



A Study of School Principals' Practices to Ensure Teacher Accountability for Curriculum Implementation in Ethiopian Primary Schools

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Abstract

This study investigates the curriculum implementation practices of principals in public elementary schools in East Wollega Zone, Ethiopia. Using an exploratory case study approach and a multiple case study research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document review, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the study confirm that principals prioritize holding teachers accountable for tasks other than curriculum implementation in the classroom. They pay insufficient attention to curriculum implementation while effectively managing subordinate accountability. The research reveals that stringent actions, such as removal from promotion and salary cuts, are imposed when teachers' performance in subordinate tasks declines. When teachers are present at schools, their shortcomings in implementing the curriculum are usually addressed by moving them to lower grades instead of imposing harsh punishments. In contrast, sanctions such as fines equivalent to three months' salary, demotion, and dismissal are reserved exclusively for violations of the teachers' code of ethics, not for performance issues in the classroom. Based on the findings, the study suggests that the government create a fresh educational accountability policy. This policy should motivate school principals to emphasize and strengthen accountability for executing the curriculum successfully.

Keywords: *accountability, consequences, curriculum implementation, management, practices*



INTRODUCTION

In the post-1991 era, Ethiopia embarked on a transformative journey of educational reform. These reforms, shaped by policy documents such as the 1994 Education and Training Policy, sought to decentralize primary education and enhance accountability with greater community engagement. The subsequent School Guidelines of 2002 provided a comprehensive framework for educational structures, management practices, and accountability relationships within the Ethiopian primary education system. Central to these documents was the empowerment of school principals to closely monitor and hold teachers accountable for the effective implementation of the curriculum (MoE, 2002).

As a result, the devolution of authority gained traction, with school principals playing an increasingly pivotal role in evaluating teacher performance and ensuring adherence to curriculum practices (MoE, 2002). The intent was clear: to enhance accountability and foster a sense of responsibility among educators at the grassroots level of the education system.

The Ethiopian educational landscape has witnessed profound changes since the early 1990s, driven by a commitment to decentralization and accountability in primary education. Key policy documents, most notably the 1994 Education and Training Policy, laid the foundation for these reforms. These policies emphasized greater community engagement and accountability as essential components of a decentralized primary education system (MoE, 1994).

Accountability has emerged as a cornerstone of public sector reform in many countries (Levitt et al., 2008). It is defined as the acceptance of responsibility and being answerable for one's actions. In the realm of education, accountability is a multifaceted concept encompassing various dimensions, including bureaucratic, legal, professional, political, moral, and market-driven (Adams and Kirst, 1999).

Of particular interest in this study is the management accountability approach. This approach involves systematic efforts and actions aimed at enabling teachers to effectively implement the curriculum (MoE, 2002; Pritchett, 2015; WDR, 2004). It directly addresses the practical roles and responsibilities of school principals and teachers, with the overarching goal of ensuring that curriculum implementation aligns with intended objectives.

The management accountability relationship serves as a critical link connecting school principals and teachers within the education system. It involves internal mechanisms through which school principals evaluate teacher performance and ensure adherence to curriculum practices (Di Gropello, 2004; MoE, 2002; Pritchett, 2015; WDR, 2004). Essentially, it represents the relationship in which school principals closely oversee teachers' behavior to align it with the intended curriculum.

The effective functioning of the management accountability relationship relies on teacher autonomy. Teachers cannot be held accountable for curriculum implementation if they lack the autonomy to make decisions independently (Bailey, 1980). Autonomy, defined as the ability to act independently, especially in decision-making, without undue external influence, is essential in the management accountability relationship (WDR, 2004).

In Ethiopia, school principals have been empowered to oversee a wide range of educational activities, including curriculum implementation, through the management accountability relationship with teachers (MoE, 2002). Striking a balance between adherence to education policies and personal values is paramount for school principals (Juwairiah, 2021).

