Comparison to Perceptions of Teachers and Head Teachers about Accountability Measures for Public School Improvement in Punjab

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Abstract

Every government faces the pressure of quality and accountability as it has become an international agenda. Countries are shaping their policies according to the interest of stakeholders in globalization and international competition. They plan to establish high-performing school systems. Developed and developing countries are also struggling with this movement to ensure the quality and accountability of schools. Different accountability approaches are in practice. Mixed methods research design opted for using an interview protocol and sur\vey with 2220 participants from public elementary schools. A pragmatic approach selected for reliability, and validity was assured while using a triangulation design. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were performed for the analysis of data. It concluded that educational accountability is a challenging job. Data revealed an ambiguity in the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, teachers, head teachers, parents, students, and district administration. Assign duties may be clarified, and responsible persons may be considered answerable. Some policies are there, but these are in practice in a different sense. Implementation of policies may be authenticated. When students' achievement is considered the main drive of school effectiveness, and schools are rated accountable for results to nurture positive change. More than achievement in numbers alone is required for quality education, as this can easily be achieved through misreporting. For quality and improvement over time, some prime features like creativity and higher-order thinking skills are mandatory. In different situations, there may be other yardsticks to judge students' personality traits like teamwork, commitment, and emotional adjustment. School teachers and head teachers had recommended replacing test-based accountability with performance-based accountability to amplify student learning and success.

Keywords: Accountability, Quality, Improvement, Autonomy, Decision Making

Introduction

Accountability is an obligation to answer about the assigned responsibilities. It is vital for sustained human relations. It has an institutional rationale to provide a system based on clearly defined measures. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary states that accountability is a substitute for responsibility, which is" required accounting for one's conduct." Accountability operates within an institute to support a rationalized system based on well-defined measures, consideration, consequences, relevance, and coherence in education (Abdalla, 2023; Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Alexander, 2000). Educational accountability is a necessary feature of public education and supports the public's remaining in the system (Deeds & Depaoli, 2017).

In Pakistan, with the promulgation of the Punjab School Reform Roadmap (PSRR), strict accountability measures for achieving defined targets exist. It is based on Barber's theory of "deliverology" (service delivery unit), a British educationist at Mckinsey and representative of DFID. The theory emphasizes that making specific goals, regular monitoring, and accountability-based performance helps schools perform better. According to this theory, reforms are driven by data collected through monitoring and evaluation. The main areas of the PSRR were access, governance, and quality, with other sub-indicators, which were revised from time to time (Flores et al., 2023; Batool et al., 2021; OECD, 2018).

Data was collected by Monitoring and Evaluation Assistants (MEA) monthly from each school. Monthly and quarterly data was compiled at Programme Monitoring and Implementation Unit

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(PMIU) in association with the Punjab Information and Technology Board (PITB), and the ranking of districts was made according to scores they achieved viz-a-viz their performance (Ehren et al., 2020). Incentives of two-month salary were provided to Deputy Commissioners (DC) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of best-performing districts, and letters of displeasure were issued to low-performing districts. In some cases, strict legal procedure was started against low-performing schools. Identified issues require immediate solutions by educational managers. MEAs were reporting assistants (Shah & Khan, 2021; Riaz & Sultan,2017). On the other hand, educational supervisors (including AEO up to CEO-E) were responsible for schools' good or bad performance (Batool et al., 2022; 2023).

Problem Statement

The accountability system is built on monitoring and information systems, which inform decision-making. The accountability component of monitoring and evaluation directly relates to the management capacity performing this assignment. In addition to collecting data about school facilities, measuring the learning level of students is another salient feature with the lens of accountability. Moreover, the transparency of data is another great challenge. The research aimed to find who is accountable for what and whether 'the one had the capacity and autonomy for decision-making or not? Whether the data is reliable, based on which accountability is fixed and consequences are awarded. Moreover, how much is it contributing to quality education and school improvement?

Research Objectives

Following research objectives guided the study.
1. How is accountability fixed for achieving school improvement?
2. Which accountability approaches are in practice in public schools of Punjab?
3. What are the gaps in carrying out school accountability?

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to collect the desired information.
1.1 Who is accountable for what in achieving school targets?
1.2 What are the differences in the perceptions of stakeholders about accountability measures?
2.1 Which accountability approaches are in practice for school improvement?
3.1 Whether schools supported with autonomy necessary for accountability? If not, why?
3.2 Whether accountability measures enhance school improvement? If not, what would be the repercussions?

Literature Review

Reforms in global networks are advocated by those who advocate policy. This includes traditional organizations (e.g., World Bank & OECD) and technical, commercial, and academic tycoons (e.g., Mckinesy). They collect data from the wide-ranging numerical assessment from international cross-tests like "PISA &TIMSS." The countries showing good results are labelled 'superclass (OECD, 2018). These world-class systems lead underperforming countries and provide them with a baseline to achieve targets. They offer their consultancy and support to the educational challenges of other countries. However, this concept has been criticized by several researchers (Gunter, 2023 Irons et al., 2007; Muller, 2022). Birdsall (2018) highlighted feeble conceptual and mechanical shortfalls in rationality and authenticity to mirror the quality of national education systems.

