

Introduction

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QUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY – CRUCIAL DETERMINANTS OF EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Abstract

Internationally, the quality of education, social justice and accountability can be regarded as key elements of successful school systems and societies. Separately or jointly, these elements can be analysed and debated as distinct fields of study, and linked to an education system to determine the success thereof.

Being a pivotal element of education, much has been said about quality education. The exact nature and definition still seem to evade many scholars and practitioners, though. Governments worldwide may be content that its young citizens' right to education has been fulfilled by merely making it available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable. Many countries reach such a basic benchmark, but without the expected high quality education, real progress will not follow.

Social justice can be regarded as one central ideal and vision for an education system, a concept that includes both juridical and social elements. Similar to quality, scholars admit that the real nature, social intent and exact action associated with social justice is difficult to capture. Societies define social justice differently, and in some contexts it often also includes political undertones. What can be stated, is that social justice discourses are mostly prevalent in societies marred by inequality and injustice. The vision of social justice offers hope for a better future.

The level of accountability amongst public officials, school managers, teachers and students, in turn, is another indicator of the success of an education system. Closely linked to the notion of moral blameworthiness, accountability is a social obligation, based on the *boni mores* of the specific community. While legal systems are largely built on accountability, the standard eventually reached in an education system depends *inter alia* on their understanding of the level of accountability demonstrated by its role-players. Regulations guide the functions and responsibilities of stakeholders associated with a specific activity. Once promulgated, such a law establishes accountability and legal liability.

The central claim of this paper is that a categorically successful education system succeeds in providing an education of a quality higher than mere accessibility, in which social justice is achieved for the students, teachers and the society. These ideals can only be accomplished if a high level of accountability, as is expected by those stakeholders who expect an individual, department or institution to give account of own actions, prevails amongst all role-players.

Introduction

In a search for key requirements for successful school systems and societies, three concepts emerged: quality of education, social justice and accountability.

While a longer list could have been compiled, this paper claims that these elements can be regarded as crucial for success. This paper offers an analysis of these three as distinct fields of study, and are finally brought to fusion as joint indicators for an effective education system.

An international literature overview shows that various scholars link two of the concepts in their research, and discuss the influence of the one on the other. Social justice is, for example, often described in terms of quality education, while accountability is regarded in some literature as a crucial element in the quest for real social justice. In order to eventually reach certain conclusions in this paper regarding their interplay, it is necessary to first find clarity on the particular nature of these concepts.

Conceptual framework

The three identified concepts that jointly serve as determinants for excellence in education, will next be analysed as they manifest in educational contexts internationally. The South African context receives prominent attention in this conceptual framework due to the author's citizenship and research focus.

Quality

Quite rightly regarded as a pivot element of education, much has been said and written about quality education. Various scholars admit that quality is hard to define, a "slippery concept" (Van Kemenade, Pupius & Hardjono, 2008, p. 176) but it can be stated that you recognise it when you see it. In an attempt to explain the nature of quality in education, Johnson (2005, p. 5) argues that "*no matter what standards the public schools achieve, their quality depends on how much the community values their product*". He stresses the fact that the norm to determine quality in education is what people value, and the quality is often defined by those outside the system, not by the school management. Adding politicians to this arena, Tikly and Barrett (2011, p. 6) claim: "*Education quality is a political issue and as such participation in deciding about what are the valued outcomes of education and valued processes to support these should be a matter of debate*". It thus can be stated with some certainty that the quality of any entity is rather determined by external observers than by internal role-players.

Quality is judged from different angles. Van Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono (2008, p. 176) quote Garvin (1984) who discerned five approaches to quality: the transcendental approach; the product-oriented approach; the customer-oriented approach; the manufacturing-oriented approach; and the value-for-money approach. These approaches are not very useful in an attempt to define quality education, since terms such as "product", "customer" and "manufacturing" are not, and should not be integral to education in the pure commercial sense. Firstly, if one has to apply them to education, and dissociate the concept from the commercial connotation, "product" may reflect the extent to which students are deemed to be educated when they leave school, and they are thus referred to as "products" of the school. In such an approach the level of education, as observable in the students, is seen as the norm to determine the quality of the school and the education it provides.

