

QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION: WHAT SAY THE SCHOOL HEADS?

Mandina Shadreck¹, Chiheve Hebert²

¹Department of Educational Foundations Management and Curriculum Studies,

²Department of Applied Education, Midlands State University, Gweru,
ZIMBABWE.

¹ mandinashadreck@yahoo.com, ² chiheveh@msu.ac.zw

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to provide a view of school heads on what can be done to promote an environment that can assure quality and accountability in education. The study was qualitative in nature and adopted the multiple case study design. The study was conducted with six secondary school heads that were purposively sampled from a group of forty school heads. Data was collected using observations and interviews which were digitally audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed through coding, categorizing and identification of emerging themes. The findings from the study indicate that school heads can foster a conducive environment for assuring quality and accountability in education by maintaining positive relationships with members of staff, providing training to staff members, and providing material and financial resources as well as promoting professional growth and development of their teachers. School heads should also form partnerships with the private sector in order to secure funding. The study recommends that the parent Ministry of Education Sports Arts and Culture should raise educator awareness on the necessity of quality assurance and accountability in schools as well as providing further training and encourage educators to improve their qualifications.

Keywords: Quality assurance, accountability, quality education, professional development, educational outcomes

INTRODUCTION

One of the key characteristics of reform movements in education is the provision of quality basic education to learners (Smith and Ngoma – Maema, 2003). The quest for the provision of quality education was seen in the abolishing of the racially segregated dual education system at independence by the Zimbabwean government in which blacks were offered an inferior type of education than that offered to whites (Zvobgo, 2007). Due to the rapidly changing global socio-economic environment there is need to ensure that schools prepare learners for the challenges of changing times and uncertain future through provision of quality education. This vision of providing quality education to learners can only be realized if schools are held responsible to the nation and the state for equipping learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes that are beneficial to the society.

The vision for meeting learning needs which include the requirement to improve and assess learning achievement was well outlined at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien in 1990 (UNESCO, 1990). The World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, further emphasized on educational quality as reflected in goal no. 6 which states: “improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills” (UNESCO, 2000). Since then, significant improvements in participation rates in education have been noted in many countries. Quality in education has therefore

become a crucial factor in determining Zimbabwe's competitiveness in the globally developed world.

Tied to the concept of quality in education is the notion of accountability. Quality in the education system requires accountability on the part of teachers for both the learning environments they provide and the learning outcomes they enable their students to achieve. Assuring quality of educational experiences in schools cannot be alienated from the notion of accountability since schools are entrusted with the delivery of quality education, equipping learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes beneficial to the nation and society hence must be held accountable to the State and society (Ndawi and Peasuh, 2005). The central assumption in accountability is that holding schools accountable for their products will cause schools to achieve substantially higher levels of performance hence meet the demand for quality education for all (Rosenkvist, 2010). The focus of this paper is on what can be done by school heads to ensure quality and accountability in our schools.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept Quality Education

Quality is a concept that is evasive. Naidu et al., (2008) note that the term quality is difficult to define due to its meaning being associated with specific characteristics of a phenomenon it seeks to describe. Generally, quality is defined as the ability of a product, service or programme to satisfy its intended needs (Teu and Motlhabane, 2005). Other authors have seen quality as fitness for purpose while others have associated it with products, processes and services that meet or surpass customer needs.

In educational terms quality in education is seen as the ability of an educational system or programme to fulfill and meet the needs and aspirations of the society which it serves. Pertl (2006) opines that quality education is the extent to which schools achieve and realize goals which they are expected to aspire. Quality education therefore can be seen as education which satisfies the expectations and aspirations of the society in terms of the goals set within that society. Schools are therefore expected to meet certain requirements for quality education if they are to remain useful to the society.

Dare (2005) observes that conceptualizing quality in terms of a particular aspect of education is very problematic since elements associated with educational quality are interrelated, therefore a deficiency in one element is likely to have huge implications for quality in others. Ankomah et al., (2005) further note that defining quality in terms of educational outcomes is also problematic since educational purposes are value laden and culturally bound. This is because different people and societies have different views about the purposes of education.

The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990 noted the importance of educational quality and specifically the need to focus on learning acquisition and outcome (Saito and Capelle, 2010). The World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 also recognized quality education as being of fundamental importance, and specific requirements of successful education programmes were listed – including well-trained teachers, adequate facilities and learning materials, a relevant curriculum, a good learning environment, and a clear definition and accurate assessment of learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2005). Pigozzi (2006) categorized factors affecting educational quality into two levels –those that affect the level of the learner and those that affect the level of the education system supporting the learning experience. At the level of the learner, a high-quality education system would need to be able to recognize and adequately respond to the diversity of learners and their particular

experiences, characteristics, skills, and conditions. Access to relevant educational materials, the processes of education and the learning environment are also critical factors affecting this level. Pigozzi (2006) further notes that at the education system level, elements affecting the quality of education include the managerial and administrative system, implementation of 'good policies, 'a supportive legislative framework that can ensure equality of educational opportunity, human and material resources, and the means to measure learning outcomes.