The reliability and validity of measurement tools are also mandatory for the transparency of assessment scores. This serves as the basis for student learning and decision-making in the future. Judging the performance of the school is a challenging job (Brown & Harris, 2009). Different countries introduced their compensation system, positive inducements to add student achievements, and different punishments or intervention strategies for low-performing schools (Ravitch et al., 2022).

Different approaches are in progress to judge the performance. External inspection is a very popular approach to measuring school performance. It is also considered a general approach to government control of schools. While in some countries, self-evaluation is also legalized (Levatino et al., 2023; Wang, 2022; Gunzenhauser & Hyde, 2007). Portz (2023) described two inspection types: "hard and soft." Self-evaluation is a type of soft governance that operates for school improvement. Different agents provide advice and a platform to evaluate school progress. Hard governance is based on target setting, and progress and improvement are checked through inspection. Performance is ranked in the form of graphs and tables. Based on data, sanctions or interventions are awarded (Meyer et al., 2023).

Different accountability approaches are in practice, which are under the:

Standards-Based Accountability

Standards-based Accountability (SBA) is a proposition to quantify and instigate school performance by attaching results to student scores in achievement tests (Camphuijsen & Parcerisa, 2023). The U.S. is the most proponent of this approach and adopted it to foster school improvement. Standards are set, and content is outlined according to criteria to master students in specific grade levels to promote higher levels and career-building (Tsang, et al., 2023).

Test-Based Accountability Approach

Advocates of this approach claim that it increases educational achievement. They make teachers and students accountable. It is very popular in the USA. (Hinnant-Crawford, 2023; Chakrabarti & Schwartz, 2013; Brown & Harris, 2009). It is opposed as it increases pressure only to pass and achieve numbers. The opponents must be convinced that students are learning and teachers are teaching effectively. Toth & Csapo, (2022) supported that change can be effective with pressure and support.

Performance-Based Accountability Approach

When students' achievement is regarded as the main tool of school effectiveness, and schools are rated accountable for results, this process is labelled performance-based accountability (Embse et al., 2017). Performance-based accountability (PBA) aims to nurture school change to amplify student learning and success. It claims that more than achievement in numbers is needed for such a calculation. No test can examine everything we desire students to learn. Some prime features, like creativity and higher-order thinking skills, cannot be measured only by large-scale paper-pencil testing (Taylor, 2023; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014; Srikantaiah, 2009).

Professional Accountability Approach

The professional accountability approach emerged in response to the bureaucratic accountability approach, the more profound claim teaching is a basic attribute of students' learning (Trinidad, 2023). The best results are only achieved by imposing rules and regulations. Their sole aim should be to align the activities according to student needs with a high sense of commitment and professionalism to achieve quality outcomes (Sutherland,2022; Sorat et al., 2022). Autonomy and competency in decision-making are the chief wanted leadership skills, as accountability mechanisms empower teachers in taking decisions at the school level. At the same time, the latter initiates mentoring, supervision, and hiring of teachers. It will also increase teachers' and school principals' motivation and commitment levels. Making someone accountable does not add anything positive (Mentini & Levatino, 2023; Portz & Beauchamp, 2022; Loeb & Byun, 2019).

Research Design

A pragmatist approach was adopted in this research design. Mixed methods research design was used. Smith (2014) labelled mixed-methods design as the cover term that advocates qualitative and quantitative data collection procedures.

The explanatory sequential design was applied in the research under study to examine the perceived value of mixed methods research for school improvement keeping in view accountability measures. In the first phase, a survey was conducted with 2220 participants (1000 HTs & 1220 teachers) from elementary schools in Punjab. Then, in the second phase, interviews were conducted with a small subsample of teachers and head teachers (18 teachers & 17 HTs=35) to explain quantitative results. Thus, the two data sets guided the researcher to reflect on the gaps with adequate breadth and depth.

Fig.1

Explanatory Sequential Design

Multi-stage sampling technique design was applied for the survey, including 1000 HTs and 1220 teachers, as the purpose was to select samples that were present in specific geographical areas (Sahlgren, 2023; Parcerisa et al., 2022). For interviews, a purposive sampling technique was used to select HTs. These participants were carefully selected from the survey participants based on their willingness to share their experiences with the researcher. The research phenomenon was set in a

naturalistic paradigm; hence, reliability was a big challenge, as predicted (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2023). This challenge was addressed using a mixed-methods strategy and pragmatic approach in formulating the research (Portz, 2023; Luo et al., 2022). Segal (2022) defined reliability as the dependability of the research. While validity was assured using "triangulation design," as advocated by Creswell, 2013 & Clark, 2008. Documents were used as a secondary data source where the motive was triangulation. The documents were collected as supplementary data to expose the reality and expand more profound insight into the situation. Mallory (2023) mentioned the use of documents as similar to interviews. Documents collected and analyzed in this study include the "National Education Policy, 2009, Article 25-A, The Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2014, working papers of Punjab School Reform Roadmap, and Dastural al Amal". The survey, interviews and document analysis were used as data collection tools for the participation of a maximum number of people with diverse characteristics. According to the PSRR ranking on which accountability was fixed, the questionnaire was based on eight leading questions. The interview protocol was also based on eight questions. Document analysis was used to clarify legal procedures for fixing accountability measures. Simple frequency formula was applied for descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was used for interviews and documents.