Secondly, in a customer-oriented approach the opinions and perceptions of the students and parents may be the central indicator, consistent with Johnson's

approach, as discussed. The school offers quality education if these stakeholders experience satisfaction. Meier (in Hughes, 2013, pp. 21-22) also agrees that a good school is one where the students are not treated as mere “numbers” or “future members of society”. They should experience the school as a positive environment and an extension of a good childhood.

Thirdly, the “manufacturing” approach is followed when the school is judged by the success and effectiveness of its processes, as observed by a variety of stakeholders. In the South African context, these processes may be the achievements of the sport teams, the students’ academic achievements in the final year, and accomplishments on cultural level such as drama or participation in a choir. In many communities in South Africa activities such as sport and culture are only provided by schools. These are then often used as marketing tools to attract the best students out of the community.

Studying South African schools, Hayward (2006, p. 2) offers five pillars that, if applied in a classroom or school, can ensure quality education. These are:

- Values, as expressed by both the SA Constitution and a specific school’s value system, vision and mission.
- Leadership opportunities given to the full spectrum of stakeholders, including the learners, teachers, School Governing Body, School Management Team and parents.
- A school improvement plan that aims at the enhancement of personal growth, academic results and the co-curricular program.
- The effective communication of strategies with all relevant stakeholders inside and outside the school.
- Improved tools and techniques regarding assessment and evaluation.

Hayward (2006, p. 32) points at the fact that, to ensure a school of quality, these five pillars should “be working together”. He also claims that the success of such model is not primarily dependent on the availability of finances, but rather the commitment of those involved. Rossouw and Niemczyk (2013, p. 3) maintain that such mutual commitment and considerate collaboration is mainly based on the ethical behaviour of those involved in the pursuit of delivering quality work. What can be added as a further factor that impacts on quality, is the context of the school, especially the specific community.

Fellow South African scholars Soudien, Motala and Fataar (2012, p. 4) state that a substantial amount of thought should go into the establishment and maintenance of quality and the experience of it. In this regard, individuals’ relationships with others are also important. They add that:

... while quality is not a fixed thing but is a value which is in constant formation, what makes this value significant is that it has to be substantiated rather than simply asserted. It requires consistent thinking over. Working out what it is is hard and has been the subject of substantial discussion and debate for decades. Individuals, families, schools and systems of education constantly grapple with an understanding and definition of quality that is rigorous.

To conclude this concise conceptualisation, it is clear that quality, while admittedly difficult to define, is often determined by those outside of a specific institution, provided that they make objective observations. Their (sometimes biased) perceptions of what is good and what not, are the determining factors. In

determining excellence in schools, such an approach is often not ideal, seeing that outsiders are not always informed about widely accepted benchmarks against which the academic performance of schools are measured. In the South African context they tend to judge the quality of a school by more obvious and visible factors such as the pass rate in the final year of school, sport achievements, the appearance of the facilities and the rest of the premise, or the way in which they or their children are welcomed on arrival.

Social justice

What is true of attempts to define the concept quality, can also be said about social justice. In her South African oriented study Van Deventer (2013, p. 5) points out that both in South Africa and internationally different emphases are placed on different concepts associated with social justice. She explains:

Scholars of social justice are, however, still struggling to find an encompassing definition for the concept. The literature study has revealed that it is primarily a social concept, essentially difficult to capture, and politically burdened with numerous interpretations (Shoho et al., 2005, p. 48) and differing accents (Marshall & Oliva, 2010, pp. 5-6).

