

REFEREED ARTICLE

The Importance of Accountability in Teacher Learning

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Abstract

It has been suggested that the best way to improve student learning is to improve teacher practice. In order to do so, all levels of the educational system must accept accountability for teacher learning. Teachers have a responsibility to improve their practice, administrators have a responsibility to create an environment that fosters growth, and government has a responsibility to offer quality material and learning experiences. Fulfilling these expectations will improve results for schools, teachers, and students alike.

Accountability is an important and interesting aspect of educational leadership. It builds trust and effectiveness, two characteristics that schools, divisions, and even provincial departments strive for throughout their organizations. Though used frequently, the term *accountability* is often used rather freely and can be rather difficult to explain (Yan, 2019). By definition, accountability means responsibility. In education, that could mean the responsibility a teacher has to students or the responsibility educational leaders have to provide opportunities for teachers to improve their practice. When considering the importance of accountability in teacher learning, we can explore the roles of government, administrators, and the teachers.

The “pyramidal accountability of performance” (Chitpin & Jones, 2015, p. 389) explains how government officials, administrators, and teachers are all accountable in the educational system. However, when the system is not working and achievement levels are less than desired, the pyramid can be inverted and create a culture of blame (Chitpin & Jones, 2015). This culture occurs when each level blames those above or below instead of being responsible to them. Therefore, the system works in two ways, each level desiring accountability and trust from the others. Smith and Benavot (2019) explained trust as a required condition in systems such as education, where accountability is required. There is currently a lack of trust between those at the government level and those at the school level.

Role of the Government

With the most authority over public education in Manitoba, the provincial government has a great deal of responsibility in teacher learning and establishing a vision for education within the province. Divisional leaders or school administrators are regularly expected to perform unfamiliar tasks, which is unfair if they were not involved in the process (Postholm, 2019). They are often asked to provide time and opportunities, or even to instruct their teachers on mandates and materials created by the government department of education. Examples include government-developed curricula and assessments that schools and teachers are to implement. Government, schools, and teachers must work together, but this relationship is problematic in Manitoba because teachers do not always receive the necessary “resources, capacity, motivation, and information” (Smith & Benavot, p. 197). Government departments attempt to provide training, but too often this training is insufficient. There is a disconnect between governments and schools because teachers are rarely involved in developing curriculum or assessment. Therefore, the voices of those working in schools are usually missing from these conversations about accountability, leaving mandates to lack validity in the eyes of classroom teachers (Smith & Benavot). The success of schools is dependent on both teachers’ and

students' experiencing "rich curriculum" (Bae, 2018, p. 13). This increases the importance of the government's role in teacher learning, because it must start with quality curriculum material and be followed up with the necessary supports to attain teacher and student success.

The inclusion of teacher voices in the development of provincial curriculum and assessment would greatly decrease the need for government personnel to travel around offering training sessions. Sinek (2009) wrote about the most successful organizations in the world being able to state clearly why they do what they do. He used examples ranging from Apple Computers to the Wright brothers having success due to a clear vision and an unwavering belief in their purpose. Governments do not present new mandates in this way. The mandates are often presented with little direction, reasoning, or an explanation of the vision for education in the province of Manitoba. This lack of communication leaves divisional and school leaders to fill the "gaps in professional knowledge" (Copp, 2019, p. 188) by sending teachers to professional development, buying more resources, or hiring extra support. With limited resources and declining budgets, divisions and schools are seldom able to provide what is required for teachers to be successful. Unfortunately, government departments are not always willing to provide these supports to teachers.