Fig. 2
Research integration
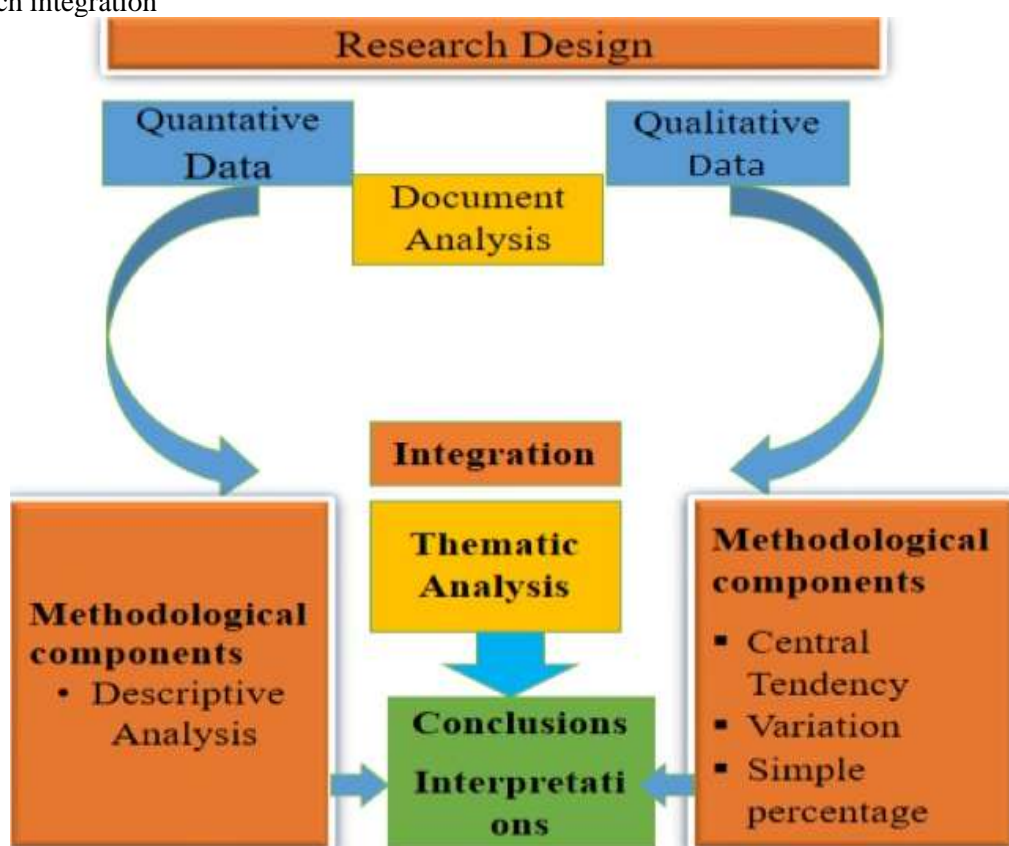
Results
Table. 1
Comparison of Responsibility for 100% Attendance of Students

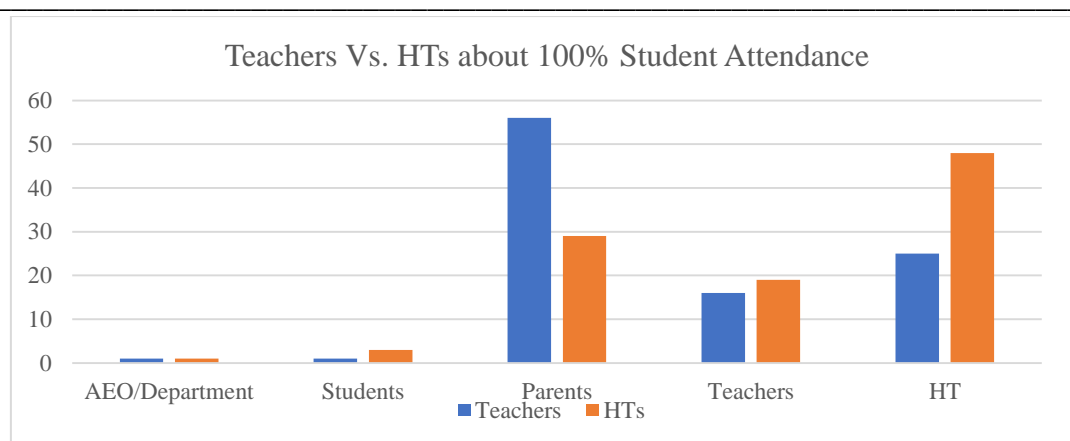|	Responses of teachers		Responses of HT	
	F	%	F	%
AEO/Department	12	1	6	1
Students	17	1	42	3
Parents	688	56	287	29
Teachers	200	16	188	19
HT	303	25	477	48
Total	1220	100.0	1000	100.0

Fig.3 Attribution of Responsibility for 100% of Students' Attendance

Data shown in Table 1 and Fig 3 compared the responsibility attribution for 100% attendance of students by schoolteachers and HTs. It is noticed that both teachers and HTs hold parents responsible for student attendance. HTs claimed to be more responsible for 100% student attendance than their teachers; the same was the teachers' response. Students themselves or district management were not responsible for 100% attendance either by teachers or HTs.