Despite these reform initiatives and the evolving roles of school principals, the efficacy of curriculum implementation in Ethiopian primary schools remains a pressing concern. Various studies highlight a gap between policy intentions and practical outcomes, with incoherent accountability relationships and weak commitment among both school principals and teachers hindering effective curriculum execution (Dantow et al., 2002; Datnow, 2005; Desimone, 2002).

Recent large-scale studies in Ethiopia have highlighted ongoing challenges in primary education, including learning crises and inadequate curriculum implementation (Hoddinott et al., 2019). These issues are exacerbated by a lack of accountability within the education system and insufficient engagement of stakeholders, particularly school principals, in monitoring and holding teachers accountable for curriculum implementation (Gershberg et al., 2023).

In light of these challenges, this study seeks to answer two fundamental research questions: 1) What are the primary purposes behind school principals exercising their management accountability relationships to hold teachers accountable for curriculum implementation? 2) What consequences do school principals employ to hold teachers accountable for effective curriculum execution?

Understanding the dynamics of the management accountability relationship in Ethiopian primary education is crucial for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. This study aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities within this accountability framework, ultimately contributing to more effective curriculum implementation and improved learning outcomes.

METHOD

The study utilizes a comprehensive multiple-case study design to examine the intricate accountability relationships within educational management, with a particular emphasis on the dynamic interplay between principals and teachers in authentic educational settings. In light of Yin's (2003) influential framework, this research design provides a strong foundation for conducting in-depth case studies

that allow for a more nuanced exploration of the operation of accountability in educational contexts.

Purposive sampling techniques, as recommended by Creswell (2002), were employed to ensure high relevance of the research sites and participants to the study's objectives. Six primary schools in the zone were intentionally selected as research sites based on their stability status, with three located in each of the three districts. Six school principals, one from each respective school, were chosen as respondents for the study based on their positions. We investigated school principals' practices regarding management accountability for curriculum implementation based on their personal experiences and reflections.

Case study research incorporates multiple data sources to establish data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003), which we implemented in our research to increase reliability and internal validity (Merriam, 1998). Triangulation was used during data collection to achieve these goals. Therefore, we utilized interviews and document reviews as data collection techniques.

After presenting the data, we conducted a thematic analysis. This method is fundamental for qualitative analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006), as it provides fundamental skills for performing various qualitative analysis forms. After receiving the transcripts, we conducted keyword coding from the interview questions and study conceptual frameworks. Subsequently, we coded the respondents for data analysis as School Principals One (SP1), through to SP6.

RESULTS

Since schools are administered under the same zone education office, school principals are guided and monitored through similar formal and informal commands and enforcements. Schools are in a similar situation, and school principals use almost similar accountability relationships with the teachers. Teachers have primary responsibility for implementing high-quality curriculum, but they are expected to do far more than the instruction that was discussed one after the other.

1. Practices of School Principals

This section explores the difficulties that school principals encounter when ensuring teacher accountability for implementing curricula, which is a pressing concern. The Ethiopian primary school guidelines (MoE, 2002) explicitly require teachers to effectively carry out their duties and responsibilities regarding curriculum implementation in the classroom. The objective of this accountability relationship is to elevate the quality of curriculum execution.

However, all principals have consistently emphasized certain critical aspects related to the responsibilities delegated to curriculum implementers (CIs), including aspects such as student test scores, promotions, dropout rates, and enrollment

numbers. These elements are crucial for principals to maintain accountability in their management relationship with teachers. Moreover, these tasks are progressively integrated into teacher evaluations.

Within the management accountability relationship, there is a widespread belief in the significant correlation between teacher performance outcomes and student outcomes. This belief highlights the significance of accountability in promoting successful curriculum implementation. As a result, teachers are often unquestionably held accountable for improving student test scores in order to achieve better efficiency outcomes. In summary, principals eagerly reported the following:

As directed by the WEOs, principals assume that if students' test scores improve, they will generalize that the curriculum is being implemented effectively in the classroom (SP2). If students' results do not show improvement by 5 to 10% from the previous year, then teachers will be punished. (SP5)

Evidently, from a document review of teachers' evaluation formats given by WEOs, one of the expected roles of the teachers is to improve students' results by 10% from their previous or last year's average score. This means, that by receiving commandments from WEOs, school principals were exercising their management accountability relationship to force teachers to enhance students' results by giving less emphasis to the teachers' curriculum practices in the classroom.

