

The Role of District Education Officers in Ensuring Accountability in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Accountability has become one of the more dominant terms in education systems across the world, and like other terms, "accountability" can mean different things across education, and can be conceptualized and applied in different ways. What is meant by the term accountability is enacted by school actors, specifically teachers, principal teachers and education officers, who are ostensibly accountable for the education of their pupils. There appears to be layers to accountability in education, as it works towards its most clear goal of improving education quality. The purpose of our research investigation into accountability focuses on how District Education Officers (DEOs) enact their authority in order to meet the expectation of the accountability regime. Qualitative-method approaches were adopted for data collection with 12 District Education Officers (DEOs) from Punjab, an equal split of urban and rural contexts. After initial interviews, participants were re-interviewed in a semi-structured format as a follow up to investigate the DEOs views of the education accountability mechanisms from provincial disciplinary legislation for accountability in education. Using thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke's presented six stages, enabled the researcher to systematically uncover and analyze patterns and themes throughout the data. It enabled depth and nuance in rich descriptions in regards to the enactment of teacher accountability legislation as well as how the legislation exists in practice, and some helpful ideas of the implications for the ways to consider our possible response strategies for enacting the teacher legislation on teacher morale and autonomy, and the operational accountability factors associated to teacher accountability. It is important to note that the accountability pressures facing DEOs is forcing them hold teachers to greater accountability for the examination student outcomes in order to reach quality education targets. The study focused on the degree of accountability on teachers in connection with DEOs managing educational standards for the improvement of education in the districts. The results of the study confirm that ultimately, it is education safety officers that are ultimately accountable, in addition to teachers so therefore accountability to others should be reconsidered based on historical processes so as to create a better educational environment for both teacher and student in practice of educational excellence. The study provides useful insight for educational authorities to take pragmatic approach for implementation of accountability measures to ensure desired performance of teacher and commendable achievement of students.

Key words: District Education Officers (DEOs), Accountability, Disciplinary Laws, Educational system, Teacher performance, Measures, Achievement, Educational outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as a contributory factor in promoting national development. Present era is marked by swift technological progress and growing globalization. Pakistan needs a very competitive modern education system catering for societal and global demands. Despite educational reforms, policy, and plans introduced over the last 76 years Pakistan has still lagged behind to achieve its objectives. While institutional changes were implemented to achieve the aim of good governance.

Sundaram and Chowdhury (2012) explained good governance as a structured approach that includes principles like autonomy of perspectives, integrity equity and accountability. To pursue path of good governance in the country, accountability stepped in all the fields of life and education department was no exception to it.

Of very pertinent to unfold that Education systems worldwide have experienced to substantial accountability reforms in pursuance of a result of political shifts and increasing global competition for quality education (Grindle, 2018). Major international organizations are advocating constantly for enforcement of accountability laws to enhance educational outcomes and these reforms have produced far reaching bearings on performance and conduct of teachers. As a reform paradigm, New Public Management (NPM) is being more widely adopted in the public sector which is consistent with the growth of test-based accountability (Verger, & Parcerisa, (2017). The implementation of strategic reforms holds educational institutions more accountable and answerable. Accountability has laid greater emphasis on stakeholders, principal, teachers and administrators to put into practice the educational performance standards (Bush, 2009).

With the passage of time, accountability within educational field has been gaining momentum as a mandatory component for enhancement of educational outcomes and the regime bent on transforming the vision into reality to ensure good schooling. The gigantic task of ensuring accountability in schools has been assigned to District Education Officers (DEOs) by the Schools Education Department to maintain quality of education and standards of accountability within their jurisdiction. They discharge their pivotal role to evaluate teacher's performance and adopt accountability procedure and process to ensure adherence to established educational standards. Their responsibilities are of paramount importance in this framework for achieving students learning outcomes which has been already determined for schools (Amtu et al. 2020).

The concept of accountability in education stands for holding schools, teachers and administrators responsible for student outcomes and overall quality of education. This is attained through a variety of mechanisms like standardized testing, teacher evaluations, and school inspections (Lingard, Sellar, and Lewis, 2017). To recognize the significant role of accountability in the governance of basic education, many education reforms stand for strengthening accountability introduced worldwide. Nonetheless, despite the prevalent application of the term "accountability," a definite and certain, globally recognized definition is not found in the current literature that has arisen out of these reforms. In numerous instances, the notion of accountability is employed imprecisely and occasionally assumed without due consideration. The prevalent system requires various stalk holders in the education sector to furnish particular sorts of information or "accounts" to pertinent stakeholders who subsequently provide feedback through sanctions, penalties, awards, and other means. The reforms primarily focus on four themes: choice and competition, autonomy and involvement, threat-induced enhancements and rewards and support (Evans and Popova, 2016). Each point is theoretically substantiated and thoroughly analyzed in the literature with systematic reviews and evidence syntheses, providing comprehensive insights into these elements. Nonetheless, when evaluating the experiences of both emerging and established nations, it remains ambiguous whether these accountability reforms have effectively improved student learning outcomes. Notwithstanding the prevalent enthusiasm and substantial investments, the evidence indicates that the reforms may not have quite fulfilled the expectations (Yifei Yan, 2019).

