropriate. This is especially so, as Childress et al. (2007) argue that public education has a history for silver-bullet solutions.

Verger and Parcerisa (2017) argue that the forms and the main aims of accountability have substantially evolved over the years. Hence, Senge (2006) views that the art of systems thinking lies in being able to recognise 'complex and subtle structures … amid the wealth of details, pressures, and cross currents

that attend all real management settings' (124). Silberstein (2020) argues that 'when the devil is not in the detail', there is bound to be system failure, while Spaull (2015b) argues for the importance of aligning the structures of accountability with the processes of capacitation. Spaull posits that only when schools have both the incentive to respond to an accountability system and have the capacity to do so will there be an improvement in student outcomes. He notes that on a practical level, until such a time when we have many interventions that have been rigorously evaluated – both capacity-building and accountability-enhancing interventions – we will not have the evidence base needed for sound resource allocation, which is itself a prerequisite for improved quality of education for all. Arguably, this aligns policy intentions with the equity agenda. As Subreenduth (2013) postulates, that even the best social justice intentions, when misaligned with the national practice, limit or diminish possibilities for social justice and equitable treatment. This thinking is aligned with Senge's (2006) view that emphasises the ability to see through the 'detail complexity to the underlying structures generating change' (124).

Indeed, as Lewis and Pettersson (2009) aver, the impacts of investments in education in developing and transition countries are typically measured by inputs and outputs. Tikly and Barrett (2011) assert that many communities in Africa are multiplied disadvantaged in terms of being able to influence the form and content of education relevant for their children and in mechanisms for holding schools and the education system accountable for performance. These communities are disadvantaged through poor systems of national governance and again through the imposition of top-down global and regional agendas that are significant in defining education policy.

Methodology

This paper draws from qualitative research conducted in the Eastern Cape Province, which is the second largest and the poorest of the nine provinces in South Africa. The size and the socio-economic status of the province are particularly relevant in the context of this paper, given South Africa's legacy of inequalities that are predominantly race-based. The EC province is home to approximately 22% of schools in the country, the majority of which are in black African communities and in the lowest quintiles (1–3), indicating the lowest socio-economic status where children qualify for free tuition and free school meals. In South Africa, quintiles 1–3 schools are 'no fee-paying schools' due to poverty levels in the areas where the schools are located, whereas quintiles 4–5 are 'fee paying schools' due to their better economic status. The EC province has also been one of the worst performing in the country, arguably not only because of poverty, but also because of poor governance and administration (Bantwini, Moorosi, and Diko 2017), leadership instability, politicisation and financial mismanagement (Kota et al. 2017).

Sample

Interviews were conducted with 18 school principals of both primary and secondary schools. Nine principals were from the primary schools and the other nine, from secondary schools. Schools were selected from five different districts representing urban (mostly township) and rural areas. From each district, four schools (two primary schools and two secondary schools) were selected based on geographical access and willingness to participate in the study. Although most schools were drawn from urban areas due to geographical access and participants' willingness to participate in the study, care was taken to include equal numbers of both primary and secondary schools with the school principal as the key participant from each school. The rationale for choosing principals as the participants was due to the focus of the study, which required a leadership perspective from school principals as accounting officers at the school level. An initial survey was sent to all principals in five of the then 23 districts, and those who indicated willingness to participate in the study were black African, eight of whom were females and 10 were males. All the participants had more than 20 years of experience in teaching and all had been principals for no less than five years.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim. This later initialed descriptive codes (for analysis) that aimed at identifying, linking and labelling the principals' interviews, in order to determine themes and patterns. The process of coding included three stages as prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and O'Donoghue (2007). Open coding involved the process of generating initial concepts from data, axial coding to the development and linking of concepts into conceptual families, and selective coding to the formalising of these relationships into theoretical frameworks. The codes were then divided into broader categories that were visible in the data. The categories that were established to be distinctive were grouped into themes according to Cresswell (2007) and Saldana (2009). These themes are used as subtitles to group the findings in the section below. Representative quotes that best illustrate the findings were selected. The selection was distributed across the participants to ensure wider representation across the data set, which is illustrated by the numbers used to code the principal participants.