Table.2

Responsibility for the Dropout of Students in School

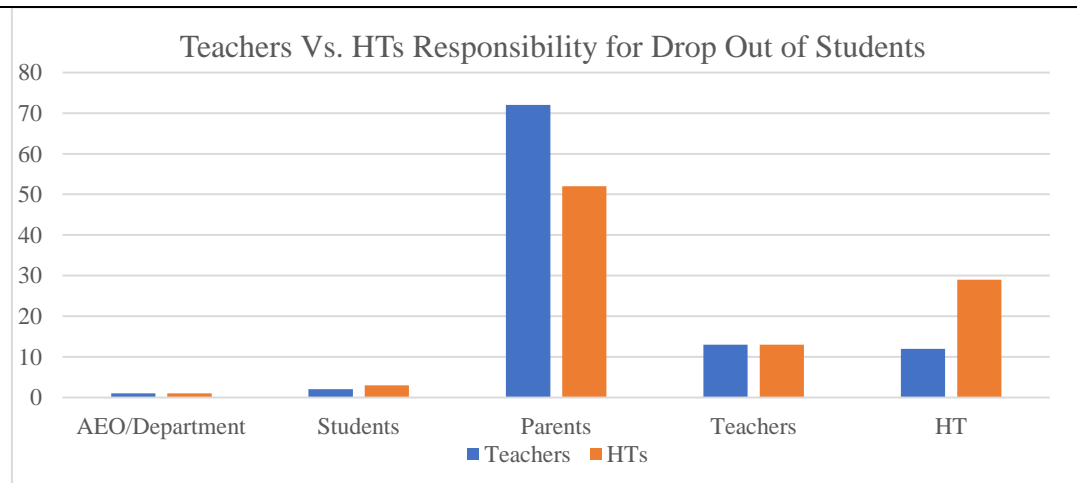|	Responses of Teachers		Responses of HT	
	F	%	f	%
AEO/Department	11	1	6	1
Students	31	2	45	3
Parents	881	72	524	52
Teachers	157	13	133	13
HT	140	12	292	29
Total	1220	100.0	1000	100.0

Fig.4 Attribution of Responsibility for the Drop Out of Students in School

Data shown in Table 2 and Fig 4 compared the attribution of responsibility for students' dropout by school teachers and HTs. It was noticed that both teachers and HTs hold parents responsible for student dropout. Next, parents, teachers, and HTs hold themselves equally responsible for student dropout. Students themselves or district management were not responsible for 100% attendance either by teachers or HTs.

Table. 3

Responsibility for Ensuring the Cleanliness of the School

	Responses of Teachers		Responses of HT	
	f	%	F	%
AEO/Dep.	4	.3	12	1
Students	1	.1	34	3

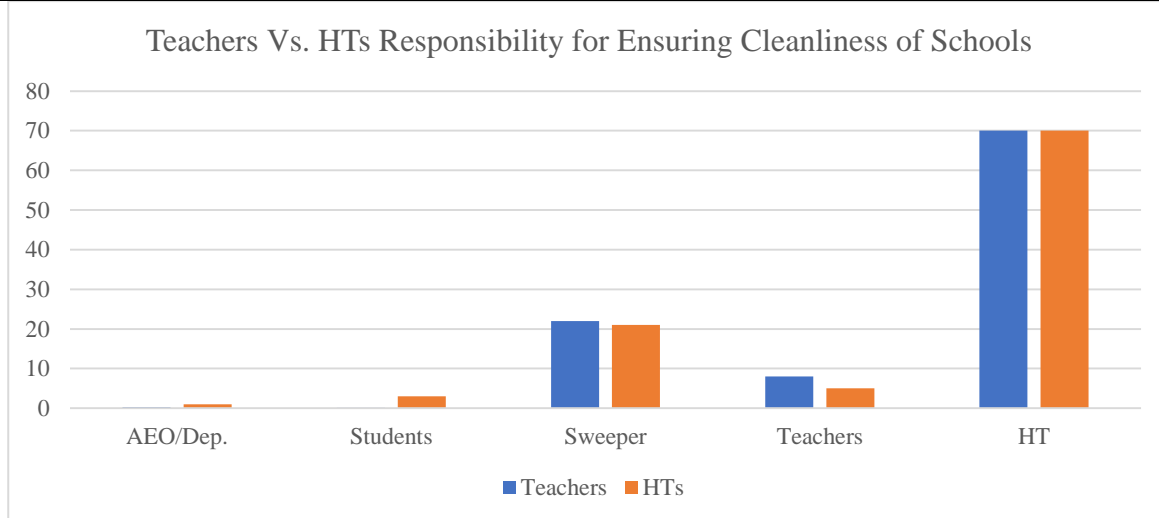|				
Sweeper	262	22	205	21
Teachers	101	8	49	5
HT	852	70	700	70
Total	1220	100.0	1000	100.0

Fig. 5 Attribution of Responsibility for Ensuring Cleanliness of School

Data shown in Table 3 and Fig. 5 compared the attribution of responsibility for ensuring the cleanliness of the school by school teachers and HTs. It was noticed that both teachers and HTs hold HTs responsible for ensuring school cleanliness. HTs and teachers also hold the sweeper responsible for ensuring the cleanliness of the school. However, some teachers hold themselves more responsible than HTs for cleanliness. Students themselves or district management were not rendered responsible for school cleanliness either by teachers or HTs.

