

Exploring School Leaders' Experiences of External Accountability: Narrative Review

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Abstract

External accountability is the cornerstone of policy reforms. A growing body of research documents the balance between external accountability and school autonomy. Various other quantitative studies link it to teacher stress, educational equity, student achievement, and effective leadership, among others. The existing literature often overlooks the complex narratives of school leaders themselves while focusing on quantitative data. This narrative literature review aims to illuminate the nuanced perceptions of school leaders regarding external accountability. A systematic analysis of 23 papers from various databases was conducted to collect the experiences of leaders. Findings reveal that school leaders struggle to strike a balance between autonomy and external accountability. While some leaders experience compliance pressures and the imposition of control, others feel supported, trusted, and guided for the betterment of school performance. The cross-national analysis revealed unwilling compliance among leaders driven by job insecurities, coercive behavior, and punitive measures. Conversely, some leaders experienced a sense of shared responsibilities, collaboration, and autonomy. The administrators of accountability will gain insight into the impact of their policies and practices on leadership. This may lead to future policies addressing the challenges faced by leaders. Future studies should focus on longitudinal and ethnographic research to record changing experiences with innovations in accountability policies.

Keywords: External Accountability, School Leadership, Student Performance, Leadership Experiences.

Introduction

Accountability in schools takes various forms. School is held accountable to the community, as parents' choices depend on the school's reputation, excellence, and quality of education, as well as its performance (Pagès, 2021). School heads are answerable to external administrators and the Ministry of Education, in the case of public schools. Teachers are accountable to school heads for their professional development and the teaching and learning process (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Thakuria, 2024). Students are judged based on their grades, learning outcomes, achievements, and class participation, among other factors (McLroy, 2023). Therefore, school accountability is an umbrella term covering its vast nature and scope. Managing accountability with all its intricacies is itself a challenge for school leaders (Erdağ & YeniPinar, 2022). Research is continuously

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enlightening significant aspects of all forms of accountability, ranging from processes, influence, balance, strategies, to perceptions, experiences, and challenges of stakeholders. This narrative review intends to shed light on school leaders' experiences of external accountability.

External review through school inspection is a standard method for measuring the quality of education, despite the wide variations in the procedures used to hold schools accountable for the quality of instruction they provide (Behnke and Steins, 2017). Wang et al. (2021) narrate that "external accountability occurs when the principal is held accountable to a group or entity outside the school site (e.g., district school board, Ministry of Education, professional regulatory body, etc.)" external accountability is a top-down system that holds schools accountable for their functioning and performance (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017). It takes the form of test-based accountability (Lee, 2017), on-site visit evaluations (Brown et al., 2024; Evans, 2025), or audit-based accountability (Hutt & Lewis, 2021).

This narrative review aims to explore the current understanding of external accountability and how leaders perceive and experience it in educational settings, such as schools. Most of the research on accountability is quantitative and based on policy analysis; however, the narration of school leaders' experiences with external accountability is limited. Leaders are firsthand witnesses to the phenomenon of accountability, and they are the ones who translate expectations, demands, and pressures into action. Therefore, their perception, experiences, and challenges are noteworthy. This narrative review intends to identify the gap and suggest future directions for researchers. This review aims to draw the attention of researchers to filling the gap in research, specifically capturing the first-hand experiences of leaders and how they navigate, respond to, translate, and manage the pressures of accountability.

Policies have introduced a new approach to external accountability, taking into account the rise of personalized learning, competency-based education, and collaborative learning, among others. This paradigm shift from coercive accountability to intelligent and collaborative accountability has also changed the experiences and actions of leaders. This narrative review presents both forms of accountability and how leaders' acts of compliance are different for each of these forms. The existing literature lacks a direct examination of the evidence on the influence of a shift in accountability approach on leadership practices and student performance. Moreover, this narrative review is focused on following the objective, i.e.