Ethics

Permission to undertake this research was obtained from both the EC Province Department of Education and participants. The researchers ensured that the

ethical responsibilities associated with dignity, rights, safety and well-being of the participants were considered. Care was taken to remove identifiable information that could put our participants' anonymity at risk.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we present some of the findings that emerged from the analysed data. We present these findings using themes developed from research questions that include; the perceptions about the accountability demands; the political interference as external pressure; maintaining the accountability reforms amid the political demands; and the support required to ensure their effective implementation.

Conceptualisation of accountability demands

As a starting point, we sought to establish how accountability as a process was understood by participants. All the school principals, both from primary and secondary school, viewed the accountability measures as possessing a potential to be reasonable depending on how they are implemented. Most importantly, accountability was understood as a legal prescript and therefore something to be complied with. Describing accountability, one secondary school principal had this to say:

> *… the accountability is a constitutional prescript, section 195, chapter 10 of the Constitution, saying, we need to have an accountable public service, which then find resonance in the white paper for transformation of public service delivery through the Batho Pele principles. Because one of them state that we need to be accountable as public servants. But this accountability … , in our case, number one, we are appointed in schools as accounting officers, principals are appointed as accounting officers … but we are not treated as such. (P7, Secondary School Principal)*

This principal's understanding of accountability suggests a legal undertone that renders them as principals liable, and therefore expected to adhere to the law and serve. However, the bone of contention appears to be with the implementation approach to these accountability reforms, which was viewed as potentially nullifying the principals' own accountability. While the 'constitutional prescript' accountability is accepted for what it is, the accountability process was perceived by all participants as having become unrealistic, forcing the schools to just comply which may not really play the role of accounting or holding individuals or public servants accountable. Phrases such as '*it's all about box ticking*' were used to note the displeasure. Describing the situation further, another secondary school principal stated:

> *… eh this thing of accountability prof, to me it has lost its meaning, it is just a rhetoric, because we do this accountability for the sake of compliance and not for the sake of improving the system. We account Prof for the sake of saying no I am accounting for compliance, I have to comply, I have to submit a monthly report, FINCOM report, but not for*

the sake of improving the system because my understanding is that if there was a constant monitoring and evaluation of the system, then the accountability will be followed by an improvement plan … (P3, Secondary School Principal)

Based on the above insight, accountability had apparently become a buzz word with no meaning or value. Among the displeasures expressed was that the accountability process was never accompanied by a remedial action plan based on the identified gaps, weaknesses or discrepancies. About eight principals from the secondary schools and seven from primary schools believed that accountability should help them become better in their daily practice and thus, leading to better performance of schools. These principals were of the view that the lack of monitoring of the accountability implementation has led to inaccurate representation of what was going on in the schools, as seen below.

… we do it (accountability) literary to comply … otherwise you will find a direct opposite of what is in paper when you visit schools. (P11, Primary School Principal)

Evident from the above quote and the trend of responses was the allegation that the accountability provided to some districts was not a genuine reflection of what was taking place at the schools. The accountability reforms now appear to be a window dressing exercise, instead of helping improve education. Perry and McWilliam's (2007) observe that the new accountability regimes have become ubiquitous in schools to the extent that they threaten to leave little, if any, space for experimentation, innovation and risk taking – the conditions so important for learning. Bantwini and Letseka (2016) also observe that most intended changes assume that teachers are ready and prepared for whatever changes that are introduced and do not leave room for teachers to engage. This assumption misses the point that some teachers feel 'professional identity bankruptcy' (Bantwini and Letseka 2016, 340), which appears to be implied in these extracts.

In an endeavour to illustrate why and how accountability has lost its meaning, a primary school principal provided the following insight:

… We have meetings, but in those meetings prof we report, but the reports that we submit, they are not interrogated on a monthly basis, those reports are not interrogated by qualified accountants of the district so that you have a room for improvement in your financial management aspect, you simply submit, and those things are kept and nothing happens. And again, another thing, in schools you have accountability meetings, it starts here at school, we are told to have accountability meetings where we monitor the curriculum delivery as school principals, and we submit those reports to the district office but such accountability, the report we submit to the district there is no follow up that is made by the subject advisors … (P1, Primary school principal)

