

## **CCEAM CONFERENCE 2008**

### **Presentation**

#### **'The Accountability of Primary schools in the Seychelles: a Stakeholder Analysis'**

**Veronique R-H Figaro**

**(University of Warwick): NIE Seychelles**

#### **Introduction**

There is no way that anyone involved in education can ignore the issue of accountability. While the concept continues to gain national prominence in the Seychelles, concerns have been raised as to the accountability of schools and teachers. The concept of accountability in education is perceived differently among school leaders, teachers and other parties with an interest in education. The literature states that this is because of its complexity from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint (Heim, 1995). Central to the research are questions, which delineate accountability in the primary schools: who is accountable to whom, for what, by what means and with what consequences? The study is a stakeholder analysis, with a conceptual base rooted in theories of school and teacher accountability.

#### **The Accountability Context: Seychelles**

The development of strong accountability systems, since the mid 1980's, has been one of the most powerful trends in educational policy in the UK, USA, and many other countries, including Holland, Australia, Canada, Sweden and Russia (Barber, 2004). Barber's central point is that strong accountability, if well designed, can make a decisive contribution to the achievement of the widely shared moral purpose of improving student outcomes. Together with the growing importance of education, it was recognized that there were limits to the amount of tax people were willing to pay for services, which delivered uncertain outcomes. In response to those pressures, Leithwood and Earl (2000) argue that accountability makes sense. This argument bears significantly on the Seychelles Education System.

The Seychelles are a very small group of islands lying in the Indian Ocean, with a total population of around eighty-four thousand. The education system is characterised by a comprehensive co-educational one, (Leste et al, 2003) offering ten years of compulsory schooling after two years pre-primary, at the age of around six to sixteen. At the end of secondary schooling students are accepted after a selection process based on their IGCSE or 'DEL' or 'DALF' results, into academic, technical or vocational institutions. That is followed by further education if one qualifies according to the criteria.

Schools are regulated by the Ministry of Education through the headteachers. It also controls the facilities, budget, resources and staffing with the aim of providing equal opportunities and equitable distribution of resources.

One of the three main operational goals of the Ministry of Education is Accountability, in terms of developing processes to evaluate outcomes, provide reliable information on learners' achievement and guide future planning (Leste et al, 2003).

Seychellois parents want to know what is happening in their schools. They may do so through the Parents Teachers Association (PTA), at parents meetings, through the Parents Educators' Council (PEC), at other forums such as open days and when they collect school reports. The Ministry of Education also calls the school to account, for example through the Quality Assurance Service (QA) which seeks to assist schools in using data from evaluation to plan for change and improvement (Ministry of Education, 2004). Schools are also required to submit progress reports of Development Planning as well as subject reports at the end of every school term. The Ministry is also emphasizing that 'no parents should be left out' (Minister for Education, 2005), as schools are to involve parents more in student learning.

There is also the expansion of private schooling and the emergence of competition between the private and state system (Vidot, 1996). There may be conflict or tensions in schools being accountable to diverse stakeholders (Bush, 1994), and this is likely to be particularly significant in a small centralized system like the Seychelles. For example, there is the risk that the comparison between state and private schooling may push the Ministry of Education to adopt an approach to accountability that could be termed 'accountability as vindication of a system' (Vidot, 1996:16). Hence the need to be clear about accountability has never been more compelling.

It is important to note that the 'Seychelles Education System is highly centralized' (Leste et al, 2003:6). As a post-colonial government, it aimed at consistency in education provision. Due to the size of the country, system-wide goals are centrally determined to meet national objectives. The main decisions are made centrally rather than being delegated to educational institutions. The curricula are also prescribed nationally. Seychelles schools are organizations with many bureaucratic features' (Bush, 1994: 36) including hierarchical and vertical organizational structures. Central to this hierarchical mode of leadership, is the concept of accountability.

Where resources are concerned, planning and budgeting is done on a national basis and school leaders are expected to spend within the stated guidelines and all accounts are subject to both internal and external auditing, as per financial instructions. Resources are allocated centrally. While this proves to be beneficial in terms of equity, there may be the tendency for students to believe that education is the Government's responsibility (Ministry of Education, 1999) and, as a consequence,

there may be much wastage and irresponsibility. With the introduction of the School Improvement Programme, as well as training for school leaders in Educational Leadership and Management, schools in Seychelles are being asked to implement changes and involve themselves in staff development projects. As a consequence the context of accountability may be fast changing.

