

Teacher Accountability in South African Public Schools: A Call for Professionalism from Teachers

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ABSTRACT Many times teachers hide behind “The Department”, “The Standards”, “The Examinations”, and “The Resources” when taken to task about their poor instruction and lack of adequate care for learners and commitment to duty. A lot of public funds are used to finance education. Such huge funding has to be justified through calls for responsibility and accountability in schools, particularly by teachers. There is a general view that if public schools were managed in exactly the same way private companies were managed and the reward and punishment for teachers was on the basis of how much students learnt, teaching and learning would improve in schools. Teachers often see themselves as teaching learners without critically reflecting on the extent to which they are accountable to parents of the learners and to the learners they teach. Such a lack of a complete understanding of the view that teachers as professionals have high levels of accountability often see teachers exhibiting unprofessional conduct in wanton disrespect and despise of parents and learners. In this paper the researchers explore the concept teacher accountability. They further examine the different types of accountability teachers have and also outline some of the elements of unprofessional conduct teachers exhibit due to lack of accountability. The reasons why teachers should be fully accountable to parents and learners are outlined. In this paper the researchers also outline conditions that should be in place before teachers are made accountable and they recommend the licensing of teachers and the introduction of performance-related incentives as some of the measures that to ensure teacher accountability in public schools in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have a critical role in ensuring that the future citizens of any country are properly raised by imparting to them the requisite skills, knowledge and values. A failing school system is a total disservice to the nation for being entrusted with the education of future generations is a huge responsibility. Sloan (2007) observes that education is the single most important family investment and parents deserve quality education for their children. Taking education as an investment, there are inputs, processes and products. Inputs include the learners as well as the huge financial, material and infrastructural investments committed by the state. The processes largely refer to the school and classroom activities for which teachers have the greatest role. The outputs are measured by learner attainment

and the overall school system product is useful in the furtherance of the country's socio-economic, political and technological goals. Schools have to produce functionally relevant products to justify the investments. Hence the need for teachers to be accountable and the questions are to whom and how? Whitaker (1998: 106) states that;
.... issues of accountability are never far from our minds these days and it is vital to be clear about our responsibilities to share information and explanations with those concerned with the school.

What is clear from the above assertion is that in every job that one does there is a need to take responsibility in some public form to stakeholders. Monyati et al. (2006: 428) refer to accountability as “responsible practice and responsiveness to clients”. In the school system, teachers have to be fully aware of their clients and should be responsive to the clients.

What is Teacher Accountability?

Wagner (1989: 2) defines accountability as “to render an account of, to explain and answer for”. In the context of teachers this simply means teachers have to take responsibility in some pub-

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lic form of the way they execute their duties by acknowledging being responsible of the processes and results. One can take an example of a first grade teacher at the foundation phase who finds that at the end of the first year three quarters of the learners cannot exhibit basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills. If the teacher, as a trained professional, has been teaching learners such skills then he or she has to take responsibility. The fact is that the teacher has been dealing with normal children who do not have any special needs and minimum resources of ensuring meaningful teaching and learning were available. Such a teacher had to be accountable in line with the dictionary definition of “accountability” that emphasise the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s decisions and actions, and to justify them to others. Accountability becomes a synonym for responsibility. In this regard, teachers should take responsibility for their performance and for improvement in learner achievement. The teachers are accountable for the life, needs and aspirations of the people in the society. In the educational system, teachers have to be accountable to the authorities, students, and teaching fraternity (Urbanski 1998). In this paper teacher accountability is restricted to their accountability to learners, parents and other teachers.

Gultig (2010) observes that as much as accountability is necessary in a democratic society to control corruption, negligence incompetence, abuse of trust and other vices, it is equally important to hold teachers accountable in schools by putting in place systems and mechanisms that ensure accountability. However, Hoyle and John (1995: 110) argue that,

Systems of accountability are vital to the attainment of quality education, but are not in themselves sufficient. They must be balanced by responsibility.

The need for teachers to be responsible is driven by professional ethics as one should always be guided by doing what is good not by systems in place.

Real accountability has to be internally driven. Even though teachers operate within the confines of a code of ethics, one should be internally driven by what is good and hold themselves responsible for their professional decisions and actions. The amount of their own time and money that teachers spend on instructional planning and professional development is a testimony to

how seriously they take their professional obligations. A good example is commitment to attending one’s duties by preparing and teaching diligently with the learners at heart. This should be far divorced from remuneration and conditions of service issues. It is the kind of commitment to duty driven by the willingness to serve, marked by taking responsibility for whatever one does.

Why Should Teachers be Held Accountable?