Coming out clearly from this school principal was the loss of hope for the accountability reforms as their returns were not clear on what was expected. We believe it is quite revealing that there was a common pattern of responses among the primary and secondary school level principals, who were of the view that the pressure

accompanying the accountability has led to districts asking schools to even account for something that they were clueless about as shown below:

> *… sometimes we are made to account for things that we do not know. For example, they say come and account for LTSM (Learning and Teaching Support Materials) that has been delivered in your school. So, if there is none that was delivered in your school, how are you going to account? You cannot account for something that was never delivered. (P3, Secondary school principal)*

From the above insight, it is evident that even the district officials that schools account to are not completely in touch with what is occurring at schools, as they ask them to account for LSTM that they themselves should have delivered. The compliance practice was thus thought to be defeating the purpose of having accountability measures that would yield authentic results. This exposes a gap and lack of synergy between schools and districts. Spaull (2015b) refers to accountability issues as cutting across all levels of the system. These findings reveal a lack of bureaucratic accountability measures which renders school leaders lacking in professional accountability. Childress et al. (2007) cautioned that cultural changes do not take place because of proclamations from the district office or by widely disseminating catch slogans. They argued that leaders must use a range of available managerial levers to build new organisational systems and structures that require and prompt people throughout a district to behave in new ways that are purposefully encouraged and rewarded.

What also emerged from the data was the complaint about lack of invitation to participate in the conceptualisation and development of the accountability measures and some reform initiatives, which later cascaded to the schools. This undemocratic process was viewed partly as the cause for the poor implementation of accountability reforms. Elaborating on this issue, one secondary school principal said:

> *We have a problem in our country of misinterpreting consultation for participation, because we are consulted but we are passive beings. We do not actively take part in our education reforms whereas, we are active participants as we are the people who deliver, because the education system is measured through the results. That's the only way we measure the functionality of the education system. We measure it through the Matric results particularly in our country. (P5, Secondary school principal)*

Depicted from the above insight was that schools are not actively engaged in the development of the reforms that they are later required to implement, making them (reforms) to be top-down imposition. This suggests that the system is results-driven as matric results (school leaving results) are currently the main measuring instrument of performance in education in the country. Sadly, this observation, which was shared by majority of secondary school principals (seven of nine) is aligned with Perry and McWilliam's (2007) view that schools have become, in many cases, closed systems where externally

determined targets drive activity, while the diversity and breadth within and between schools made possible by an open system built around reflective practice have all but disappeared.

Aggravating the situation was that many teachers were struggling with the new reforms in different ways. One of the examples given was that of not getting the policy booklets from their districts, and those who have them not understanding them, not knowing how best to implement them, and above all, there was lack of or minimum district guidance and support. The challenge of translating the new concepts into functioning and effective education systems was said to be a harder and more complicated step. This issue and the lack or minimum district guidance and support appears to persist as Bantwini et al. (2017) discussed it at length. We are of the view that the implementation of the accountability reforms cannot be achieved overnight and thus requires time. Bantwini and Letseka (2016) argue that recognition and acknowledgment of existing realities, classroom cultures and implementation requirements should be the first step in improving education. Indeed, these contextual issues form the backbone of accountability relationships in the education system (Spivack 2021), and context is seen as central to successful reform policy (Porter, Fusarelli, and Fusarelli 2015). Spaull (2015b) argues that at all levels of the education system in South Africa, there are essentially no tangible consequences for non-performance. In their view, Lewis and Pettersson (2009) caution that many teacher performance problems stem from weak governance systems that fail to reward good performance and discipline teachers who under-perform. Managing teachers and school principals' performance is an essential step to holding those responsible to account (Eddy-Spicer et al. 2019). However, this needs to be coupled with capacity building and ongoing professional development. We concur that strong leadership is a necessary ingredient to successful reforms. As Childress et al. (2007) argue, leaders must understand that achieving success is not a destination but a dynamic, ongoing process that requires leaders to modify their organisations as conditions change. Most importantly, as Childress et al. (2007) state, leaders must realise that the core of success is the ability to transform the culture of their organisations.

