

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION AND OVERVIEW

1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Dehli and Taylor (2006) point out that modern governments operate in complex environments impacted upon by globalization, the spreading of democratization, explosion of new information technologies and numerous other factors that have a bearing on their operations and practices. The combined influence of all these factors on the populace has forced many governments to respond one way or the other to the growing public demand for higher standards of ethics, for transparency and for accountability in the public sector.

In order to meet increasing demands for accountability, many countries have introduced administrative reforms aimed at improving and modernizing their bureaucracies in order to bring about the desired changes in the public sector. According to Turner and Hulme (1997) this restructuring of the public sector entailed a wide range of interventions aimed at performance improvement in the public sector with a view to promoting accountability. The goals of public sector reform are generally aimed at meeting the demand for improved quality of services to the citizens/clients and also at making public servants more accountable for their decisions and actions.

Macpherson (1999) points out that accountability policy making is closely linked to the politics of legitimation, to issues of access and equity, productivity, choice and excellence. He further states that accountability politics help to reconstruct norms and beliefs on management and governance practices. Overall, the demand for accountability is inextricably linked to the desire for improved quality of service to the general public.

The dawn of democracy in South Africa heralded a new culture and approach to service delivery. Implicit in this new culture is the acknowledgement that public service must be re-engineered to meet the imperatives of an emerging developmental state. To that effect, accountability and responsiveness have become central organizing principles for service delivery in South Africa.

The clarion call for more accountability in the public sector in general has also placed education systems under intense public scrutiny (McEwan, 1995) because effective schooling is an imperative for a democratic society and according to Thorpe (1985, p. 426), *'Accountability is a legitimate demand in a democratic society...'* Education departments generally receive the biggest share of national budgets and are therefore consistently called upon to account for learning outcomes and learner achievement. The beginning of the millennium in South Africa saw the media focusing its attention on the performance of public schools against the backdrop of poor matric results in 1999 (Nzapeza, 2005; Sylvester, 2000). Since schools are part of the broader public sector, they are bound to re-engineer themselves to respond to the demands for improved learner performance.

The general dysfunctionality of the public schooling system, particularly those schools catering for poorer communities (Mamaila, 2000; Mkhathshwa, 1999a; Pretorius, 2000) eroded public confidence in public schooling (Johnson, 1999; Matseke, 1999; Sylvester, 2000; Tleane, 2000). As result of the general dysfunctionality of schools, the pressure for school level accountability has been formalized with the 2007 amendments made to the South African Schools' Act of 1996 (South African Department of Education, 1996b). Among others, the amended Act stipulates the following:

- Uniform minimum standards for school infrastructure (Section 5A)
- The provision of learning and teaching support materials (Section 5C)
- Functions and responsibilities of a principal of a public school (Section 16A)
- Identification of underperforming public school (Section 58A) and the responsibility of the Head of Department (HOD) to address the underperformance

- The Member of the Executive Council (MEC) to report to the Minister on action taken by the HOD in regard to an underperforming public school and
- The MEC is also expected to report to the Minister on norms and standards as contemplated under sections 5A, 6A and other related provisions

The amendments made above have far reaching implications for the way the public schooling system is to be held accountable across all levels. Pressure for accountability in the South African education system has been intensified with the establishment of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) which is tasked with among others, the responsibility for the administration of the externally set grades 3,6 and 9 examinations (Govender, 2010). The Minister for Basic Education wants 60% of all learners in grades 3, 6 and 9 to pass literacy and numeracy tests in the next five years in order to improve on previous performance in which the pass rates ranged between 27% and 38%. It is apparent from the above initiatives that the Department of Basic Education acknowledges the need to hold schools accountable for the learning outcomes of their learners.

It is against this background that this study sought to develop a conceptual framework that would enhance accountability in South African public schools.

1.2. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

It can be argued that notions of accountability when applied to education can be very complex and at times controversial because education policies, generally and in South Africa in particular, are implemented within complex contexts that are characterized by inequalities and other factors. This study seeks to enrich understanding of the complexities inherent in education accountability in the South African context.

