Transparency and Accountability in School Governance

Atukunda Lucky

Faculty of Business Administration and Management Kampala International University Uganda
Email:lucky.atukunda@studwc.kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Transparency and accountability are fundamental pillars of good governance, particularly in the education sector where institutional integrity directly affects student outcomes and public trust. This paper examines the intersection of transparency and accountability within school governance structures, focusing on how legal frameworks, stakeholder engagement, and technological innovation influence decision-making and institutional behavior. Using Nigeria and comparative international examples, the study highlights persistent challenges—such as the accountability gap, ineffective participation, and regulatory ambiguity—and presents best practices for overcoming these obstacles. It further explores the implications of transparency on educational quality and outcomes, emphasizing that governance mechanisms must be inclusive, participatory, and data-informed to be truly effective. Ultimately, this paper calls for systemic reforms rooted in legal clarity, community involvement, and technological integration to ensure educational institutions fulfill their democratic and developmental roles.
Keywords: Transparency, Accountability, School Governance, Educational Policy, Legal Frameworks, Stakeholder Participation, Public Sector Reform.

INTRODUCTION

Accountability and transparency are relevant for good governance, which is a government based on leadership, respect for the rule of law, and the accountability of the political leadership to the electorate, and between the government and the governed. The two concepts are interrelated. Accountability refers to leaders giving account to the society they lead; the political leadership of a nation is accountable to the electorate; civil servants are accountable to their political heads, the internal control mechanism of the government is equally accountable to the external control mechanism such as the judiciary, the parliament, and the media; and between the terrestrial and celestial beings, the celestial beings, especially the god of heaven, must call human beings to account for their deeds or misdeeds here on earth, no matter how hidden. Accountability could be ex-ante (before acts), ex-post (after acts), and ongoing (continuous). Transparency is the opposite of secrecy. It involves conducting government business with an unprecedented openness, usually in verbal, written, and documentary forms, so that the citizenry can easily verify what rules govern public affairs or what policies govern any public action. Transparency ensures that public institution gatherings are open to the public, attendance and voting at the meetings are recorded and made publicly accessible, and public institutions' policies, regulations, guidelines, and strategies, among others, are made accessible in all written forms. However, this has not been the case in contemporary Nigeria, where it is commonplace for a significant proportion of the citizenry to denounce, condemn, and disparage their public institutions as being corrupt, incapable, unworthy, unjust, and hostile. Though the Nigerian leadership in very recent times has made attempts to brand the country and its institutions as being incorruptible, capable, worthy, just, and friendly both abroad and at home, public perception and frameworks on the country and its institutions remain the same. In 2000, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria lamented that all efforts to control corruption in the political, civil, military, police, and public service institutions in the country had either failed or had been undermined. The Nigerian political elite, according to, is like a fish that would harm itself if it refuses to harm others. However, with respect

to public accountability of institutions, few scholarly works appear to have been done in Nigeria. Indeed, it is now an accepted fact that democracy must go hand in hand with accountability [1, 2].

The Importance of Transparency in Education

Transparency is about educating citizens on available options and fostering a spirit of friendship. It involves shifting the focus from "what should be done" to "what is done," revealing often unseen aspects of services. There is a need to guide individuals on articulating their opinions, despite management's biases in decision-making. While transparency might not always yield clear insights in governance, it still holds value. Openness serves as a social mechanism for processing current information, yet risks obscuring management intentions. The necessity of involving stakeholders complicates decision-making, as rigid participation limits can hinder valuable contributions. Consequently, transparency may lose its significance or become ineffective due to over-explanations. When actions are disclosed, arguments based on privacy can diminish interest, suggesting that transparency alone cannot guide governance, as motivations might remain unexamined. The communicative aspect of transparency indicates that meaning relies on discussions. Observers in society may sense unexpected occurrences, and the interpretative side of transparency plays a crucial role. Thus, it is essential for society to engage in discourse about what is deemed informative or persuasive concerning facts. When messages are scrutinized collectively, they transform into communicative tools, empowering individuals to evaluate and critique effectively [3, 4].

Defining Accountability in School Governance

Schools are crucial for transforming individuals and hence society. However they can also be centers of ignorance, poverty, and moral decadence. Like other organizations, schools require rules for effective performance. Governance is the process by which individuals who have authority or control make significant decisions and establish expectations for the behavior of others. In their role as evaluators of existing goals and means, the governing body seeks to ensure the institution's long-term viability and effectiveness in achieving its aims. Accountability has gained prominence as a core value for measuring and evaluating government and public office performance since the mid-to-late 1990s in developing countries. This trend was due to factors including intense global calls for accountability, transparency, effective participation, and rule of law in both international and domestic governance. In Education, the ability of governments/schools to improve outcomes will depend on a combination of these key factors. It is essential that education systems improve processes of accountability between various actors (micro level) and the school up to the minister (macro level), reinvigorating the roles of parents, teachers, students, and data analysis on the performance of the system. Overwhelming evidence confirms that accountability relationships are effective in raising outcomes and improving quality for both low- and middle-income countries. Education Governance encompasses the systems and relationships through which authority, control, and accountability over education policies are exercised. Educational governance has shifted dramatically in both content and style in response to the contradictions and challenges arising from globalization and the ongoing multi-faceted reform efforts in education [5, 6].