DEOs are packed with the substantial responsibility of executing these accountability modes and measures which often includes the supervision of school management, the assessment of educational practices and the implementation of disciplinary actions when necessary (Olasunkanmi, Titilayo & Babatunde, 2024).

The developing countries like of Pakistan where educational systems may face unique challenges such as limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training and socio-economic barriers, the function of DEOs becomes even more significant (Batool, Arif & Nadeem, 2021). Their pragmatic approach to maintain pedagogical activities and implement key performance indicators are indispensable for ensuring schools to meet the required standards and deliver quality education to students (Alam et al. 2021).

The research study targets to find out how accountability of schools is held. What mechanisms are employed to make the teachers accountable by DEOS and how accountability in school systems is enforced to realize target of desired teachers' performance. In pursuit of the aim what challenges and obstacle comes in way of DEOs to enhance performance of teachers and educational outcomes of students. By examining the role of DEOs for ensuring accountability of schools, this study suggest to not only improve accountability process but also hint at the drawbacks in the process for initiating actions against teachers so that they can contribute towards better schoolings.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative method to provide a deep comprehension of the mechanisms by which District Education Officers (DEOs) uphold accountability in schools. Semi-structured interviews was conducted with a diverse group of 60 participants having equal male and female representation, comprising 12 District Education Officers, 16 Deputy District Education Officers (DEOs) and 32 Head teachers from districts with in the Dera ghazi khan Division. These participants were selected using purposive sampling to account for geographical and socioeconomic Diversity, because purposive sampling facilitates the researchers to select participant who have specific characteristics and experiences relating to research questions (Nyimbili, & Nyimbili, 2024). Data gathered was so directly linked to research objectives. The data was examined by employing thematic analyzing in light of the model enunciated by Clarke and Brown developed in 2006 and modified later in 2021 (Brown and Clarke, 2006). The model helped to analyze the collected data to detect patterns and relationships between practices of DEOs and obstacles for application/ implementation of accountability laws to fulfill the required targets.

The purpose of study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of the District education officers regarding accountability of teachers in order to suggest improvements in execution process for accountability of school teachers. The study also explores the views of Deputy DEOs and Head teachers being vital stake holders in respect to the process of implementation and its impacts of these laws on teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A method adopted by the authorities to assess teachers' performance in connection with the attainment of predetermined learning goals within a specified timeframe is deemed as evaluation. Accountability has not been conventionally employed in the evaluation of teachers in Pakistan. Word accountability at first was incorporated in Punjab Employees Efficiency Discipline and Accountability Act, 2006 which is a law enacted to regulate the disciplinary matters of civil servants in (www.punjablaws.com). This law is also applicable to all employees of school education department including teachers.(PEEDA ACT,2006). Now accountability of teachers is conducted through this instrument to curb financial corruption and wrong doings in schools to enhance teacher's performance and quality education.

Accountability in education stands for the systems, process and practices that ensure teachers, administrators and institutions are to be responsible for maintaining desired levels of performance. Term accountability according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, is characterized by the requirement to provide reports, explanations, or justifications, being answerable and responsible for one's actions. Accountability

can be alternatively characterized as the attribute or condition of being accountable, which entails a sense of duty or readiness to assume responsibility and provide an explanation for one's actions.

Siddiqua, (2019) explained the term "responsiveness" is seen more meaningful as an evaluative term rather than an analytical term in the present context. The concept of accountability is inherently associated with various outcomes including individual or collective achievements. The concept of responsibility brings out extensive discourse and debate due to the wide range of human behaviors observed within society.

Bovens, (2005) defined accountability as a "social relationship in which an individual experiences a sense of responsibility to provide justifications for their actions to a person or group of importance" The accountability can differ in its definition depending on the prevailing social, political, cultural, and institutional circumstances (Dubnick & Frederickson, 2011).

Public organizations disseminate information regarding their acts to the general public as a means to rationalize their behavior. Accountability is frequently perceived as the manifestation of openness to information as well.

