Can the global trend toward accountability be reconcile with ideals of teacher empowerment? 
Theory and practice in Guinea

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Abstract

Between 1994 and 2002, Guinea implemented an ambitious program designed to enable teams of primary school teachers to become full partners in the mobilization of the educational system by initiating and carrying out their own professional development and school improvement projects. Known by its French acronym PPSE, this program was not originally framed in accountability language. But upon closer reflection, the authors of this article discuss the ways in which accountability was built into the program. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In the introduction to this issue, Tatto discusses the global trend toward policies which “seem directed at taking control of education away from teachers and teacher educators.” This article examines the case of a country—Guinea in West Africa—that for a time ran somewhat counter to this trend, but without turning its back on accountability altogether. The chapter is in short an analysis of the interplay between accountability and teacher empowerment in Guinea.

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2. Reform initiatives and teacher development

Efforts to reform Guinean teachers' work and their preparation and professional development have been incremental, opportunistic and eclectic, but not at all revolutionary. When the French Cooperation returned to Guinea in 1984, after about 25 years of absence, France resumed its influence over education at the primary level through technical, financial and logistical support to upgrade primary school teachers in French and mathematics; training the first cohorts of primary teacher educators, pedagogical advisors and school inspectors; and supporting curriculum renewal and textbook production. Moreover, most of the cadre of school inspectors trained in Dakar under French influence are still in place as Regional Inspectors or Prefectoral Directors of Education. Given their key position within the system, they are arguably the most effective means for ensuring France's hold on the educational system as far as teacher subject-matter preparation, curriculum delivery and measurement of pupil achievement are concerned. But during the same period, several other important international players attempted to influence educational reforms in Guinea as well, including the World Bank, USAID and the German Cooperation. The WB was instrumental in the design and implementation of two consecutive education sector adjustment programs.

In 1994, the World Bank sponsored an ambitious scheme for professional development of practicing primary school teachers. The goal of the program was to enable teachers to become full partners in the mobilization of the educational system by initiating and carrying out their own professional development and school improvement projects. Given past failures of top-down reform, rather than imposing changes from the top, this program sought to give teachers more professional autonomy. With the help of ministry personnel designated as facilitators, teams of teachers (formed within or across schools) designed projects and competed for small grants to carry them out. Those selected for funding were offered a quasi-contract in which the ministry promised to provide the resources teachers had requested in their proposal and budget in return for the teachers' commitment to carry out a systematic plan of activities to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. After being piloted in two regions and part of a third in the interior of the country between 1995 and 1997, the program—known by its French acronym PPSE—expanded incrementally to all other regions in two phases between 1997 and 1999 (see Diallo, Camara, Schwille, Dembélé, & Bah, 2001; Schwille, Dembélé, & Diallo, 2001 for a discussion of the program's planned expansion).

The main organizational elements of the program are summarized diagrammatically in Fig. 1. It illustrates the fact that the program was able to engage people who were already in place in the various ministry offices at central, regional, prefectural and sub-prefectural levels to play complementary roles or to be members of some program structure. Each year, the small grants competition began with a series of workshops for groups of teacher teams, led by a facilitator. By the fifth year of program implementation, more than 15,000 teachers (representing about 2/3 of the country's primary teaching force) had participated in these workshops. At the workshop, the facilitator presented the program's operational manual and proposal writing guide and assisted the teachers in starting to write a grant proposal. Teachers determined the actual project content and prepared their own budget for the supplementary resources they needed to carry out their project. Upon completion of the preliminary proposal after two school visits by the facilitator for further revision, the proposal was submitted to a prefectural jury, presided by the Prefectoral Director of
Education and composed of local educational leaders. The most promising proposals were then sent back to the teacher teams, along with written feedback from the prefectoral jury, for revision/improvement with still more help from the facilitator. Finalist proposals were submitted to a regional jury which made the final decision.