Legal Frameworks Supporting Transparency

Most democratic countries have adopted Freedom of Information laws (FOIs), aligning with the principle of the right to access information established in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and codified in the 2011 United Nations Convention against Corruption. The first Access to Information Law acts originated from civil society, with Sweden adopting its law in 1766 and the United States in 1966. Since 1990, nearly half of countries have implemented FOIs, with notable growth in transparency laws in recent years. These laws mandate governments to provide public access to records upon request, establishing a framework for interaction between public authorities and information seekers, which can involve conflicting interests. The behavior of public authorities and information recipients is shaped by these legal frameworks, reflecting what can be described as transparency institutions. These frameworks should address disclosure, capacity, and attitude, as public accountability relies on scrutinizing government records. This accountability also pertains to the dynamics between information providers and recipients, who may act individually or collectively. Governed by authorities, the information generation process may encounter decisions that limit access, representing the "dark side" of transparency, whereas compulsory rules on record production and access constitute the "shining light" side. These rules, although sometimes viewed negatively as compliance burdens, can promote transparency when the costs of secrecy rise. Clarifying legal arrangements for complying with these rules fosters a better understanding of disclosure and practices essential for effective transparency regimes. Despite a global surge in attention to transparency, current measures still lack clarity on implementation, leaving many proactive disclosure obligations vague. There is a broad agreement that citizens should have easier access

to information without needing to request it, yet governments have not clearly outlined what constitutes such information or the timing for its disclosure [7, 8].

Best Practices for Enhancing Transparency

The threat of cookie-cutter regulations, the return-on-investment argument, the cry for discretion—the wars between transparency philosophy and political practice in the public sector rage on. With defiance of hope for change, unequally waxed and waned battles of information openness fought during the Age of Enlightenment resurfaced in the early twenty-first century. Amid a renewed dedication to open governance in the realm of both policy scholarship and practice, forces destructively conspired, sporadically enhancing or undermining the effort, thus tearing tight its public face. To the enemies of public accountability, a hollow smile masking reticence and monadic power, the intangible benefits, like the most intangible public trust, are lost offences compared to the tangible gains certain to spring from procedural manipulation. Whether exposed to the Outer Information Universe or encased in the fortress of the Inner Public Centre, information has pervaded governmental operations. Alas, paradoxically, the conundrum of public accountability same as that tenaciously frustrating Leviathan's true independently associative privacy has always been skirted. Ideal notions of information openness—the whole of potential information being open without restriction—inevitably confront limits imposed by competing notions, notably information privacy. Hopefully, in this crowded landscape of information provision, duly constructed mechanisms of checks and balances among branches of power—legislature, executive, and judiciary—would manage to safeguard the self-sustaining design of sanity check [9, 10].

Challenges To Transparency

Formal School Governance is protecting the students' rights to education, which are also their human rights. Hence, school governors must consider the school's goal in planning and running the school. There must be transparency so that the governors can account for their actions. Therefore, an essential point of the analysis will be how formal school governance has developed transparency. The larger the accountability/delegation gap, the transparency of formal school governance instruments is, less the gap, the transparency. Demands for school governance to show accountability are being made in every country and at all government levels. The method in which they must implement accountability is often described as formal or "a rule of law." Formal governance on behalf of the legislature delegates certain tasks to governing entities. This delegation can lead to a gap between the governance activities and the decision-makers' intention. This gap can also be filled with new formal governance instruments, which would apply to both new and ancient actors. This path might lead to new institutions or agencies tasked with overseeing agents' conduct instead of using the existing instruments and agencies that would control the new actors. The accountability gap may also deceive the ruling democracy into thinking the decision-makers are able to control their agents, while their instruments fail to do so in practice. In either case, following this path may eventually enlarge the accountability gap instead of improving it. A school governance committee is to be formed in every country, at every school, consisting of parents with voting rights and representatives of other bodies, parents of students. Such committees are here with the authority to supervise the school's operation. In every country, the representatives of the education system, i.e., the members of the governing body, are elected by the representatives of the parents of the schools, by population in proportion to the selection of the agenda. Until the 1980s, the legislation was passed, but as of now, the pasts of the golden 1980s until the new century, of concerted efforts to focus on targeting clear goals for the education system, remain very vague [11, 12].