Accountability burdened the education officers with the obligation to monitor the performance of teacher and students to address any existing deficiencies in areas for improvement in regard to attaining high-quality education. National and provincial ministries have devised their strategies for establishing educational accountability in Pakistan (Mbiti, 2016).

Each province has its own educational laws that reflect its particular needs and challenges. Punjab has chalked out the Punjab Education Policy, which set out frameworks for accountability of schools. With the introduction of 18th Amendment in the Constitution of Pakistan, education has been devolved to provinces. The provinces along with Punjab has been conferred the authority to enact their own laws and regulations to meet their educational goals (Jamal, (2021).

The School Education Department in Punjab has approved key performance indicators to evaluate whether the approved goals are being achieved by the schools. Teachers are made answerable and accountable for achieving desired targets for attaining quality education (Smith & Benavot, 2019).

Since long the policy planners and administrative authorities has been deeply deliberating the mechanism for implementation of strict accountability in education system. The pivotal role of District Education Officers (DEOs) in ensuring educational standards and policies are contributory towards seeking goals of quality education.

According to Fullan (2014), accountability in education is not merely about monitoring performance but also about creating a culture of continuous improvement in teaching. Fullan suggests that proper accountability structures should emphasize supporting teachers' capacities for professional growth and development alongside their evaluation. Darling-Hammond (2020) contends that applying accountability and evaluation frameworks result in valuable improvement in teacher performance. She indicates that continual monitoring and evaluation of a school with ongoing feedback provides significantly better teaching practices and improved student performance. Graves (2020) highlights the importance of the use of data to enhance accountability. His study shows that using student performance data and school inspections significantly brings a sharper change with desired progress in student performances.

One of the dominant discourses is the teacher accountability movement, and it asserts that lack of accountability is the chief source of inadequate teaching and school performance. Advocates of teacher accountability contend that increasing oversight and establishing a system of accountability will improve educational outcomes. As noted by Ingersoll and Collins (2019), accountability will not guarantee educators will learn key organizational structures and management practices that support educational

effort and performance. Furthermore, accountability systems will not usually address the underlying determinants of poorly performing teachers when they are even construed in good faith, and even when explicitly constructed in good faith they can diminish effective teacher performance and school efficiency.

Instead, the authors argue for an alternative, pragmatic means to effectively improve teacher quality that considers school organizational factors and individual accountability as opposed to individual accountability alone (Ingersoll & Collins, 2019). Numerous investigations also highlight challenges with the realization of accountability. For example, Mbiti (2016) describes issues with a negative consequence of policy on implementation in the local context. Bayeni, & Bhengu, (2018) also discusses the challenges of implementation of accountabilities. DEOs often face resistance from different quarters like school unions, politicians and other stake holders. Lack of resources, financial constraints and political interference impede the smooth sailing of accountability (Naviwala, 2016).

Political interference in formulation of policy and its implementation levels influence accountability in Pakistan's education system Bari and Munir (2018) argue that political interference often undermines the trust and autonomy of DEOs leading to inconsistent mechanisms of accountability. The research indicates DEOs are not able to withstand the pressures from political elites in different forms and as a result the accountability system suffers. Political interference is strongly prevalent in rural areas where local leaders hold more power than would be warranted within their position in the educational context (i.e., educational administration).

Mahnaz et al (2023) note role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes are key in carrying out accountability. The monitoring and evaluating (M&E) process is dependent on the collecting of timely and accurate data (Okuta, 2019). Most districts in Punjab do not have access to sufficient quality data collection which therefore limits the accountability process. However, school data is required to be available to District Education Officers (DEOs) in timely, accurate and relevant ways. A study of the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) demonstrates the significance of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).

The analysis shows that District Education Officers (DEOs) who had better training and adequate resources were more successful in monitoring accountability processes. The study shows that districts with strong monitoring and evaluation systems (M&E) have significant gains in teacher attendance and student learning outcomes. In fact, the results from the administrative capacity of District Education Officers (DEOs) help identify key principles for the successful implementation of accountability measures (Hamid, Arif, & Afzal, 2021).

There are many issues with accountability law in Pakistan's education system. Corruption is a significant impediment to the effective functioning of accountability systems within the educational bureaucracy (Faisal and Jafri, 2017). Corruption at various levels within the education sector undermines the process of accountability. In fact, District Education Officers (DEOs) also participate in corruption, which ultimately leads to the objectives of transparency and accountability in the department being hampered. Corrupt practices in governance are interconnected with multiple institutional deficiencies that permeate education systems. Notably, restricted community participation in the process of accountability and transparency for instructional staff in schools influences less development at the institutional level. This community participation is significant because enhanced involvement of the community promotes school accountability (Cummings and Olson, 2020). Furthermore, DEOs who engage well with communities and civil society promote transparency better. However, it is reasonable to say that this form of engagement is limited due to cultural/social challenges - this is particularly true in rural Punjab.