1. To explore how literature draws the school leaders' perceptions and experiences of external accountability practices and policies.
2. To describe how leaders translate their accountability experiences into decisions, actions, and practices
3. To identify the perceptions of teachers about their leaders' challenges of accountability

This narrative review is significant as it will help explain the complex relationship between external accountability and leadership practices, and how leaders comply with set standards to improve and enhance the performance of their schools. Moreover, the administrators of external accountability (the School Inspection and Monitoring Team, the Ministry of Education/ School supervisors) will gain insight into the influence of their practices and policies. This might lead to more improved policy development and implementation process, which is sensitive to leaders' voices and suggestions.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted to explore the school leaders' lived experiences, interpretations, and perceptions about external accountability. It included peer-reviewed journal articles that either

described leaders' experiences with accountability practices regarding school evaluation visits/inspections or their attitudes and perceptions toward external accountability policies. Articles were searched from electronic databases such as Scopus, Taylor & Francis, Sage, Springer, Emerald, Elsevier, DergiPark, and MDPI. The time range was set from 2020 to 2025. Later articles from 2012 to 2020 were also added to indicate the shift from a punitive mode of accountability to a collaborative one. Keywords included were "external accountability", "school leader accountability experiences", "accountability of principals", and "school inspection".

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were as follows

1. Research work published in English for clarity and relevance
2. Work published over the last 10 to 15 years in the context of external accountability and relevance to the educational sector.
3. Literature focused on accountability practice as well as accountability policies in some countries.
4. Studies based on the attitudes, perceptions, and practices of school leaders under test-based accountability and school visit inspections

Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria for this narrative review were as follows:

1. Studies based on teachers' perspectives of accountability without input from leaders.
2. Researchers employ quantitative research methodology.
3. Literature that focused on internal school accountability, personal accountability, professional accountability, moral accountability, performance-based accountability, and market accountability.
4. Non-peer-reviewed sources, such as blog posts, unpublished work, opinions, and books.
5. Studies including leadership practices of sectors other than the educational sector.