Accountability Mechanisms in Schools

Accountability is defined as a system in which agents are held to account for their performance. Its major elements are publicly articulated standards of performance, independent evaluations of performance, and the granting of authority to act or, conversely, sanctions to change behavior. Thus, systems of accountability require both professional discretion in the organization of a service and effective interventions in the event of poor performance. Accountability systems in Tanzanian education and their consequences, like diverse forms of accountability and multiple ways of implementing them, are elaborated in the context of forms of decentralization. This provided evidence of both systemic equity problems and a wide divergence of policy ideologies and underlying governance mechanisms. Thus, the occurrence of educational accountability studies in Tanzania and their differences in policy and institutional perspective, as well as in content, are first discussed [13, 14].

Case Studies of Successful Governance

A Midwest urban district launched an initiative for engaging parents, students, teachers and staff, community members, and partners with school governance and board of education processes. These stakeholder communities were provided periodic updates on current issues and long-range plans, and

invited to participate in regular polls on instructional and governance policies. Resulting disagreements generated fears of public confrontation, keeping them outside the governing process, despite earlier enthusiasm. The research and data collection for this case were accomplished via telephone discussions and email communications with the steering committee of the stakeholder group. The committee itself was formed from parents and community leaders concerned about insufficient information regarding the district's goals and products. The steering committee members varied in ethnicity, language, and social class, but met several times to draft the first set of questions used in the polls. Two more sets of questions were later added, and a panel was formed to review the written communications prepared by the steering committee and decide on their publication. Once a month, a question paper was sent to all parents electronically or by mail to students. The paper contained a brief background description for each question. It was important to keep this description short and easy to understand. The deadline for responses was set as fifteen days after the distribution. In total, three formal papers were published by the steering committee. In addition, various statistics on poll discussions and governance meetings were published. After the receipt of ballots, responses were keyed into a computer system to verify their accuracy, and analyzed for statistical results. The results were then distributed to steering committee members, the panel, and the district administration for future action. A large suburban district initiated a community-based process to develop a plan for shared vision, governance, student performance six years before outside intervention. Educators and community members held discussions and generated scenarios about the future of their schools. Particular governance strategies were highlighted, and a citizen-based governance council and school governance teams were formed to facilitate the process. The district's budget process was significantly altered to require funding proposals to be posted for one week in order to seek citizen input prior to the Board vote [15, 16].

The Role of Technology in School Governance

Technology is increasingly important in the governance of schools, from improving how schools express and enact their accountability and governance, to being part of the very fabric of schools themselves. Emerging technologies offer both possibility and temptation for self-interested control of governance by the few, regarding the lives of the many. In circumstances where the role of technology in accountability and governance is both dispersed and contestable, schools will be judged by their ability to use technology intelligently to enhance participation, discussion, argument, and ultimately consent. Technology is changing most aspects of the management and administration of schools and school systems. From data management systems to budgetary accounting, administration is increasingly driven by technology. Critically this also means that larger systems must insist on the appropriate use of technology and that the information that they deliver should be accessible to all members of the system. In countries with compulsory national assessment programs for students, technology is also changing the heart of the school, schools are increasingly subjected to statutory accountability through such systems. Technology plays a key role in driving schools' compliance with demands for performance data. However, unlike other areas of governance, national and state agencies cannot so easily apply performance management regimes to disparities in the presentation of data. On the contrary, the presentation of the data itself is the object of the governance. While states can specify the format, schools' technology inheritances and the skill and willingness of school staff to make the data accessible and interpretable, vary in ways that are difficult to manage. Thus, in the presentation of performance data technology is a powerful influence driving the ability of schools to act in responsible and compliant ways. Future schools will need to shape their technological environments in ways that generate normalised governance of a performing system [17, 18].

The Impact of Transparency on Student Outcomes

Though transparency and accountability issues are universal, some nations, like Jordan, face more severe challenges. This research provides insights into local perspectives on accountability and governance, aiming to spark study and dialogue among those wanting to change the socio-political landscape in Arab states toward improved governance. It serves as a resource for both policymakers and civil society to evaluate how these conditions affect interactions between state and civil society, thus guiding socio-political dialogue and fostering development. Transparency serves as a mechanism for enhancing accountability and governance. By holding public officials responsible for their actions, civil society can ensure integrity in government and equitable access to economic opportunities. The ultimate benefit of transparency is increased public trust, efficiency, and fairness. Public oversight can significantly influence the functioning of public administration and help correct government actions. This research gathers insights from various stakeholders in Jordan regarding accountability and governance, aiming to ignite discussions that could enhance state-society relations. Semi-structured interviews will rigorously question established perceptions about Jordan's socio-political climate from diverse viewpoints [19, 20].