Tikly and Barrett (2011) focus in their research on the quality of education from a social justice perspective. They criticise the scope and applicability of two other perspectives that, at the time of their publication, dominated thinking on education quality, respectively the human capital and human rights based approaches. Tikly and Barrett (2011, p. 3) postulate that a human capital approach to quality in education mainly focuses on economic growth as an indicator, while the human rights approach emphasises the role of the state in guaranteeing basic rights. In the latter case the statement might be an oversimplification of the wide variety of ways in which a human rights approach is factored into quality education. These authors then recommend the social justice approach as a better vehicle for discourses on education quality, seeing that it “can provide a fuller rationale for a policy focus on education quality”.

In South Africa, Turnbull (2014, p. 102) relates the necessity of social justice to the apartheid history:

Following the democratic elections of 1994, the importance of promoting social justice in South Africa post-apartheid was established in the Constitution (1996). The role of education in delivering the Constitution’s intentions was set out in the White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1995), and in subsequent White Papers and policy documents.

Of note here, is Turnbull’s statement that the education system plays a very specific role in the establishment of social justice, at least insofar as it relates to the ideals of the South African Constitution, as promulgated 21 years ago. The preamble of the Constitution (SA, 1996) envisages the following ideals for the constitutional dispensation:

... the Constitution, as the supreme law of the Republic so as to

- *Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;*
- *Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;*

- *Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and*
- *Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.*

Over and above the specific reference to social justice, most of the other concepts included in the preamble also directly or indirectly relate to justice in society. The preamble thus offers a fitting introduction to and sets the tone for a Constitution wherein several values are enshrined in section 1:

Republic of South Africa

The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values:

- a. *Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms.*
- b. *Non-racialism and non-sexism.*
- c. *Supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law.*
- d. *Universal adult suffrage, a national common voters roll, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.*

Of specific relevance in this discussion that aims at defining the concept of social justice are the founding values of human dignity, equality, and freedom. Over the past two decades these three values, together with the right to life, have become household terminology in South Africa, and are also echoed in many mission and vision statements of educational institutions, including public schools and universities. The education system at large, and more notably the schools, play a crucial role in the nation's quest for social justice. As with various other human rights related ideals, the challenge is to (internally) implement the principle of social justice during the education process, and simultaneously (externally) instil it in the wider society. Put in a different way, schools have a double obligation: make social justice and other aspects of human rights a reality for the students during educational activities, and also carry the principles out into the community. Carr and Hartnett (1996, p. 9) confirm another perspective on the important role of schools in the interaction between school and community by stating: "*Any political system shapes education and conversely education unquestionably determines the type of political system that a society will have*".

It can thus be stated that achieving social justice is a process whereby internationally accepted values or those values enshrined in a constitution, bill of rights, some convention or mission statement, is firstly internalised by the associated individuals. This can be done by becoming aware of values as legal imperatives in a bill of human rights, a moral blameworthiness (if not demonstrated), or just a basic ethical approach to life. Secondly: once internalised, these values are lived, demonstrated, and consciously or unconsciously transferred to others. In education at school, the inspirational teacher thus instil these values in students, who, in turn internalise such values and "live them out" towards others. Such a process gives rise to social justice in that society.

Accountability

In education, and beyond the education sphere, accountability is closely linked to the concept of quality: in the absence of the former, the latter is hard to reach. It is

also hard to imagine that social justice will prevail in a society characterised by a lack of accountability.

Bovens (2007, p. 450) briefly defines accountability as “the obligation to explain and justify conduct”, but also offers a more comprehensive definition:

Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences.

Discussing the possibility of accurately defining accountability, Küsters, Truderung and Vogt (2010, p. 526), state that:

... there does not exist a general and convincing definition of accountability that would allow to assess the level of accountability a protocol provides. The few existing formulations of accountability are, for the most part, quite ad hoc and protocol specific.