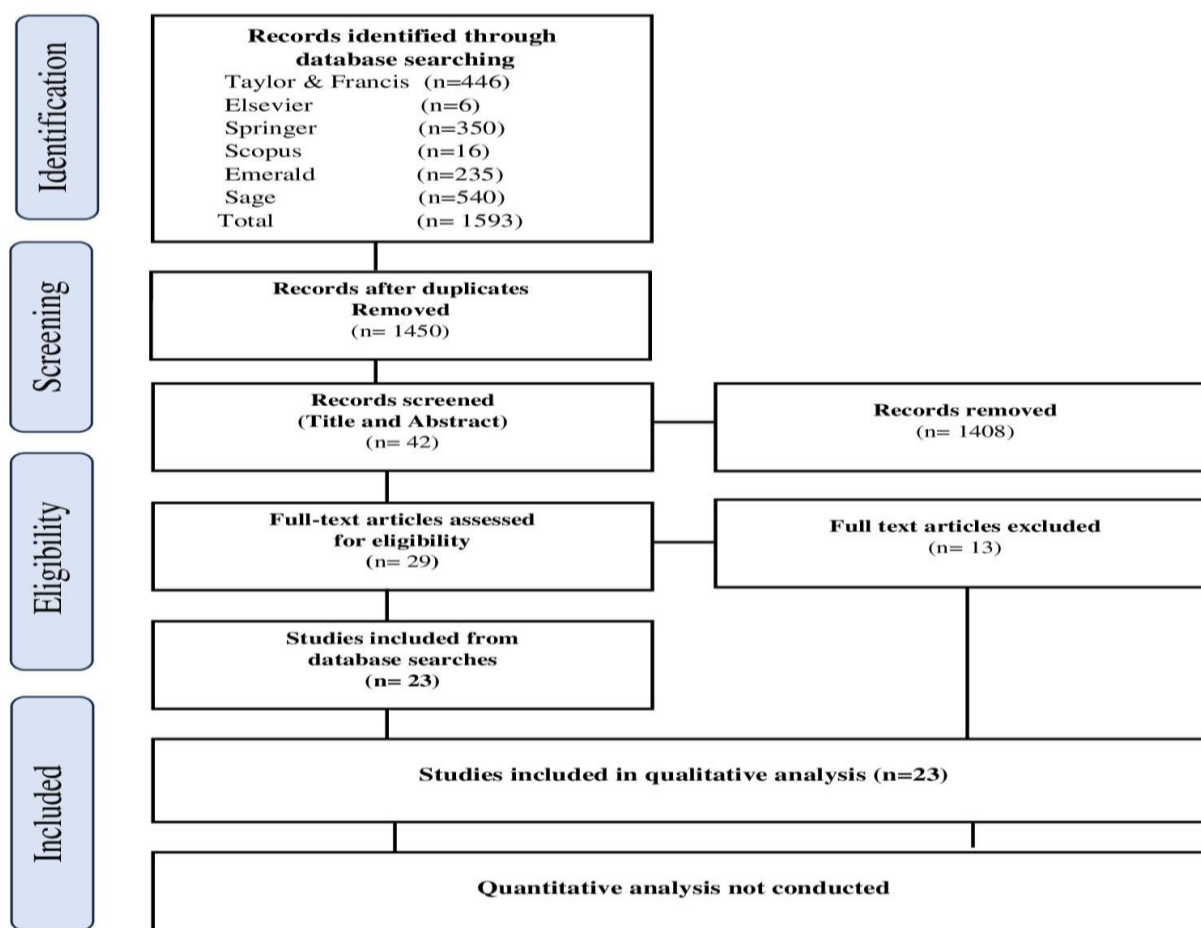
Table 1: Search keywords used

Database Searched	Date	Keywords Used	Results Found	Useful Articles Identified
https://www.tandfonline.com/	14th May	School inspection, school leader accountability experiences	446	18
https://www.elsevier.com/	14th May	School leaders' accountability	6	3
https://link.springer.com/	14 th May	School accountability	350	12
https://journals.sagepub.com/	14 th May	School leaders' accountability	9405	11
https://www.ebsco.com/	14 th May	External accountability	16	2
https://www.emerald.com/	14 th May	Accountability of school leaders, accountability of principals	235	17
https://scholar.google.com/	14 th May	School leaders' accountability	18300	2

Selection Process

Record obtained through initial searching of databases was 1593 articles. Duplicate articles in different databases were removed. 42 articles were screened as their title and abstract was relevant to the external school accountability and included perception of leaders. Only those research articles were selected in which the phenomena were explained by qualitative research methodology. Later articles were again screened for eligibility based on their full text availability. Out of 29 full text articles, 13 were again excluded based on relevance. Excluded articles were based on experiences of leaders toward accountability other than external (test-based and inspection visits). Finally 23 articles were selected from the database searches for the study. Data was analyzed by one researcher independently based on the self-developed framework. Thematic analysis was done for the purpose of exploring experiences of leaders with external accountability. Findings from the selected articles were carefully studied and sub-themes were given. Similar sub-themes were grouped under same theme.

Figure 1: Selection Process Flowchart



Emergent Themes

Atmosphere of Shared Responsibilities

Principals shared clear responsibilities for teachers to ultimately assist in meeting external accountability demands. Leaders involved teachers in the process through coaching, observation, and documentation of their performance (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). The external pressure by administrators needs to be transformed into a culture where everyone shares the responsibilities, and feedback from leaders and teachers is welcomed (Liljenberg, 2015). The purpose of school evaluation has changed from monitoring for compliance with policies to improvement and accountability (Farooq & Sardar, 2015). Principals want their supervisors to walk with them through the leadership journey rather than imposing control to ensure professional companionship (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). School staff in Iceland are open about their performance and improvements, ensuring an atmosphere of collaboration and trust (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022), due to a feedback-based accountability approach. Leaders construct more humane, generative, and responsible accountability to cater to the holistic development of students (Kim, 2022). Leaders considered teachers a crucial asset for achieving student outcomes as expected by external administrators, and therefore created a collaborative atmosphere of shared responsibilities, ensuring openness in teaching (Laursen et al., 2024). School principals in Israel adopted collaborative accountability as a mediating strategy during a crisis and considered it a collective responsibility of all (Ganon-Shilon & Becher, 2024).

Imposition of Excessive Control

Leaders do not have an insubordinate perspective, but rather the experience of external accountability bodies imposing excessive control over internal matters of the school (Liljenberg, 2015). The impact of external accountability in low-performing schools is evident in strong principal leadership, where principals take charge firmly, leading to severe teacher appraisals (Yi & Kim, 2019). Leaders often feel the pressure of compliance and accountability, which compromises their autonomy (Niesche et al., 2021). Tensions between the top-down policies of accountability regimes and educational leadership agency are inevitable (Kim, 2022). Leaders have limited autonomy in the face of external accountability and complain about a lack of balance between autonomy and accountability (Alajmi, 2022). Leaders do not impose or interfere in the practices of teachers despite external accountability pressures (Laursen et al., 2024). Under accountability pressures, leaders compel teachers to follow the same script of external mandates, irrespective of students' needs (Brezicha et al., 2022). Principals imposed the Ministry's orders and their ethical values on teachers to create a professional standard (Ganon-Shilon & Becher, 2024).