Political interference

Political interference in education was perceived as a major disruptive form of external pressure that continues to have negative outcomes. The school principals were of the view that schools contend with rife political interferences on many occasions. Several examples were alluded to including how district officials or executives of some political parties would exert pressure on schools to violate school policy as shown below:

> *… they know that by the end of August admissions are closed. But you will find a branch executive committee of the … .(name of a political party) coming with children at the beginning of the year to say this is our school, you must admit them. Now that is where this contrast comes from, and I say no I have already submitted, the department dictates that before the end of the year, by the 5th of December I must have submitted the list of learners who are going to be in my school and you are now interfering by saying I must admit these learners … (P11, Primary school principal)*

This clearly complicates the implementation of the policy by the very people who are supposed to help enforce it to ensure accountability. This issue appeared to affect both primary and secondary schools. Expressing further discontent, a secondary school principal mentioned the following:

> *… Sometimes this interference does not even come from the local people, in terms of admissions. You will find that having admitted those learners there is a constitutional prescript that says "no learners shall be denied access to education" now after having admitted, someone will come with his child to the school and if you deny this child access to the school they will go to the district and the district will pick up the phone without even understanding what is happening and say "you must admit, … (name of the principal) you must admit that learner, you are violating that child's rights. (P18, Secondary school principal)*

It was evident from these school principals that education has painstakingly become a very politicised space. Clearly, this was not a compliment but an expression of concern as these politics were viewed negatively. Explaining their situation, another secondary school principal said:

> *… and again, we need to depoliticize the public service. Depoliticize it in the sense that when we are going for class visits now, we cannot compromise that, that is part of our work. Unions will come and say, you don't visit classes, but where do they feature? Their role is clearly defined in the Labour Relations Act. They are there to maintain labour peace, not to interfere in the running of the schools. I mean Prof if we can depoliticize the public sector and ensure that the administration takes smoothly without the interfere from the politics. (P3, Secondary school principal)*

Spaull (2015a) cautions against prioritising the concerns of a political minority, which are teacher unions, over those of a politically atomised majority, the parents, and children in this case. Schools are said to be under a constant pressure to provide an account of all school policies and practices to anyone and everyone (Perry and McWilliam 2007), yet in this case they appear to be contending with demands that sometimes make it impossible for them to genuinely account.

How schools maintain internal accountability amid political demands clouding the education sector was noted as a difficult exercise. This was partly due to the conflict between political interests and the daily demands of the school and principals' duties. For instance, school principals have the legislative prescripts dictating that their duty in a school is to monitor, monitoring that involves classroom visits (Department of Basic Education 1996), yet some teacher unions

demand that principals do not visit classrooms. Principals indicated that it was difficult to maintain internal accountability amid these external political pressures. The issue of teacher unions has been contentious in South Africa for some time, with Mahlangu and Pitsoe (2011) noting a 'power struggle' (367) between government and the teacher unions in South Africa and Mahlangu (2019) further labelling this struggle as 'education capture' (111).

Maintaining internal accountability amid political demands

Principals identified several mechanisms helpful for survival in this difficult situation of political interference. One of the common strategies among the school principals was the thorough and sound knowledge of the education policies and the quest for their implementation. Principals indicated that political pressures vary based on certain political interests at any one moment, but one cannot be easily swayed when one is well versed in policy. One secondary school principal stated thus:

> *… the only way of ensuring that you raise your head above the water is to ensure that you know your story, you are capacitated through continuous professional development. As principals, we need to be lifelong learners because the changes in education demand that we are lifelong learners. Education systems changes daily so one has to read so that these politics don't affect you adversely and negatively … (P17, Secondary school principal)*

In addition to the need for principals to be thoroughly knowledgeable, it was also suggested by a primary school principal that teachers ought to be equally improved:

> *… teachers have to improve their qualification, they have to study further, and each teacher has to know his/her job description … there is a lot beyond classroom work, there is a lot beyond the four walls of the classroom … (P2, Primary school principal)*