Engaging Parents and Community in Governance

In many countries around the world, legislation has been passed to engage parents and the community in school governance. In South Africa for example, it is entrenched in the South African Schools Act of 1996. The Act built on the precedent set by the former NP government by transferring the governance of every public school into the hands of parents through the establishment of a School Governing Body (SGB). For once, parents play a pivotal role in the appointment of principals, teachers and non-teaching staff, deciding on the language policy of the school, control and maintenance of school property and determining school fees. In recognizing the right of parents to govern schools, the government hoped to restructure the school system to one which cannot only provide equitable access to quality education, but also one which is accountable to parents. How success has been the SGB in engaging parents and the community in school governance? What problems have been encountered? What suggestions can be forwarded for effective parent engagement? These are questions this article seeks to explore. The philosophy underpinning the article is the democratic theory of education. A democratic school allows all stakeholders to participate in deliberation on school governance issues. In such an environment, stakeholders acquire necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours through active democratic involvement of the parents. Educators, especially rural school principals, have responsibility to create such an atmosphere. It is argued that the extent of stakeholder participation is determined by the complexity of the participation mechanism. While answering the crucial question of 'how to engage the public in school governance democratically and appropriately?', it is observed that it is so contorting to engage stakeholders in governance decision making. Too complex of a mechanism will be a hurdle for stakeholders to participate. Schools also have their precise governance goals. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary to engage in limited participation. Nonetheless, the non-participative governance should consider the purpose and transparency of decision making, to let stakeholders understand the situation and avoid misunderstanding [21, 22].

Policy Recommendations for Improved Governance

Policy Option 1: Uniformity in School Governance Structure and Functions. Organizations have changed their structures in response to challenges and mandates. Local school governance must evolve from basic compliance to effective functioning of governance policies. Advocates for school-based governance are needed to establish consistency in the constitution and operation of governing bodies. Given the need for balancing childcare and formal education, educational departments must ensure that governance policies guarantee uniform quality of education across all schools. Policy Option 2: School Performance Targets and School Development Plans School governance structure is just one factor in school performance. Evidence shows that equitable quality education relies on accountability, consultation, and greater parent involvement beyond management accountability. Therefore, school performance targets and development plans should accompany centralized governance policies. Authorities must ensure these targets address admission and retention, recruitment, professional growth, and resource planning while avoiding limits that caused past failures. Policy Option 3: Parent Development and Governance Contingencies. There is a need for advocacy for school performance and parent-friendly plans, alongside the involvement of parents in their children's education. Educational authorities should create a charter outlining parent roles, focusing on integrating formal, informal, and mutual involvement [23, 24].

Future Trends in School Governance

In this paper, we will look at future trends in governance, focusing on three themes: emerging knowledge-based governance, shifting sources of accountability, and a confluence of democratic, technocratic, and commercial influences on governance. These trends point towards more complex arrangements being in place for decision-making, accountability, and consultation in education globally. Increasingly, governance processes will involve negotiable and contentious relationships with a growing array of stakeholders. More diverse technology and workforce arrangements for educational provision will challenge governance conventions with potentially significant implications for stakeholder participation. Increasingly, there is a demand for 'knowledge-based governance' (KBG) in education to ensure that technologies and expertise are used effectively in governance arrangements. Significant investments are being made worldwide to address the governance gap created by the fact that many boards and parents do not have access to the information, social capital, and specialist knowledge required to engage as informed governing partners. In education, KBG initiatives are manifesting through standardised 'education dashboards' which allow for swift access to a broad set of operational, performance, and capacity data clearly and engagingly. Problems relate to trustworthiness, frequency, and granularity of the data, and how to present it to governance audiences. New governance systems will emerge in response to proposed KBG arrangements in education. Some initiatives will aim for consistent

use across large jurisdictions, while many will aim for locally constructed arrangements. The proposed KBG arrangements will challenge existing governance both to provide better information about governance participation and practice, and also to account to stakeholders regarding how information about governance practices is used and shared in public discourse [25, 26].

CONCLUSION

Transparency and accountability are not merely administrative concepts but moral imperatives in school governance. They form the foundation upon which trust, participation, and educational equity are built. Despite various global and national efforts to enforce legal frameworks and implement oversight mechanisms, challenges such as accountability gaps, ambiguous regulations, and insufficient stakeholder involvement persist. This study underscores that improving school governance requires more than procedural compliance—it demands an ongoing commitment to openness, inclusive dialogue, and informed decision-making. Technological tools, legal reforms, and community empowerment must work synergistically to reshape governance cultures. When schools become models of transparency and accountability, they not only enhance educational outcomes but also reinforce democratic values and social cohesion. The path forward must be one of collaborative engagement, where all stakeholders— governments, educators, parents, and students—actively contribute to building institutions that are just, responsive, and future-ready.

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