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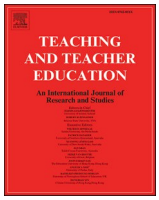

Research paper

The multilevel context of teacher accountability: Findings from low- and high-performing schools in South Africa

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A B S T R A C T

How do teachers interpret and act on external accountability and how are these interpretations influenced by the school, community and system context in which they work? We explore this question through interviews with teachers in eight South African primary schools, divided equally between affluent, high-performing schools and deprived, low-performing schools. Some teachers adopt an agentic, professional orientation, while others follow a compliance-oriented approach. Teachers' interpretations of accountability were influenced by mutually reinforcing factors in their multilevel contexts. However, within-school variations in teachers' mindsets and practices also indicate the influence of their own values, skills and capacity.

1. Introduction

Teacher accountability is a perennially debated and highly complex topic in education policy because of the way in which it often constrains teachers' professional autonomy and leads to unintended consequences. Examples are narrowing of curricula to tested subjects, or teaching to an inspection (Parcerisa et al., 2023). Although many accountability systems are oriented towards an evaluation of the school rather than an individual teacher, these structures inevitably shape teachers' occupational experiences and professional mindsets (Ehren & Bachmann, 2020). Previous studies have however indicated that teachers respond differently to how they and their school are held to account and these responses not only vary by type of accountability system, but they also vary within the same system (Buchanan, 2015; Guenther, 2021). Whilst many studies find that accountability frameworks increasingly permeate the work of teachers, these processes unfold differently depending on teachers' own understandings of their professional roles and responsibilities and the extent to which their contexts constrain their agency (see Buchanan, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2018). Given the widespread critique of accountability policies and pressures for threatening teachers' professional integrity and growth (Goffin et al., 2022), it is important to understand teachers' own perspectives on their accountability and why and how these vary. This paper explores these variations for teachers in primary schools in South Africa through case studies of eight schools that vary in student outcomes and socioeconomic status. We ask the following research question: *How do teachers interpret their external accountability and how are these interpretations influenced by the school, community and system context in which they work?*

In the next section we first present an overview of relevant literature on teacher accountability and our conceptual framework; we then explain how teachers are formally held accountable for their work in South Africa before we introduce our methodology, research findings and conclusion and discussion.

2. A conceptual framework to study teacher accountability

2.1. Conceptualizing teacher accountability

'In its most general sense, accountability means giving a justification of what one has done' (Hoffer, 2000, p. 529). Such justifications can be given in an informal and non-routinized manner, or through more formalized systems. The informal manner involves simply giving an account, taking responsibility for explaining one's actions in a form of social interaction, while the latter implies being called to give an account by an authority who enforces responsibility on another through more standardized and prescribed systems (Mulgan, 2000).

Accountability implies a relationship between those who seek answers and those who are answerable, those who may impose sanctions and those who anticipate them, according to Brady (2021, p. 26). This type of relationship is captured in Bovens' (2007, p.9) commonly used definition of accountability as:

> 'a social relation between an actor and a forum, where the actor has the obligation to explain and justify conduct, where information is

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provided and debated, a forum passes judgement, and the actor faces consequences'.

According to Bovens (2007), the actor can be an individual, but will often be an organisation; the forum can be a specific person (professional peer, journalist, minister, superior), an agency (inspection agency, parliament, audit office, the court), or a virtual entity (the general public or specific advocacy group). Our interest is particularly in teachers' interpretation of their accountability and to whom and for what they feel accountable. Their interpretations may include a sense of responsibility towards their students, peers, parents, and/or principal, and/or the need to respond to those who oversee and control their work through formal accountability.

Various authors distinguish different types of accountability systems on the basis of specific configurations of who is accountable to whom, for what (e.g. input, process or output indicators), how (inspections and/or standardized tests), and with what type of consequences (high/low stakes sanctions and/or support) (De Grauwe, 2007). These systems are often presented as ideal-types, but they tend to be much more diffuse in reality with various combinations of systems. Here we follow Anderson (2005, p. 1) who argues that the education field has seen a distinction in compliance-orientated systems, professional and performance-based accountability.

1. In compliance-oriented systems, individuals are held accountable by rules and bureaucratic procedures to the bureaucracy, often through inspections with additional administrative self reporting. These systems mostly emphasize input expectations (such as opportunity to learn, class size, teacher training, teacher attendance etc.) (De Grauwe, 2007)
2. Professional accountability is based around professional norms and ethics that are developed and upheld by teachers themselves. Within this system, educators are held accountable by peers for adherence to standards, such as through peer review or registers that are managed and monitored by national professional associations. The focus is on the instructional process and what happens in the classroom, as well as wider professional conduct and continued professional learning.
3. Performance-based accountability relies far more on management by objective/NPM techniques to hold individuals and organizations accountable by the results that they produce. In education, this is characterized by league tables and other performance measures.

This distinction is particularly relevant for our study as South Africa has a combination of the first two types. The logic underpinning both systems is however quite different and one could argue also somewhat incompatible. Where teachers are monitored and controlled by supervisors or inspectors, they are expected to implement standardized curricula, be in school on time and adhere to regulations without questioning. Professional accountability however asks them to question and improve their work both individually and collectively, rather than respond to prescribed standards. Given these two types of systems in South Africa, we expect corresponding variations in how teachers interpret their accountability. This leads us to a further exploration of how teacher professionalism is conceptualized more broadly.

2.2. Teacher professionalism vis a vis accountability

Professionalism is a multifaceted concept that has particularly been used to describe occupations in medicine and law. Essential aspects of professionalism are the freedom of judgment in performing work, the belief that certain work is so specialized as to be inaccessible to those lacking the required training and experience, and the belief that it cannot be standardized, rationalized or commodified (Freidson, 2001). Professionalism requires discretionary judgement and action, underpinned by a commitment to doing good work and serving the public good, rather than ensuring one's own economic gain or ensuring the economic efficiency of work. The concept of teacher professionalism is thus intrinsically linked to notions of teacher autonomy and whether they have the capacity, freedom and/or responsibility to make choices about their own teaching, either individually and/or collectively (see Aoki, 2002, p. 111).

The introduction of accountability, particularly where this implies a strict control on the work of teachers and high pressure to conform to external standards, essentially reduces teachers' autonomy. Hargreaves (2000) and Banks (2013) for example explain how New Public Management forms and performance-based accountability have introduced values of efficiency, standardisation and competition into the teaching profession that reduce their level of discretionary decision-making. Parcerisa et al. (2022) also argue that increased pressure on teachers through an increase in centralized accountability and control and reduced autonomy have led to a shift from the original understanding of professionalism, which they refer to as 'occupational professionalism', towards organizational forms of professionalism, characterized by more rational-legal forms of authority and hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision-making', involving increasingly standardized work procedures and practices, consistent with managerialist controls. According to Parcerisa et al. (2022, p. 6), organisational professionalism relies on external forms of regulation and accountability measures, such as target-setting and performance review and these shift the decision-making over the content of teachers' work from their professional group to the school organisation, particularly in compliance and performance-based systems where standards for their work are determined externally and integrated in their managerial control. The school organisation then becomes an important mechanism by which external accountability enables or restricts teacher professionalism. The likelihood of standards being actively resisted or reinterpreted is much higher where schools are professional workplaces with shared decision-making and a culture of learning and where the school leader either buffers accountability policies or mediates a constructive implementation of these policies (see Spillane et al., 2002). Any resistance to accountability is also more likely when teachers collectively decide to oppose standards they are expected to comply to. Falabella (2020) for example identified a group of Chilean teachers who came together and refused to be assessed by the test outcomes of their students. Such resistance however tends to peter out over time due to the increasing alignment between teacher training, professional development and school improvement to these standards and ways in which standards make their way into localized forms of accountability (see Ehren, 2016; Holloway, 2019).