Table. 4

Responsibility for the Best Results -100% Rate of the Students

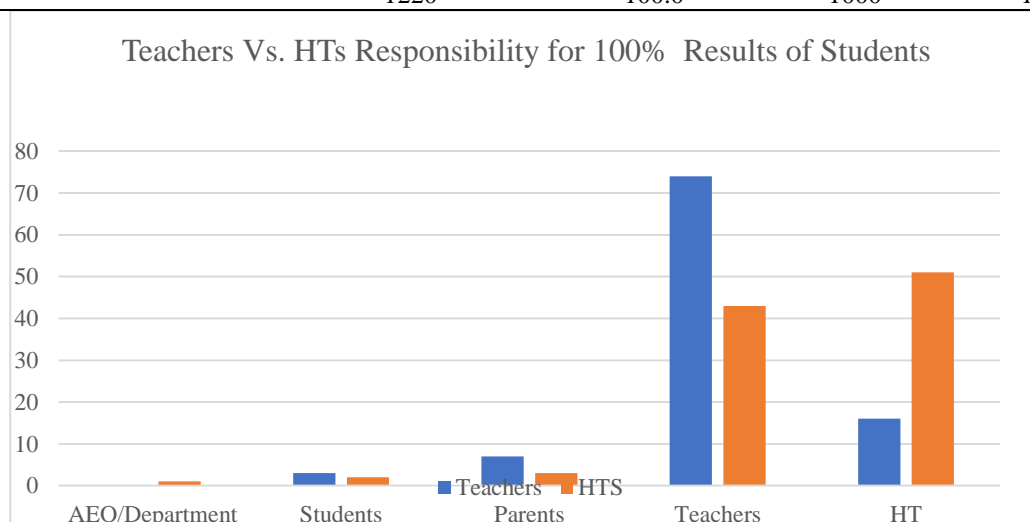|	Responses of Teachers		Responses of HT	
	F	%	f	%
AEO/Department	1	.1	4	1
Students	36	3	24	2
Parents	84	7	27	3
Teachers	904	74	435	43
HT	195	16	510	51
Total	1220	100.0	1000	100.0

Fig. 6 Attribution of Responsibility for Best-Results 100% Rate of Students

Data shown in Table 4 and Fig. 6 compared the attribution of responsibility for ensuring the best results and 100% pass rate of students by school teachers and HTs. It was noticed that both teachers hold themselves more responsible for the 100 pass results of students, and HTs hold HTs

responsible for ensuring school cleanliness. HTs also took self-responsibility for the best student results in the LND assessment. Data reflected that teachers and HTs considered themselves equally responsible for the best student results in the LND assessment; however, teachers were more responsible than HTs. Both HTs and teachers also hold the sweeper responsible for ensuring school cleanliness.

Table. 5

Responsibility for Low Attendance of Students in School

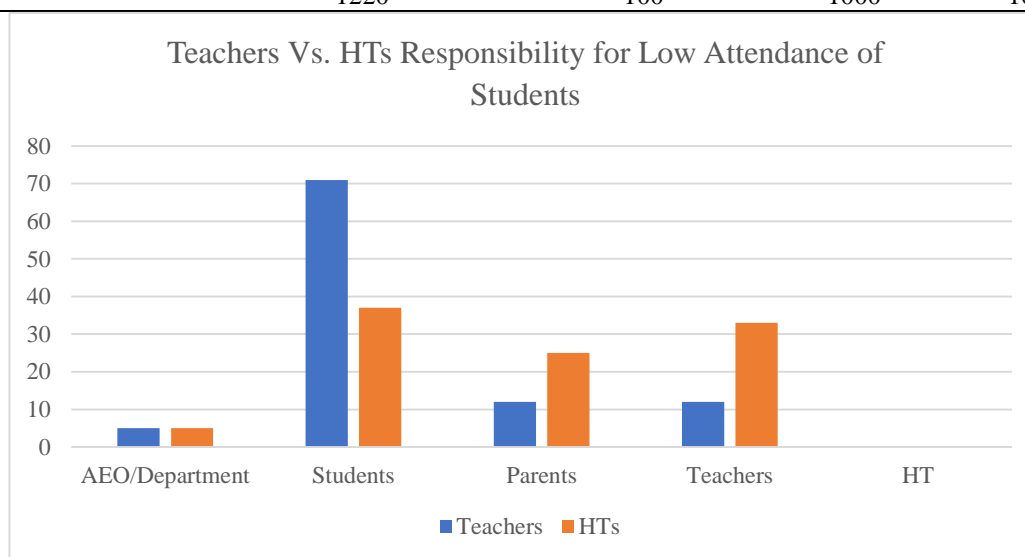|	Responses of Teachers		Responses of HT	
	f	%	f	%
AEO/Department	62	5	49	5
Students	864	71	363	37
Parents	148	12	254	25
Teachers	146	12	334	33
HT	0	0	0	0
Total	1220	100	1000	100