Fig. 1. Program structure.
Selected teams were granted full funding, while other teams who reached the second stage received consolation prizes in kind. The selected teams were given project implementation support. This included a project launch workshop at the beginning of the school year, close-to-school assistance through the project cycle from the project facilitator and often other resource persons as well, plus three visits by an evaluator. To encourage further school improvement, teams had the possibility of renewing their grants for a second and third year.

2.1. A vision of empowerment with accountability

A PPSE team, if successful, could be funded for 3 consecutive years. Such long-term involvement in the program was expected to facilitate and reinforce internalization by teachers of the habits of innovative problem solving at school level that the program was trying to introduce into the Guinean educational system.

PPSE is thus premised on the interrelated assumptions that we cannot bypass teachers to improve teaching and learning in classrooms, that making teachers full partners in their own professional development is an effective incentive for engaging them in professional development, and that authentic and serious teacher professional development must be directly linked with classroom teaching and student learning (Dembélé, 1999). Guinea is thus among the rare developing countries that have taken seriously research-based recommendations for effective continuing teacher professional development (see Craig, Kraft, & Plessis, 1998; Day, 1999; Elmore, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Lieberman & Miller, 1992, 2001; Schwille & Dembélé, 2007; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

Originally, PPSE was not framed in accountability language. The primary aim was not to hold teachers or teacher educators accountable. But upon closer reflection, we (as consultants in the development of the program) had to own up to the fact that we and our Guinean collaborators had built a lot of accountability into this program. In what ways was accountability built into Guinea’s Small Grants Staff Development and School Improvement Program? This is the central question that we address below.

3. The reciprocal accountability of the Ministry and teachers to one another

PPSE is an example of the combination of professional and bureaucratic/administrative accountability (O’Day, 2004, p. 33). Accountability in the context of this program means holding both sides accountable to carrying out the work required by the quasi-contract. From the Ministry of Education side, it means providing the promised support to enable each team of teachers to engage in professional development in ways that are beneficial to them and their students. From the teacher side, it means convincing juries of the worth of their proposals and, after receiving funding, doing what they have proposed. This reciprocal accountability is built on the following principles: competition based on merit, explicit expectations, authentic training and nondirective assistance to meet these expectations, combining internal and external evaluation, the need to make a case for dissemination, and transparency throughout.

3.1. Competitive allocation of program resources with merit review of proposals as an instrument of accountability

Since no country is capable of implementing a new, complex nationwide program of organizational support for teachers effectively all at once in every classroom, some way of
reducing the initial cohort is necessary. A competitive process was considered appropriate to keep the program manageable and as quality control—in short, as one instrument of accountability.

In the case of PPSE, juries were called on to do this work. There were two levels of juries: a jury at the level of each of the 38 prefectures (and urban communes) and a jury at the level of the eight administrative regions of Guinea. In each case, the juries were predominantly composed of key persons in the Ministry of Education at that level. Since at the beginning, we [1] were not sure that jury decisions would be based on merit rather than on various sorts of relationships and favouritism as is commonly the case in many Sub-Saharan African countries (Van de Walle, 2001), much attention was given to the training and monitoring of juries especially in the first years so that the jury system would indeed serve as one of the main instruments of accountability. Initially, jury work was observed and in cases where adherence to the prescribed criteria and procedures seemed weak, arrangements were made for additional special training.

Nevertheless, if we had any questions about whether the juries were going to take their work seriously, this concern was greatly reduced by the first regional jury in Labé (chaired by the regional inspector or superintendent of schools for one of the eight educational regions of Guinea). Using their special criteria and rating procedures, this jury worked extremely hard on 130 proposals for a whole month before they selected 54 teacher projects to be funded. Thus, the initial problem turned out not to be one of getting the jury to take its work seriously, but rather to find ways to make the process less time consuming. However, in the following years, although there were still relatively few accusations of bias in the work of juries, in general there was not enough continued training of juries and monitoring of their work to be sure that merit remained as determining a factor in selection of projects as it was in the first years.

