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An Exploration of the Key Indicators in Holistic Accountability at Public Sector Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To ensure sustainable progress in education system accountability comes into play, prompting the researcher to undertake school accountability at public sector elementary schools to gain insight into the prevailing accountability norms within public education as well as to gauge the applicability of a comprehensive model of Holistic Accountability. The study focused on the exploration of the four key indicators of holistic accountability at public sector elementary schools of Islamabad.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Qualitative descriptive approach was used to study of school accountability at public sector elementary schools within public education in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. Document analysis, Checklists and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data.

Findings: Study revealed an acceptance and need for adopting holistic accountability practices at elementary schools, along with transparency as regards to decision making, goal sharing and resource spending with the public.

Implications/Originality/Value: This research study helps to contribute to the literature on school accountability and attempted to seek evidence whether holistic accountability can have some level of relevance in Pakistani context. The study helps to demonstrate the need to extend an understanding of western school accountability frameworks in juxtaposition with contextual complexities.

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Introduction

Accountability could be understood as a relationship whereby one party – sometimes interpreted as an individual, sometimes an institution – has an obligation to account for their actions or performance to another (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2011). The obligation assumes that whoever is giving account and being held to account has some responsibility for the actions. So

accountability involves both responsibility and accounting which may be evaluated against established or expected standards and action taken. In Pakistan, educational accountability has yet to carve a niche for itself as an independent area of research and policy making. It is presently seen in the context of pending educational reforms which need to be implemented with force and fervor. Educational accountability in general and school accountability in specific will help to overcome the bigger educational challenges facing Pakistan today such as; delivering quality education and making the system deliver. Bringing efficiency and transparency in public schools as well as confidence building in public delivery will help improve equity as well.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

1. To find out the current practices of accountability system at elementary level under Federal Directorate of Education (FDE).
2. To explore the four key indicators in holistic accountability system at two public sector elementary schools of Islamabad.

Research Questions

1. What are the current practices of accountability at elementary schools, relating to teaching?
2. What percentage of teachers are meeting state licensure requirements for the grade/subject that they teach?
3. What are the teaching practices that influence students' achievements in a positive manner?
4. What are the current practices of accountability relating to leadership?
5. What potential leadership behaviors can allow school leaders to embrace the opportunity to be accountable?
6. What are the current practices of accountability relating to curriculum?
7. What are the core standards of curriculum?
8. What are the current practices of accountability relating to parent & community involvement?
9. Do more than 90% of students have an adult regularly involved in school support activities?
10. What channels of community communication are utilized?

Review of the Literature

Elementary school education is a constitutional right of every child in many countries including Pakistan irrespective of the fact that at one end education is viewed as a public good and at the other a purchasable commodity for private benefit. Providing a public schooling system built upon the principles of equity and social justice is the ultimate duty of the governments. The Commission on Growth and Development which reviewed the factors associated with sustained economic growth around the world cited the following two key conclusions in its 2008 report, *The Growth Report: Strategies for Sustained Growth and Inclusive Development*:

- Every country that sustained high growth for long periods put substantial effort into schooling its citizens and deepening its human capital.
- Rather than the quantity of education (years of schooling or rates of enrolment) it is the results (literacy, numeracy and other cognitive skills) that matter to growth.

World Development Report (2004) states that a root cause of low quality and inequitable public services such as education, is the weak "accountability" of providers to both their supervisors and their clients. Similarly, Shadreck & Hebert (2013) in their research study established that the concept of quality in education is tied to the notion of accountability. Therefore, accountability is the catchword for the 2030 Education Framework for Action by UNESCO. However, educational accountability is a broad concept which may entail utilizing of political processes to assure democratic accountability or introducing market-based reforms to provide results to parents and

children or developing peer-based accountability systems to increase professional accountability of teachers but most commonly accountability in education involves the use of administrative data-based mechanisms for improving student achievements (Anderson 2005). The schools may also be held responsible and accountable to the community for cultivating in the learners certain knowledge, skills, attitudes and potentials which are needed and expected by the society. In short, the structure of accountability is inextricably linked to its purpose. Reeves (2002) argued that the obvious or convenient message which conventional fragmentary systems of accountability in education put forward is that however unfortunate the results have been, tests are the only way to evaluate student achievement because students come to schools with high or low ability and other variables such as ethnicity or economic status that are beyond control. So, the test-scores become inconsequential numbers which tell only if a method/intervention was successful or a failure but shed little light on how to improve the system. Thus, pushing for accountability practices towards a more holistic and comprehensive approach.