Fig. 7 Attribution of Responsibility for Low Attendance of Students

Data shown in Table 5 and Fig. 7 compared the attribution of responsibility for the low attendance rate of students by school teachers and HTs. It is noticed that teachers hold students more responsible for the low attendance of students, while HTs fix this responsibility on students, parents, and teachers equally. Here teachers and HTs need to accept this responsibility. District management was attributed very less responsibility regarding low attendance of students either by teachers or HTs.

Table 6

Responsibility for In-complete/ Dirty Uniforms of Students

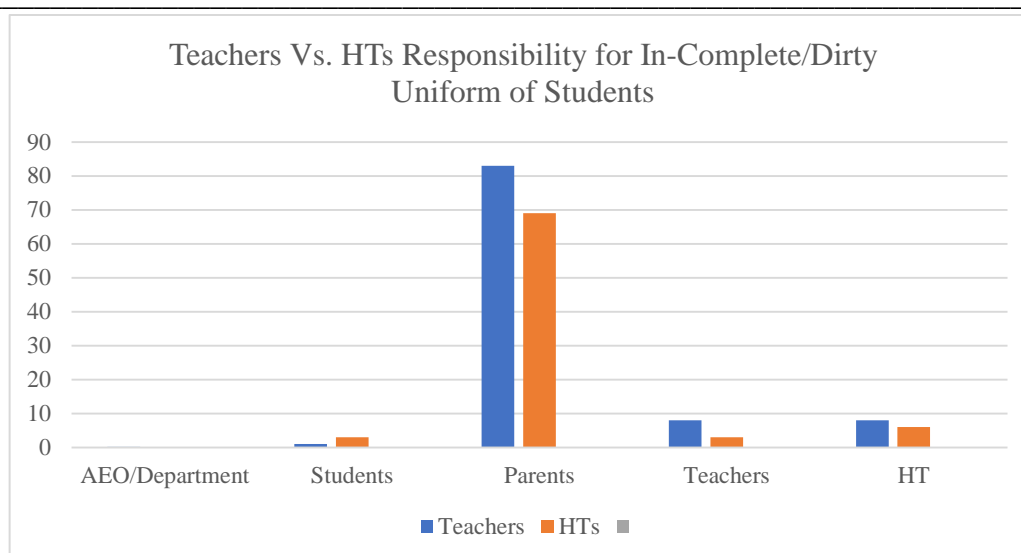|	Responses of Teachers		Responses of HT	
	f	%	F	%
AEO/Department	2	.2	0	0
Students	13	1	25	3
Parents	1017	83	694	69
Teachers	91	8	25	3
HT	97	8	64	6
Total	1220	100.0	1000	100.0

Fig. 8 Attribution of Responsibility for In-complete/Dirty Uniform of Students

Data shown in Table 6 and Fig. 8 compared the attribution of responsibility for the incomplete and dirty uniforms of students by school teachers and HTs. It was noticed that teachers and HTs hold parents responsible for students' incomplete/dirty uniforms. Very less responsibility was attributed to the department regarding the low dirty uniform of students by teachers or HTs.

Table. 7

Responsibility for Providing Resources for the Construction of Classrooms, and Toilets

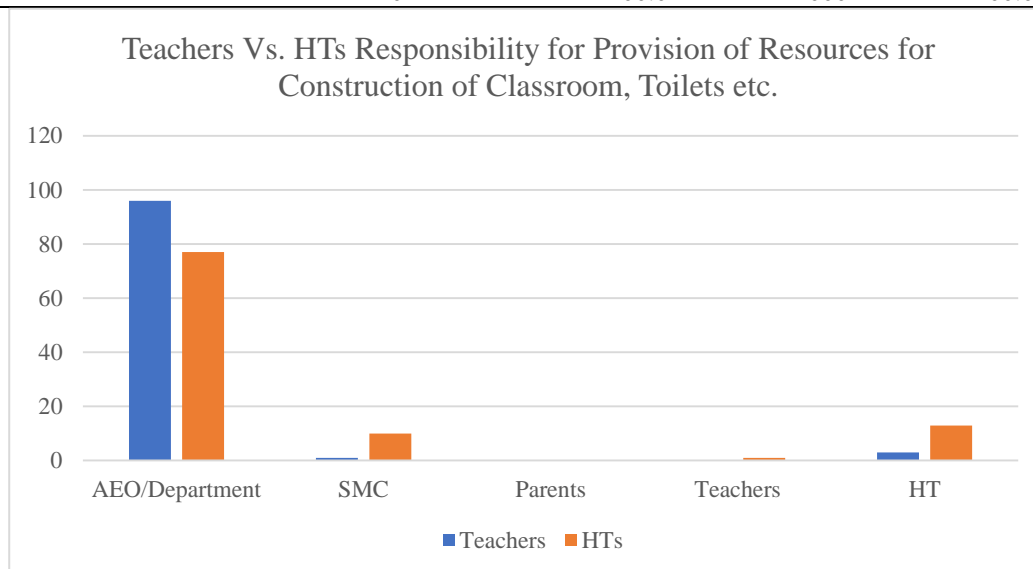|	Responses of Teachers		Responses of HT	
	f	%	f	%
AEO/Department	1167	96	766	77
SMC	23	1	91	10
Parents	0	0	0	0
Teachers	0	0	10	1
HT	30	3	133	13
Total	1220	100.0	1000	100.0