Demands and Expectations

Some leaders experienced external demands and high expectations from their administrators. While leaders face high demands for accountability and compliance, they often have a fear of failure (Niesche et al., 2021). A study (Watkins et al., 2020) suggests that principals perceive themselves as expected to fulfill unrealistic goals set by accountability policies. Leaders also term the accountability system as punitive and threatening, which involves making numerical judgments rather than engaging in meaningful conversations (Hutt & Lewis, 2021). While in Iceland, there is no ranking of schools based on their results, nor are there any punitive actions or threats in case of failure (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022).

Support and Guidance

Some leaders sensed trust, support, and collegial relationships that facilitated the implementation of AFL by the external accountability body (Tolo et al., 2019). Leaders report that external

accountability serves as a source of guidance, feedback, motivation, and regulation of ethical rules, making them feel safe, transparent, and reliable (Erdağ & Yenipinar, 2022). Leaders perceive the feedback provided by the inspection system as positive because it saves their time and provides guidance (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022). Leadership strives to support the teaching practices to the highest degree by providing a clear mindset, motivation, and shared values. This bridges the gap between teachers and management (Laursen et al., 2024).

Alignment with Leader Values

External accountability policies positively impact instructional leadership (Louis & Robinson, 2012), particularly when they align with the values of the organization. Leaders perceive their role more from a moral perspective, rather than a bureaucratic one (Ng, 2013), as only one participant reported being accountable to the government. School leaders face a challenge in balancing external demands with their values (Liljenberg, 2015). Principals perceive the situation as a dilemma when the system's demands confront the personal values and decisions of the principals in order to suit the students' needs (Wang et al., 2021). To address accountability pressures, leaders tend to humanize accountability by reflecting on morals, values, and the school's purpose (Kim, 2022). For the sake of collaboration, principals aligned their own ethical and moral values with the orders of the Ministry and the standards of the school (Ganon-Shilon & Becher, 2024).

Accountability and Work Stress

Accountability is an increasing workload. Principals define their role as overwhelmed and all-encompassing. They experience issues related to role clarity and a lack of clarity regarding accountability responsibilities (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). Principals perceived the integration of accountability and innovation policies as developing significant stress around their jobs (Watkins et al., 2020). Leaders sense accountability as imposing fear and stress (Erdağ & Yenipinar, 2022). In some public schools in America, how leaders imposed accountability mandates exacerbated the teachers' feelings of stress and anxiety (Brezicha et al., 2022).

Lack of Job Security

Principals often filter their decisions according to the expectations of their employers and supervisors due to a perceived lack of job security and protection (Wang et al., 2021). Both administrators and leaders threaten teachers for non-compliance, and they are not allowed to question them. The punitive nature of accountability robs teachers of job security (Brezicha et al., 2022).

Mode of Measurement

Leaders criticize the mode of measurement, as accountability systems often focus solely on numerical judgments, failing to capture the nuanced details and complexities of school performance (Hutt & Lewis, 2021). While in Iceland, there is no ranking of schools based on their results, nor are there any punitive actions or threats in case of failure (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022). Principals prefer on-site evaluations over test-based accountability for bringing about sustained change (Bezem, 2023).