Ballard and Bates (2008) observe that it is important to hold teachers accountable for students’ learning to take place. Once adequate measures are put in place to hold teachers accountable, their attitude towards their duties improves and, invariably, quality instruction and improved learner attainment are guaranteed (Ballard and Bates 2008). Teaching as a profession has professional standards that should be upheld. Hence teachers as professionals should be held accountable for such standards. All other professions such as the medical profession, practitioners are answerable for every decision they make as they deal with human life and errors of omission or commission have immediately felt results. In teaching the results of the teacher’s dereliction of duty may not be immediate but they really affect the young children’s future. Schallack (1998) observes that teachers have a direct impact on how children learn hence they should be responsible for the way learners learn.

To Whom and For What are Teachers Accountable?

Teachers are primarily accountable to the learners. The main curriculum transactions take place between the teachers and the learners. Therefore, the teacher has to be answerable to the learners on the way they learn in classrooms. Teachers are responsible for meeting learners’ various and diverse learning needs. It is important to note that classrooms have students with diverse needs and it is the responsibility of the teacher to accommodate every learner in the teaching approaches. Learners with learning difficulties have to be catered for by teachers in mixed-ability classes. In their accountability to learners, teachers have to ensure that learners receive quality tuition. There is real need to take cognizance of challenges teachers may encounter.

ter in ensuring quality teaching and learning yet the need for quality teaching and learning cannot be questioned. Teachers are also responsible for supporting the social and personal development of learners they teach. Learner care and safety are also a responsibility for teachers and they have to be accountable in the event that learners under their care are involved in any mishap. Proper measures have to be put in place to ensure learners' safety all the time.

In their accountability to learners, teachers have to ensure quality instruction in the classroom. Bennell (2004) observes that it is a concern when there is low quality teaching and even greater concern when there is no teaching at all. Orlich et al. (2010) identify core assumptions expected of a teacher that necessitate the holding of one responsible for all that happens in the classroom and states that the teacher should be committed to students and their learning, should be knowledgeable in terms of subject content and pedagogy, should be able to monitor and manage students' learning, reflect on own practice and should be a member of a supportive professional community. It is easy to hold a trained and well qualified teacher accountable for their instructional abilities and decisions compared to an untrained teacher who may not be fully ware of the professional requirements. However, untrained teachers need basic induction in teaching so that they too can be held accountable.

Teachers are also accountable to parents or guardians of the learners they teach. In sending their children to school, parents and guardians have faith in the school system and the teachers. It is important to note that parents and guardians differ in their education and literacy levels. However, all parents have expectations about school insofar as the moulding of the future of their children is concerned. Teachers, therefore, are answerable to parents and guardians as key stakeholders in the education business. By paying fees to the school, parents and guardian become major clients who need to get value for their money from how teachers teach their children. Schools operate with School Governing Bodies, which are essentially a representation of parents in the school. Teachers have to be answerable to this body. When members of the School Governing Body seek to hold teachers accountable of the way they dispense their duties, it should not be seen as interference in teachers' duties because as representatives of parents they are key stakeholders.

Clase et al.(2007) state that, "The success of any country's education system is dependent to a great extent on the mutual trust and collaboration existing between all partners". To this end, teachers and parents are partners in the education of children hence teachers have to work well with parents and report to them on the way they dispense their duties. There should not be any tension or mistrust between teachers and parent members of the School Governing Body as the School Governing Body is legally mandated to oversee the happenings in the school and report to parents. In as much as the School Governing Body's role is in governance and not professional management of the school, they ought to hold teachers responsible of the execution of duty (Heystek 2006). Teachers often argue that they have professional rights and have to work with great autonomy. However, such rights may not be claimed if teachers are engaged in a plethora of unprofessional conduct in full view of the parents. Lewis and Naidoo (2006) observe that teachers could be afraid that parents may be aware of their shortcomings in teaching. It is imperative for teachers to be accountable to parents for the education of their children (Akporehe 2011; Darling-Hammond and Ascher 1992). In a study to find out educators' views on the functions of School Governing Bodies, Van Wyk (2004) found that teachers revealed that it was not the parents' duty to be involved in issues of educator misconduct. However, teachers have to be answerable to parents for their actions that affect teaching and learning in schools.

Teachers are also accountable to the government through the relevant ministry or department of Education. The accountability is two-way. The government makes available the resources and pays teachers so the teachers have to produce the results. So the teachers are accountable to the government as employer and the employer is accountable to the employee insofar as making sure that conditions are put in place to make the teachers deliver the results required. Before teachers are held accountable of what happens in schools they need to be supported. In their accountability to the government, teachers are also accountable to school administrators, the principal and the School Management Teams who are on the spot in schools for professional management on behalf of the government (Barrett 2005).