Teacher professionalism is however not a unidimensional concept and various authors make a distinction in different aspects of teacher professionalism. Evans (2008) distinguishes between a behavioural component, which relates to 'what professionals do in their working lives', an attitudinal dimension which refers to 'how and why they do it', and the cognitive or intellectual sphere, involving everything concerning 'what they know and understand' about their professional practice (Evans, 2008, p. 855). Using these dimensions to conceptualize possible interpretations of teachers' accountability, we expect these to follow a logic of compliance or professionalism.

Where a logic of *compliance* dominates, teachers will typically see themselves as functionaries of the bureaucracy, tasked to fulfil administrative directives and compliance with external standards around, for example, syllabus completion and maximizing pass rates (e.g. Aiyar et al., 2021). Such experiences and judgements are invoked by the fact that compliance-oriented accountability focuses on what can be counted and verified, such as the attendance records and curriculum completion in South Africa. Honig and Pritchett (2019) refer to these as 'accounting-based' and critique them for their inability to benefit students who, for example, need remediation in certain subject areas, or whose teachers work with large multigrade/age classrooms for which these standards were not designed. Teachers who have an attitude of compliance will exercise limited discretionary decision-making to ensure standards are implemented in a meaningful and effective

manner, but rather follow requirements to the letter.

Where *professional accountability* prevails, teachers would actively interpret external standards, individually and/or collectively with respect to their own professional identity and understanding of professional role. A professional approach means that teachers understand accountability as a responsibility to deliver 'good work' that would lead to student learning. Teachers whose professional identity revolves around their students' outcomes and wellbeing would use their experience and moral judgement to try and serve all learners alike, develop their own methods to provide support to those who are struggling, particularly in diverse classrooms. In particular, teachers with a high level of expert knowledge and specialized skills, and freedom in the choice and adaptation of teaching material, acquired and maintained through rigorous and continuous study would be able to exercise such agency in their accountability. The high level of expertise would support them in altering their routine, exercising discretionary judgement and action (Robertson, 2012; Olivant, 2015), and making and explaining these decisions with, and to their peers, to their principal and to learners' parents.

2.3. Understanding the link between teacher professionalism and accountability

The conceptions teachers construct of their accountability is, according to Carnoy et al. (2003) shaped by a complex chain of events and there are various theoretical frames that can help us understand these interactions. Most notable are 'policy enactment' which describes the process of social, cultural and emotional construction and interpretation of policies and how these are situated and contextualized (Ball et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 2011; 2015), 'sensemaking' and how teachers and school leaders individually and collectively notice messages and construct understandings of them through the lens of their existing practices and worldviews, including prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences, school culture and professional communities, tools and routines in their daily practice and interactions with colleagues and administrators (Weick, 1995; Coburn, 2004; Spillane & Anderson, 2019, pp. 121–145), and social cognitive theory which emphasizes the interplay between human agency (capacity, self-efficacy, aspirations, values etc) and environmental conditions such as the economy, and the wider sociocultural environment (Bandura, 1999; 2001; Priestley et al., 2015).

What these fields of study have in common is a view of educators as active interpreters of their (policy) environment where those interpretations are shaped by their own background and past experiences as well as the current and ongoing context in which they work. Policy enactment and sensemaking however both tend to look at how *new* situations that emerge from the introduction of reforms and policies are filtered and encountered (see Hodge & Stosich, 2022). Accountability systems have, in many countries, however become a 'system of meaning' in their own right, shaping teachers' professional identities and dominating the way teachers and school leaders think about their work (Goffin et al., 2022). Many studies point to the considerable pressure teachers are under to fabricate themselves as successful in the view of external frameworks where any initial resistance peters out over time due to the increasing alignment between teacher training, evaluation, professional development, and discipline (see Ehren, 2016; Holloway, 2019). Maguire et al. (2011) for example point out that, in England, teachers have adopted the language of accountability when talking about their own practice and it is no longer possible to understand their response to accountability in isolation. We therefore draw on social cognitive theory which provides a wider frame to understand if, and to what extent, teachers have agency in interpreting their accountability.

Agency is described by Bandura (2001) as 'the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence is exercised' (p. 2). To be an agent requires intentionality and choosing to behave accommodatively or, through the exercise of self-influence, to behave otherwise. Agency is a particularly relevant concept in any study about accountability, given the wide-ranging work that indicates how externally imposed standards can contribute to educators' perceptions of a loss of agency, vulnerability, and demoralization (see Hodge & Stosich, 2022). In the context of accountability, agency means that teachers purposefully reflect on the standards and mechanisms by which they are held accountable and the extent to which these align with their own professional values and objectives. They would then decide on future actions with a commitment to bringing these about, rather than merely complying to external standards without active thought and engagement.

Bandura (2001) discusses personal agency in terms of intentions and actions that are separated in time but functionally related. Agency requires forethought, where people plan ahead, reorder their priorities and structure their lives accordingly (ibid). For example, where accountability standards are not in line with teachers' own professional goals and expected behaviours, agency would see them seek out opportunities to either resist or leave when possible. At this individual level, teachers' personal and professional backgrounds, cognitive patterns, and actions shape their ability to exercise agency by influencing their repertoire of responses. Frank et al. (2020) explain that teachers' experiences and familiarity with the local context play a crucial role in how they understand, interpret, and navigate accountability pressures, ultimately shaping their intentional practices. In Buchanan's (2015) study, Californian teachers reflected on past teaching experiences to assess the introduction of stricter accountability measures, determining whether to resist or comply with policies that restricted their autonomy. Similarly, Goffin et al. (2022) highlight research on high-stakes testing, where teachers, feeling pressured to produce strong student outcomes, experienced threats to their professional integrity and were more likely to adopt deficit-based perspectives.

The ability to reject, negotiate or reconfigure accountability measures and pressures is not just a matter of identity, or the ability to self-reflect and react. Priestley et al. (2015) and Bandura (2006) refer to the contextual conditions in which individuals operate and wider social relations; these influence whether a repertoire of potential practice is translated into action. Imants and Van der Wal (2020) conceptualize this interaction as a model where individual teachers are embedded in a team, within a school, and above a school environment. We use their model as our conceptual framework: situating individual teachers as part of a school and its community and the wider education system.

At the school level, capacity to meet external accountability standards is an important condition for agency and how teachers interpret their accountability. Various studies point to material resources, the culture in the school, the role of the school leader and the composition of the student population in constraining or enabling agency (see Eddy-Spicer et al. systematic review, 2016, 2019). Schools are important mediating sites in the interpretation and implementation of accountability policies through their internal structures of decision-making, power relations and culture (Guenther, 2021).

School principals can for example choose to ignore accountability policies or translate external standards into school policy and teacher performance reviews, thereby either constraining or enabling teachers' agency and professional accountability. Spillane et al.'s (2002) study of performance-based accountability in the US shows the important role of school leaders in aligning instruction with external standards in literacy and mathematics, such as by reallocating teachers' time in mandatory weekly workshops and checking teachers' classroom activities in their instructional rounds.