While it is difficult to capture the notion of educational quality in absolute terms, UNESCO, (2005) notes that quality is at the heart of education and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people and adults. A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living. It should be noted that quality in education influences what students learn, how well they learn and what learning outcomes they achieve the values and skills they acquire that help them play a positive role in their societies.

Quality Assurance

In industrial terms, quality assurance refers to conformance to customer expectations. Naidu et al., (2008) define quality assurance as a system of continuous monitoring of a product during production with the purpose of ensuring that the product conforms to standards required by customers. Kontio (2008) on the other hand states that quality assurance means all the procedures, processes and systems that support and develop the education and other activities of educational institutions. Quality assurance is thus the systematic review of educational programmes to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained.

The South African Council on Higher Education, Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (2004) defines *quality assurance* as a process of ensuring that specified standards or requirements have been achieved. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK (2010: 83) also links quality assurance with achievement of standards when they say

Quality assurance is the means through which an institution ensures and confirms that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by it or by another awarding body.

Quality assurance thus provides users of the education system with a guarantee that institutions, courses and graduates meet certain standards. Centrex (2004) defines it as an institutional confirmation of achieved standards. He further says that quality Assurance is the means by which an organization confirms that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by the educational institution.

Despite the different contexts within which quality assurance can be defined, Hämäläinen and Jakku-Sihvonen (2000) note that it always includes two purposes: accountability and improvement. In the same vein, Vlăsceanu *et al.*, (2007: 49), provide an extended description of quality assurance as follows:

Quality Assurance is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous *process* of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed upon and consistent process and well-established criteria.

The above definitions demonstrate that quality assurance is a generic term that can be interpreted differently by many people. However, there seem to be common elements cutting across the varied perspectives such as compliance, accountability, reliability, credibility, and quality maintenance and quality improvement. Accordingly, quality assurance helps to support teachers and build expertise and capacity in the education system to deliver positive outcomes for children and young people. Through sharing, understanding and applying standards and expectations, quality assurance helps to raise standards and expectations, and levels of consistency across teachers and schools.

Accountability

Levitt et al., (2008) note that accountability has become a cornerstone of public sector reform in many countries. Accountability is defined as the acceptance or responsibility and being answerable of one's actions. In the school management context accountability may take other additional meanings: (i) the act of compliance with the rules and regulations of school governance; (ii) reporting to those with oversight authority over the school and (iii) linking rewards and sanctions to expected results (Rechebei 2010).

Hopman (2008) opines that producers should be held accountable for the outcomes they generate. Thus teachers and schools – who are trusted with the imperative task of teaching and instructing children should be held accountable for student's outcomes and holding teachers and schools responsible for results intends to improve performance and identify “underperforming” schools for remediation (Booher-Jennings, 2007). It is important to note that student test results can be used for improvement purposes without teachers and schools being held accountable for the results. For example, a teacher can use test results to identify student weaknesses and strengths in order to improve classroom instruction.

Ndawi and Peasuh (2003:210) further suggest that accountability is concerned with responsibility and acknowledging the responsibility in some public form by demonstrating success or acknowledge failure in some way which is publicly meaningful. Accountability is thus a demand for efficiency, effectiveness and being held responsible for failure to meet the expectations of those who entrusted duties to you. Through its curriculum, the school has an obligation to educate the young the people of the society to cultivate in the learners certain knowledge, skills, potentials and attitudes which will enable them to confer the expected benefits to society (Ndawi and Peasuh, 2003). The school therefore should be answerable to the community for performing duties as expected and be held responsible for failure to meet the expectations.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to gather information from six secondary school heads to gain a deeper understanding of their insights on what can be done to create an environment that is conducive to quality assurance and accountability in our secondary schools. The study was held in Gweru district with secondary school heads.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The main goal of this study is to understand secondary school heads' experiences and perspectives on assuring quality and accountability in our secondary schools. Bogdan & Biklen (2003) note that qualitative research is better able to assess and understand human experiences and perspectives so it is the overarching methodology for this research. Qualitative research can utilize five traditional approaches: biography, phenomenology,

grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2007). The approach utilized in this work is case study as it provides for an in-depth understanding of the situation and its contextual meaning for those involved. Since the goal of this study is to add the secondary school heads' voice to the literature on quality assurance and accountability, this form of qualitative research is appropriate for this study. This study employed a multiple-case study design from six secondary schools with the school heads as key informants.

Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling in choosing participants for the study. Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009). The researcher wanted to discover school heads' perspectives of quality assurance and accountability based on their experiences to add to current understandings of quality assurance and accountability in education. As such, he identified potential participants as those who were open to sharing their experiences and understandings.

Data Collection

Multiple sources of information were utilized to gain an overall picture of the individuals' perspectives. Merriam (2009) opines that data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. The qualitative data in this study was recorded in field notes, protocols, and audio recordings, which were transcribed for review and analysis. The primary data are the participant interviews. The participants received the interview protocol in advance of the interview, and the interviews took place in the school heads' offices. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and they were digitally audio recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were coded and used to create individual case summaries. In addition to the interviews, the researcher also conducted observations, which were recorded in the researcher's journal.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves reducing and organizing the data, synthesizing, searching for significant patterns, and discovering what is important. Blatchfield (2005) observes that three steps are involved in data analysis, namely, organizing the data, summarizing the data and interpreting the data. The first step in organizing is to reduce the data through a process called coding. Field notes, transcripts and other qualitative data were categorized. This enabled the researcher to physically separate materials by theme or sub-unit. The audio recordings from the interviews were listened to several times by the Researcher and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed by reading through several times by the Researcher to identify emerging themes that were relevant to the study for interpretation and analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following cross case themes emerged from the study:

Maintaining Positive Relationships

The school heads noted that quality assurance and accountability can be enhanced in an environment where there are healthy relationships between school management and teachers. The school heads further identified that enabling relationships result in a climate of trust and mutual respect. School head B had this to say

Sound relationships dispel fear and encourage open communication and disclosure among school members which has a positive influence on the performance of both learners and

teachers. Furthermore, members should be able to share interests, care for each other in times of crisis and have empathy.

The findings are consistent with those of Lawrence (2005), Green (2001) who notes the importance of positive relations in assuring quality and accountability in education. Legitimacy, transparency and fairness should characterize the process of assuring quality and accountability and this only happens in an environment of sound relationships (Parkes and Stevens, 2003).

Promoting Professional Growth and Development

The role of the school head is to provide support, assistance and advice to teachers that promote professional growth and development. One school head (A) noted that:

As a school head I should support my teachers' work as well as enhance creativity, maintain their talents as well as encourage them to do their best.

School head D said that She ensures quality and accountability by giving continuous feedback about the progress of her teachers highlighting their strong area as well as areas of weakness that need improvement in a friendly manner.

In line with this thinking, Earley and Bubb (2004) note the importance of professional development as an integral part of managing and leading human resources for delivering quality education. School head C further noted that since school heads have managerial and professional expertise as well as a broad knowledge base about educational matters they should develop collegial relationships with teachers and be accessible and continuously available to give advice and support for enhanced professional growth and development.

Provision of Training

The school heads noted the importance of training of both school heads and teachers as a precondition for the successful implementation of quality assurance and accountability in education. School head E had this to say:

Before we can call upon educationists to be accountable for educational outcomes we need to establish whether they had been equipped with adequate knowledge, techniques and strategies to enable them to achieve the desired outcomes.

The findings are consistent with those of Taunyane (2006) who views training as an important element of success of any quality assurance and accountability system. Ndawi and Peasuh (2003) further see qualified educators as a prerequisite for instituting accountability since trained educators are well equipped to produce the desired educational outcomes.

Provision of Material and Financial Resources

Financial and material resources are the means of supply and support that assist schools in the achievement of educational goals. The school heads noted that while financial and material resources are critical in assuring quality and accountability, they are always in short supply in schools. The researcher observed that schools in rural areas continue to receive little funding because the parents are so poor while those in urban areas are well funded and have adequate resources. However one school head (school head A) noted that:

Inadequate resources should not be an excuse for failing to assure quality and accountability since school heads can use other strategies to raise funds and resource for quality improvement in the schools. School heads can seek funding from the private sector through the formation of various partnerships.

While the provision of resources is critical, Chisholm (2005) notes that the resources need to be managed and used towards effective teaching and learning in schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study revealed that in order for school heads to create an environment that is conducive for assuring and quality and accountability in education they should maintain positive relationships with members of staff, provide training to staff members, and provide material and financial resources as well as promoting professional growth and development of their teachers. School heads should also form partnerships with the private sector in order to secure funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings made in this study, the author proposes that the following recommendations need to be considered to enhance quality assurance and accountability in the education system of Zimbabwe:

1. Raise educator awareness on the necessity of quality assurance and accountability in schools
2. The ministry of education should provide further training and encourage educators to improve their qualifications.

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