What Conditions are Necessary to Hold Teachers Accountable?

It is also necessary to create conditions necessary to hold teachers accountable. Such a view is hinged on the realization that certain conditions have to prevail before teachers are held accountable. Teachers have to be properly trained if they are to be held accountable. Proper and meaningful interpretation and implementation of the curriculum rests on the quality of the teacher. Teachers bridge the gap between planned curriculum as espoused in curriculum policy documents and actual curriculum as practiced in actual teaching and learning. It is, therefore, important that teachers are properly equipped with knowledge, skills and values to deliver effectively. Hammet (2007) contends that there is a shortage of qualified teachers in South Africa. This results in classes being manned by unqualified teachers who may not be held accountable of their performance in the same manner as qualified teachers would be.

After training, teachers should constantly be staff developed to keep abreast with latest developments in education. This will ensure that they are always adaptable to changing environments and remain relevant. Professional development courses should also be undertaken by teachers to improve their academic and professional standing and, invariably, quality teaching and learning transactions for the benefit of the learners. Maphosa et al. (2007) observe that school staff development meetings should also be an integral part of school curriculum improvement plans. Such meetings allow teachers to meet and share ideas for curriculum trouble-shooting.

Resources should be readily available in schools to ensure that meaningful learning takes place. It would be unfair to hold teachers accountable of results in situations where the minimum expected resources are not available. In a study on factors affecting students' poor performance in science subjects, Mji and Makgato (2006) established that the issue of lack of basic resources such as textbooks had a contribution to students' low attainment. It would be impossible to hold teachers accountable for students' results when they operate without basic resources such as textbooks. However, where resources are provided, teachers have to be accountable.

The remuneration of teachers and overall conditions of service should be in such a way

that teachers lead a decent life. When held to account for the way they dispense duties, teachers will not hide behind poor conditions of service. There is a view that if we desire to have better teachers, we must make a career in teaching more desirable than other professions (Diko and Letseka 2009; Nesane 2008). Improved conditions of service are one way of making the teaching profession, a profession of choice (Naong 2011). It is only when people are competing to join the profession that the best can be attracted into the profession. In South Africa at the moment, teaching is shunned by many young career seekers. Using a Lemieux Decomposition instrument to determine what the distribution of teacher wages would look like if teachers were remunerated according to the same structure as non-teachers, Armstrong (2009) found that the teaching profession was relatively unattractive to skilled individuals in the South African labour market. Armstrong (2009) further notes that the quality of teachers is largely dependent on the wages they are offered in the teaching profession. Diko and Letseka (2009) state that teachers will continue leaving the profession until the issue of improved conditions of service is addressed.

In a study carried out to establish school-related factors that lead to teachers abandoning the profession, Nesane (2008) found pay-related issues, violence and lack of resources in schools as some of the reasons why teachers opt out of the profession. Nesane (2008) recommends the use of performance-related incentives to motivate outstanding teachers. It is a pity that under current conditions poor and excellent performers are not separated which becomes a demotivator to hard workers. This results in a teaching profession full of mediocre and poor performers. This becomes even worse in a situation where proper accountability measures on performance are non-existent. It is important to note that not all conditions may be addressed at the same time and the teacher as a professional entrusted in shaping the students' future should be accountable for performance and results.

What are the Types of Accountability?

Accountability comes in different forms. In this paper the researchers focus on three types of accountability namely moral, professional and social accountability. As already alluded to in

the general discussion of accountability moral accountability is premised on what is morally good as dictated by ethical considerations. Mahoney (2009:983) states that, "Ethics deals, amongst other things, with right and wrong, ought and ought not, good and evil..." It is clear from this explanation of ethics that moral accountability should derive from the teacher's conscience of doing what is morally right. A good example is a teacher going for lessons without prior preparation. Is it ethically proper for a teacher to exhibit such behaviour when dealing with the future of the innocent learners he or she is supposed to assist? In moral accountability the teacher is expected to perform to the best of his or her ability and to assist learners of different abilities without any external push. In summarizing the need for moral accountability through observation of high ethical standards, Clark (2004:80) observes that;

Teachers, as professionals, are engaged in one of the most ethically demanding jobs, the education of young people; thus it is that teachers need to reflect on the ethics of their activities to ensure they in their work they exhibit the best ethical; example possible to those they are morally educating.

The same moral standards the teachers have are easily transferred to students hence the importance for teachers to be fully conscious that they are always under scrutiny from their learners.