In schools with a strong culture of collaboration and mutual learning, teachers' interpretations of external standards will also emerge through a collective process of defining what successful teaching and learning means in response to external standards. Guenther (2021), Frank et al. (2020), and Dulude and Milley (2021) for example all find that teachers' exposure to others' comprehension and interpretations of the external accountability standards had a pronounced influence on their own practice and whether they were able to navigate, adapt and respond

strategically to tensions and apparent conflicts. In a study by Buchanan (2015) in the United States, teachers who had developed an identity that conflicted with the accountability discourse resisted by pushing back, and, when failing to change the discourse, such as in the absence of collaboration and support from colleagues, they would leave the profession or move to another school.

The school environment also influences teacher agency through the available capacity to meet external targets and providing them with time to work with peers. In low and middle income countries, such as South Africa, many teachers lack essential resources, such as textbooks, teaching guides or ICT devices required to deliver the prescribed curriculum and that will inevitably influence their ability to meet standards (UNESCO, 2016). Where teachers lack materials to cater for a diverse group of learners they will struggle to meet external standards and experience much higher accountability pressure (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2016). In South Africa, this is particularly relevant given that teachers are held accountable for the implementation of the national curriculum that was designed for monograde teaching by subject, while many teachers in poor, rural areas are faced with large multigrade classrooms and are often not qualified to teach all subjects (Nakidien et al., 2021).

Where teachers and schools are performing well below standard and have limited capacity to meet the required target performance, the likelihood of a more strategic response is also higher. Most of the examples come from performance-based accountability that set clear targets around student performance (e.g. Booher-Jennings, 2005), but similar responses have been recorded for systems that set targets around input and instructional processes, such as misreporting and fraud or narrowing the curriculum to tested and inspected subjects and ignoring other subjects (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2019). How teachers interpret their accountability and whether accountability leads to improvement will depend on what aspect of teachers' work is measured, how often and the actual pressure they face to conform. Teachers may have more autonomy and capacity in some areas, such as subjects or grades that are not tested or inspected, but not in other domains of work (Ehren, 2016). Their actual level of control may also vary by location of the school. Eddy-Spicer et al.'s (2016, 2019) review of accountability in low and middle income countries for example shows that where schools and teachers are far removed from the policy centre, they experience little external control as school inspectors tend to visit schools in urban areas due to their own lack of resources.

Location also shapes teachers' accountability interpretations through the composition of the student population and wider community expectations and engagement. According to Parcerisa et al. (2022), teachers who work in schools with minority and working-class populations tend to experience much greater pressure from performance-based accountability and a greater constriction of their professional space compared to their peers working with students from middle or upper-class backgrounds. Westhorp et al. (2014) and Eddy--Spicer et al. (2016) also point to expectations local communities have of schools and how they vary in the extent to which they value high accountability outcomes. These expectations will inform school staff's understanding and response to accountability, particularly when many aspects of context come together. These include, according to Westhorp et al. (2014), the roles, membership, and power relationships within local structures; the expertise, resource levels, and attitudes of staff in schools; the processes used to engage local leaders, service providers and officials, and community members; the capacities and attitudes of community members; and so on.

Thus, we expect that teachers' interpretations of their accountability and the extent to which they exercise agency in how they are held accountable will depend on these contextual influences, constraints and boundaries. This is an assumption that needs to be tested as various authors have criticized accountability policies for reducing teacher agency more generally, particularly the types of models that emphasize control and efficiency (see Leijen et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2015). This leads us to a further explanation of South Africa's accountability system.

2.4. Context: teacher accountability in South Africa

In South Africa, teachers face both compliance-oriented and professional accountability. The first includes the performance management by their principal (Ehren et al., 2020). Principals must record attendance data in the education management information system and send these records to the province for monitoring. Also, they (or, in larger schools, their heads of department) monitor teachers' curriculum coverage and implementation of activities and assessments as prescribed in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and national workbooks and sign off each teacher's record of completed activities and assessments. National monitoring surveys by the Department of Education are used to check on the tasks completed and assessed, with further physical checks of learner workbooks by the district to check for accuracy (Christie & Monyokolo, 2018; Metcalfe, 2018).

Professional accountability is instigated by the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) which requires teachers to engage in a process of self-evaluation where they set developmental goals and score themselves against these goals, after conversations with a self-selected peer. The principal moderates their scores on an annual basis with a school staff development team and is expected to provide training where needed. The scores are expected to inform teacher pay and grade progression (Ehren et al., 2020).

On the national level, the South African Council for Educators (SACE) aims to enhance professional accountability by developing teaching standards, an ethical code of conduct and dealing with complaints over teacher (mis)conduct. These standards outline expected conduct of teachers in the classroom and their collaboration with peers. SACE is a professional body, comprising representatives of key stakeholders, such as teacher unions, school governing bodies, lecturers, and principals from a variety of schools. The council upholds teachers' professional accountability through the registration, management of professional development and inculcation of a code of ethics for all educators (Taylor & Robinson, 2016).

This summary reflects how teachers—in theory—are held accountable directly and through the accountability of their school. Various authors, however, refer to a lack of capacity in South Africa to realize these measures, particularly in areas of deprivation. Van der Berg et al. (2016) describe how districts vary in their capacity to visit the large number of schools assigned to them, sometimes up to 200 per advisor. Only 45% of foundation phase teachers were visited during the year of their study; where teachers and their schools were monitored, the process was described as excessive reporting with no follow-up support. Van der Berg et al. (2011) and Døssing et al. (2011) also point to labour laws which prevent any real consequences for teachers who are employed on permanent contracts, while many school principals and department heads had limited capacity for in-depth monitoring of curriculum implementation, often resorting to a 'tick box approach' to signing off the implementation of lessons plans. Metcalfe (2018) and Christie and Monyokolo (2018) describe how the formats and tools used to monitor curriculum and assessment are highly bureaucratic and allow for little flexibility to alter the calendar or allow extra time and resources for students to catch up. Teachers with multigrade classrooms or whose students have fallen behind curricular expectations particularly struggle to manage the pace and congestion of activities in the tracker sheets. Such large classrooms are a common feature in schools in the most deprived quintiles (1, 2 and 3) where schools are prohibited from raising school fees to appoint additional staff and where overall material conditions are much poorer. Coupled with strong bureaucratic monitoring of a monograde curriculum this would create particular challenges for professional accountability.

3. Methodology

Our methodology consisted of eight case studies of primary schools in South Africa, using a comparative case study approach where data

were compared vertically and horizontally (see Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The case studies were part of a broader study on the relation between trust, capacity and accountability to improve learning outcomes; the interview transcripts were reanalyzed for the purpose of this paper. The vertical axis for comparison included an analysis of teachers' interpretations of their accountability within each school and how these were informed by and interact with the school, community/family and system-level context. This vertical axis of comparison was followed by a horizontal comparison where we compared and contrasted teachers' mindsets and practices across low/high performing schools to identify more general patterns and processes which explain teachers' interpretations.