Reeves (2002) proposed progressive three-tier model of Holistic Accountability system for policy makers, educational leaders and the public which goes beyond rudimentary numbers/test-scores. It offers comprehensive information that can lead to better decision making by educational stakeholders thus ultimately leading to improved student achievement and better allocation of resources. Reeves (2004) asserts that holistic accountability is in effect student-centred and so more constructive than traditional accountability as its focus is on improvement of teaching and learning rather than just evaluation and publication of a report. He further clarifies that classroom assessments are intended for improvement of student performance but when teachers are taxed for poor results either because of student absenteeism or personal problems, a sense of resentment brews up resulting in low motivation of teachers. Hence, opting for a student-centered accountability approach which takes into account more comprehensive indicators other than mere test-scores would help the teachers and school leaders to embrace accountability in essence. Holistic accountability works on the basis of the following three tiers of indicators:

- a) System-wide indicators i.e., test scores, curriculum & core standards.
- b) School-based indicators i.e., community-parent linkages, professional practices of teachers and educational leaders
- c) School Narrative i.e., qualitative context for quantitative data

Figure 1: 3-Tier Model of Holistic Accountability

The basic thrust of this study was to explore the four key indicators in holistic accountability (Teaching, Leadership, Curriculum & Parent-Community involvement) among two representative elementary schools from the Federal Capital Area Islamabad. This study attempted

to assess school accountability with respect to the theoretical framework as suggested by Douglas B. Reeves (2004), within the local context to gauge its applicability in Pakistan and offer suggestions based on the results.

Methodology

Qualitative descriptive research methodology was adopted for this study whereby a comprehensive summarization was made for the studied process of public-school accountability in relation to the key indicators of Holistic Accountability framework. Use of qualitative descriptive approach is relevant where direct information and rich description of the experience is required, and time or resources are limited (Anderson & Sondergaard 2009).

Population

The population of the study was public sector elementary schools of Islamabad Federal Capital Territory. The population contains both urban and rural public elementary schools which are further categorized into girls and boys public schools.

Sampling

Purposive sampling technique was applied to get data from each stratum i.e. urban-rural and boys-girls elementary schools fulfilling both geographical and gender parity distinctions. Sample participants were 32 in all as general recommendation for qualitative descriptive research is to have a sample size 20-30 (Morse & Chung, 2003).

The school heads/principals of both elementary schools under study as well as the subject teachers of all the core-subjects and the parents who are the representatives of Parent Teacher Associations or School Management Committees were participants.

Instruments of Research

Research tool of document analysis was utilized for the official manuscripts from which four separate checklists were compiled based on the official accountability procedures mandated by the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE); pertaining to the four key indicators of holistic accountability. Three separate semi-structured interview questionnaires based on research questions guided by the objectives of the study, were developed to be administered in the field to three separate participants of the sample: School Heads, Teachers and Parents.

Validity & Reliability

In Qualitative research dependability or reliability can be established through trials and triangulation and validity or credibility through saturation and peer-review (Simon & Goes, 2016). The research engaged expert-review to cross-validate instruments and after being cleared of having satisfied logical/face validity requirements the instruments were administered. Triangulation for reliability of data was attempted by using both interviews and checklists to collect data on the same key indicators of holistic accountability and to capture different perspectives and dimensions of the same phenomenon.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis technique was utilized to interpret documented information, checklists and interview responses. Analysis of the data was categorized around the two objectives of research and then further broken into four categories based on the four key indicators of holistic accountability model.

