

Effects of Accountability on the Instructional leadership Practices of School Principals

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Abstract— The focus of United States current educational policy on student learning outcomes expects principals to act as instructional leaders. Principals are required to improve student academic achievement while fulfilling the demands of state and federal mandated accountability. This paper is an attempt to explore the effects of accountability on three dimensions of instructional leadership: (1) Defining the school mission (2) Managing the instructional program, and (3) Promoting a positive learning climate. Accountability has both intended and unintended effects on all dimensions of instructional leadership. Though there are examples of successful principals who utilized accountability to gain broader goals the prominent response to accountability is mistaking standards for improvement vision, focus on subjects that are tested and compliance to policy while ignoring broader goals for learning. High stakes accountability promotes direct supervision of instruction and creates an atmosphere of distrust which is less favorable for school improvement.

Keywords- instructional leadership; accountability; NCLB; school principals

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1990, educational reforms in developed countries are inclined towards quality assurance and increased accountability of schools [1]. In US the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) aims at raising the quality of education by employing test-based accountability [2]. The schools that fail to meet standards could be reconstituted or taken over by the state or administrators and/or teachers could be replaced [3] and [4]. The underlying assumption of accountability is that that the support and negative sanctions will direct teachers and school leaders to focus on student achievement and mobilize resources towards desired outcomes [1],[5]-[8]. Under high-stakes accountability the principals in US face great pressure to improve student performance and instructional leadership is a dominant role expectation [9]-[12]. Instructional leadership practices include all the direct and indirect behaviors that affect learning teaching processes [9] and [13]-[15]. The recent literature Hallinger [9] and [16], Marks and Printy [17], and Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe [14] suggests that an inclusive model of shared instructional leadership could fulfill the demands of accountability but the NCLB could reassert the traditional top-down principal-led model of instructional

leadership [11]. Walker and Ko [1] proclaim that accountability may exert unproductive pressure on schools and can lead to unintended consequences. The fact that many schools remain under sanction rather than improving [5], [6] indicate that principals face tensions while improving instruction under accountability.

Identification of the tensions that principals face as instructional leaders under high-stakes accountability would help devise counter strategies. This paper explores the effects of high-stakes accountability on the instructional leadership practices of school principals. The three dimensions of instructional leadership proposed by Hallinger [9] are used as a framework for this paper: (1) Defining the school's mission, (2) Managing the instructional program, and (3) Promoting a positive learning climate. The effects of accountability on these dimensions/practices are discussed.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper is informed by instructional leadership and instructional supervision literature. The descriptor 'instructional leadership' was run through the database Education Research Complete that resulted in 754 studies. Adding the term 'accountability' left 54 studies. The results were further refined by using peer reviewed articles from 2000-13. Abstracts of the resultant 40 articles were studied carefully. 12 empirical studies that gave an in-depth account of the practices of school principals under accountability were selected. The same process was repeated using the descriptors instructional supervision and accountability that resulted in 10 studies.

III. THREE DIMENSIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE EFFECTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

"The instructional leadership model developed by Hallinger is the most fully tested model" [18], and the three dimensions: Defining the school mission, managing the instructional program and promoting a positive learning climate encompass almost all the practices of instructional leaders. The relative effect of different dimensions of leadership on student learning resulted in effect size from 0.27- 0.84 standard deviation [14]. Which showed that different leadership dimensions could have

varying effect on student learning but all the dimensions are integrated and no dimension could be neglected. The following pages will give an overview of the three dimensions and the tensions that arise for principals under the context of accountability.