3.2. Detailed program documentation to specify the expectations to which all participants could be held accountable

One of our initial efforts in this respect was the first training seminar for facilitators held in Labé in May 1995. It set the standard and tone for subsequent training events by relying on authentic tasks (in this case the writing of simulated proposals for PPSE projects), which could be extensively discussed and evaluated during the course of the seminar itself. The following is an illustrative excerpt from a paper on that seminar:

The prospective facilitators were divided into small groups for the writing of the simulated proposals. The guide had been pre-tested a number of times by the national and international team with small groups of teachers and revised each time. It includes various sections which are intended to form the outline of the proposals teachers would be asked to write to describe the project they would carry out if funded. The guide is conventional enough, even ordinary in its content and organization. But helping teachers to understand and use this process when they have no prior experience with it and when they are used to receiving direction for all their work is a challenge.

Therefore in the seminar to prepare the facilitators, we focused intensively on the guide, working on each section in turn, beginning with an explanation of that section,
continuing with small groups to write the corresponding sections of the group’s simulated proposal. These drafts were in turn described by each group in a plenary session. The writing was facilitated by members of the national and international team who observed each group and offered advice, without being too directive (Schwille & Dembélé, 1997).

We also learned at an early stage the importance of providing precise written instructions for group and individual work within all training events and conferences. The Guinean seminar as we came to understand it through our work on this program embodies a respect for the written word which has few parallels in our North American experience. Some things are to be said and some things are to be written down, and the two were not only not interchangeable, but there is also for many seminar activities a strong preference for reaching consensus on a written text. We therefore learned to produce written instructions for all small group activity and individual work. This has great advantages in forcing the seminar leaders to think through these instructions more carefully, knowing that they will be taken literally by participants who are not likely to go off on their own even when the instructions leave much to be desired.

3.3. Frequent training events and professional development meetings to ensure that the project’s accountability policies and practices were taken seriously

To allow the structures to function effectively and the people involved to competently play their respective roles, the program provided training for the entire spectrum of personnel involved. Among most notable training activities were the following:

- Introductory workshops for teacher teams;
- Initial 2 week preparation workshop for first cohort of facilitators;
- Second 6 day session for facilitators;
- Special initial week-long preparation workshop for first cohort of evaluators;
- Combination of formal and on-the-job training for second, third, etc., cohorts of facilitators and evaluators;
- Initial 5-day preparation workshop for jury members;
- Two-day in-service meetings for all facilitators and evaluators every other month;
- Annual week-long launch/management/evaluation workshop for funded teams;
- Initial 5-day preparation workshop for new regional coordinators;
- Various planning workshops for national and regional program leaders.

Each of these activities was somewhat different in terms of content, but they had one common denominator: they were all highly participatory, product-oriented, authentic and grounded in earlier experiences and products (see Schwille & Dembélé, 1997). The products of any training session, whether actual or simulated, formed the basis for subsequent sessions. They enhanced the authenticity of learning tasks and contributed to motivating participants to take these tasks seriously. They also reinforced the ideal of teacher as active learner.
3.4. Helping schools live up to expectations through regular visits and assistance without being too directive

For several years, as indicated in the previous section, the small grant competition process began with a series of workshops for groups of teacher teams, led by facilitators. During these workshops, the facilitators explained the program’s basic philosophy, procedures and documents (including an operational manual and a proposal writing guide), but their primary task was to guide teachers’ first steps in grant proposal writing. They provided guidance while making sure the content of the proposals was left to the teachers, for the projects had to be theirs, not the facilitators’. In other words, their task consisted in facilitating a process, not teaching or imposing a particular content. To ensure this, facilitators were repeatedly encouraged not to be too directive or “dirigiste.”

To help teachers continue to write their preliminary proposals, the program provided close-to-school follow-up. Thus, each team was visited twice in their school by a facilitator after the initial workshops.