Accountability Practices Relating to Teaching

A detailed document analysis of the School Management Manual was undertaken because it is a comprehensive manual/toolkit on policies, procedures and guidelines for school management of

educational institutions under PMERP Prime Minister's Educational Reform Program (2017). The only valid document dealing with any rules/laws containing any semblance of accountability or evaluative practices at FDE per say. Research exposed that teaching practices are to be monitored by far the most frequently. It is the chief responsibility of the School Head to perform daily classroom observations to assess teacher's practices. However, School teachers are not directly held accountable for the results of students rather are assessed and evaluated on several key areas through specific and quantifiable objectives which become part of Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs), salary increments and identification of training and development requirements. Under FDE teachers are evaluated through adherence to the school norms by such process indicators as punctuality, attendance/absenteeism, notebook checking routines, personal behavior, students' assessments and making lesson plans. Performance components such as knowledge, skills, and lesson delivery in teaching are to be assessed by the School Development Plan (SDP) which, however, is not regularly undertaken by the school management owing to multiple factors such as lack of resources, neglect of authorities or general mismanagement.

Research data found that holistic accountability indicators on teaching practice were fully acknowledged as fitting our local context by the participants. Incorporation of cross-disciplinary approach to instruction along with other innovative techniques such as differentiated, individualized, integrated and collaborative instruction were found to be fully appreciated and approved by local teachers. However, their accurate application demands official intervention. Similarly, command on subject matter and skills like communication, lesson delivery and behavior management must be recognized as binding indicators of teacher accountability. It became apparent through research that some of above teaching skills are already being practiced by faculty members in classrooms but in a personal capacity without the credit yet with moral support of school management. It was widely suggested that frequency of meaningful feedback to both students and parents along with frequency of reading, writing and lessons integrating technology must be increased at elementary level and teachers be held accountable on it.

Accountability Practices Relating to Leadership

Document review revealed that school management is mostly the responsibility of the school head who supervises all aspects of staff management, data/record management, parent-community coordination, staff-development and training, health, safety and infrastructure upkeep. He/she is entrusted with a very powerful role to play, connecting staff, students, curriculum, parents and community and uplifting them all towards a sustainable school environment. A school head is answerable to the respective Area Education Officer (AEO).

Research outcomes revealed that school heads approved of each leadership indicator in holistic accountability of schools such as recognition of teachers' best practices, initiating parent-community contacts, interventions for under-achieving students, frequency of staff-meetings to aid student achievement or professional development activities. EMIS in schools is working to provide monitoring data but regular evaluation through an annual School Development Plan is hardly initiated let aside generating an evaluative report. School heads are accountable to their Area Education Officer and then to Director Schools at FDE. Research revealed that the officially designated SOPs of school management are routinely followed but many are subject to availability of funds and pressure from above. A strong demand for new recruitments in teaching staff and helping staff was also found along with better school funding for health, safety and infrastructure maintenance.

Accountability Practices Relating to Curriculum

Document analysis revealed that evaluative measures undertaken with regard to curriculum implementation must include activity and academic calendar upkeep, Scheme of Work (SOW), homework schedule to be duly followed, examinations as per policy schedule, formal

examination committee is formed to warrant procedures and SDP takes into account quantitative data of students' performance in external and board examinations. Records are maintained for subject-wise, grade-wise comparison of student's assessment data in three core-areas (English, math, science) and grade-wise comparison of overall results of the last three years is done to assess/evaluate if learning objectives are being met. However, no formal evaluative template was found regarding curriculum or syllabus monitoring in the SDP documents which leaves an impression of inadequate accountability practices.

Field research data indicated that curriculum of public elementary schools is fixed by FDE and its monitoring takes place through affixed SOPs which are duly followed and the data of students' performances is updated in the centralized EMIS regularly without regular evaluations through SDP bringing to light the non-reliance of SDP as an evaluative mechanism in public school education. Whereas Holistic Accountability is a comprehensive accountability system which not just supports the goals of the Federal Board of Education including student achievement and safe, secure environments but it also gives the stakeholders freedom to determine those school-based practices and programs which work for them. The Tier-1 indicators are the state-wide indicators which the state/district authorities authorize such as curriculum, test scores, infrastructure, resources & student demographic data etc. However, in holistic accountability the Tier-2 indicators being school-based can be controlled and maneuvered by school heads, teachers, parents-community representatives and student associations, affording periodic changes as deemed fit. Sample participants favored its applicability in FDE schools.