3.1. Data

Our data included interviews with school staff in a purposive sample of eight high- and low-performing schools in two provinces, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). These differences in performance coincide with the level of deprivation of the school community. South African schools are categorized into five quintiles based on the socioeconomic circumstances of the surrounding community. Relatively deprived schools in quintiles 1, 2, and 3 receive more per-pupil funding and are not allowed to charge school fees (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Schools in quintiles 4 and 5 tend to be in historically privileged, predominantly White areas. To maximise variation, four case study schools come from the most deprived quintile 1 and four from the most affluent quintile 5. We expect these contextual differences to have a profound influence on teachers' interpretation of their accountability and will analyse whether that is the case.

These interviews were conducted as part of a wider project on the relationship between trust, accountability, and capacity in South African primary schools. Participants were asked a range of questions, covering areas such as what a typical day looks like, what they like and dislike about their job, what trust and accountability mean to them, and their interactions with school colleagues, government officials, teacher unions, and the local community. Ethical approval was received from University College London's review board.

In this analysis, we focus on interview transcripts from 64 teachers and school leaders across the eight schools. Table 1 provides an overview of teaching staff at the selected schools. In line with historic patterns of inequality, almost all staff members of the high-performing affluent schools were White, and all staff members of the low-performing, deprived schools were Black. (Although there is greater ethnolinguistic diversity among the low-performing schools in Gauteng and high-performing schools in KwaZulu-Natal than in the other case study schools, our qualitative data do not allow us to delve into such differences systematically.) With two exceptions (principals of Gauteng-3 and Gauteng-4), all interview participants holding special roles also had classroom teaching responsibilities. Further background characteristics (gender, teaching qualification, average number of years at the school) are available in Appendix Table A1.

Table 1
Background characteristics of teaching staff in case study schools.

School	Population group (all staff)	Home language (all staff)	Interviewed staff
High-performing, affluent (socioeconomic quintile 5) schools			
Gauteng-1	53 White	52 Afrikaans	1 principal 1 deputy principal 3 heads of department 3 teachers
Gauteng-2	23 White	23 Afrikaans	1 principal 1 deputy principal 1 head of department 1 teacher union representative 4 teachers
KZN-1	1 Black 1 Coloured 9 Indian/Asian 13 White	1 Afrikaans 22 English	1 principal 3 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 2 teachers
KZN-2	3 Black 2 Indian/Asian 24 White	3 Afrikaans 23 English 3 isiZulu	1 acting principal 2 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 6 teachers
Low-performing, socioeconomically deprived (quintile 1) schools			
Gauteng-3	13 Black	1 Afrikaans 1 Tshivenda 1 other 1 isiXhosa 9 Setswana	1 principal 2 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 3 teachers
Gauteng-4	39 Black	1 Tshivenda 1 Xitsonga 10 isiXhosa 11 isiZulu 1 Sepedi 7 Sesotho 9 Setswana	1 principal 1 deputy principal 2 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 4 teachers
KZN-3	16 Black	1 English 15 isiZulu	1 deputy principal 1 head of department 2 teacher union representatives 4 teachers
KZN-4	13 Black	14 isiZulu	1 principal 1 head of department 1 teacher union representative 4 teachers

3.2. Analysis

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each interview transcript was coded according to the coding scheme in Appendix Table A2. This scheme includes three levels of codes. At level 1, the two main categories are 'Teacher accountability: compliance–professional' and 'Context'. This aligns with the research question of: *How do teachers interpret their accountability and how are these interpretations influenced by the school, community and system context in which they work?* At level 2, teachers' interpretations toward accountability are divided into attitudinal and cognitive dimensions of professionalism (grouped together under 'mindset') and a behavioural component, and context into 'school', 'community', and 'system'. Level 3 codes include, for example, 'Contextual influence on mindset' and 'School leadership interpretation of external accountability'.

The second stage of analysis involved writing a detailed, within-case summary for each of the eight schools. The summaries were structured according to level 3 codes, with appropriate aggregations and disaggregations that emerged inductively (e.g. the code 'Engagement from parents' was separated into subsections on parental engagement through collective channels and informal/individual parental engagement). At this stage, the overall orientation of each participant was classified along the professional–compliant spectrum, with the goal of providing an overview of the degree of convergence within each school, as well as characterize the dominant interpretation of each teacher (see Table 2).

In the final stage of analysis, the within-case summaries were analyzed for patterns across cases and particularly differences between teachers in low- and high-performing schools. This analysis proceeded iteratively, with the authors taking turns to update, discuss, and refine these findings with ongoing reference back to interview transcripts.

4. Findings

This section presents a summary of patterns from our cross-case analysis. We organize our findings by theme from our conceptual framework and compare and explain teachers' responses from the high-

Table 2
Teachers' interpretations of accountability, by school.

School	Fully professional	Mostly professional	Mixed	Mostly compliant	Fully compliant	Unclear	Total
High-performing and affluent quintile 5							
Gauteng-1	5	3	.	.	.	.	8
Gauteng-2	2	4	1	.	.	1[a]	8
KZN-1	5	2	.	.	.	.	7
KZN-2	4	5	.	.	.	1[a]	10
Low-performing and deprived quintile 1							
Gauteng-3	.	2	2	3	.	.	7
Gauteng-4	.	.	4	5	.	.	9
KZN-3	.	3	1	3	.	1[b]	8
KZN-4	.	3	4	.	.	.	7

[a] Interview participants' interpretations of accountability were unclear because these teachers were union representatives, and the relatively short interviews focused primarily on union activities.
[b] Interview participant's interpretation was unclear due to a language barrier and the field interviewer asking a high proportion of leading questions.

performing and affluent schools to those in low-performing and deprived schools.

4.1. How do teachers interpret their accountability?

Within and across our eight case studies we find differences in how teachers interpret their accountability. In both low- and high-performing schools, there are teachers who describe good teaching in terms of learner outcomes and being responsible and accountable for ensuring such outcomes. However, as Table 2 indicates, such professional orientations are more consistently present in high-performing schools, with relatively more orientation toward compliance in low-performing schools. Also, teachers in high-performing schools more often question the suitability of external standards as benchmarks for good teaching, describing how their professional view of good teaching conflicts with external standards. Contrastingly, some teachers in low-performing schools seem more concerned about how to implement external standards, and particularly those around the national curriculum.

Teachers who take a more compliance-oriented approach focus on being in class on time and covering the curriculum. For example, the deputy principle at KZN-3 describes good quality teaching as:

> 'A good quality teaching mainly will be number one: the basic functionality of the school – I'm saying, do we start on time; do we honour the period subjects we are allocated to; do we leave when were supposed to leave.' (deputy principal, KZN-3)

Such compliance with formal expectations can come at the cost of children's learning. According to a teacher in the same school:

> '[There are] too much activities, too much of everything; they don't look at the conditions you work under; they don't look at you and environment. […] And now you end up rushing to push the curriculum and the learners are at the back there are just there you are just rushing through the paperwork finished showing those activities while you don't go back and see whether the learners are getting what you are teaching there's not enough time for them to grasp the content.' (teacher, KZN-3)

This emphasis on compliance was not confined to low-performing schools. For example, when asked how they know whether their colleagues have the capacity to provide high-quality teaching, a head of department in high-performing Gauteng-2 responded:

> 'I'm looking at the curriculum coverage, I'm looking at because I'm drawing the books for the curriculum coverage and I'm not someone that uhm keep quiet if I'm not really satisfied so I would always leave a, a small note saying, "please get that ready for me."' (HOD, Gauteng-2)