Schools are forced by curriculum and instruction experts of WEOs to be ranked by their promotion rate and the school-wide average students' scores. Document analysis shows that, as one of the evaluation criteria, teachers are evaluated by the number of promoted students. This score is also used for Woreda school rankings, so school principals are very interested in making their schools compute. Thus, principals exercise their devotion to students' promotion as an additional management accountability relationship to evaluate and hold teachers accountable. This matters because school principals' great management accountability relationship functions are to be blessed in front of the WEOs' experts and to satisfy the needs of education offices. Principals said that:

The big issue is promoting all students (100%) to the next class. These issues are inextricably linked to teacher evaluation and efficiency results. Principals do have an informal command from the WEOs to do so (SP3). Principals have solid commandments/orders from WEOs' C and I experts to hold teachers accountable for promoting students because all students are expected to be promoted to the next class to enhance the rate of promotion at the WEOs, the Zone Education Office, the Regional Education Bureau, and the country's Ministry of Education too to get international funding. That is why principals are forced to exercise their right to hold teachers accountable. (SP4 and SP6)

From the document review of teachers' evaluation format, students' dropout and enrollment rates are also another serious issue that led school principals to pay attention to holding teachers accountable. In this case, teachers should focus on and act to reduce students' dropout rates and increase students' enrollment rates for their efficiency results. Because these matters are amazing and chronic, school principals monitor teachers to find those dropped-out students to improve the school's ranking. Some participants witnessed that:

The majority of students do not like to attend school regularly. They have little hope for their future careers (SP1 and SP2). Students may drop out if they get a survival income (SP3). Principals urge forcing teachers to travel from village to village on foot to search for dropped students. This is because WEOs' C and I experts usually evaluate and force principals to increase enrollment and reduce the number of dropout students. (SP5)

The existing management accountability relationship was also strongly exercised to hold teachers accountable for informal and bureaucratic messages and reports. This relationship has placed less emphasis on holding teachers accountable for elements that contribute to the failure of curriculum implementation, such as classroom curriculum practices and instructional time waste. One principal was deeply concerned about the ideological incompatibility of bureaucratic intervention and educational management guidelines.

There are top-down bureaucratic messages from WEOs about the number of dropouts and enrollment students that are eventually passed down to schools; they usually contradict the written guidelines for school management documents. These messages come through the telephone in their hidden form and in oral speech in meetings that allow school principals to hold teachers accountable. I have little autonomy to resist the WEO's command. (SP4).

Since school principals are working under similar experts, they discuss their school experiences:

Students generally dislike going to school regularly, and they see this as a democratic issue. They are not held accountable for their attendance or classroom activities (SP3). Students do have side jobs that supplement their daily income. Students are usually absent from the class to support their families in a variety of agricultural harvests (SP6). Students usually assume that learning is for the jobless... they drop out of their education. School principals consume their time and energy trying to bring those dropped students back. (SP2).

2. Consequences to Ensure Management Accountability Relationships

One of the ways of ensuring the accountability of curriculum implementers in Ethiopia is by implementing simple and rigorous disciplinary penalties. The accountability measures are either simple or rigorous, which is applicable if

curriculum implementers do not discharge their duties and responsibilities (Proclamation, 2002). Nevertheless in practice,

If teachers agree to perform the directions given by WEOs like subordinate roles, no punishment (SP6). If teachers do not perform their content and pedagogical practices they then give advice and oral warnings are one approach (SP3). If teachers cannot teach, they will be transferred to the lower grade levels as punishment (SP1 and SP2). So far, no teacher has been severely punished for the problems related to teaching-learning unless it is a disciplinary problem.