Accountability Practices Relating to Parent-Community Involvement

Research data brings forth the analysis that parent-school-community interactions are suggestions in the formal documents which are left up to the discretion of the relevant School Head to follow as there is no fixed template or outline evaluating this activity and/or its frequency. Moreover, a yearly evaluative enquiry in the form of SDP is to be steered by the School Head along with a deputy school head, teachers and a representative from an Area Education Office (AEO). This is documented as an annual attempt at internal evaluation and monitoring of the school management so could be counted as a half-way exercise towards accountability because evaluation and monitoring essentially provide effective feedback for accountability which in turn would help individuals/institutions fulfill responsibilities and reach goals.

Data analysis with respect to parent-teacher and community involvement in line with second objective revealed that the most satisfied parents belonged to the urban site and dissatisfied ones from rural site highlighting the gap between rural and urban educational standards in terms of; teachers meeting state licensure requirements, selection and frequency of communication methods to convey meaningful and timely feedback to students, incorporation of extra-curricular activities, community service and involvement of community leaders to parents feeling welcome at their child's school. All these practical indicators of holistic accountability concerning parent-community involvement with the schools were fully endorsed by all respondents. A general complaint received was regarding lack of parental and community involvement in all areas of student well-being. Parents are only rarely consulted on nominal school issues such as school trips or school transportation, so most parents voice their concerns and opinions regarding teacher behavior and curriculum on/during PTM. Marginal respondents involved with SMC are consulted and/or involved for donation/charity about plantation, health, safety and sanitary facilities of the school. All respondents denied of ever been interviewed by school management or for that matter ever heard of School Development Plan as a school evaluative exercise. In their opinion, currently parents/SMC are the only evaluative influence in public education so unanimously endorsed the application of holistic accountability measures in public education calling for transparency and public sharing.

Results/Findings

Results in line with the first objective of the research found that school accountability is in practice “Evaluation of School Management” as cited in official documents by Federal Directorate of Education (FDE).

Results coherent with the second objective of the research showed that all the respondents agreed that holistic accountability of schools must be initiated, and an annual accountability report be shared with all the stake holders. All respondents unanimously agreed that school accountability would improve quality of education and teachers, administrators, parent-community reps will be more likely to deliver efficiently if they are held accountable irrespective of the lack of funds because quality checks will be there.

The main disparity in results was due to the urban-rural gap. Rural schools are lacking more resources hence, deficient in following the set standards but keeping up the mission of equitable education with the aid from NGOs. It was discovered that holistic accountability if implemented across the board, at elementary schools of ICT with the involvement of school leaders and teachers would greatly benefit public education through better student achievement and improved professional practices. It would also help to restore the confidence of teachers in educational accountability because it includes indicators that can be directly controlled and influenced by teachers such as sharing of their ‘best practices and awareness of the core-standards of the syllabus that they teach thereby ensuring teacher commitment and engagement in the process.

It became apparent that currently, public schools are delivering in accordance with their catchment area credentials. So, a rural school with low facilities is most likely to receive high number of students from illiterate and poor background demotivating the teachers to get transfers thus increasing workload of permanent faculty through high student-teacher ratios so generating a strong need to hire young energetic teaching staff. This research also exposed that most respondents view public school curriculum as redundant and too lengthy to afford conceptual or practical understanding hence, shortage of time during school term encourages rote-learning of the syllabus.

Study results indicated a prevailing stoicism among rural illiterate parents depicting lack of rigor in educating their children. This impassiveness on the part of parents may lead to indolence of school management again emphasizing holistic accountability as simply indispensable. Research suggests that this placidness is either due to poverty, illiteracy or the unwillingness to change. For them schooling is only about gaining literacy and not much else. So, attitudinal change is required in poverty stricken rural areas to encourage school education; not just for skill development but knowledge seeking and inspiring change.