Fig. 9 Responsibility for Providing Resources for the Construction of Classrooms, Toilets

Data shown in Table 7 and Fig. 9 compared the attribution of responsibility for providing resources for constructing classrooms and toilets for the incomplete and dirty uniforms of students by school teachers and HTs. It was noticed that both teachers and HTs hold department/district management responsible for providing resources for constructing classrooms and toilets. Some teachers hold headteachers responsible, while others hold SMC responsible. Parents have not attributed any responsibility regarding providing resources for construction either by teachers or HTs.

Table. 8

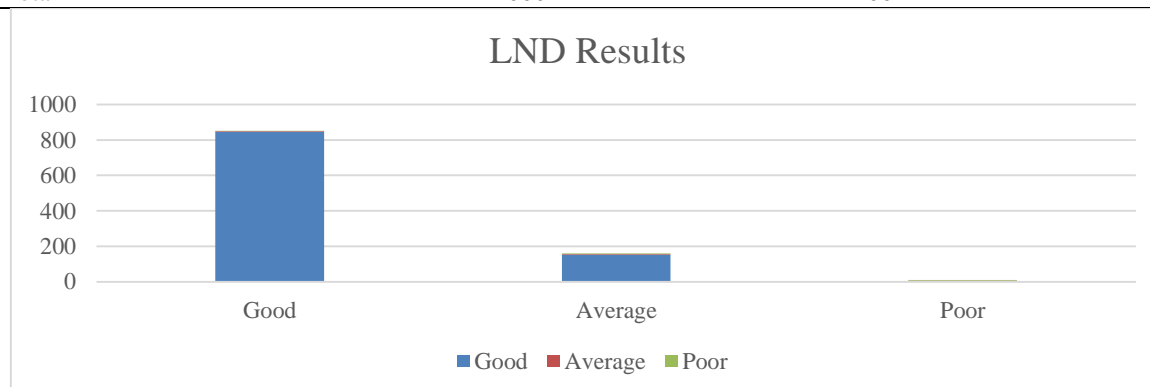| LND Results	f	%
Good	847	85
Average	153	15
Poor	0	0
Total	1000	100

Fig. 10 Comparison of LND Scores

Data reflected that 85% of schools out of which 1000 were showing good results while others were ranked in average or poor.

Thematic Analysis of Data

Thematic analysis is an n approach used in qualitative analysis to represent themes and classifications. It embellishes the data in detail via interpretations, as Mifsud (2023) mentioned. It provides elements to systematically associate the frequency of themes according to research questions. The main purpose of qualitative research is to come across diverse perspectives of different people in different contexts. Thematic analysis bestowed an opportunity to comprehend the depth of any issue in detail (Kraft et al., 2020; Hayes & Trexler, (2016).

Thematic analysis is a flexible and prolific research approach that fruitfully deals with the complex nature of data (Creswell & Clark,2018). Especially where synthesis is required, the six-stage approach is beneficial for data collection processes and analysis. This phased-in approach grants the needed flexibility, intricacy and formulation for researchers to check systematically and transcribe fully from the qualitative data (Levatino, et al., 2023; Falabella, 2021; Ehren & Bachmann, 2020). Different researchers presented the precise, six-stage data collection and thematic analysis process as given in the table (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023; Hamiltonet al.,2013; Diamond, 2012).

Table. 9

The Six-Stage Thematic Data Analysis Process

The six-stage data collection and analysis	Procedure adopted
1. Collection the data	Referred to all recorded data and written notes during interviews
2. Engage with the data	Data was familiarized by reading and re-reading text files, and reflection notes were prepared to keep in view the research questions.
3. Code the extracts from the data.	Initial codes were generated and labelled to nominate meaningful segments according to research questions.
4. Generate the code categories from codes.	Categories were generated to condense the data. Categories were named to reflect the data.
5. Conceptualize the themes from the categorized coded extracts	Data were reduced and consolidated. The themes developed were coherent and meaningful concerning existing literature.
6. Contextualize and represent the findings.	Vivid data extracts and analytical narratives were weaved together to inform findings.

Keeping in view the above process following themes emerged from the qualitative data: Lack of autonomy in decision-making, Non-professional monitoring persons, accountability for the things for which HTs are not legally authorized and threats of achieving low test scores.