Role of the Administrator

As support from government declines, the role of the administrator in supporting teacher learning becomes increasingly important. Administrators must remember that teachers may need encouragement to be more critical of their instructional practices and underlying logic (Chitpin & Jones, 2015). Many leaders do not encourage teacher learning by modelling their own growth and emphasizing its importance. Administrators tend not to "break away from the isolation of their work" (Chitpin & Jones, 2015, p. 391) in order to advise and mentor their teachers. It can be difficult for administrators not to focus only on results and outcomes, but it is more important to focus on building trusting relationships and creating environments with an expectation for everyone to improve. The everyday routines of administrators often interfere with instructional leadership that ensures teachers feel successful. Administrators forget that even though they may not directly influence classroom learning, they can prompt student success by helping to uncover the "existing potential" (Postholm, 2019, p. 438) in their teachers. When it comes to increasing accountability administrators must increase trust, which in education is considered to be "trust in the person, trust in the profession, and trust in the process" (Smith & Benavot, 2019, p. 196). Within relationships of trust and respect, administrators will understand how their teachers will learn best in order to improve their practice. While the role of an administrator is challenging, it presents an opportunity to create professional relationships built on trust and foster an environment wherein everyone feels accountable to grow.

The administrative challenge of creating accountability in teacher learning can be compounded by having teachers at different stages of their career. While it is important for administrators and other leaders in education to come alongside their teachers in the process of teacher learning, it is crucial to do so with new teachers. Infusing an accountability for growth early in the careers of teachers will have lasting benefits. Two of the best ways to support new teachers are to afford learning experiences focused on various instructional methods and to form meaningful relationships between teachers and administrators (Bonato, 2019). For this to occur, it is imperative for leaders at the division level to strengthen the capacity of administrators to help teachers improve and recognize the value of teacher learning. Even though teachers are thought to be the primary influence on student success, principals remain a crucial factor in the process as well (Cortes et al., 2019). This must be built, supported, and strengthened in school leaders. Teacher learning is often considered a professional development event, which does not enhance accountability in the process. Administrators can provide opportunities for teachers to improve, such as by sharing between colleagues and using programs such as teacher mentors or professional learning communities (Pierce, 2019). These practices take time, preparation,

and organization but they are vital for division and school administrators not only to enforce a sense of accountability around teacher learning but to increase their instructional leadership. Professional development sessions are not always the best source of teacher learning. Teachers tend to appreciate, and benefit more from, having time to meet and discuss practices with their colleagues. Administrators must understand what works for their teachers, consider more than the latest test scores, and link teacher practices with school goals in order to practise true instructional leadership (Chitpin & Jones, 2015). They must accept their role in teacher learning in order to have a positive, lasting influence on the success of their teachers.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers play an equally important role in their own learning and infusing accountability throughout the educational system. Research continues to show that at the school level teacher quality has the biggest effect on the performance of students (Bae, 2018). Unfortunately, teachers can quickly fault government or administrators for not providing enough support. Teachers' casting blame rather than taking responsibility creates a problem because there is increasing pressure from the general public for accountability in education (Smith & Benavot, 2019). Taxpayers want to know that their money is going toward improvement, especially when it concerns the education and training of youth. However, teachers tend to perform better when they have professional freedom to determine their classroom strategies and resources (Bedard, 2015). A balance between autonomy and accountability must be found, because both are vital in education (Chitpin & Jones, 2015).

Even though teachers may prefer a degree of professional freedom, they must remember that they are accountable for continuously improving their instruction. Because teachers in Manitoba are generally paid with taxpayer dollars, they have a responsibility to provide the best possible instruction. This may require learning new pedagogies, strategies, or assessments. When directly associated with student learning, the professional learning of teachers translates to improved professional practice (Killion, 2016). Teachers can be creatures of habit, but they will alter their practices if the required changes are expected and are clearly and fairly implemented and evaluated (Copp, 2019). Whether stemming from evaluation, mandates, or expectations, teachers cannot forget their own accountability for learning to improve their practice.

Conclusion

Accountability for teacher learning is the responsibility of all levels of the education. In the province of Manitoba, this includes the government department of education, administration at both the division and school levels, and the teacher. The government must provide meaningful learning opportunities in order to establish clear expectations of their material and mandates. Administrators must develop trusting relationships and create, facilitate, or find beneficial opportunities for teacher growth. Finally, teachers must accept their obligation to improve professionally in a way that benefits their students.

One of the most effective ways to improve student learning is to improve teacher practice. To improve results for schools, students, and teachers, each level of the education system must be accountable for improving teacher practice. Each level must accept responsibility for their role in teacher learning and agree to work together to create a system whereby everyone works toward the common goal of instructional excellence in Manitoban classrooms.

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About the Author

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