According to a regional program leader, the facilitators took the advice not to be too dirigiste to heart:

Previously the facilitators were good inspectors, but these were classical-type inspections. They came, sat down—sometimes like a police officer with an attitude that got little out of the teachers who immediately got upset. But now the facilitators have become collaborators. When they arrive in a class to be helped, they start out by motivating, and the teachers respond by putting forth their best efforts, both in the lesson and its preparation. The facilitators ask the teachers to critique themselves and the teachers agree to do this. The facilitators then say what they see as good and not so good and ask the teachers if they agree. The teachers are willing to be criticized and to correct what’s wrong because there will be a follow-up when the facilitator comes back and sees that the teacher has made the corrections (Schwille & Dembélé, 1997, italics added).

Successful teacher teams were provided with further project implementation support. A launch workshop aimed at preparing teachers to implement their projects, including carrying out planned training and evaluation activities, documenting project implementation, and submitting required financial and activity reports. It ended with a formal ceremony of contract signing between the teacher team representatives, the program’s regional coordinator, and the regional inspector of education. This signing of the contract symbolized each party’s commitment to carrying out its duties.

3.5. Mixing internal and external evaluations

Many thorny issues were raised by the need to assess the effectiveness and justify funding for this innovative, unconventional program giving primary school teachers in a hierarchical, centralized educational system more responsibility for their own professional development. In a word, there are sticky questions of how to hold teachers accountable in this situation.

The compromise approach to evaluation was built into the program in two ways. First and foremost, the teacher projects were intended to be self-documenting. In other words, the teachers were required to document what they were doing and to collect data to find
out how much their project improved teaching and learning in their classrooms. Their evaluation design had to be described in their proposal and the results of this evaluation discussed in a final synthesis report. The intent in this final report was for them to make a case for their findings in as persuasive a way as possible for purposes of disseminating the results and convincing other audiences.

The program attempted to take advantage of the fact that the process of evaluation itself is an opportunity for professional development, and was designed as a way to help teachers think and learn about what it takes to find out if their teaching and student learning had improved as intended by their projects, how to proceed if the project was not meeting its objectives, and how to make a convincing case to outsiders that the intended improvements had indeed taken place. For these reasons, priority was given to a mostly internal formative approach, but organized in ways which would lay the groundwork for a later external summative evaluation of the entire program.

Thus, evaluation was seen as integral part of this program from the beginning. At the end of the first iteration of the program in 2002, there were about 100 evaluators selected from among mid-level Ministry of Education personnel. Each of these evaluators was expected to devote 50 days of work to the program each year.

The initial program documentation makes the importance of evaluation clear in two ways. First, early drafts of the operational manual in 1994 created an evaluator role to be, along with the facilitator, one of the key organizational support roles for the teacher teams. The need for a separate evaluator was premised on the assumption that facilitators would inevitably assume some ownership of the projects and hence would not be able to evaluate their projects from a fresh and less-biased perspective. While the evaluators are not external to the Ministry, they are organizationally independent of the teams of teachers and their projects.

In all such activities, as would be expected, it was the evaluators who received the most evaluation training. The training of the first cohort of evaluators focused on writing good reports on meetings and activities in a special PPSE format. This format encouraged detailed observation and clear separation of evaluative/interpretive comments from the descriptive report. Evaluators were required to make three visits per year to each funded team. Detailed guidelines were developed for these visits, each of which lasted between 3 and 5 days. While the first visit was baseline assessment, the second visit at the middle of the year was conceived as an occasion to find out what the team has accomplished to date, what progress had it made in implementing its proposal. The third and final visits took place near the end of the project and toward the end of the year. It focused, not simply on whether the teachers had implemented their project but more directly on its impact—both on teacher learning and student learning.

This first year experience led to major changes in the evaluation procedures and further experimentation the next year. Although improvement was noted, difficulties persisted and were followed by still further changes. The basic format of three evaluator visits to examine the starting point, implementation and impact of the project was maintained, but with numerous changes of responsibility for teachers, facilitators and evaluators to make the process more feasible. One of the persisting difficulties in this process had to do with data analysis and reporting. At the same time, carrying out these tasks was reported to be a powerful means for teachers as well as other program participants, including facilitators and evaluators, to develop or improve their reflective, language and technical skills.
3.6. Embedding accountability in dissemination