Data showed that fortunately most of the evaluative practices as authorized by FDE in its official papers are in sync with the four key indicators of holistic accountability. Moreover, this research has shown that holistic accountability may fit very well in our local context of ICT and it can offer pointers as to the inclusion of holistic accountability indicators in the annual school reports. Professionals such as school heads and teachers fully welcomed the idea of holistic accountability because it not just involves them at the helm but also provides an opportunity to embrace accountability as a step to improve themselves and the education system. Many teachers reiterated that such an initiative would weed out the incompetent from the competent and be beneficial for all the real professionals. Evaluative practices can never replace accountability which seriously needs to be mandated irrespective of lack of resources because as most of the professionals pointed out accountability doesn’t necessarily require big budgets rather a will to be answerable to one’s obligations and responsibilities and this can be achieved through serious commitment by FDE.

Conclusions/Discussions

Following conclusions are made with respect to the two objectives of research:

1.The current practices of educational accountability system under FDE at elementary level consist of performance evaluations and monitoring of professional norms lacking a public sharing of transparent information about school budgets, defined targets, lines of responsibility and mechanisms to hold all actors to account for their commitments and ensure corrective action when commitments are not met.

2.Introduction of Holistic Accountability at public sector elementary schools of Islamabad will lead to continuous improvement of student achievement, professional teaching practice and leadership decision making within the school system through a systematic examination of system-wide and school-based indicators and community engagement.

Literature review for this study revealed that in the Federal Capital territory of Pakistan educational accountability practices are essentially limited to compliance-based evaluations and Slater (2013) explicates that evaluation focusing on improvement includes access (equity) and educational performance (quality and efficiency). It is formative in nature, aiming to bring schools up to a uniform high standard whereas, accountability aims to provide information to policy makers and stakeholders on meeting standards and value for money. So, accountability is summative and essentially a means of achieving specific ends in education.

The GEM Report (2017) states that to meet a specific end such as the SDG 4 every country would require an efficient educational accountability mechanism as a frontline premise. Pakistan fraught with its many challenges needs a workable holistic accountability system with adequate resources matching its capacity supplemented with genuine commitment by all stakeholders and especially the government because governments are the primary duty bearers for the right to education.

Accountability is a necessity when it comes to improving education systems, but it must always be a means to educational ends such as inclusive, equitable and good quality education but not an end. So, it must be designed with caution to avoid unintended consequences.

Research findings brought forth a general complain that the focus of public schooling is sadly just on improving literacy rate and not on cultivating relevant employment skills or knowledgeable, tolerant citizens. And, that the mantra of free education for all in Pakistan has resulted in empty student funds which were hitherto utilized for the up-keep of school resulting in tatty school buildings, unkempt grounds, broken furniture& poorly furnished labs. The whole setup needs revision with a total mind shift. Many contributing factors need to be addressed by FDE such as lack of funds for repair/up-keep, ghost teaching staff, incompetent teachers, high student-teacher ratio, staff recruitments, flexible and practicable curriculum, leadership-initiated accountability practices and parent-community involvement at all levels.

Results suggested that a student-centered approach as proposed by the holistic accountability model, must be taken up by the school management and focus be on quality of teaching-learning experiences rather than on quantity of content/syllabus taught/memorized. Similarly, leadership led faculty development activities must be prompted for better classroom practice and improved student achievement. School management committees must be made dynamic with rigorous involvement of parents and community members in all issues concerning student welfare.

Qualitative data analysis showed that the few variances in the responses centered on the rural/urban divide and were not in any way gender specific. The consensus revealed that a few

handfuls selected urban schools in Islamabad are treated with advantage while the rest in poor or rural catchment areas are neglected by the Federal government. NGOs are assisting but serious concern of the authorities is required towards such peripheral institutions for the delivery of equitable and quality education.

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