1.3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Concomitant with other strategies aimed at nation building, education has been considered a major instrument for achieving goals of national unity, political stability and

equality of opportunity. Despite their misgivings about the huge investments made in education, Todaro and Smith (2003) concede that the expansion of educational opportunities at all levels and to all citizens (poor, rich, urban and rural) has contributed to aggregate economic growth in many countries. The two authors further make the point that the extent to which education can contribute to sustained economic growth and development of a country, will be determined not by its ability to promote quantitative expansion but by enhancing the quality of its graduates. Weil (2005) and Block (2009), support the views expressed above and point out that the growth of any economy is largely dependent on the quality of its labour force, and that it is labour quality that best explains differences in individual income and also accounts for differences in income among countries.

According to Claasen (2000), Christie (1998) and Kraak and Young (2001), trends in education governance in many countries indicate that attempts have been made to make schools more responsive to emerging needs of their societies so that their learners can be globally competitive. The authors quoted above maintain that global contexts have shaped education policies in both developed and developing nations. According to Kraak and Young (2001), the pressure for improved performance and for making public services more accountable through centrally determined processes has found expression in the search for measurable educational outcomes.

According to Kogan, Johnson, Packwood and Whitaker (1985), education accountability originates from the United States and is tied to value for money debates and the inputs/outputs considerations. They further argue that the lack of trust in the ability of schools to meet the needs of society has led to more demands for accountability in education. According to Caldwell (1993), governments in many countries responded to accountability pressures by taking the lead in setting goals, establishing priorities and building frameworks for accountability while at the same time shifting authority and responsibility to the level of the school.

Bush and Bell (2002) agree with the observations made by Caldwell above and state that educational systems in many parts of the world are being restructured because governments want to improve the quality of educational outputs so as to increase competitiveness in the global economy. Bush and Bell (2002) further make the point that this restructuring often takes the form of greater decentralisation of power to schools or to local administrative bodies in order to enhance responsiveness to the needs of local communities. The huge expectations imposed on educational establishments have, according to Bush and Bell (2002), led to a significant change in the nature and scale of accountability in supporting the views expressed by Bush and Bell (2002), Macpherson (1999) makes the point that education accountability and criteria must enhance learning conditions, professional development and school improvement i.e. education accountability must improve public education as well as advance accountability policy making capacities in schools.

The dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994 forced the country to join the Global community and to compete on an equal footing in terms of human capital. The imperative for education policy making after the democratic elections was therefore to transform education provisioning and to substantially improve access, quality, equity and redress for learners. Consequently, education financing has been directed specifically towards considerations of the principles of access, quality, equity and redress.

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2008) indicates that almost all children of school going age in South Africa are enrolled in public schools, and that the majority of them reach the end of grade 9. This suggests that South Africa is close to achieving universal basic education. The report, however, noted that there was a high rate of failure, repetition and drop-out particularly in grades 10-12. Both local and international studies point to the fact that South African learners achieve poorly compared to learners from other countries- including the Southern African countries (Block, 2009; Govender, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008).

There is general consensus that the learners' levels of achievement in South Africa are very low (Block, 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). The OECD Report (2008) further states that learners' levels of achievement are not commensurate with the financial investment made in public ordinary schools (about 80% of the total education budget). The World Bank's 2010 Africa Development Indicators Report (World Bank, 2010) confirms the findings of the OECD Report and goes further to suggest that one of the reasons why public spending in the South African public education has not translated into higher test scores is because of corruption and teacher absenteeism. Block (2009) asserts that 60-70% of schools in South Africa can be said to be dysfunctional.

The Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga (2010) also concedes that many schools are dysfunctional and pupils leave the foundation phase without the basic literacy and numeracy skills. Among other factors, the Minister attributes school level dysfunctionality to the poor accountability culture among the majority of stakeholders in the education system. Schools that are dysfunctional are generally poorly managed and led and therefore not accountable. There is a clear and direct relationship between an accountable school and the role of a principal as the manager of the school.