Already the first regional dissemination seminar held in Labe in summer 1997 was a great success in spite of the shortage of hard evaluation data and the fact that the teacher teams were not prepared as well as was hoped. To remedy this problem, representatives of the funded teams spent 2 days before the formal opening of the seminar preparing for participation. Each representative got ready to make a contribution to each of four different types of small group sessions during the conference. In addition, four of the teams that were judged most exemplary were asked to prepare to present their whole project in plenary session. The report submitted by the international consultants at the time (quoted in Schwille, Dembélé, & Bah, 1999) gives a sense for the ambiance of this meeting:

As one entered the main auditorium in Labe’s teacher training college and vocational school complex, one was struck immediately by two rows of tables along the walls. As one got nearer, one realized that these tables (or booths) were used to exhibit the results of the implementation of the first teacher projects funded by the Small Grants Program. Each table bore the name of one of the 54 teams funded in 1996–97 and was occupied by a teacher who had, in advance, prepared a poster showing the problem his/her team dealt with, the objectives of their project and its impact on teaching and learning. Thus, one could see on the tables, among other things, lesson plans written by teachers, geometric shapes designed with local materials by students, audio or video cassettes, student work, results of evaluation tests, graphic representation of the school success rate at the end-of-primary school exam, observation or interview write ups, journal entries, etc.

The presentation made by the four teams selected as exemplary constituted high points of the dissemination seminar-workshop. In effect, these presentations helped participants get a good idea of the implementation and impact of the four projects on teaching and learning. The following excerpt from an article published in the seminar newsletter Echos (p. 7) is telling in this respect: “I listened to the leader of the teacher team of Patakó with great interest. ... What he brought to this gathering where one gives and receives has further motivated me vis-à-vis PPSE. ... He helped me better understand the life of a teacher team.”

Three of the main achievements that this seminar brought to surface deserve to be highlighted. The first is the realization and mastery—by teachers and other participants—of a basic concept of project evaluation, i.e., demonstrating the impact of the project in relation to a well-understood point of departure. The second, and most important, is the acceptance—by the teachers themselves—of accountability in terms of student and teacher learning, thus increasing the burden of proof on one another. The third, and not the least important, was the call to focus on comprehension in assessing students in the area of reading. Teachers who limited themselves to correct pronunciation of words, correct intonation, and orally demonstrated respect for the way a text was punctuated as evidence of their students’ ability to read were challenged by their colleagues to show that these students understood what they read. This is an important achievement because typically what goes unchallenged in classrooms in Guinea and elsewhere is rote memorization of facts. Students working on a second language in such classrooms often memorize sentences and recite them without understanding what they are saying.
Internalization of accountability was also revealed in a very powerful way by the participating teachers’ reactions to the impressive yet problematic work done by one of the teams of an elementary teacher education laboratory school (Ecole d’Application). The work of this team on local geography for third and fourth grades—leading to the production of four local maps, photographs of local sites, and a textbook—demonstrated that funded teams can be creative and add to teaching materials in ways that otherwise would not be possible. The fact that the team budgeted for a cartographer as an unconventional resource person to teach them how to make maps was a particularly important indicator of teacher initiative. But even more important was how other team representatives held this team accountable for what they did. Producing materials was perceived as not enough. In fact, other teams expressed some indignation that their colleagues of the laboratory school were not held to the same standard of accountability that they were.