That said, teachers in the high-performing schools were more likely to refer to compliance with external standards as an important element of their work, while also indicating conflicts between these standards and their own conception of good teaching—which is described in terms of students' holistic development, socio-emotional wellbeing, and academic progress. Some teachers explicitly say that external standards, and particularly those that require them to implement curriculum standards and annual teaching plans, are unproductive for student learning. The foundation phase head of department in high-performing Gauteng-1, for example, says:

> 'Children are like little sponges, but I sometimes think that they are shutting down and saying, "too much information now", because the syllabus is so compact. Yes, and the syllabus courses, they take the fun out of the teaching because it's pressure, pressure, pressure […] It's like achievement-driven thing […] I tell the teachers, "Just relax."' (HOD, Gauteng-1)

While this head of department exercises her professional discretion by contesting the standards that she perceives as too ambitious, another head of department in the same school instead exercises discretion by adding curricular content to standards that she perceives as insufficiently high:

> 'I think we have a very high standard of education. Me, for instance, I do more than the CAPS document wants from me. I started in 1995, so I started with the old syllabus and I'm still doing everything that was in the old syllabus. So, I don't do the assessment necessarily or all the other stuff, I want learners to know more on my subject than what they are supposed to. Because when they go to high school, if the teacher there talks about something, I want my learners already to know something about it.' (HOD, Gauteng-1)

The variation within the same school suggests that teachers, at least to some degree, have a level of individual agency where their response to external standards and interpretation of accountability is related to how they understand their professional role as a teacher, and their skills and expertise. To give an example of within-school variation in teachers' understandings of their professional role from a low-performing school, one head of department (and teacher) in Gauteng-3 says:

> 'A high standard of work is teaching the learners and the learners understand what they learn and be able to implement what they've learned, you know. It's not about rushing to capture the marks, rushing to submit according to the deadline of the district. Rushing to finish the annual teaching plan even though learners do not understand.' (HOD, Gauteng-3)

In contrast to this professional orientation, the principal in the same school demonstrates a more compliant orientation when asked to describe good quality teaching: 'Good quality teaching is when somebody or maybe if it's me, you cover all the ATPs [annual teaching plans] which is the curriculum there, the syllabus. […]' (principal, Gauteng-3).

These variations within the same school indicate that teachers' mindsets and practices are not only a function of the context in which they work, but also of their own values, skills and capacity.

4.2. System-level context

The formal standards and accountability processes that affect teachers' professional accountability revolve around curricular compliance. Many interview participants spoke of the curriculum and/or annual teaching plans (ATPs) as formal regulations which are checked by the district and incorporated in schools' internal monitoring. This often includes weekly monitoring of classroom teaching by the school management team, such as checking books and files for appropriate documentation and curricular coverage in line with the ATPs.

Other externally mandated accountability instruments identified by participants include the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), the school evaluation system that mandates semi-regular classroom visits to monitor teacher performance. Participants also mentioned the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS), which requires schools to regularly submit data on areas such as student attendance, curriculum coverage, and assessment outcomes.

Additionally, schools receive visits from district-level subject advisors and/or circuit managers for different subjects. Interview participants describe the purpose of these as checking whether classroom lessons were keeping pace with the ATPs, which they verified by checking students' books, assessment files, and the like. Where the accountability to, and support from the district enables local professional accountability, it seems to work through personal relationships where members of the school management team know whom to call in the circuit or district for advice on reporting requirements or how to get funding and resources the school is entitled to (Gauteng-2, KZN-2). However, in most cases, school visits from the district office tended to focus on checking teachers' compliance with various external standards (Gauteng-1, Gauteng-2, Gauteng-3, Gauteng-3, KZN-3).

Across our case studies, regardless of the performance and deprivation quintile the school is in, we find references to an overloaded curriculum, too many assessments, and overly demanding reporting structures. The value of administrative reporting is often questioned, particularly when it does not lead to support (KZN-3, KZN-4), when the district loses paperwork which then needs to be resubmitted (KZN-2), or when different systems for curriculum monitoring are introduced at the same time by the district (KZN-3). Additionally, the interviews generate a picture of districts—the main interface between schools and the government—that are not well organized or capacitated to support teachers and schools or to hold them to account in a productive manner. In some cases, the introduction of multiple, sometimes conflicting requests creates confusion in schools, rather than a joined-up orientation towards professional learning, as explained by the principal in the high-performing and affluent KZN-1:

> 'The one thing that, that for me is very challenging is the uhm when, when the Department of Education does things that are unplanned and sort of, I'm a person who, whose very meticulous in the sense of from a planning perspective and then when things are unplanned and then we've called for meetings or we are told to change things that have already been asked of us to change uhm that's something that I don't take lightly to it. But I also do understand the dynamics of the department but that's the one thing that I sort of dislike in terms of my job portfolio.' (principal, KZN-1)

There were clear differences in schools' capacities for engaging productively with external accountability in the face of inadequate district support and excessive standards and structures. For example, participants from socioeconomically deprived schools (i.e., Gauteng-3, Gauteng-4, KZN-3, KZN-4) appeared to view the IQMS as a peripheral administrative task rather than a meaningful professional development mechanism. In contrast, participants from high-performing and affluent schools (i.e., Gauteng-1, Gauteng-2, KZN-1, KZN-2) were much more likely to observe that the external standards and reporting requirements created helpful structures for planning and monitoring—albeit with the organizational functionality of the school organization as the mediating factor, as the following illustrates:

> 'To a certain extent uhm you know the IQMS is a brilliant system, it's a brilliant system but I think […] the system is changing too much into paperwork and how well your filing system is, how well you keep policies, etc. There has to be a system that will measure you according to, you know, how well your learners are actually achieving at the school, that will then allow you that opportunity to grow […] the IQMS that we have currently, it's just a tool and it becomes a farce at times if it's not done properly. But I'm, I'm happy to state that you know the IQMS system like at our school, like through our district and circuit it is not rushed, it is done properly, but I feel it's not the perfect and ideal tool to measure who I am and my output uhm, it's definitely not.' (principal, KZN-1)

This capacity to productively engage with external accountability structures in affluent schools is likely linked to the income from school fees that they can use to hire additional staff and otherwise improve organizational functioning (e.g. subscribing to third-party platforms that streamline data entry and analysis into the less versatile SA-SAMS system, in Gauteng-1 and Gauteng-2).

Overall, however, interview participants convey a sense of responsibility to adhering to accountability and reporting requirements in all schools, even when the system is perceived as overly bureaucratic. A potential reason, other than perhaps acclimation to working within a hierarchical system, is the perceived benefit of accountability standards in preventing potential favouritism or arbitrariness:

> 'Policy principles for me, are the ones that are important for me. If I follow the policy, I think I am doing the right thing, and then the person who evaluates, will be evaluating what is on policy, and not what he likes, or she likes.' (HOD, Gauteng-4)

4.3. Community context

The affluence of the student population and the involvement of their parents are important conditions for teachers' professional interpretation of accountability. For schools in affluent socioeconomic quintiles, the school governing body (SGB) can levy fees that allow for additional resources, investments in school infrastructure, and additional staff. These extra resources can contribute to capacity for professionalism. Additionally, the local community, and particularly parents, can either support or distract teachers from focusing on student learning.