In his or her way of executing duties the teacher should be fully aware that he or she is a role model and students learn more through hidden curriculum. Kentil (2009:86) cites Giroux (1983) who contends that hidden curriculum entails unwritten and unstated norms, values and beliefs imparted to students through "underling rules that structure the routines and social relationships in the school and classroom." The teacher, therefore, has to be the appropriate role model to students in every aspect of conduct of duties.

Professional accountability is also important for teachers. Professional accountability implies teachers' accountability towards the profession and colleagues. In instances where the teacher does not execute his or her duties professionally this puts the whole profession into disrepute and affects colleagues as well. It is vital that in every way teachers execute their duties they are aware that they will not be doing the work for them-

selves but have colleagues and the whole profession to account to. Teachers should, therefore, prepare and plan their work well, execute their planned lessons effectively, relate well with learners and be willing to go an extra mile to assist students. All work should be done with high sense of responsibility so as not to leave colleagues questioning one's dispensation of duty.

In social accountability teachers have to be aware of their critical roles in society. One area is of human rights where teachers should be fully aware of such rights and their place in the school life. Instances where teachers are on the forefront of violating children's rights are unfortunate. Such teachers should be answerable for their actions. Teachers should also work closely with communities for the development of communities in areas such as promoting the literacy levels of their communities. Ntini (2006) explains that teachers have a role to play in community development projects and should be actively involved in projects for community development.

Professional Misconduct Due to Lack of Accountability

There are numerous cases and forms of teacher misconduct in the South African education system. Most of these are a result of lack of proper accountability measures. In a study aimed at establishing how principals managed educator misconduct, Mothemane (2003) alludes to the fact that educator misconduct ranged from financial to sexual misconduct. One sad and worrying issue is of male teachers involved in sexual relations with the learners – who are minors. This is contrary to the teacher's role as acting in *loco parentis* hence the need for moral and social accountability.

Commitment to Teaching

Teachers as professional ought to be aware of what is expected of them as teachers hence the need for them to execute their duties diligently. They have to be aware that they are dealing with shaping the future of the children under care. James and Pollard (2006: 4) observe that;

Promoting the learning and achievement of pupils is a main aim of school education. Teaching is the main way of achieving this. Teaching and learning are what ultimately make a difference in the mind of the learner, and thus affect

knowledge, skills, attitudes and capacity of the young people to contribute to contemporary societies.

Teachers, therefore have to be committed to their teaching and understand teaching holistically as involving the imparting of the requisite knowledge, skills and values that enable learners to fit and function effectively in society. Lethoko et al. (2001) point out to a lack of culture of teaching and learning in most public schools in South Africa and the school system is faced with a lot of challenges and lack of professionalism among teachers being one of the challenges.

Elliott and Crosswell (2001) notes that commitment is a term that teachers normally use to describe themselves and yet it is used to distinguish those who are 'caring', 'dedicated' and who 'take the job seriously' from those who 'put their own interests first'. Commitment to duty, therefore, entails that the teacher has to be selfless and put learners first in everything he or she does. The teacher takes teaching more than just a job one is paid for. Some of indicators of teacher commitment include these, among others;

- ♦ Thorough preparation for lessons
- ♦ Always being available to teach
- ♦ Making use of varied and learner-engaging methodologies.
- ♦ Willingness to see students succeed
- ♦ Assisting all learners including those with special needs
- ♦ Improving where there is lack of resources
- ♦ Sacrificing time and working outside working hours
- ♦ Engaging students in both curricular and co-curricular issues
- ♦ Working with parents and appraising them of learners' progress
- ♦ Resolving conflicts between and among students
- ♦ Being a role model worth emulating

A lot is expected of teachers in their commitment to duty and a sense of accountability to learners, parents and school authorities will ensure that teachers perform well.

Teacher Absenteeism

Teachers are hired to teach. They should be in school every day to teach. It is a case that hinges on lack of proper accountability when teachers absent themselves from duty for no due

cause or worse still fake illness to get sick leave (Mkwanzani 1997). Mkwanzani (1997) further observes that teacher absenteeism results in a plethora of challenges in the school and it negatively affects learning. Chapman (1994: 31) observes that the main reason why teachers are often absent from school is lack of accountability and states that;

Because classroom teaching occurs in relative isolation from central, regional and even district authority, few people outside the school or community know much about the diligence with which individual teachers approach their work.