3.7. Interactive accountability

Putting all these activities together, we can see that each of the major activities is intended to elicit a certain type of teacher response (see Table 1). Making this sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational support</th>
<th>Hoped for teacher response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Preparation of proposal writing guide</td>
<td>Participate in repeated consultation and tryout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Creation of teacher teams and organization of workshops for all teachers</td>
<td>Commit to participating in grant competition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start writing grant proposal (with facilitators’ assistance but content left to teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Follow up visits by facilitators for preliminary proposal writing</td>
<td>Continue writing proposal and submit it to prefectural jury by a certain date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pre-selection by prefectoral juries and follow up visits by facilitators to revise proposals</td>
<td>Work on improving proposal to increase chances of being selected by regional jury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Submit finalist proposal to regional jury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Selection by regional jury</td>
<td>Commit to carrying out funded project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Project launch/management/ evaluation workshop</td>
<td>Show understanding of what is involved in carrying out the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Delivery of requested material resources (textbooks, professional books, notebooks, teaching materials and other supplies, etc.)</td>
<td>Respond with increased motivation to carry out project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Follow up visits by facilitators, training visits by resource persons, visits by evaluators</td>
<td>Implement project designed by themselves (including carrying out planned training and evaluation activities, documenting implementation, and submitting required financial and activity reports)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Regional and national dissemination seminars</td>
<td>Make a persuasive case for the value of the implemented project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Grant renewal offer</td>
<td>Continue to work on improving teaching and learning through project work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
explicit allows us to see how for each side to proceed, the other must produce. The result is a sort of accountability chain in which each side has a series of actions which depend in large part on the other side’s accomplishing its set of tasks.

3.8. Keeping the program transparent to reinforce accountability

The emphasis on visits, documentation, peer observation, dissemination and more generally teams of teachers having authority to make certain decisions themselves all gives the program a certain transparency that is one of the primary bases for accountability. The proposal commits the teacher team to a certain set of activities and the evaluation of these activities. For the funded project, this set of activities and the associated budget has already been legitimated by the two levels of juries and it can be found in a document that is kept at the regional headquarters for others to examine. So, then if the sequence of activities in the proposal does not happen as planned, there is a need for follow-up by the facilitator and perhaps other remedial action as well. The proposal shows what funds are needed and how they are to be spent. If the treasurer of the team spends them otherwise, this should be apparent to the other teachers, the facilitator and the evaluator, again allowing remedial action to be taken. Or if, as turned out to be much more often the case, the teacher team did not receive the funds or the other resources (textbooks, etc.) on time, or if they received something other than what had been specified in the proposal, the team had the right to complain and point out this failing to the facilitator and the regional coordinator. At the end of each year, the dissemination conference was still another exercise in transparency.

All this is not to say that the program operated in the ideal fashion in which it was conceived. There were many problems and many of them did not receive the attention they needed. However, the follow-up system of organizational support always provided an opportunity to reinforce the norms of open discussion and continuous improvement. It was only when the Guinean authorities no longer wanted to invest sufficient amounts of World Bank funds to keep this intensive system of transparency working that these norms were increasingly undermined.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the designers and leaders of Guinea’s Small Grants Staff Development and School Improvement Program developed several ways to build accountability in a program designed to promote empowerment of teachers, through: competitive allocation of program resources with merit review of proposals by a two-stage jury process; detailed program documentation to specify what was expected of the teams of teachers; requirements for the teams of teachers to design and implement a self-evaluation component in each project so that they could make a case for its effectiveness; regular visits and assistance to schools (mostly by pedagogical advisors trained as program facilitators) to help maintain these expectations without being too directive; assignment of midlevel ministry personnel as evaluators to make on-site visits assessing each team at the beginning, end and during each project; and requirements for each team to report on its accomplishments at annual regional dissemination conferences.
In general, the teachers responded very well to these expectations and provisions. Thus, from an experimental program in one region, PPSE was extended to all eight administrative regions of Guinea during the period 1995–2000.

Success in PPSE can be attributed to program designers’ ability to balance organizational support and teacher autonomy and self-direction. This was achieved through a combination of bureaucratic and professional accountability as put forward by O’Day (2004). We argue that teacher empowerment and accountability are not necessarily at odds, and in fact can be brought together in ways that are more complementary even though organized in bureaucratic rather than complete professional self-control fashion. In other words, there is no inherent contradiction between these provisions and the overall goal of supporting the self-directed professional development of teachers and making this process more effective. As Elmore (2002) put it, “[a]ccountability must be a reciprocal process. For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance. This is the principle of ‘reciprocity of accountability for capacity’. It is the glue that, in the final analysis, will hold accountability systems together” (p. 5).

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