A. Framing and Communicating School Goals

This dimension has two functions that are necessary for organizational improvement: (1) developing a shared vision, setting measurable and time-based goals, aligning resources to goals, and (2) gaining commitment to shared goals [5], [9]. The analysis of the selected studies suggests the following conflicts that principals face while framing and communicating goals for instructional improvement.

i. Version for improvement vs. policy requirements

Setting the direction means developing a vision for improvement and articulating expectations for students and staff [6]. Under accountability principals feel that they have a little discretion to design and develop their own school wide goals as federal, state and districts define targets and instructional expectations [19] and [8]. School leaders are required to integrate external agenda and specific needs of the organization [20] but some principals are unable to integrate external agenda with internal goals and their own beliefs. This conflict could make them pursue incoherent agendas. A four-year longitudinal case study of two urban school principals in Chicago revealed that one of the two principals under study initiated two programs one focusing on direct test preparation to appease the district and secondly, established small academies in school to pursue his instructional goals for students. Both initiatives proved to be a failure [4]. Another principal explicitly disintegrated his goals from policy goals "The [bureaucratic] accountability is not for my purposes. It's whatever data or statistics they want to show. To me, it's moving students, graduating them and moving them to college" [8]. Resnick [21] proclaims that higher stakes lead to compliance and provide an irresistible incentive for educators to match teaching to tests. The prominent response to policy requirements was either compliance or adoption of policy expectations as a vision for improvement. The low performing schools focused on getting off probation status and used short-term strategies to boost test scores rather than articulating goals for comprehensive student learning [19], [20], [22], [2] and [6]. And principals shifted their focus from holistic curriculum and broader social issues to assessments and state standards [23].

The case studies [4], [6], [20] and [23] also depicted that successful leaders articulated a broader vision and wider purpose, and aligned external policies and mandates with their educational vision, and focused on creating sustainable structures. Though there are examples of successful principals who could develop broader vision with district support but a narrow response to policy goals and an ambition to achieve external targets in a short time is a pitfall that is difficult to avoid.

ii. Commitment to goals vs. disincentive

One of the roles of the instructional leader is to communicate goals and gain staff commitment to them. Teachers show commitment to goals when they believe that goals are important and they have the capacity to achieve them [20] but the goals provide disincentive if they are perceived as unattainable [5]. Principals find it hard to gain staff commitment as they themselves do not agree with the targets of NCLB and find them unrealistic and unfair. 92.5 percent of 325 Florida's elementary principals and assistant principals expressed the view that it was unfair to grade schools based on student test scores [2]. One of the principals from a New York City school talked about the unrealistic timeline and initiatives, "Department of education is trying to do, probably, a lot in a little bit of time. I can't do fifteen initiatives at one time because they're not gonna work" [8]. Another principal shared his fears "You are never going to get to the point where 100 percent of your kids are proficient." The challenge seemed tough and unfair to him [20]. Under accountability teachers associate students' performance with the school's ability to get off probation status [5] and principals cannot secure teachers' commitment if initial data does not show progress or the school fails to meet benchmarks [4].

Another problem posed by high-stakes testing is the hierarchical, telling mode of communication. A principal describes the situation in these words, "Once in a while I'll come back from an administrators meeting and say—OK, this is a top-down decision, we have no say in this, this is the way it's going to be and you have to accept it" [19]. Principals from low performing schools even communicated negative effects of accountability on teachers' motivation [6]. Moller [7] proclaimed that negative incentives increased the problem of motivation in low performing schools.

B. Managing Instructional Programme

Management of the instructional program is necessary to achieve organizational goals. Principals manage the instructional program by supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress. The focus of this dimension is on teaching and learning so principal must have expertise to perform the functions [9]. Supervision and evaluation for improving teaching and learning has been an important part of principals' responsibilities [24], [25] and the historical role of supervision has been inspection and control [26, p.9]. Principals can monitor the quality of instruction through classroom observations, conferences, and direct contact with teachers [27].

Supervision could be described as a process in which the principal engages teachers in instructional dialogue for the purpose of improving teaching and promoting student achievement [28, p.55]. The concept of supervision as an expert technical service for improving student achievement is compatible with accountability demands [29, p.30, 31]. But direct supervision of instruction i.e. regularly inspecting student homework, observing classroom activities and after

observation working with teachers to improve their teaching under accountability context generate unhealthy pressure and have negative indirect effect on student learning [30]. Though evaluation is widely understood as the most effective quality assurance tool [31], Hallinger [9] suggests that principals do not influence classroom instruction through direct supervision or evaluation of teachers. The relation between leadership dimension of quality assurance and accountability and support for students yielded a weak correlation ($r=0.215$). The beta for quality assurance and accountability was negative, indicating that it may hinder the provision of support for students [1].