A number of concerns remain (Purvis, 2004); where attainment is concerned; a significant group of students have been scoring consistently low marks in core subjects, giving a strong indication that the objectives of the National Curriculum are not being properly met. When viewed in the context of change, the expectation should be one of improvement and an increased readiness for students to cope with the next education cycle. It is also generally accepted that comprehensive schools have to cater for a wide range of abilities, even though the pace and the content of learning cannot apply equally to all students. The establishment of non-streaming in all primary schools, through a policy memorandum (Ministry of Education, 2004), and the promotion of teaching methods suitable for mixed-ability classes, are being emphasized.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study, which is still in progress, was aimed at investigating the accountability of school leaders and teachers. The study's main research questions are:

1. Who exercises accountability in the Seychelles Primary Schools?
2. What is the scope of accountability in Seychelles Primary Schools?
3. To whom are school leaders and teachers accountable?
4. What is the nature of accountability in the Seychelles?
5. What are the implications for school leaders in exercising accountability?

The intention is to develop a framework for both school and teacher accountability appropriate for a small centralised education system like the Seychelles.

### **Methodology**

The investigation used a combined approach; positivist and interpretivist in order to facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between variables, that is, the relationship between the various respondent groups as potential stakeholders, the relationship between management structures, expectations and perceptions of accountability. The design was also decided upon to address the level at which generalisations could be made. It was to allow appropriate emphasis at different stages of research process (Morrison, 2002); the survey, then the case studies.

A questionnaire was used in the survey. It was structured in such a way that it scanned from perceptions to the types of consequences, and included both standardised and open questions to allow respondents to explain freely and openly what they perceived to be significant, hence yielding both quantitative and qualitative data. The scope of the survey covered all 19 state primary schools from the main island. Data from the private schools were late in coming in; time constraint made it impractical to be included. However, those data will be considered for the complete study. Purposive samples of the headteacher, three subject coordinators; from Maths and Science, Languages and Early Childhood, three teachers and the PTA chairperson from each school were the respondents, a total sample of 152. The data from the survey will be later used to refine interviews, observations and documentary analysis for subsequent in-depth data collection from case studies. Ministry officials and a focus group of students will also be involved as respondents. The questionnaires included core questions and a few specific ones for each respondent group. Particular care was taken at the design stage to ensure that the questionnaires would really yield both types of data. The response rate was excellent at 87.5% overall.

#### **Data Analysis**

The questionnaires from nineteen headteachers, fifteen PTA chairpersons, forty-seven teachers and fifty-two subject coordinators yielded quite a large amount of data. They were edited, recorded for each category of respondents, under pre-formulated sections and the analysis was deferred until all findings had been recorded for each respondent group. This was to allow for comparison between potential stakeholder groups.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Perceptions of school accountability

Perceptions of school accountability differed among the four respondent stakeholder groups. While teachers, subject coordinators and headteachers focused on the ideas of 'being responsible' and 'answerable to', parents perceived the concept as the school accomplishing the role it is supposed to undertake and that the accountability of schools should not be separated from that of the Ministry. The use of the phrase 'being accountable to' signifies a lack of clear understanding; because the respondents could not find other words to explain the concept; portraying it as a muddled one (Heim, 1995) and this is very significant in the current education reforms, but references to 'responsibility' or 'being responsible' indicate adequate level of understanding of the concept.

#### a) Why should schools be accountable?

All respondents believe that schools should be accountable, and teachers explained that they should be so for improvement purposes, which is consistent with what Barber (2004) stresses; that accountability creates continuous improvements through getting schools to address their weaknesses.

#### b) Who should schools be accountable to?

Parents, the ministry, the community and students were the top four groups identified by respondents (See Table 1.0):

Perceptions			In Practice			
	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Headteachers</i>	<i>Subject coordinators</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Headteachers</i>	<i>Subject coordinators</i>

1.	Parents	Community	Parents	Parents	Parents	Parents
2.	Ministry	Parents	Ministry	Ministry	Ministry	Ministry
3.	Community Students	Ministry	Community	Students	Students	Headteacher
4.	Other school staff	Students	Students	School Management	Community	Students
5.	Teachers	Other agencies	Teachers	Headteacher	Other school staff	Community
6.	Other agencies	Teachers	Other agencies	Community	Government	Other school staff

*(Table 1.0- Showing who schools should be and are accountable to)*

Patterns for who the stakeholder groups ought to be accountable to did not follow through to the actual practice. Emerging trends were that credence was given to the hierarchical structure of schools, where both teachers and subject coordinators were accountable to the school management and the headteacher respectively. Headteachers ranked the ministry much higher, in practice, than other stakeholder groups. All three professional stakeholder groups ranked parents as the top party to whom they are accountable in practice, even higher than the Ministry.