It is apparent from the paragraphs above that school level accountability in general, and in South Africa in particular, is impacted upon by complex contextual variables and factors that should be understood. This study seeks to develop a conceptual framework that could best enhance public school accountability in the context of South Africa and the North-West province in particular. To achieve this goal, the following questions framed the study:

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Question 1: What constitutes accountability in the public sector?

Question 2: Accountability in education: what are the issues and lessons from other systems?

Question 3: What are the characteristic features of education accountability in South Africa?

Question 4: What are the views and perspectives of key role-players on the notion of accountability in public schooling?

Question 4.1: What are the views and perspectives of principals on school level accountability?

Question 4.2: What are the views and perspectives of departmental officials on school level accountability?

Question 4.3: What are the views and perspectives of teacher unions on school level accountability?

Question 5: What conceptual framework could best enhance public schooling accountability?

1.5. RESEARCH GOALS

This study is focused on the design of a conceptual framework that would enhance accountability in public schools. In order to achieve this goal, the following objectives were elaborated upon:

1.5.1 To define the notion of accountability and other related concepts and to explore their application in the public sector .

1.5.2 To give a global overview on the notion of accountability as it relates to education with examples drawn from other systems.

1.5.3 To identify key accountability features and elements within the South African education system.

1.5.4 To profile the views and perspectives of key role-players on the notion of education accountability as it applies to or perceived in their contexts.

1.5.5 To develop a conceptual framework for accountability in public schools.

1.6. OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

According to De Vos, Schurink and Strydom (1998) a research design is a blueprint or detailed plan for how a research study is to be conducted. Wellington (2006) cautions that the research process is not a linear, and logical sequence starting with aims, then planning, collecting, analysing and interpreting data and ending with conclusions and the writing up of the report. He maintains that a realistic approach is to admit that the process is cyclical in that it entails going back and replanning or refocusing the research depending on the data collected and their relevance to the objectives of the study.

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed to develop a conceptual framework for enhancing accountability in public schools. According to Hittleman and Simon (2002), the use of both methods in a research project can incorporate the strengths of both these types of research. Wellington (2006) argues that the polarization of the two approaches is false because quantitative methods are never value-free and qualitative approaches can never be complete fiction because they must depend on some inter-subjective reality. Thus, for Wellington (2006), therefore the two approaches can complement each other.

Quantitative research, according to Hopkins (2001) is essentially about quantifying the relationships between variables. Swann and Pratt (2003) add that the term quantitative is often used in educational research to characterize a particular paradigm such as

positivism. The two authors prefer to talk of quantitative techniques rather than quantitative methodology because they contend that there are no exclusively quantitative or qualitative methodologies. In this study, a quantitative instrument in the form of a questionnaire was used to obtain information from a sample of school principals. Statistical procedures were administered on the questionnaire for principals using the Statistical Programme for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyse their perspectives on school level accountability.

According to Lofland and Lofland (1995), qualitative research involves methods of data collection that are non-quantitative. In qualitative research, observations are collected and reported in everyday language. Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) state that research studies that investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations or materials are frequently referred to as qualitative research. According to Swann and Pratt (2003), qualitative techniques characterize the interpretivist paradigm. In this study, focused group interviews were conducted with district officials and representatives from teacher unions in the North-West Province. Qualitative procedures, including themes and sub-themes, were used to analyse the views and perspectives of district officials and teacher unions. A detailed account of the research design employed in this study is given in chapter 5.

1.7 EXPLANATION OF THE CONCEPT “CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK”

The following paragraphs will provide a brief discussion on relevant terminology.

1.7.1 Conceptual Framework

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1995, p. 275) defines a concept as *a general notion; an abstract idea*. The Longman Exams Dictionary (2006, p. 298) take this definition further by stating that a concept is *an idea of how something is, or how something should be done*. This dictionary continues to define conceptual as *dealing with ideas or based on them*. According to Wellington (2006), a theory may be a metaphor, a model or a

framework for understanding or making sense of things that happen in education. He further points out that a theory in educational research is only worthy of the name if it helps us to explain phenomena and thereby aids our understanding of these. It provides a new way of seeing things.