Table 2: Summary of findings, relevance and themes

	Data Base Source	Author(s)/ Year	Title	Key Findings	Relevance to Your Topic	Themes
1	Emerald	(Knapp & Feldman, 2012)	Managing the intersection of internal and external accountability: Challenge for urban school leadership in the United States	Leaders embraced accountability by establishing high standards for teachers and empowering teachers to take initiative and share accountability.	It documented the leadership approach toward accountability. It highlights the strategies used by the principals to improve instruction in an accountable way.	Convergence of external and internal accountability, Transfer of clear ambitions, Atmosphere of shared responsibilities
2	Elsevier	(Rus et al., 2012)	Leader power and self-serving behavior: the moderating role of accountability	Holding powerful leaders accountable for their actions could undermine their self-serving actions.	It presents the role of accountability in moderating power and self-serving behavior of leaders.	Perceived accountability
3	Emerald	(Louis & Robinson, 2012)	External mandates and instructional leadership: school leaders as mediating agents	School leaders internalize the external accountability policies and shape them according to their own values.	Leaders' perception, behavior and attitude toward external accountability is explored.	Convergence of external and internal accountability, Alignment with leader values
4	EBSCO	(Ng, 2013)	An examination of school accountability from the perspective of Singapore school leaders.	Principles share the conception of accountability as the schools should be internally reflective rather than relying on external scrutiny.	The study captures the prospects of the Singapore school leaders about school accountability.	Convergence of external and internal accountability, Alignment with leader values
5	Taylor & Francis	(Liljenberg, 2015)	School leaders as coupling agents – mediating between external demands and internal values	School leaders feel challenge to fit in external demands when they do not fit in with their values.	It explored how school leaders make sense of and respond to external demands of accountability.	Alignment with leader values, Imposition of excessive control, Atmosphere of shared responsibilities
6	Elsevier	(Yi and Kim, 2019)	Exploring the relationship between external and internal accountability in	External accountability positively impacts the	It explores the impact of external accountability	Imposition of excessive control,

			education: A cross-country analysis with multi-level structural equation modeling	principal's performance goal-oriented leadership. Principals in low performing schools practice strong leadership.	on the leadership practices of principals.	Convergence of internal and external accountability
7	Springer	(Tolo et al., 2019)	Intelligent accountability in schools: A study of how school leaders work with the implementation of assessment for learning	Some leaders experienced external demands and high expectations from their administrators, while others sensed trust and support.	It documented experiences of leaders with the school municipal administrators. How leaders relate and implement accountability expectations.	Intelligent accountability, Trust vs distrust relationship Demands, expectations
8	Google Scholar	(Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020)	Autonomy, accountability, and principals' work: an Australian study	Under external accountability leaders reported workload, increased accountability, unclear accountability responsibilities, lack of supervisor's support.	Highlight the experiences of leaders under increased external accountability	Need of Professional companioning
9	Taylor & Francis	(Watkins et al., 2020)	Principals' sensemaking of leading under accountability and innovation policies	Principals regard the overlapped accountability-innovation policy. But criticize the unrealistic goals, narrow achievement measures and conflicting mandates that is bringing stress to their role.	It explores the perceptions of the principals about accountability and innovation policies and how they sense their role in this context.	Accountability and work stress, Demands, expectations
10	Scopus	(Niesche et al., 2021)	Principals' perceptions of school autonomy and educational leadership	Leaders feel the pressure of compliance and accountability compromising their autonomy. While leaders face high demands of accountability	It reports the experiences of autonomous schools' leaders with increased compliance demands, accountability pressures and	Imposition of excessive control, Demands, expectations

				they have a fear of failing.	increased managerialism.	
11	Springer	(Wang et al., 2021)	“I am here for the students”: principals’ perception of accountability amid work intensification	External accountability poses sense of compliance among principals and they filter their decisions as per expectations due to perceived lack of job security.	It highlights the complexity of the accountability and its scope. Demonstrates how the leaders differentiate between various types of accountabilities and create a balance.	Lack of job security, Alignment with leader values
12	Taylor & Francis	(Hutt & Lewis, 2021)	Ready for reform? Narratives of accountability from teachers and education leaders in Wales	Leaders narrated frustration while working in competitive accountability environment and criticism lied upon means of measurement.	It includes direct narration of leaders and teachers of external school accountability.	Mode of measurement, Demands, expectations
13	Emerald	(Alajmi, 2022)	School principals' experiences of autonomy and accountability: outcomes of the School Education Quality Improvement Project in Kuwait	Leaders have limited autonomy in the face of external accountability. They experience lack of balance between autonomy and accountability.	It features the experiences of leaders with balance between autonomy and accountability in schools.	Imposition of excessive control
14	Google Scholar	(Erdağ and Yenipinar, 2022)	Exploring the Accountability Relationships of Turkish School Principals: A Qualitative Study	Principals were optimistic about they get guidance, feedback, transparency and safety while few principals reported accountability poses stress and fear.	This study highlighted what the principals are accountable for and how the accountability is implemented and how it impacts the role of principals.	Accountability and Work stress, Support & Guidance
15	Taylor & Francis	(Ólafsdóttir, et al., 2022)	The mechanisms by which external school evaluation in Iceland influences internal evaluation and school professionals’ practices	Principals have positive attitude towards accountability because of its low-stake feedback- based approach.	It highlights their attitudes of the principles and features towards accountability and how they perceive the feedback.	Atmosphere of shared responsibilities, mode of measurement, Guidance & support