The progress and development of technology today has exceptional influences on diverse aspects of life, and especially accountability system. The ability to monitor more efficiently by means of more effective

technology has added another layer of transparency and accountability (DeWitt, & Alias, 2020). Technology has also alleviated corruption since financial and educational issues have been electronically documented (DeWitt, & Alias, 2020). The action of technology, specifically monitoring technology in Punjab has been welcomed by education considerations.

There is a full-time responsibility with District Educational Officers (DEOs) monitoring schools. Consequently, the need for seamless fast internet infrastructure all over the area is of the utmost importance for accountability and transparency.

FINDINGS

The scholarly literature identifying accountability within Pakistan's educational sector elaborates on the complex role of District Education Officers (DEOs) - especially their role in regulations implementation. Even with political meddling, limited assets, and chronic corruption serving as challenges to performance, DEOs can at least take steps towards betterment by enhancing skills, securing community involvement, and integrating modern technology. Understanding DEOs will help to establish the norms of accountability, and to support better quality education throughout Pakistan.

District Education Officers (DEOs), often perceived as the "closest education bureaucrat" to the school, when optimally trained and optimally equipped can cultivate the ability to either monitor school performance and sustain school accountability. District Education Officers (DEOs) can enhance transparency and assure agency against corruption through effective monitoring models and contemporary digital tools. The roles of District Education Officers (DEOs) creates a continuum that drives a culture of quality education and accountability.

The study focused on the significant issue of political interference, limited resources, and corruption that undermines a system of accountability. District Education Officers (DEOs) are constantly trying and struggling to be able to work through significant issues to meet educational objectives. The DEOs have not yet reached maturity with the accountability system because political interference issues have inhibited their agency and ability to respond to being accountable as to expectations of engaging in agreed-upon accountability systems. In addition to these issues of accountability, there exist flaws and issues in existing accountability systems that structure accountability in ever obscure avenues making it more difficult achievement of appropriate accountability function.

The recent study of accountability in the education system in Pakistan has presented District Education Officers (DEOs) as holding a complex position in implementing the law and all the challenges that DEOs face around political interference, limited resources, and corruption, but despite these barriers, there are still solutions to harness through the use of human resources, community engagement, and technology. Understanding these context matters when creating accountability systems to improve educational outcome in Pakistan.

When DEOs are trained and properly resourced, they can be powerful agents of school performance and accountability. DEOs can also help promote transparency and accountability and address corruption through various new forms of modern digital technology and monitoring systems. There is a consensus about the importance of the DEOs' roles in developing a climate of accountability in pursuit of quality education. The findings of the study show that substantial issues of political interference, resourcing levels, and corruption in the division's hierarchy undermine accountability systems. The DEOs and other education leaders have to work constantly to overcome these issues as part of everyday practice to address educational goals. Given that the most relevant accountability structures have not fully matured as a result of these interference constraints on the DEOs' roles and deliverables, it is important, however, to strictly exercise standing accountability mechanisms. In addition to this, the implementation procedure utilized to

accomplish the aims is hampered by defects and faults that are present in the existing accountability legislation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research provides several recommendations for proceeding of accountability framework which are grounded on the findings of research.

- Political interference should be controlled and autonomy of DEOS augmented to pursue and implement accountability in schools. Law in this regard be enacted to remove unwarranted political interference.
- Compulsory training program must be chalked out to train Education officers to practically understand the accountability structures and use of relating laws.
- Sufficient financial resources should be allocated to District Education Officers (DEOs), specifically targeting rural and under developed districts for operating of modes of accountability.
- Comprehensive and useful Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems be established in all districts, prioritizing decision-making based on measurable evidence. Protocol should be included the routine school inspections, teacher accountability and student assessments.
- Performance-based incentives for DEOs be introduced and those DEOs who regularly execute accountability and maintain the criteria also be applauded by the department.
- Involvement of community in accountability of school should be introduced in line with the advance countries to effectively implementing accountability measures.
- For the augmentation of digital infrastructure, government should allocate funds specifically focusing on rural districts to guarantee universal access to necessary tools for all District Education Officers (DEOs). They should undergo training for collecting analyzing data for the purpose of implementation of accountability. Strengthening the capabilities of DEOs
- Corruption in any form in education system minimizes the effectiveness of accountability initiatives. Transparent reporting system and making of high power supervisory committee at division level can curb the corruption and enhance accountability of schools.

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