A secondary school principal mentioned that 'politics in a nutshell have a direct influence and sometimes a very negative influence in how we run our schools and districts'. Hence, the need for knowledge of policies is not to be restricted to school principals but passed to teachers as well. This power of knowledge enables school leaders and teachers to meet their internal expectations without crumbling under external demands that are influenced by different political interests. Knapp and Feldman (2012) argue that [lifelong] learning for school staff is necessary so that the latter are in a good position to engage the external environment and their demands. Indeed, this resonates with the call for ongoing professional development for school leadership, which Moorosi (2020) argues requires political will. While we can conclude that a combination of knowledge, ongoing professional development and courage gives school principals the agency to balance these external pressures and internal demands, we are also not complacent about contextual and political challenges

facing local school principals. Hence why, our suggestion for improvement is informed by a systems thinking approach that acknowledges the reciprocity of the accountability process. Elmore (2008) asserts that accountability is a give and take contract of reciprocity between the concerned parties. Earlier, Ranson (2003) suggested that accountability is a process of trust wherein 'patterns of expectation and answerability are reciprocal' (461). It follows then that all partners in the education system, who form the core accountability relationship (Spivack 2021) at the macro, the meso and micro levels play their part.

Support required to ensure success of accountability reforms

All reform, as Bantwini (2010) states, will face challenges, whether contextual, cognitive, or otherwise. Thus, the launch of reforms must take these challenges into consideration, and they should be treated positively, and plans made to resolve them concurrently with the implementation of the reforms. Among the suggestions provided by some principals regarding the support included human capacity.

> *I think it is time that the department empowers the principals in legislation so that, the only weapon that we have, that will protect us from this political administration dichotomy is legislation. If principals can be well versed, empowered, and workshopped in legislation. Maybe have all the teachers, as a prerequisite for a person to be a principal, at least that person must have educational law. One thing that jeopardizes the whole process is people who are not aware of what they have to do, they are not aware of their job description … or don't know how to infuse the law into their job description, which then becomes a problem. (P2, Primary school principal)*

The empowering of those that will implement reforms can never be overstated, as it was repeatedly shared by both primary and secondary school principals. Spaull (2015a) talks about the importance of aligning the structures of accountability with the processes of capacitation. He argues that only when schools have both the incentive to respond to an accountability system and the capacity to do so will there be an improvement in student outcomes. Real accountability, as Lewis and Pettersson (2009) argue, hinges on having well-defined standards and adequate information about performance in education provision to enable policymakers and programme administrators to improve service delivery.

Additional to the support desired by the principals is to be given space and the alleviation of the pile of paperwork that they usually find themselves buried under. Bantwini and Letseka (2016) argue that due to the wave of changes some teachers do not feel that they belong to the profession anymore. Seemingly, the accountability reforms and political pressures demand more than what school principals can give. Bantwini and Letseka (2016) caution that the aspiration to compete with Western countries is admirable, but a consideration of the period it took the Western countries to be where they are today should be seriously considered in addition to contextual factors that differ significantly.

The other support required to ensure the success of the accountability reforms was the assistance from the district office:

> *… We need them (district officials) to come forward to display their skills, expertise and so on and to simplify this Bible … we want them to change their management style to transform, to change totally and to come to the level of schools. To visit schools regularly and not principals to run after them, which is what is going on. I have got to, they phone, please submit this and this, I have to take it to them, they are seating there and they do not come to us. We need EDO's who will come and stay with us … (P13, Primary school principal)*

As also noted above, schools require support from their districts to understand and be able to implement accountability reforms. In Elmore's (2008) observation, accountability, and the provision of support for capacity go hand in hand. Concurring, Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit and Pittenger (2014) argue that for an accountability approach to be truly responsible for the outcomes that children deserve, and communities require, it must support a system that is cohesive, integrative, and continuously renewing. It should enable schools to offer high quality education, reduce the likelihood of harmful or unequal practices, and have means to identify and correct problems that may occur. Based on Darling-Hammond et al. (2014), it is fair to then ask: is our system cohesive, integrative, and continuously renewing? If not, why? And what are we going to do about it?

Implications and conclusions

Accountability reforms in education exist to support and improve the system. While the literature we draw from mostly suggests a degree of complementarity between external and internal accountability pressures, where the external environment can be used as a resource to improve learning within the school context (e.g. Knapp and Feldman 2012), our findings generally suggest a lack of synergy between external and internal accountability pressures. We acknowledge the methodological limitation of a one-sided perspective from the school principals' side, but this lack of synergy most likely indicates the existence of conflict between internal and external accountability demands, which exert unbearable pressure on school principals and their schools and renders mistrust between school principals and district officials. Indeed, the lack of trust between stakeholders in the system renders the system 'powerless' and dysfunctional (Van der Berg et al. 2016). Macbeath (2008) advanced the notion of shared accountability, and it is in this frame that we find systems thinking relevant in arguing for shared accountability between schools, districts, provinces and the other stakeholders (Brundrett and Rhodes 2011). Here, we align with Senge's (2006) assertion on the timeliness of a systems thinking approach as education systems are becoming overwhelmed by complexity. To this, we add *timelessness* of systems thinking. A systems thinking approach can never