Similarly, regarding the case of school discipline against teachers, the leaders said that:

Repeated advice was put forward as the solution to improve their performance (SP5 and SP6). If teachers show deficiencies in their work they will be threatened, counseled, given short-term training, and not fired or dismissed from the job (SP2 and SP4). Despite the lack of implementation of the implementation of the curriculum, the practice of teacher firing has never been implemented so far. (SP2).

The orders from WEOs are informal, as I reviewed the school management guideline documents,

When looking at the documentation of the penalties mentioned by the teachers above, the same guideline does not prescribe these penalties. However, teachers find it difficult to implement teacher points in their evaluation rubrics.

DISCUSSION

School principals play a crucial role in ensuring the curriculum is effectively implemented, requiring continuous improvement on their part. This can be accomplished through establishing management accountability relationships, as noted by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2002) and research conducted by Ramsteck et al. (2015). According to the MoE (2002), teachers are primarily responsible for implementing the curriculum, while principals hold them accountable for their duties. Accountability hinges on data relating to various tasks, influencing current management practices. Principals act as intermediaries between schools and educational authorities (WEOs). The effectiveness of teacher monitoring by principals depends on their capacity to concentrate on specific duties.

This study has revealed a critical element that may influence principals' focus: unofficial messages from WEOs. These messages may cause principals to prioritize administrative tasks over the instructional duties of teachers, as evidenced by Tucker and Coddling's (2003) study, which found that principals in low-income schools frequently face emergencies that divert their focus from academic matters.

At the same time, teachers are ensnared in a complex array of competing demands that make it challenging to ensure accountability for teaching quality.

Subordinate positions within the educational hierarchy have a direct impact on teacher efficiency. Individuals who do not meet the requirements set by WEOs run the risk of having their needs neglected. However, there is a clear and logical connection between teacher evaluation and performance (Chaerunnisa, 2022). School accountability policies do not explicitly require principals and teachers to prioritize administrative tasks over instructional roles.

According to MoE (2002) guidelines, principals have the responsibility and authority to improve teachers' skills, resolve ethical dilemmas, provide an optimal learning environment, and oversee school administration. In cases where teachers fail to improve students' academic performance, accountability measures such as non-promotion or salary cuts can be implemented.

In contrast, weak management accountability has had negative consequences in Tanzania, where teachers are frequently absent from their duties and underperform (Bank, 2016). Dismissing teachers due to curriculum-related issues is uncommon, as there are no contractual agreements between schools and government-employed teachers. Instead, issues are addressed through warnings and transfers, which can impede the smooth implementation of the curriculum.

In Ethiopia, teacher accountability works differently. Performance evaluations have a substantial impact on the benefits teachers receive, including promotions and salary increases. Sanctions are imposed for cases of misconduct, unexcused absences, and substance abuse, including fines and dismissals. Such strict penalties serve as a mechanism for ensuring accountability and maintaining high standards of leadership within schools.

CONCLUSION

School principals are responsible for managing schools and ensuring that education procedures, rules, and curricula are followed. However, according to this study, school principals missed the opportunity to use management accountability sanctions for subordinate roles and reports to hold teachers accountable, rather than for curriculum implementation, by making an unnecessary link between these reports and teacher efficiency scores. The management accountability relationship was weakened by a skeptical attitude and superficial evaluations of teachers by school principals. This was due to compromising the established roles of management accountability and identifying teachers' presence on school grounds. As a result, school principals lacked experience in holding teachers accountable through rigorous and formal punishments, instead relying on professional advice and oral suggestions.

It was discovered that school principals did not adhere to their accountability relationship as stated in the proclamation and the school management guideline, resulting in the failure of curriculum implementation due to their roles being manipulated by external WEOs' pressure. Additionally, they exhibited weak autonomy and conciliation practices. This study reveals that penalties outlined in the proclamation, such as fines of up to three months' salary, demotion, and termination, were only imposed for violations of teachers' code of ethics, such as smoking, excessive absenteeism, and substance addiction. They were not used for failures to implement classroom curriculum. The study's scope was limited to the practices of primary school principals. Further research is necessary to compare the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students within different student populations, providing a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

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