Parents, for their part commented that there ought to be a two-way route where accountability matters are concerned, suggesting that accountability needs to be reciprocal and mutual.

*c) Schools should be accountable for what?*

Teachers expressed that the most important thing schools should be accountable for is student learning, headteachers claimed it is the school's performance and the quality of service it provides, PTA chairpersons said for any decisions that they take that affect students and subject coordinators added the implementation of the national curriculum to student learning.

Those beliefs mostly underlie the particular stakeholder group within the school and the range of responses about aspects for which schools ought to be accountable, encompass an enormous scope. However, within the perceptions of each stakeholder group there were no references to the skilful use of organisational processes believed to contribute to the successful implementation of change (Leithwood and Earl, 2000) and those include strategic planning, school improvement planning and carrying out reviews which are believed to be characterising primary schools.

*d) By what means should schools be held accountable?*

The most common ways in which schools should be held accountable were through report writing, giving feedback in meetings, through providing accurate and meaningful information to the school community, the Ministry, and other stakeholders, record-keeping, and through students' termly reports.

The range of measures outlined indicates a combination of approaches that should provide a basis for improvement, such as grouping, promotion, retention and expectations.

*2. Accountability for the stakeholder Respondents*

All members of three stakeholder groups, teachers, headteachers and subject coordinator, claimed that they were accountable and what they were actually accountable for did not differ much from their perceptions of what they ought to be accountable for; with each group emphasising aspects pertaining to their particular role in the institution.

PTA chairpersons rated the accountability of teachers from 'good' to 'satisfactory'. Such ratings had been guided by real experiences of teachers doing their best considering the lack of resources, recognising that teachers would be more accountable if parents themselves are more challenging and less passive. This evidently drives one to ask; 'How can parents be more involved in the effort to respond to accountability demands?' The persistent isolation of teaching from parents may result in the school's conception of accountability collapsing into individual teacher's conception of accountability.

Most (85%) teachers believe other teachers see themselves as accountable and the reasons for saying so derived from what they were actually experiencing; teachers respecting deadlines, there is good planning, and teachers delivering on what is expected of them, having students' learning profiles, teachers seek professional development and reporting about class performance. Most of the justifications provided are activities pertaining to accountability

*3. School Accountability: Constructs and functioning.*

The section required respondents to answer about constructs and functions of accountability at schools level. Respondents described accountability procedures at their schools.

The responses of the four stakeholder groups provided the explanation that there is some form of accountability system operating and guiding ways in which people account for their actions. This

may take the form of formal processes or expectations. Second, quite a significant group of respondents claimed that accountability is also imposed from outside the school.

Most headteachers (78%) and subject coordinators (58%) reported that the accountability relationship most common at their school is lateral; everyone is accountable to another, a claim which directly contradicts the previous evidence of hierarchical accountability. Headteachers did not feel they are accountable to other management members and subject coordinators did not feel that they are not accountable to other colleagues.

#### *4. Accountability Processes: Reporting and Consequences.*

A very high percentage of each stakeholder group took reporting to be an accountability process. Reporting was considered as a way of sharing information about what is happening; strengths, weaknesses and decisions on to how to work on problems. The responses emphasised 'giving an account' which raises the question of documentation of evidence. In order to evaluate the performance that is reported, substantial evidence may be required. Furthermore, teachers believed that reported accounts were valid to some extent only, and that sometimes the validity is difficult to gauge due to the lack of evidence or the subjectivity of the one evaluating the performance.

#### *5. Are there penalties or consequences following reported accounts?*

There was great variation on this topic, with significant numbers in each stakeholder group who stated that there were consequences and others who said there were none. Teachers said that the most common were verbal or written warnings by management, getting penalised in one's appraisal, and given time to work on weaknesses. Headteachers expressed that one was asked to clarify issues and advised on possible ways to improve, salary was forfeited or warnings are given. One concern of headteachers was that they were sometimes appraised poorly and subject to derogatory remarks about having poor leadership and management skills. Subject coordinators explained that there was conferencing done, targets set or action plans drawn for improvement. The consequences listed may be grouped into what Kogan, (1986) termed as hard and soft sanctions. In most cases, accountability is the concentrated responsibility of people keeping with expectations of one's role. On the whole, most respondents believed that people should be given maximum support to do better, through what they described as positive consequences.