A framework on the other hand is defined as an essential supporting structure, a basic system (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1995) or a set of ideas, rules, or beliefs from which something is developed or on which decisions are made.

According to Merriam (2008), the theoretical framework of a study is anchored in a particular disciplinary base and its literature, it is in this literature that particular concepts, models, or theories that structure the study are found. She goes on to say that it is this theoretical framework that determines what the problem is, the specific research questions to be asked, the particular data that are to be collected to address the questions, and how these data are analysed.

Based on the definitions derived from the two dictionaries above, a Conceptual Framework (or theoretical framework) can be defined as a set of ideas or concepts used to describe the notion of accountability as it relates to the public sector in general and the education sector in particular. For the purposes of this study, the ideas or concepts so described formed the basis upon which a framework for enhancing public school accountability was developed.

Gaynor (1998) makes the point that every conceptual/theoretical framework is useful because it focuses your thinking on particular elements in the situation that might be contributing to the problem. He further states that to use any conceptual framework for analyzing a problem situation, one need to understand the elements of the framework and then organize the analysis around them. In the context of this study, the conceptual framework is anchored in the bureaucratic theory as a framework for analysis because accountability processes and procedures lend themselves to Webber's bureaucratic

theory. Chapter 7 of this study provides a detailed overview of Webber's bureaucratic theory.

Webber's bureaucratic theory has helped to define the core concepts that relate to public education accountability. Consequently, all education accountability related concepts were integrated to offer a meaningful definition of and credence to the notion of accountability in education. The conceptual framework talks to the context (school, district, provincial and national) whilst also incorporating external philosophies and approaches (global context). In a way, the conceptual framework also reflects a constructivist approach in which points of view of participants were considered in the form of surveys and literature study. Table 1.1 below provides an overview of the conceptual framework that anchored this study.