Lack of autonomy in decision making

Most of the HTs opined that they were not bestowed with legal authority. Even in small administrative work, e.g., using funds for purchasing items according to need. The hiring of sweepers etc. In promotion, demotion of students, hiring and firing of teachers etc. This authority becomes even worse in the case of primary schools, where there is no designated post for the head. The senior one is nominated as HT. The authority of teachers is limited to teaching only, and they cannot decide about the promotion or demotion of students. They have to promote all students at every cost. Teachers must refrain from striking off any students' names from class despite serious indiscipline, as this will cause a low retention rate of students. They did not have any authority to design any specific curriculum according to the need and context of the area. They had to follow the Taleemi Calendar (document about the course outline of classes) at any cost and finish it for the final assessment.

One of the teachers opined

> "As teachers, we are supposed to achieve the 100% attendance target; if a student is not wearing the uniform, we are responsible if anyone is migrating and leaving the school. We are answerable if the LND result of any student is poor. Nevertheless, we do not have any resources nor authority to plan any strategies for the betterment of our students."

Non-professional monitoring persons

Counselling and mentoring were outside our education system. Teachers were issued with show-cause notices. Someone else is there to guide them. They just want a compliance report at any cost. Both teachers and head teachers reported that their queries always remained unexplained.

Threats of low test scores

Teachers were always afraid due to the low achievement scores of students. Sometimes they use unfair means to show good results.

One of the headteachers opined,

> "We are always threatened that action will be taken against us according to PEEDA (Punjab Employees Efficiency and Discipline Act 2007) if students achieve low scores on monthly assessment of LND test. The word PEEDA had become a teasing word for us."

Findings

- The thematic analysis reflected that only teachers and HTs were issued show-cause notices for not achieving the targets. While incentives for good performance were provided to district administration (CEO & DC).
- Descriptive analysis showed that stakeholders' perceptions of accountability mismatch do not complement each other. Results show that head teachers were more liable to claim self-responsibility in school affairs, whereas teachers were reluctant and shifted the responsibility either to head teachers or parents.
- Parents in the public sector were also reluctant to accept responsibility.
- Roadmap ranking of districts and schools reflected that the standard-based accountability approach is in practice, while LND assessment scores and fixing consequences based on scores reflected that Test Bases Accountability Approach is also in practice in our public sector schools.
- Accountability measures which were in practice needed to be added in quality. These were effective only for achieving short-term objectives. Cosmetic changes erode over time if without achieving real objectives.

Conclusions

Punishment is the main strategy. The district administration is responsible, implementation is the responsibility of HTs & teachers, and parents are also responsible.

There needed to be more differences in reported data and empirical analysis of responses. Fictitious records were maintained to avoid inquiries and letters of displeasure according to thematic analysis. Schools had achieved good LND results, but quality education still needed to be completed. It was concluded that test-based and standards-based accountability were practised in our school system. Accountability is effective only when coupled with autonomy and decision-making; otherwise, it leads only to producing fictitious data to avoid consequences. Accountability measures could have been more effective for change and sustainability. Roles and responsibilities may be clearly stated to avoid ambiguities. Only those persons should be held accountable who had autonomy in decision making.

Discussion

As a leader in school improvement, the headteacher faces accountability demands, and how those pressures are processed and responded to shapes how they are experienced by the students (Datnow, 2022; Cochran-Smith, 2021). It was also mentioned in social learning theory, as put out by Bandura (2001), that humans construct experiences depending on external settings, and those beliefs within the individual influence behavior (Camphuijsen & Parcerisa, 2023; Nazar & Chaudhry, 2017). This means that humans are ultimately in control of their own lives. With the concept of human agency, we can ask how people might best generate and process actions and experiences to meet their goals. Adaptation is encouraged by the agency and behaviour modification to satisfy mandatory school improvement programs or settings favourable to the individual (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1994, 2001). Increased motivation may change teaching-learning practices, improving student achievement and no more holding them "test-taking robots" (Levatino et al., 2023). With motivation, this accountability can be coupled with a sense of responsibility. Research findings highlighted that only accountability is not putting any value addition. Research findings align with (Levinson, 201; Nasrullah et al., 2020) who observed that autonomy in decision-making enhances motivation with a sense of ownership, as also advocated by various researchers (Silseth et al., 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2020; Alexander, 2000).

Future Implications

Data revealed an ambiguity in the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, teachers, head teachers, parents, students, and district administration. There may be clear clarification for fixing responsibility and who is responsible for what?

Assign duties may be clarified, and responsible persons may be considered answerable. Some policies are there, but these are in practice in a different sense. Implementation of policies may be authenticated.

Research findings suggested a demand for quality improvements in overall student achievement. School teachers and head teachers had recommended replacing test-based accountability with performance-based accountability. When students' achievement is considered the main driver of school effectiveness, and schools are rated accountable for results, this process is labelled performance-based accountability (Wang, 2022). Performance-based accountability (PBA) aims to nurture school change to amplify student learning and success. It claims that more than achievement in numbers alone is needed for such a target to be easily achievable through misreporting. No test can examine everything we desire students to learn. Some prime features, like creativity and higher-order thinking skills, cannot be measured only by large-scale paper-pencil testing. There may be some yardsticks to judge students' personality traits like teamwork, commitment, and emotional adjustment in different situations.

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