Most parents (73%) were in favour of sanctions or penalties when schools do not meet expectations, because they felt that society was relying on the institution to educate children to be good citizens and, if that is not done properly, then the results are many non-readers and frustrated learners.

Others felt that schooling was such a big investment, which definitely should come with consequences. Those who disagreed maintained that some issues are beyond the control of teachers or schools and that teachers are moved around too much, hence the lack of continuity.

These responses suggest that the types of accountability relationships, and the things for which schools or teachers are accountable, should be re-examined to see whether they carry any obligations, or if consequences have been specified. To be consistent with what Leithwood and Earl (2000) advise, sanctions should be applied in cases of failure if there have been specifications of rewards or penalties. However, one has to weigh the impact that sanctions may have on students' learning or teacher's careers through asking how schools can mitigate the negative effect that accountability requirements may have on the school climate. Teachers who are against sanctions may also convey their fear of being judged by hard and fast criteria or they may be disclaiming their responsibility for learning outcomes.

Elaborating on the ideas of sanctions, penalties and consequences for schools, responses show mixed views from teachers, headteachers and subject coordinators. Teachers did not agree with teachers themselves being sanctioned or penalised, while headteachers and subject coordinators agreed more to the teacher being sanctioned than the school. Greater emphasis was put on various forms of support, for example, mentoring, or guidance through improvement after target-setting. However, respondents did not discard the fact that, sometimes, transfers and termination of contracts needs to be considered.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper is to view school and teacher accountability from the perspectives of four potential stakeholder groups: teachers, headteachers, subject coordinators and PTA chairpersons. Taking this perspective has provided an insight into how each group is affected by accountability as each typically brings its own perspectives to the issue.

First, there is a weak understanding of the concept by some of the stakeholders. Even if they believe that schools should be accountable, the details of how, for what, to whom and to what consequences, are not clear, as the scope of accountability is significant and may mean over-looking vital features such as ensuring that specific organisational qualities critical to effectiveness are reflected in the school.

The hierarchical and bureaucratic features of schools and the Seychelles Education system reflect the accountability relationships as seen by the stakeholders although school personnel also aspire to lateral accountability.

Reporting is an essential component of both school and teacher accountability but stakeholders believe that accountability needs to have elements of judgment and intervention, in terms of support and positive consequences, as opposed to sanctions or penalties. There is more emphasis on teachers being sanctioned than schools, except amongst the teachers themselves.

The next stage of the study, which focuses on case studies, and the involvement of other stakeholders; ministry officials and students, will shed more light on many of the issues raised in the survey. However, the most important conclusion drawn so far is that any framework for school and teacher accountability relies strongly on delineating who is accountable to whom, by what means and to what consequences.

## References

Barber, M. (2004) The Virtue of Accountability: System Redesign, Inspection, and Incentives in the Era of Informed Professionalism, in, *Journal of Education* Vol. 185 (1) pp.7-38.

Bush, T. (1994) 'Accountability in Education' in T. Bush and J. West Burnham (eds) *The Principle and Practice of Educational Management*, London: Pearson Publishing Ltd.

Heim, M. (1995) *Accountability in Education*, Paper prepared for Hawaii School Leadership Academy.

Kogan, M. (1986) *Educational Accountability: An analytical Overview*, London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.

Leithwood, K. and Earl, L. (2000) Educational Accountability Effects: an international perspective, in, *Peabody Journal of Education* Vol. 75 (4) pp. 1-18.

Leste, A. et al (2003) *SACMEQ II Report: The Quality of Education in Seychelles*, Ministry of Education, Seychelles.

Ministry of Education (2004) *Quality Assurance Service: Collaborating for School Improvement*, Ministry of Education and Youth, Seychelles.

Ministry of Education, (2002) *Education for a Learning Society: Policy Statement of the Ministry of Education: Seychelles*.

Morrison, M. (2002) 'What do we mean by Educational Research?' in M. Coleman and A. J. Briggs (eds) *Research methods in Educational Leadership and Management*, London: Paul Chapman.