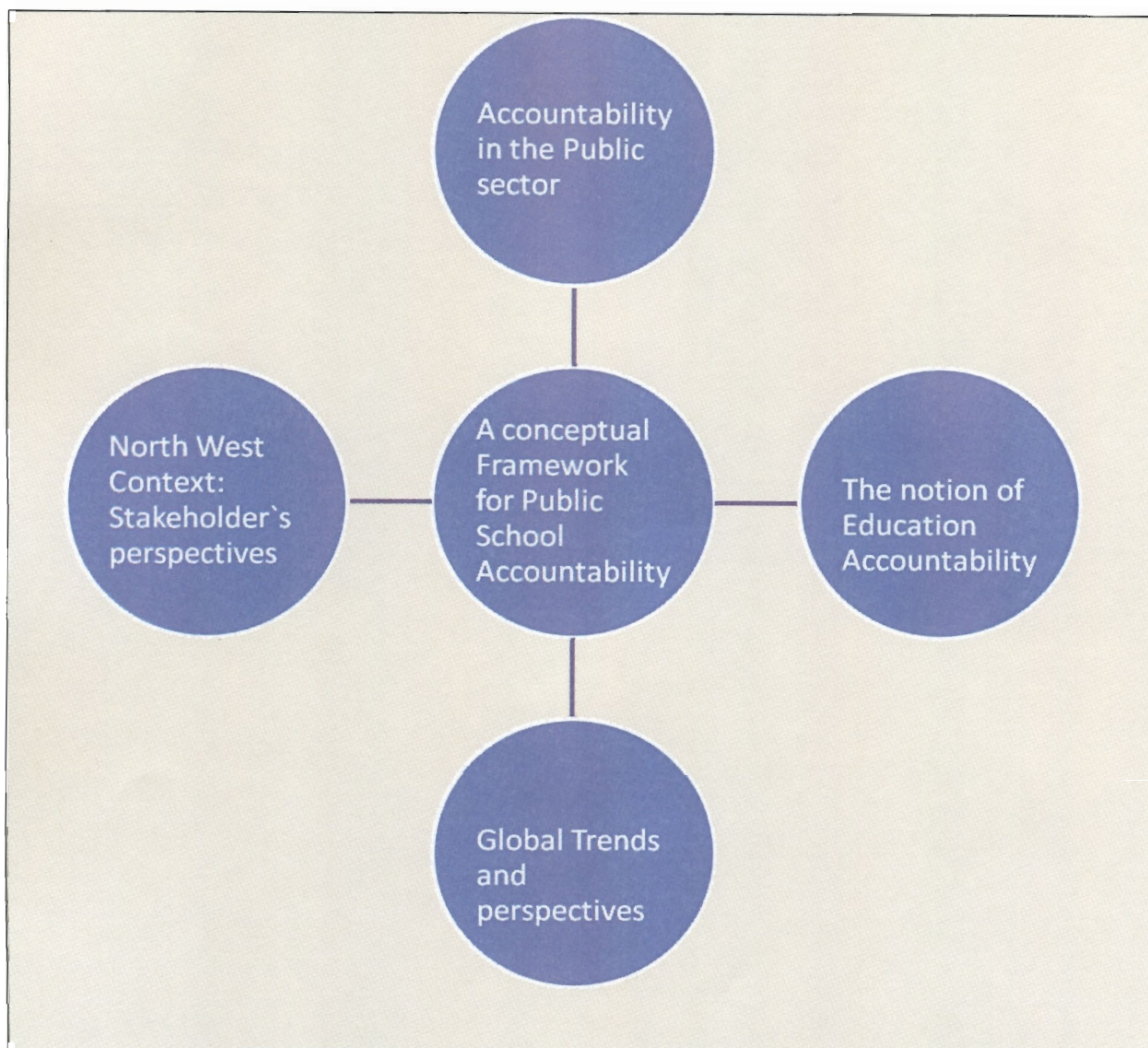


Figure 1.1 The Conceptual Framework Anchoring this Study

The conceptual framework as depicted above (Figure 1.1) defines the core concepts of accountability and assisted in achieving the following:

- Locating public school accountability within the broader public sector accountability framework.

- Linking the broader notion of education accountability to school-level accountability.
- Relating the Global accountability frameworks to the South African context in general and the North-West Province in particular.
- Soliciting the views of education stakeholders regarding their experiences on and perceptions of education accountability practices and processes.

1.7.2 Enhancing Public School Accountability

To enhance means to improve something/ to make it better (Longman Exams Dictionary, 2006) or to heighten/ intensify the qualities, power, value, etc. of something. Public means concerning the people as a whole, open to or shared by all people (Oxford Dictionary, 1995). According to the Longman Exams Dictionary (Longman Exams Dictionary, 2006) public also means not hidden from anyone to know, see or hear.

A public school, in the context of this study is defined in terms of the South African Schools Act (South African Department of Education, 1996b) which distinguishes between two types of schools: Independent and Public. Public schools are under state control, and these are further divided into sections 20 or 21 respectively, based on their capacity to manage their own affairs. The focus of this study is on public schools as part of the broader public sector.

All transformational efforts aimed at improving education take as a point of departure enhanced devolution of authority to the level of the school. Schools Based Management (SBM) is a system designed to promote school effectiveness by devolving more authority to schools so that they can make decisions relating to their operations. Under this system, schools, in effect, are deregulated from the district office. This also brings about major alterations in the basic authority and accountability relationships. Schools are given greater responsibility and accountability for their performance and learner achievement. This study was aimed at designing a framework that would enhance school level

accountability in line with the conceptual framework as outlined under section 1.7.1 above.

1.8 AN APPROACH TO THE STUDY

The structure of the study will comprise the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Background, Orientation and Problem Statement
- Chapter 2: Accountability in the Public Sector
- Chapter 3: Accountability in Education
- Chapter 4: Education Accountability in South Africa
- Chapter 5: Research Design
- Chapter 6: Analysis and Interpretation of Results
- Chapter 7: Overview of the Main Findings and Recommendations
- Chapter 8: A Conceptual Framework for Public School Accountability