Nieuwenhuis et al. (2007, p. 103) concur with this element of contextuality by stating that meanings ascribed to accountability depend “on ‘who’ defines it and for ‘what’ purposes they define it”. In her research on accountability owed by Higher Education lecturers, Bothma (2015, p. 129), claims that a clear, generally acceptable definition for accountability does not exist. Similar to both quality and social justice, as discussed, Bothma (2015, p. 129) states that it is:

... a very elusive concept lacking clear scope and boundaries. Contemporary scholarly discourses use accountability as a conceptual umbrella covering everything from transparency and democracy to efficiency, responsiveness and responsibility.

The level of accountability amongst public officials, school managers, teachers and students is an indicator of the success and quality of an education system. Closely linked to the notion of moral blameworthiness, accountability is a social obligation, based on the *boni mores* of the specific community. The standard eventually reached in an education system depends *inter alia* on the level of accountability demonstrated by its role-players. Legal imperatives regulate and guide the functions and responsibilities of stakeholders associated with a specific activity, and, once promulgated as law, such determinants establish accountability or legal liability.

In addition to its general definition, the concept accountability therefore has a legal basis. Accountability as a central value has found its place in the supreme law of South Africa, the Constitution, where in section 1(d), it refers to accountability, responsiveness and openness. Accountability and the other founding values should also be read with the notion and ideal of a *democratic and open society*, as stated in the preamble and reiterated in sections 36 and 39 of the Bill of Rights, which forms chapter 2 of the Constitution.

A key difference between the legal terms accountability and liability, according to Nissenbaum (s.a., p. 1), is the grounds on which each is considered: liability is assessed on the damage experienced by the plaintiff or victim, while accountability is “on the relationship of an agent to an outcome”. Another difference is that accountability is closely linked to the notion of moral blameworthiness referring to those cases where harm done is brought about by a wrongful and negligent action on the side of the agent. Accountability, which is linked to moral blameworthiness, is a

social obligation, based on the *boni mores* of the specific community, while liability is linked to legal measures.

Legal systems are largely built on accountability, seeing that most legal provisions regulate the respective functions, responsibilities, rights and duties of stakeholders associated with a specific activity. Accountability is also the basic premise of delictual liability in cases of damage caused by wrongful and negligent or intentional acts. Accountability is obviously not only a term used by jurists, but it is used and understood much wider as an imperative for a society characterised by order and justice.

In the light of above, accountability refers to a social obligation that has already been established in 2027 (BC). Van Wyk and Chege (2005, p. 26) point to the fact that the Laws of Hammurabi was developed 20 centuries BC to ensure justice in society, to counteract evil and to restrain the powerful from oppression of the vulnerable. It also does not only have such vertical application between a powerful entity such as the state and the weak, such as minority groups or individual citizens. Being held accountable for one's actions is equally applicable on horizontal level, in the relationships between individual citizens. This has been the case since the establishment of civilisation. The Laws of Hammurabi contained the following legal rules:

If a builder has built a house for a man and has not made his work sound, and the house which he has built has fallen down and so caused the death of the householder, that builder shall be put to death.

If it destroys property, he shall replace anything that it has destroyed; and, because he has not made sound the house which he has built and it has fallen down, he shall rebuild the house which has fallen down from his own property.

If a builder has built a house for a man and does not make his work perfect and a wall bulges, that builder shall put that wall into sound condition at his own cost.

—*Laws of Hammurabi [229, 232, 233], circa 2027 B.C.*

Despite strict legal regulation, the phenomenon of not to accept accountability is noticeable in the political world, amongst government officials, and in school communities. It is also part of the relationship between schools and parents, often when the progress of children's education is assessed. Educators blame parents, and vice versa, for the lack of the expected progress. The unwillingness to accept responsibility is arguably one of the most prominent reasons for the absence of quality education in the estimated 75% of South African schools that are currently classified as only partially functional or dysfunctional.

To blame another party for what has gone wrong, or to shift the responsibility for something that still has to be done to another person, is a natural but unacceptable tendency. Looking at education matters in a critical way, as is expected from an academic, will always include an element of blame. This does not, however, exempt any scholar from actively and creatively seeking solutions. It might be that many scholars feel, or might even be convinced that they can personally make no contribution towards the state of affairs in public education. We should accept that there is a certain level of accountability amongst scholars.