State accountability not only impacts the ways principals monitor student achievement, align curriculum to the testing, provide remedial and tutoring services to pupils and assign teachers to grade levels or subjects [3] but also could limit the scope of supervision [30]. Management of instructional program within accountability context may create the following tensions for principals.

i. Supervision vs. evaluation

Supervision literally means “watch over,” “direct,” or “oversee” the instructional practices of teachers and is broadly defined as “a function, which includes processes of evaluating, influencing, planning, and managing and it aims to influence people, situations, and relationships” [32, p.258]. It also includes facilitation of opportunities and becomes a process for enhancing teachers’ capacity to modify their teaching behaviors to improve instruction [29, p.30, 31], [33]. In practice supervision is often confused with evaluation. A study conducted on 100 teachers and principals [33] reported that teachers and principals described supervision as evaluation and judgment. Only 11% principals defined it as a regular process to improve learning and providing discussion about improving teaching.

Evaluation is also essential to improve professional practices in teaching and is often narrowly defined as a process of rating teacher performance to the preexisting standards. But in broader conceptions the focus of evaluation is less on measuring and more on describing and improving teaching and learning [34, p.282-3, 289]. Depending upon the purpose there are two types of evaluations: (1) Summative evaluation is an administrative function for teacher accountability. It seeks to determine if the teacher has met the minimum expectations. Standard rating scales, checklist are used to evaluate teachers. (2) Formative evaluation is supervisory function that intends to assist and support teachers’ professional growth and improvement [26, p.276, 278].

Berube and Dexter [35] separate evaluation (the bureaucratic function) from instructional supervision (the democratic function) by associating evaluation with accountability and judging teachers’ efficiency while associating instructional supervision with helping teachers grow professionally. Though supervision has a wider scope and purpose, supervision driven by accountability is limited to classroom inspection and judgment of teacher quality. Within a highly regulated accountability context principals perceive

direct supervision as an easy and efficient way to increase test scores [30] and may sacrifice the long-term gains resulting from teacher professional growth, for gaining short-term goals by inspecting and directing instructional program [11]. This trend was prominent in the case studies. Rutledge [4] reported that principals used context of accountability to enhance their administrative authority. Principals from low performing schools that remained on probation focused exclusively on monitoring for compliance rather than improvement for learning. Principals were more concerned about procedural issues and teachers had negative feelings about tight surveillance [6]. Ovando and Ramirez Jr. [24] also reported that principals increased instructional monitoring through walk-throughs. Principals with low instructional leadership supported teacher change through monitoring [20]. In the context of accountability principals could mistake evaluation for supervision.

Legislators and policy makers value summative evaluation while educators favor formative evaluation for professional growth [36, p.9]. Summative evaluation (accountability) and formative evaluation (professional growth) are both necessary for student achievement and overall school improvement [24] and should be employed according to distinct purposes they serve. But when principals are required to conduct summative evaluation for learning and instructional improvement they might face frustration and follow the letter of rule but not the spirit. After completing the prescribed, mandatory evaluation they would focus on instructional improvement [34, p.44]. Summative evaluation cannot serve the purpose of instructional improvement as learning almost always involves non-judgmental feedback that could be provided through formative evaluation. [26, p.278]. Most districts assume that their system meets both summative and formative evaluation needs but in practice primary emphasis is placed on summative goals and formative evaluation does not get due importance, so it is important to keep both separate [26, p.277]. However, accountability requirements insist on employing summative evaluation for instructional improvement.