16	Sage	(Kim, 2022)	Reimagining accountability through educational leadership: Applying the metaphors of “agora” and “bazaar”	Principal city define accountability as a culture deeply rooted in care, respect and shared responsibilities.	The study explores how leaders reimagine the concept of accountability.	Atmosphere of shared responsibilities, Imposition of excessive control, Alignment with leader values
17	Sage	(Brezicha et al., 2022)	“This school is killing my soul”: Threat Rigidity Responses to High-Stakes Accountability Policies	Under punitive nature of accountability, the leader’s transfer the pressure to the teachers and threaten them for non- compliance.	The American Corp members interviewed the public school teachers and leaders about implementation of accountability policies.	Imposition of excessive control, accountability and work stress, Lack of job security
18	Springer	(Bezem, 2023)	Principals’ attitudes towards on-site school evaluations: contribution to sustained school reform	Principals prefer on-site evaluations rather than test-based accountability for bringing a sustained change.	The study examines the principal’s beliefs about school inspection and their readiness to implement change.	Guidance & support, On-site evaluation
19	Google Scholar	(Brinia et al., 2023)	Attitudes and Perceptions of School Principals about the Contribution of Evaluation to the Efficient Operation of Schools Both at the Administrative and Educational Levels	Principals recognize the importance of evaluation for weakness identification and improvement. However, when imposed by the state suddenly it creates pressure, stress and fear.	It includes the attitudes and perceptions of the school principals regarding external evaluation.	Convergence of external and internal accountability,
20	Emerald	(Laursen et al., 2024)	Navigating egalitarian culture and accountability pressures: shared instructional leadership practices of Danish school leaders	Under external accountability pressures, principals are imperative of creating a conducive and collaborative environment for achieving student outcomes.	It highlights the leadership practices under scrutiny and how leaders play their role in facilitating the teachers to achieve the expected outcomes.	Atmosphere of shared responsibilities, Guidance & support, imposition of excessive control
21	Springer	(Dadvand, 2024)	Navigating the paradox of excellence and equity in school leadership	A shift from punitive to positive accountability is essential for mitigating the	The study highlights the punitive accountability as one of the many obstacles	Imposition of excessive control, accountability shift

				tensions and conflicts arising from competing goals in education.	in the leadership role while balancing equity and excellence of education.	
22	Sage	(Ganon-Shilon and Becher, 2024)	Principals' sense-making and sense-giving of their professional role tensions: School leaders' professionalism and creative mediation strategies during Covid-19 crisis	School principals were driven by collaborative accountability rather than external accountability and they aligned their ethical values according to the Ministry's standards and protected themselves from demands that were against their moral beliefs.	This study examines the Israeli principals' mediation strategies while facing accountability pressures in the time of crisis in context of sense making and sense giving framework	Alignment with leader's values, Atmosphere of shared responsibilities, Overwhelmed by accountabilities
23	Sage	(Evans, 2025)	An inspector calls! School leaders' perceptions of inspection in Wales	Although leaders acknowledge the significance of accountability, but they were concerned about their inspector's disrespectful conduct and communication.	The study explores the perceptions of leaders about inspection in schools of Wales	Authoritarian accountability, Misconduct and poor communication

Critical Discussion

Articles indicate that most of the school principals in the United States have to confront the challenge of the intersection between internal and external accountability. One of the observed coping strategies is to internalize the accountability process and encourage teachers to take the initiative. Leaders embrace accountability by establishing high standards for teachers and empowering teachers to take initiative and share accountability (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). Principals share the concept of accountability, suggesting that schools should be internally reflective rather than relying on external scrutiny (Ng, 2013). School leaders internalize the external accountability policies and shape them according to their values (Louis and Robinson, 2012).

Most of the leaders were found to be overwhelmed and stressed under the pressures of external accountability, which was imposed without considering their leadership roles. Leaders perceive that the top-down approach by accountability causes organizational problems (Liljenberg, 2015), compromising and hindering organizational effectiveness. Principals define their role as being overwhelmed and all-encompassing, as they experience issues with unclear accountability responsibilities (Heffernan and Pierpoint, 2020). Although they perceive the importance of accountability for improving school performance, they also stress the undermining of accountability practices. Principals regard the overlapped accountability-innovation policy but

criticize the unrealistic goals, narrow achievement measures, and conflicting mandates of accountability that are bringing stress to their role (Watkins et al., 2020).