be outdated as education systems are increasingly getting complex. This approach can only ensure a concerted effort towards reform, which in turn guarantees synergy and coherence of approach to accountability. While our findings do not depict this level of synergy, Bryant, Ko, and Walker (2018) propose that successful principals 'created synergies between external policy mandates and internal school agendas' to ensure mutual support (357). Silberstein (2020) contends that an incoherent system does not produce learning. We therefore conclude that education reforms must be accompanied by *a strong coherent and cohesive system accountability*, one that should mainly aim to improve and better the system to help schools and their communities and yield better and desired results.

Also, fundamental to this study, is that although the accountability reforms may have value to add in advancing the education system, in this province the legal accountability reforms were found by both the primary and secondary school principals wanting, with less value. They have been reduced to a window dressing buzz word with uncritical compliancy that is not accompanied by any meaningful change or genuine achievement of outcomes. As we have previously argued, unless schools, districts and provinces work together collaboratively towards attainment of educational goals (Bantwini et al. 2017; Moorosi and Bantwini 2016) meaningful school improvement and achievement of learning outcomes will forever remain a pie in the sky. We conclude that school principals' own contribution to improvement and reform may be inhibited by *blind compliancy*, which they are being forced into by the competing political demands. While compliance may be a necessary step towards ensuring bureaucratic accountability, school leaders ought to be capacitated through ongoing professional development for school leadership, that enables them to engage reform initiatives critically. This could increase levels of trust in the school principals' ability to make local decisions and judgements based on their professional knowledge and contextual privilege. We believe that critically engaging reform initiatives unleashes school principals' own potential to enhance improvement rather 'than simply implement the policy with fidelity' (Leithwood 2018, 393). As Bryant, Ko, and Walker (2018) emphasised, when principals are empowered, they implement policy mandates 'with confidence' and 'with little worry about fidelity to' external mandates (356).

We appreciate that politics in the education system are inevitable, and an important part of a healthy democracy. Indeed Ranson (2003) views politics as a necessary part of the democratic process that should provide grounds for representation and dissent and Silberstein (2020), perceives politics as an integral part of the accountability relationship that produces learning. Additionally, politics represent democratic participation, which is a corner stone of the South African Constitution. However, fundamental in such situations is democratic responsibility which involves caution in navigating that murky terrain guided by reciprocity and sound knowledge of what is expected of the

different parties without losing focus of the bigger picture. Van der Berg et al. (2016) have identified the 'undue union influence' as a significant 'binding constraint' (7) which undermines the functionality of the South African education system. In this sense, it is imperative that districts and provincial officers ensure that schools are protected from unwarranted union interference, so they can focus on their mandate, to provide learners with the basic quality education they constitutionally deserve.

We concur with Spaull (2015a) and Leithwood (2018) that accountability should be accompanied by capacity building to achieve meaningful improvement of education outcomes. Elmore (2008) asserts that 'if accountability is the policy, improvement is the outcome' (39). As the OECD (2015) also cautions, education systems must not only provide access to equivalent opportunities, but also aim to promote successful educational outcomes for all students by responding to different student needs. Owens, Pogodzinski, and Hill (2016) contend that because of these accountability reforms, comprehensive professional development policy reform has the potential to be an integral part of improving school effectiveness and student outcomes. We also strongly believe that accountability reforms, when clearly understood and effectively developed and implemented, can improve the education system for the better. We thus conclude that for accountability reforms to succeed, there is a need for capacity building among school leaders who are tasked with reform implementation. We believe that it is a positive starting point that school principals in the Eastern Cape are aware of the bureaucratic expectation and demand on them to account. What they need further is support through enforceable legal accountability, which would minimise undue political interference, coupled with professional development to ensure they have the capacity to enact reform efforts. We see this reciprocity as an essential aspect of the systems thinking equation to functional accountability.

Disclosure statement

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