It becomes imperative for teachers to exhibit professional conduct at all times and be available to teach and such commitment should be drawn from the 'loyalty to children or community to which they are assigned' (Chapman 1994: 32). Attending school and teaching should not be based on fear of sanctions imposed by authorities but on commitment to serve through a good sense of accountability. The same teacher who is not available to teach expects to find a medical practitioner to be on duty when he or she visits a health facility for medical attention. There is a litany of problems associated with teacher absenteeism in schools and these include;

- ♦ Loss of instructional time.
- ♦ Lack of consistency in teaching and learning.
- ♦ Learner indiscipline in schools
- ♦ Poor learner attainment.
- ♦ Public loss of confidence in schools.
- ♦ Poor quality instruction.
- ♦ Parents transferring children to perceived better schools.

In the South African context, parents always feel private schools have better control of their teachers and teachers perform better and despite the high fees in the private school they will have no choice but send their children where they feel teachers are more accountable. There is, therefore, serious need to ensure teachers are held more accountable in public schools.

Abuse of the Rights of the Child

There are many reports of South African teachers' abuse of children's rights. Sexual abuse is quite rampant as male teachers are reported to abuse young female learners (Prinsloo 2006;

Shumba et al. 2008). If teachers were adhering to moral accountability they would be aware of the need for proper conduct at all times and refrain from abusing their positions and sexually abusing learners. While perpetrators of abuse may be charged and discharged from the profession, there are many cases that go unreported or which take long to investigate and finalise. It is our appeal for teachers to take all children as theirs and be on the fore of protecting them from any abuses. Teachers stand in place of parents and have to take their role as parents honestly and responsibly through moral conscience. Physical abuse through the use of corporal punishment is quite common in South African schools (Makapela 2006; Sokopo 2010). Teachers have been observed to always resort to the outlawed disciplinary practices owing to their limited knowledge in the use of alternative disciplinary approaches to corporal punishment. The challenges associated with the use of corporal punishment are well-documented (Shumba et al. 2010; Maphosa and Mammen 2011). It is such problems that led to the ban of corporal punishment in South African schools in line with the need to promote and preserve the rights of the child. Shumba (2002) talks of emotional abuse as another form of abuse learners suffer from at the hands of teachers. This is the kind of abuse where learners' feelings are hurt overtly and covertly through the way teachers treat learners. This does not only negatively affect learners' performance in school but may result in their developing emotional challenges for their entire lives. It is unfortunate to realize that some of the problems by teachers have severe lifelong negative consequences on learners.

Measures to Ensure Teacher Accountability in South African Public Schools

One of the ways of ensuring accountability of teachers in South African schools of regulating entry into the profession by licensing teachers. Podgursky (2004:1) contends that "teacher licensing plays an important role in determining quality and performance". Licensing teachers could be equated to professionals in the health and medical fields who are licensed on an annual basis. In South Africa, teachers register with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) but the said authority does not play a thorough regulatory function as lazy and truant teachers re-

main in the system for years. There are numerous press reports of such teachers still practising and Maclean (2011) reports of a teacher who raped eleven of his pupils before he was finally arrested. The licensing the researchers suggest is a more rigorous one that entails examining teachers and taking into account their previous records. There will be need for teachers to satisfy set licensing requirements and close monitoring is done after licensing. Reports are also used for future licensing. This will assist in weeding out unprofessional teachers from the system.

Performance-related pay increases and bonuses also play an important role in ensuring proper accountability for teachers. The current scenario where teachers do not get salary increase and bonuses based on performance serves to celebrate and reward mediocrity. Hanushek (2003) states that the issues of quality delivery in schools need to be looked at from the angle of policies that emphasise performance-based incentives. In a study that evaluated the impact of performance-related pay for teachers in England by establishing whether the payment scheme based on pupil attainment increased teacher effort, Atkinson et al. (2004) found that there was generally some improvement. Earlier studies by Ladd (1999) and Boozer (1999) had also confirmed that performance-related incentives increase teacher effort and, invariably, learner attainment. Maile (2002: 330) contends that "when people feel accountable they attempt to unconsciously improve their performance...." The issue of performance-related salary increases, bonuses and other incentives should seriously be considered in the South African public schools. As teachers are paid from the tax-payers' funds they need to be accountable for their performance and learner attainment as well as justify their earnings.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the researchers argued that professionals cannot continue with the same way of conducting business without being held accountable. Accountability, in various forms, should be the hallmark of any profession. If schools operate in the same manner as private companies and every worker is fully aware of the existence of accountability measures and procedures then quality service delivery is guaranteed. The quest for quality education becomes a reality. Whatever earnings teachers draw from

the state have to be based on actual performance and not through mere existence in a system without tangible contribution or results.

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