First, in terms of resource levels, the high-performing, affluent schools use school fees to hire extra staff to reduce class sizes and alleviate work pressure across teachers. Having sufficient resources and staff capacity to meet external standards appears to be an important condition to ensure a more learner-oriented and professional approach. For example, in KZN-1, the principal explains that school fees are channelled toward salaries for additional teaching staff, 'to keep class sizes at a reasonable size' and have a teacher assistant in each class, and to maintain a high standard of physical infrastructure. According to a head of department in the same school, 'We've got Wi-Fi in every classroom, we've got smartboards in every classroom, laptop, uhm, interactive boards, projectors.'

Contrastingly, in KZN-3, lessons take place in prefabricated classrooms that are not fit for purpose:

> 'On a cold, gloomy day like this one those prefabs don't have electricity […] so in order for the children to be able to see the chalk board you have to open the door so that you can at least have some sunlight coming in […] and as a result learners get sick because it's cold, flu because it's cold. And on hot days it gets so hot in those

prefabs that after break, which is after 11 o'clock, learners are exhausted […] it impacts on the learning of the learner which is not good because we all came here to give it our best.' (union rep, KZN-3)

Apart from compromising the quality of teaching and learning, two participants noted that these infrastructural shortcomings also worsen teacher turnover—all of which would make it more challenging to sustain a professional interpretation of accountability.

In addition to such resourcing, the affluent schools also benefit from a conducive school community context for professional accountability, where parents are generally supportive of teachers and actively press them for high learning outcomes. Besides organized support such as SGB-led fundraising events, some parents provide the school with food, support their children with completing homework, and ensure that children are in school on time. In KZN-1, for example, parents have chosen the school for its high performance and expect teachers to make sure their children do well on tests. They particularly put pressure on younger teachers, and this leads these teachers to ensure the workbooks of learners are up to date, that they cover all the required activities, and that learners do well on assessments. As a head of department explains:

'It felt like every time their child […] doesn't do well in a test that they question and as a teacher that's exhausting, if you open up your emails and you're getting 4 or 5 emails a day from parents that want to know why.' (HOD, KZN-1)

In low-performing schools in deprived communities, we find that teachers face more behavioural problems and violence from students (and sometimes parents); they talk about a lack of respect from parents, high levels of migration and student turnover, and limited engagement. In KZN-4, teachers describe the community as transient and showing little interest in the school. For example:

'The parents do not help them, it's rare, maybe 2 percent, 2 out of 10 help their children […] maybe the parents, I don't know how to explain it. They don't see the need because if you give the child homework they ask, what the teachers are doing they are supposed to tell you how to do this. Ja maybe you are giving the child a project to do at home maybe build something. They can't help them. They say the teachers must teach you.' (HOD, KZN-4)

In KZN-3, there had been a major conflict over staff appointments into senior roles as some teachers from the local, socioeconomically deprived community wanted these (higher-paying) roles. Such conflicts take time and energy away from teaching-related matters. In deprived communities, illiteracy rates also tend to be high, causing parents in some communities to defer to what teachers think is best, rather than challenging them (Gauteng-3). Where caregivers don't speak the instructional language of the school, this would also imply limited engagement overall as they are unable to communicate with teachers easily (Gauteng-4). According to teachers in Guateng-4, the point also has direct consequences for teachers' capacity to meet external curriculum standards as children lack basic language skills.

4.4. School context

4.4.1. The role of school management teams (SMTs)

High- and low-performing schools are markedly different in how well they are organized to meet external accountability standards, with school management teams in the high-performing schools routinely having meetings with teachers to moderate and discuss assessment outcomes, plan the scope and sequence of the curriculum, and allow teachers to discuss their teaching and plan extracurricular activities. The clear decision-making structure and collaborative culture reduces conflict and ensures that disagreements do not escalate in ways that disrupt teaching and learning in the school. As the principal in Gauteng-2 says:

'I've always taken all big decisions to the SMT, uh, so that we, so that we make the decision there. In the end, staff members can't turn around and say it's the headmaster, it's the SMT decision. Sometimes we even vote on some matters, uhm, that is important to me.' (principal, Gauteng-2)

A grade 3 teacher in the school expresses a positive view to how the school is run in saying: 'The strength of the school is that we have a fantastic principal, so […] everything falls in place, we have an amazing principal who knows what he's doing.'

The SMT has an important role in mediating external standards in ways that enable teachers' professional accountability and by setting up structures for teachers to plan their teaching within the requirements of the national curriculum. A teacher and grade head in KZN-2, for example, explains how she only sets the broad framework of topics and lets teachers collectively decide how to implement it:

'When we do our planning, we all do it together […] I don't tell my teachers right on Monday you must do shapes, on Tuesday you must do this, I'll say: "We need to cover these concepts within this week and it's up to you to actually get them covered."' (teacher, KZN-2)

In the low-performing schools in deprived areas, we find a more hierarchical structure where the decision-making lies with the school management team (Gauteng-3, Gauteng-4) and these decisions don't tend to be questioned even if teachers privately disagree (Gauteng-4). In Gauteng-4, professional development workshops and internal school monitoring are focused on compliance with district policy. Moreover, when asked whether the school uses data from the electronic SA-SAMS platform, the deputy principal says:

'Yes, we do […] it will say red that shows there's something wrong with us [we're not] doing our work properly or we didn't upload like every Wednesday we have to do learner attendance, teacher attendance and if you don't do that, at the end of the day it will say red. […] I become worried why are we red here which means somebody didn't do something, we didn't do our analysis, we didn't send registers, we didn't send this, so we must be on our toes.' (deputy principal, Gauteng-4)

While a teacher explains that:

'The work is monitored by the HOD. Why? Because whatever the tasks that we need to give the learners, we have to submit for moderation. There's pre-moderation, there's yeah, post-moderation. And then at some stage curriculum coverage has to be reported to the HO [head office of the provincial department of education], yeah. If somebody doesn't manage to deliver a high standard of work, then a person has to be reprimanded.' (teacher, Gauteng-4)

The exception of a low-performing school with a more collaborative school culture to support professional accountability is KZN-4; staff talk about receiving individual feedback and express a willingness to learn. The small size of the school (13 teachers to 376 learners) seems an important factor for the exceptional culture, including the fact that most teachers share the same Christian faith and go to the same church.

4.4.2. The role of teacher unions

Across all schools, the local teacher union representatives have a visible and often positive role in teachers' accountability. Participants note that the union representatives act as intermediaries between the school management team and teachers in negotiating and preventing conflict (Gauteng-2, KZN-3, KZN-4), offering professional advice to the school's leadership team (KZN-3), communicating information about government policies or union decisions (all schools except for Gauteng-3), and organizing workshops (all schools except for KZN-3). However, there was a great deal of variation in the extent to which unions affect teachers' working lives. For example, multiple participants in KZN-1 explain that union membership is a personal matter that doesn't

influence school life. In contrast, all participants in Gauteng-4 agree that most school staff are highly involved with the union—attending briefings at school, attending off-campus mass meetings, and wearing union regalia to school—and many from KZN-4 said that teachers from the school are involved in union-organized social activities ranging from choir to soccer to traditional dance.