ii. Monitoring data vs. utilization of data to inform practice

A positive aspect of NCLB is the provision of data (student test scores). Availability of data has increased awareness about standards and students subgroups [37]. Principals intensively use data [6], [2], [20], [24], [4], [8] and [38] especially in instructional and operational leadership [39]. Principals used data in different ways, some used data to establish their authority and monitor teacher compliance with new instructional strategies and routine and to monitor whether standards were met or not. Official test results were used to make student placement decisions but no connection was made between student and teacher needs [6], [20] and [4]. The successful principals employed data to track student progress. They concentrated their efforts on developing internal accountability. They devised their tests, organized data teams and used data to track progress and influence instruction [6], [20], [4]. Principals also used data to eliminate the ineffective programs and aligning curriculum to test content [6]. Data

could be an effective indicator of growth but yields no progress if dealt as an outcome. Accountability has driven school leaders' attention towards data but many are not skilled to use them effectively.

C. Promoting a positive learning conducive culture

Hallinger's [9] review of instructional leadership studies suggests that principals affect classroom instruction not through direct supervision or evaluation of teachers but by creating positive school culture and by modeling. This dimension has a broader scope than the other two, and includes the functions of protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers and for learning, maintaining high standards and expectations for teachers and students, and modeling the values and practices that create a learning conducive climate.

Successful leaders view quality control not as a managerial problem but as a cultural problem related to teachers' beliefs, commitment to quality, identification with their work, and the intrinsic satisfaction [34, p.139]. The highly effective schools have a mindset and culture that focuses on improving teaching and learning [40]. A healthy culture marked with trust, experimentation, openness, collegiality and interpersonal relationship supports students as well as adult learning, and promote individual and organizational effectiveness, commitment to goals and long-term stability of the organization [41],[42, p.15-18], [32, p.265], and [43]-[45]. An atmosphere that supports professional development is essential for sustainable improvement but the work of school leaders is affected by context of accountability.

i. Culture of trust and collegiality vs. fear and accountability

One of the key responsibilities of school leaders is to build staff capacity [20] Principals could support instruction by providing professional development and encouraging risk taking, and by strengthening teacher commitment and job satisfaction through relational trust between themselves and teachers [6], [27]. Professional development requires open, trusting and secure environment [36, p. 25] [46] and [18]. The high stakes accountability changes the work context. Principals are increasingly facing conflict between bureaucratic and professional accountability. Political and market accountability is replacing professional and moral accountability in principals' decision making [8]. High stakes accountability, with its focus on standards and assessments, constitutes a legislative, public, and workplace threat that inhibits the risk taking and experimentation [4] and [47]. Individuals and organizations respond to threat with rigidity and persistence of well-learned and dominant responses that serves as a protection against anticipated job loss, and sanctions linked to accountability [48], [49] on the other hand Burke and Krey [32, p.110, 111] maintain that freedom from fear of job loss or loss of promotion or retention constitutes negative security. They suggest that supervisor and teachers must understand their responsibilities and it is ethical

responsibility of participants to achieve security by overcoming deficiencies rather than demanding it [32, p.117]. This concept of security is quite tempting but in an era of high-stake accountability such ethical standard is hard to find and maintain. Fear of sanctions make teachers less likely to listen and admit error, thereby eroding the professional growth process [46].

Studies [20], [50], [4] and [38] indicate that principals used accountability to increase focus on student performance and used it as a tool to create a no excuse culture. They organized committees, drew on teachers' expertise to improve instruction, provided time for collaboration and tried to funnel resources towards increasing student test scores. Some principals over relied on accountability standards. Principals encouraged faculty to attend professional development programs in areas related to the policy effort [4], [38]. A novice principal from an urban high-performing elementary school used accountability as a way of measuring the fit of people and programs in his school. Another principal depended on standards to create high or low-pressure work environment. The author proclaimed that principals' focus on accountability standards imposed limits on their ability to frame instructional problem [50]. Rutledge [4] speculates that under test-based accountability principals may avoid strong positions that counter policy goals and may not support school-level professional communities that do not focus on high-stakes assessment. It will erode the professional culture in schools.

IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Accountability affects all dimensions of instructional leadership from setting the school goals to creating a positive culture. It defines targets and a time frame to achieve them, legislates the evaluation process and creates an environment characterized by sanctions. The case studies and surveys in Table 1 clearly indicate that accountability has both intended and unintended consequences.

Table 1. Leadership under accountability: case studies and surveys

Case studies and surveys	
Study type/place /participants	Main Points
[2] Survey /Florida/ 325 elementary principals and assistant principals	69.5% reported positive effect on principal's ability to improve teacher effectiveness positive and 79.1% said they use test scores to meet the needs of low achieving students. 92.5% had negative opinion about grading schools. The Negative effects of accountability reported by survey include: narrowing of the curriculum and definition of school success, increased teaching to the test, negative effect on principals' ability to retain high quality teachers.
[4]	Test-based accountability capitalizes

<p>Longitudinal comparative case study/ Chicago/ Principals and English teachers from 2 high schools</p>	<p>on unclear jurisdictional boundaries between district administrators, principals and teachers over curriculum and instruction. Both principals focused on curricular and instructional activities, increased monitoring of teachers and started specialty programs to attract high performing students. The successful principal aligned his goals with policy goals, articulated a broader vision for school and used accountability to expand his instructional authority whereas principal who remain on probation status saw accountability as a major challenge to his beliefs, and started many initiatives aiming at getting off probation and increasing test scores.</p>
<p>[5] Survey/ Chicago/ 4,545 elementary school teachers in 398 schools</p>	<p>Principal's instructional leadership and support for change are associated with teacher expectancy and teachers' expectancy is associated with a school's ability to move off probation status. Principal leadership areas i.e. instructional leadership, principal's support for change, teacher-principal trust and inclusive leadership were lower in schools on probation.</p>
<p>[6] Longitudinal Case study/Chicago/ 331 teachers and administrators in 10 low-performing elementary schools</p>	<p>Principals' responses were closely linked to their interpretation of accountability. All principals centralized decision-making. Two schools that moved off probation quickly articulated broader vision, focused on changing organizational structures and norms. Used additional testing to identify problems and program effectiveness, and provided professional development. Principals tried to buffer negative effects of accountability. Three schools that moved off probation slowly focused on reading, did not articulate broader goals. Minimal professional development was provided and to some extent collaborative culture was developed. Four schools that did not move off probation and one that moved off and then back on probation, over emphasized management practices. Focused on meeting accountability measures to get off probation. External partners selected programs that did not fit with school reform. Implemented a variety of programs to comply with district mandates. They had a narrow response to policy without a vision for organizational change, limited professional development and low</p>

	<p>support and trust. They threatened teachers about negative effects of accountability.</p>
<p>[8] Comparative Case study/ New York City/ Two groups of 10 and 18 High school principals</p>	<p>Principals faced conflict between external demands and their own sense of professionalism but the conflict diminished over time. The number of reported critical incidents increased from 96 in 2004-05 to 241 in 2007-08. The most reported critical incidents were characterized by bureaucratic and professional accountability. 93% reported three-way conflicting accountabilities. 85% reported experiencing accountabilities that were aligned (political accountability supporting professional accountability and bureaucratic accountability supporting professional accountability). By 2007-08 the market and political accountability replaced some of the professional and moral accountability in decision-making. Other problems reported were tensions between school developed instruction and district wide curricular mandates, focus on testing, budget cuts that affected improvement plans and frustration with unrealistic timeline and overwhelming initiatives.</p>
<p>[19] Qualitative/New England & Mid Atlantic, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest and West US states/ 81 Superintendents and 85 principals</p>	<p>Narrowness of curriculum objectives and outcomes, top down decision making and punitive measures have impact on the work of instructional leaders. Increased pressure and frustration, focus on tested subjects, inability of school leaders to set the goals as decisions are made at higher level. Positive outcomes include data driven school improvement, increasing attention to student subgroup performance.</p>
<p>[20] Mix method/ 9 States of US/175 sampled schools, case study of 7 principals</p>	<p>Principals internalize external policies if these align with their own values and when district leaders are supportive. Four principals with high instructional leadership developed a broader vision, aligned district policy with their educational vision and led teacher learning. Three principals with low instructional leadership focused on complying with district and state standards, monitoring test results,</p>