Whereas some leaders take accountability positively, as it improves their practices and encourages them to achieve their goals, and they remain honest in their work. External accountability also leads to the transparency of the leaders' work. External accountability has a positive impact on the principal's performance-oriented leadership, whereas principals in low-performing schools tend to exhibit strong leadership (Yi and Kim, 2019). Holding influential leaders accountable for their actions could undermine their self-serving behaviours (Rus et al., 2012). However, leaders of low-performing schools exhibit strong leadership because they translate external accountability pressures, in the form of imposed control and coercive measures, into improvements in their school performance. Principals recognize the importance of evaluation, as it serves the purpose of identifying weaknesses and promoting improvement. However, when imposed by the state, it suddenly creates pressure, stress, and fear (Brinia et al., 2023).

Some leaders reported feeling such pressure that they had to comply with the standards, regardless of their will to follow, due to the fear of losing their jobs. Leaders often feel the pressure of compliance and accountability, which compromises their autonomy. While leaders face high demands for accountability, they usually have a fear of failure (Niesche et al., 2021). External accountability instils a sense of compliance among principals, who filter their decisions according to expectations due to a perceived lack of job security (Wang et al., 2021).

Simultaneously, this review found that some leaders are highly content with external accountability practices, approaches, and policies. Principals noted that accountability is sometimes based solely on feedback and clear discussions of the results, creating a space for improvement. Principals have a positive attitude towards accountability due to its low-stakes, feedback-based approach. There is no ranking of schools based on their results, nor are there any punitive actions or threats in case of failure (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022). External accountability sometimes takes on a more valued and supportive approach regarding leaders and teachers, focusing on their work and guiding them throughout the school improvement process. Leaders construct more humane, generative, and responsible accountability to cater to the holistic development of students (Kim, 2022). Some leaders faced external demands and high expectations from their administrators, while others experienced trust, support, and collegial relationships that facilitated the implementation of AFL by the external accountability body (Tolo et al., 2019). Since the COVID-19 crisis, school leaders perceive accountability as a more collaborative task rather than a top-down approach (Ganon-Shilon & Becher, 2024).

The need for a shift from punitive to more collaborative external accountability was observed. Leaders expect and appreciate trust, support, and direction from administrators, rather than merely checking for compliance. Principals want their supervisors to walk with them through the leadership journey rather than imposing control (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). According to leaders' perceptions, on-site visits trump test-based accountability, as they provide administrators with more precise and more detailed information about school performance, rather than relying on judgments based on grades. Principals prefer on-site evaluations over test-based accountability for bringing about sustained change (Bezem, 2023). Under external accountability pressures, some school leaders delegate their responsibilities to teachers to achieve the expected outcomes, as mandated by their external administrators. In doing so, they create a conducive and collaborative environment where teachers are open to acting and making decisions (Laursen et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Over time, an overall shift in accountability policies was observed, from a punitive, compliance-based framework to a more transformational and collaborative model for school improvement. As this narrative review constituted a comparative cross-national study, the perceptions and experiences of leaders varied with different accountability policies and practices. Majorly, the school leaders were overwhelmed and stressed due to external demands, compliance requirements, standardized evaluation, performance pressures, unclear responsibilities, and impractical goals. However, in some schools, leaders also experienced trust-based accountability where administrators allowed leaders the autonomy to make decisions and provided support, guidance, feedback, and motivation, rather than making judgments based on grades. External accountability implementers provided room for mistakes and taking corrective measures. School leaders perceive search accountability as more advantageous for the holistic development of schools and the facilitated attainment of student outcomes. This review aims to provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the lived experiences of school leaders under external accountability. This may inform policymakers and administrators about the strengths of their policies and practices, identify areas for improvement, and provide guidance for future innovation. It reaffirms the necessity of viewing leadership as a more intellectual and interpersonal task rather than just an administrative one. By highlighting the voices of school leaders, it provides insight into external accountability, how it is received, and how it is implemented. Policymakers and administrators should also consult with school leaders when setting standards. Further researchers should focus on longitudinal and ethnographic studies to explore how the perceptions and experiences of educational leaders evolve with the introduction of new accountability policies.

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