Crucially, union influence had varied effects on teachers' time in the classroom. At one end of the spectrum, a union representative in KZN-2 expressed the preference that the union would 'leave us alone', apart from teachers' active involvement in union-organized courses. At the other extreme teachers in KZN-3 reported going offsite during school hours to attend union marches and mass actions. Interestingly, union involvement could interact with professional–compliant orientations to affect instructional time in varied ways. In Gauteng-4, although the union representative appeared to encourage compliance with expected decorum, such compliance may be an improvement on the baseline for classroom instruction, as implied by a head of department:

> 'I like when they come from the union meetings, because they will come back, encourage and teach us to go to class and teach the learners. Because some, we are not all complying, because some teachers go to class ten minutes after the period has started. You understand what I mean? Coming from the union, every time there will be a curriculum and assessment matter that is put [forward]. So I like it, because it encourages teachers to go to class and do what they are paid for: teach the learners.' (HOD, Gauteng-4)

While compliance, enforced through union involvement, was favourable for instructional time in Gauteng-4, union-imposed restrictions on teachers' working hours in Gauteng-3 came into direct conflict with the school management team's plan to run a remedial intervention programme before and after formal school hours. This persisted until the principal exercised professional agency and successfully negotiated with union representatives to make provisions for the intervention. His own union membership and constructive relations with the local representative allowed him to make the change:

> 'The only time we had, but it was just a small thing and then we rectified it, this one-off knocking at 3 o'clock, the intervention programme and starting the day at 07h15 instead of 07h30. We started this last year. […] It was an agreement, so this year they went to the SADTU meeting, […] at the meeting it was announced that that is not allowed […] they said no more morning classes, no more afternoon classes, no more starting the day at 07h15. Then I called the site [representative], because I'm also a SADTU member, and then I told them I wasn't happy. […] But we ironed it out, it was okay. So, we're still continuing with that intervention programme.' (principal, Gauteng-3)

The examples indicate that union representatives can play a role in promoting a professional orientation towards teacher accountability, such as by acting as an intermediary between teachers and management and in organizing professional development sessions. Also, in settings with particularly weak accountability relationships, union involvement can encourage teachers toward compliance with formal expectations that can be a significant improvement on business-as-usual.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to understand teachers' interpretations of their accountability in a system that combines two seemingly contrasting logics of compliance and professional accountability. We looked at how these were determined by their individual background and shaped by the school and community they work with/in and external standards in place. We investigated the question through interviews with teachers in eight schools in the South African provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal that vary in low and high student outcomes and are situated in the poorest (quintile 1) and most affluent (quintile 5) communities. South Africa provides an interesting context of work given the high inequality in student outcomes which are to a large degree caused by the country's history of segregation, following spatial divides in affluence and accessibility to resources. Regardless of these differences, all teachers are subjected to professional and compliance-oriented accountability; two logics that are inherently contradictory and predicated on different assumptions about teacher professionalism.

Within and across our eight schools we find differences in teachers' interpretations of their accountability, ranging from compliance to professionalism. Some teachers in both low- and high-performing schools describe good teaching in terms of learner outcomes and being responsible and accountable for ensuring such outcomes, even when this comes into tension with external accountability demands. However, such professional interpretations of their accountability appear more consistently in high-performing schools, with more examples of a focus on compliance in low-performing schools. Educators who take a more compliance-oriented approach may instead prioritise being in class on time and covering the curriculum, even when this may mean leaving some students behind.

In our conceptual framework we assumed that teacher agency would imply a professional interpretation of accountability. We found teachers sometimes comply because they believe it's right or because they choose not to invest time and energy in diverging from standards. Both choices show agency and perhaps reflect different views on accountability - whether to learners or to the state employer.

It is important to note that this description only reflects teachers' own descriptions of their accountability where we categorize their answers on a continuum from professional to compliant as described in our conceptual framework. Our interviews were however only conducted at one point in time and did not include observations of actual practice. This means that we are limited in describing more detailed variations in interpretation by remit of their work, how these translate into actual practice or develop over time in interaction with aspects of their environment. Future studies that take a longitudinal approach can provide such additional insights.

Although teachers exercise agency in their interpretation of accountability, we also find that they are influenced by the multilevel contexts in which they are embedded. At the *system level*, several external accountability instruments that affect teacher professionalism and teacher accountability, particularly standards around curriculum coverage, the submission of attendance and assessment data into the centralized school management systems, their performance management, and monitoring by the district. Some of our interview participants identified benefits of these external standards, such as when these provide a structure for school decision-making and create opportunities for learning and feedback. Such benefits, which can facilitate professional accountability, seem to emerge in affluent high-performing schools where the community and school context is conducive to a good quality of education, and where the district supports the implementation of these standards and has a joined-up, coherent, and well-organized structure for monitoring schools on these standards. In socioeconomically deprived schools, external accountability structures do not typically enable high-quality teaching and professionalism accountability, often because the school lacks the capacity (skills, resources, infrastructure) to meet external standards and because these standards are enforced (either by the school management team and/or district) without providing the support to improve or the autonomy to interpret these.

Next, at the *community level*, socioeconomic status plays a significant role in whether conditions are conducive for teachers to sustain a professional mindset toward accountability and classroom practice. A well-resourced, fee-paying student population results in sufficient resources such that accountability standards are achievable challenges rather than impossible ordeals. Teachers in affluent schools are more likely to take a professional approach to external standards and accountability because the fee-funded hiring of additional staff makes workloads manageable.

In contrast, teachers in the resource-constrained schools in this sample face additional challenges such as having a wide range of learners' home languages within the classroom because economic pressures in the local communities create ethnolinguistically diverse student populations. Additionally, interview participants discussed how parents in affluent areas often hold teachers accountable for their children's learning outcomes, while parents in poorer communities tend to be less involved in school life due to factors such as high levels of migration, illiteracy, or the perception that teaching is solely within the school's purview. School governing bodies, in theory, also play a role in the internal accountability of the school, but our case studies show little involvement in quality management. Instead, school governing bodies seem primarily involved in fundraising, particularly in affluent schools.

Such 'place effects' have been well established in other work. Lupton (2006) for example points to the role of neighbourhoods in shaping student learning and outcomes, such as through the family and social networks or neighbourhood stigma that affect educational aspirations, or the lack of role models and opportunities in the local labour market. Poverty and (lack of) expectations affect the ability to meet external accountability standards, and invite potential resistance when external standards are considered unfair (see Colman, 2021; Ehren et al., 2023). As many schools in high poverty quintiles are far removed from district offices and see little monitoring to enforce standards, it is mostly teachers' relations with their learners and the community that inform their sense of accountability, in addition to the conditions in the school.

Finally, relevant contextual features at the *school level* that affect teachers' accountability interpretations are the internal organization of the school and the role of teacher unions. In terms of internal organization, the school management team has an important role in mediating external standards in ways that shape teachers' understanding and approach to accountability. This can include conducting classroom observations and checking lesson plans and workbooks not just to report curriculum coverage to the district but also to provide collegial feedback and offer targeted support. Such practices were more common in well-resourced, high-performing schools. In the low-performing schools in deprived areas we find a more hierarchical structure where the decision-making lies with the school management team and, in some cases, these decisions don't tend to be questioned even if teachers privately disagree. Nonetheless, some school leaders in these challenging circumstances successfully choose a professional approach and expect this of their teachers, as with a school principal who organized a before-and-after-school remedial programme and liaised with the local teacher union representative to bypass a union prohibition on extending teacher working hours.