	ensuring teacher familiarity with state standards.
[22] Case study/ US/ Middle school principal	The top-down punitive decisions of district central office create unproductive pressure for school leaders and staff and could lead to unethical practices for boosting test scores.
[24] Multiple case study/ Texas/ 6 administrators from exemplary elementary, middle and high school	Principals' instructional leadership actions included: setting clear expectations, monitoring instruction through walk-through observations and providing professional development opportunities. Principals applied teacher appraisal system to enhance instruction. Principals shared and clarified performance expectations related to evaluation instrument to ensure compliance with the law. Elementary principal used it as a process and aligned instructional strategies to the system domains. At middle and high school principals focused on providing assistance and applied the system as summative tool. Principals planned instructional activities according to the evaluation instrument. Course offerings and teaching assignments were also determined by evaluation data.
[37] Survey/Wisconsin/ 40% of the school districts	73% responses about consequences of NCLB were negative and 34% of these were about disruption of educational services due to testing. 27% responses were positive and 36% of these were about provision of useful data through testing.
[38] Ethnographic, longitudinal case study/ Northeast US/ principals, teachers, students and parents in 4 elementary schools	State and local level policies are reshaping and redefining curriculum leadership. Two categories of curriculum leadership were identified. New professional curriculum leadership: The two principals altered progressive holistic instruction to increase academic achievement. Their concerns about curriculum resulted in focusing on standards, prepackaged programs, and tests rather than students' cultural backgrounds and social issues. Critical curriculum leadership: The other two principals had a critical response to the policy. They developed curriculum leadership identities in relation to societal and academic needs. They led community-based curriculum and involved teachers, students and parents, used discourse analysis to interpret the notions and assumptions

	of policy beyond written text. The enactment of curriculum leadership is relational and grounded in subjective interpretations. The leaders need a broad range of analytical tools and curriculum perspectives.
[39] Survey/ Midwestern State US/ 183 high school principals	Principals use data more frequently in instructional and organization operational leadership than in creating school vision and collaborative partnership.
[50] Case study/Texas/ 3 urban high performing elementary school principals	Study reported an extensive use of data. Principals used accountability to measure fit of people and programs, and used standards for conflict management. Focus on accountability standards imposed limits on the ability of two principals to frame instructional problems. Exceptional principal articulated a greater vision and relied on personal involvement rather than accountability measures.

Accountability has increased the focus of leadership on external accountability, subjects that are tested, on monitoring data and instruction, resource allocation and building teacher capacity. But innovation-conducive environment that is necessary to meet the educational goals of 21st century is not possible under high-stakes accountability.

The studies in Table 1 revealed that principals responded to the context of accountability in three ways: (1) compliance to avoid sanctions and focus on meeting standards while being aware of the fact that broader goals of education are ignored, (2) adopting policy expectations as a vision for improvement, or (3) challenging and redefining the assumptions of policy and with the district support articulating a broader vision that encompasses mandated standards. These responses incorporated instructional leadership practices but varied greatly in scope. One reason that explains the difference among principals' responses is the district support or the latitude that districts grant to principals. The other reason is complex and includes principals' sense making of the policy and their rich educational vision, and their ability to use external accountabilities as an opportunity to advance their own agenda.

Principals mediate the policy ideas and it is their interpretation of the policy that is communicated to staff and implemented in schools [20]. It is crucial that principal preparation institutes incorporate the essential skills in their programs that principals require in practice. Principal preparation programs should focus on developing creative problem solving, analytical and policy reading skills. Instead of tacit knowledge a deeper understanding of concepts is required.

Principals also require strong communication skills to establish a supportive and trusting relationship with district office and teachers.

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