Of major concern is the approach of a large segment of teachers regarding their educational and professional duty. If education as a profession is judged, one can

empirically establish the wide range of attitudes towards teaching. Well-functioning South African schools, and even some mediocre schools, have educators in their staff who compare favourably with the best in the world. The adverse influence of members of the dominant teachers' union is, however, clear. Many of these teachers demonstrate an attitude to their duties that is contrary to the international notion of professional conduct. The notorious dysfunctionality of numerous departmental offices, often also due to the influence above-mentioned union, is also apparent. Needless to say, an unfortunate combination exists when educators are not motivated and refuse to be held accountable, the national Department of Basic Education is not functioning well because officials shy away from accountability, and the political will to effectively uplift education is seemingly not strong enough, despite many commendable initiatives from government.

Although above discussion of accountability only scratches the surface of such a complex and vast concept, it should be clear that accountability stands central to the success and quality of any educational endeavour. Alongside equality and social justice, it can rightly be called a crucial indicator for excellence in education.

Fusion of concepts

After an analysis of the most salient characteristics of the three concepts, I am now finally in a position to generate a synthesis of the interplay between the three in selected educational contexts. As stated in the central claim of the paper, these concepts separately (as discussed in the conceptual framework) or jointly, can serve as crucial determinants of excellence in education. If any one of quality, social justice or accountability are regarded as ideals for an education system, they can also serve as indicators of prevailing excellence.

To fuse these concepts is not difficult. Existing links between two of the concepts, and how they influence each other, have been confirmed in the literature analysis of the conceptual framework. Tikly and Barrett (2011, p. 3), for example, postulate that quality education is directly linked to and dependent upon social justice. Also confirming an existing link, it has been established that the level of accountability amongst role-players in education is an indicator of the quality of an education system. Again, quality depends on another factor, in this case accountability.

Based on such cause-effect reasoning, I want to conclude the paper through the formulation of three extended statements, in which I fuse all three concepts in an attempt to establish the triangular interplay that emerged. Firstly, once accountability and social justice have become established characteristics of an education system on national, local, school or class level, it will lead to education of a higher quality. There are obviously a myriad of other factors that play a role in the establishment of quality education, but the relative absence of accountability and social justice will decay any system to such an extent that real quality education will be rendered non-existent. If a teacher does not experience justice in the social context of the school community, it will inevitably lead to a decline in motivation, effectively diminishing quality teaching. If a teachers' union fails to establish and maintain accountability as an organisation or amongst its members, the education system has a slim chance of witnessing quality education provision in those schools where the majority are members of such union.

Secondly, prevailing and sustained accountability and quality education jointly will contribute to social justice amongst students and teachers. If teachers approach their educational task with integrity and visible accountability, and simultaneously uphold the students' right to education of a high quality, such students have a good chance of experiencing social justice. Students will witness that certain values have been internalised by the teachers, and that they acknowledge students' human rights. Education of such a nature has an excellent chance of establishing and internalising the same values in the individual student, who will in turn live it out in his or her interactions with others.

Thirdly, a link can be established between quality education and social justice on the one side, and a resulting higher level of accountability. Teachers who actively aim at offering and maintaining quality education, and simultaneously strive towards social justice by standing for certain values in their relationships, are also those teachers who embody accountability in its ideal form. The negative of such argument is equally true: an absence of quality education provision and a lack of acknowledgement of social justice principles, denying others' their human rights, are invariably associated with a lack of accountability.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that a categorically successful education system succeeds in providing an education of a quality higher than mere accessibility, one in which social justice is experienced by the students, teachers and the school community. It can ultimately be stated that accountability prevails over the other two concepts: any ideal regarding social justice or quality education can only be accomplished once a high level of accountability, as is expected by those stakeholders who expect an individual, department or institution to give account of own actions, is established amongst all role-players.

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