We did not ask school principals or heads of department about their leadership style, but work by others, such as Gu and Colman (2023) and Maguire et al. (2015) suggests that their values, as well as their ability to ensure a degree of coherence in values among staff, the intellectual and human resources and social relationships in the school all contribute to the organisational capacity required to mediate and respond to external accountability in ways that promote broader educational purpose. The more professional accountability orientation in our high-performing, affluent schools may however also result from their ability to raise fees and purposefully recruit teachers that have more professional values and skills, rather than only working with those deployed by the province.

In South Africa, teacher unions and particularly the on-site representatives also have an important role in uniting teachers around a set of shared values. While teachers' involvement in unions varied across schools, the teachers who serve as on-site teacher union representatives often influence their colleagues' orientations toward accountability structures. They acted as intermediaries between the school management team and teachers, facilitated teachers' participation in union-led professional development opportunities, or encouraged adherence to policy standards. In our study schools, the local presence of teacher unions thus takes a markedly different, and often more constructive approach to teacher accountability compared to the national union agenda and activism reported in other studies (van der Berg et al., 2016).

In summary, the contexts in which teachers are embedded exert complex, multilevel influences on their interpretations of accountability. In high-performing, affluent schools, these complex interactions tend to facilitate a professional approach to accountability; whereas mutually reinforcing challenges in low-performing, socioeconomically deprived schools can make it a struggle to maintain such professionalism. That said, besides these different orientations of teachers' accountability between high- and low-performing schools, we also find variation in orientation and practice within the same school, raising important questions about the extent to which accountability interpretations are determined by context or by individual factors such as identity and professional training background and whether and why teachers choose to comply in some areas, but not in others. Many studies have found that, over time, accountability expectations become internalized into teachers' personal codes, their sense of accountability towards students, peers and/or wider society and daily work routines (see also Dulude and Milley, 2021). This is particularly the case when the external accountability regime induces a constant awareness of regulatory norms and a culture of surveillance with resulting high levels of compliance, or 'policy dependency' among teachers (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 494). In geographically remote schools in South Africa, other, more local processes of socialisation and norm-setting, coupled with teachers' professional training are likely more important in how they understand their role and responsibility as a teacher.

This means that accountability cannot be introduced as an isolated reform to improve learning outcomes, but a more joined up approach to developing teacher capacity is always needed, also addressing the local context in which teachers are working and capacity and expectations in, and of local communities and schools.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Melanie Ehren: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis. **Yue-Yi Hwa:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix

Table A1
Background characteristics of all teaching staff in case study schools

School	Gender	Population group	Home language	Teaching qualification	Average years at the school	Union affiliations	Interviewed staff
High-performing, affluent (socioeconomic quintile 5) schools							
Gauteng-1	13 Male 40 Female	53 White	52 Afrikaans	41 yes 11 no	8.04	SAOU (majority) NAPTOSA	1 principal 1 deputy principal 3 heads of department 3 teachers
Gauteng-2	8 Male 15 Female	23 White	23 Afrikaans	18 yes 5 no	7.52	SAOU	1 principal 1 deputy principal 1 head of department 1 teacher union representative 4 teachers
KZN-1	1 Male 23 Female	1 Black 1 Coloured 9 Indian/Asian 13 White	1 Afrikaans 22 English	24 yes	6	NAPTOSA SADTU	1 principal 3 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 2 teachers
KZN-2	[no data provided]	3 Black 2 Indian/Asian 24 White	3 Afrikaans 23 English 3 isiZulu	26 yes 2 no	6.48	NAPTOSA (majority) SADTU no affiliation	1 acting principal 2 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 6 teachers
Low-performing, socioeconomically deprived (quintile 1) schools							
Gauteng-3	3 Male 10 Female	13 Black	1 Afrikaans 1 Tshivenda 1 other 1 isiXhosa 9 Setswana	13 yes	12.77	SADTU	1 principal 2 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 3 teachers
Gauteng-4	9 Male 31 Female	39 Black	1 Tshivenda 1 Xitsonga 10 isiXhosa 11 isiZulu 1 Sepedi 7 Sesotho 9 Setswana	38 yes	7.97	SADTU	1 principal 1 deputy principal 2 heads of department 1 teacher union representative 4 teachers
KZN-3	3 Male 13 Female	16 Black	1 English 15 isiZulu	15 yes 1 no	5.83	SADTU (majority) NATU	1 deputy principal 1 head of department 2 teacher union representatives 4 teachers
KZN-4	5 Male 9 Female	13 Black	14 isiZulu	12 yes 2 no	10.69	SADTU (majority) NATU	1 principal 1 head of department 1 teacher union representative 4 teachers

Table A2
Coding scheme used for analysing the interviews

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Elaboration of level 3 – illustrative questions addressed by text segments
Teacher professional qualifications and development	(N/A)	TPD	What initial teacher training (e.g. bachelor/master; subject specialization) and further professional development have teachers completed?
		TPD influence on accountability	Have these training programmes prepared teachers for complying to external standards and regulations and/or professional agency?
Teacher accountability: compliance – professional	Mindset	Teacher mindset	How are teachers understanding their role and responsibility in working with learners in the classroom and creating an environment for learning at the school level and with the local community? To what extent do teachers have a mindset oriented towards 'compliance' (responding to control and standardisation, following a script and doing what you're being told) versus 'professional' (taking responsibility for student learning, agency in working with colleagues in creating an effective learning environment and ensuring external accountability requirements are interpreted and enacted on in ways that benefit learner outcomes)?
		Contextual influence on mindset	How are these informed by the school, community and/or system-level context in which they are working?
	Behaviour	Teacher behaviour	How are teachers enacting their role and responsibilities in working with learners in the classroom, and creating an environment for learning at the school level and with the local community?

(*continued on next page*)

Table A2 (*continued*)

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Elaboration of level 3 – illustrative questions addressed by text segments
			What behaviours are they describing/showing which indicate an orientation towards 'compliance' versus 'professional'?
		Contextual influence on behaviour	How are these informed by the school, community and/or system-level context in which they are working?
Context	School	External accountability	Does the school have to meet specific external accountability targets? If so, are they meeting these currently, and/or expecting to meet these? To what extent do they perceive pressure to meet external targets? What are the consequences of such perceived pressures (e.g. is it leading to a narrow compliance-oriented mindset)?
		School leadership interpretation of external accountability	How do school leaders and school governing bodies make sense of, and translate external accountability/monitoring standards into school policy and teacher performance management?
		School-level influence on teacher interpretation of accountability	How is school level resourcing and the level of deprivation of the student population affecting teachers' sense of/engagement with accountability?
		Role of unions	What are teachers' perceptions of and engagement with labour unions?
	Community/ family	Engagement from parents	What are parents expecting of teachers and (how) are they engaging with, or putting pressure on teachers and schools to improve teaching and learning?
		School expectations of parents	What are teachers and school leaders expecting and of parents and the community involvement (including pressure, voice, choice and exit) to improve education?
	System (district/ national)	System-level influence on teacher interpretation of accountability	Does teachers' understanding of their accountability and responsibility vary according to the formal accountability system, and type of governance of the education system?
			Do more hierarchical and compliance-oriented systems lead to less professional agency of teachers?

Note: Codes related to teacher professional qualifications and development are not discussed in this paper as the analysis did not identify any consistent relationships between professional development and teachers' accountability orientations.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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