



# “I am here for the students”: principals’ perception of accountability amid work intensification

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## Abstract

Increasing job duties and responsibilities associated with the changing role of school principals have prompted even greater accountability. As a result, principals are faced with competing demands and expectations in various forms of accountability from multiple stakeholders. This study examines principals’ perception of accountability in the context of work intensification with a particular focus on the question of “accountable to whom and why.” A total of 1434 practicing principals responded to an online survey that sought to determine the groups and individuals to whom principals feel accountable, and why principals feel accountable to those particular individuals or groups. The survey achieved a response rate of 52.68%. The research results show balancing competing accountabilities concerning students has become a daunting task for school principals. The competing if not conflicting expectations from (federal and state/provincial) educational authorities, teachers, parents, students, and various interest groups often pose significant challenges to principals’ work and add to the complexity of principals’ role. The unrealistic expectations imposed on principals make it imperative to critically examine the changing role of school principals and identify essential and legislatively mandated duties and responsibilities of principalship to better reflect and address their intensified work realities.

**Keywords** Work intensification · Accountability · Responsibility · Principals’ work and role

As part of the new public management reforms in the 1980s, accountability has been a focal point in the education sphere for decades (McDonnell, 2013; Shipps & White, 2009; Walker & Ko, 2011). It has become difficult to examine school principals’ work or their role without mentioning some form of accountability. Recently, an unrelenting increase in duties and responsibilities associated with the changing

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role of school principals has resulted in increased accountability for school principals, making their accountability even more complex and demanding (Kaufhold, 2012). Nevertheless, research on principals' accountability thus far mainly focuses on the nature and impact of external accountability policies and mandates on principals' work (Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012) with a particular emphasis on student performance, school-based management, learning targets and data use, and curriculum innovations (Cheng, 2009; Lee et al., 2012; Walker, 2015; Walker & Ko, 2011). There is limited research on how accountability plays out in contemporary school principals' work amid their intensified work conditions. Moreover, globalization has redefined the notions of school effectiveness and improvement, and more importantly, impacted the accountability policies and leadership worldwide. Studies on Asian, American, and European societies have clearly captured how accountability is reflected in the national and regional policies and shaped leadership practices amid the influence of globalization (Easley & Tulowitzki, 2016). There is nevertheless a limited representation of the Canadian perspective on leadership within the context of accountability. Using data from our larger study on the changing nature of principals' work in Ontario, Canada (Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014), this article closely examines principals' perceptions of accountability in the context of work intensification, specifically, how they view accountability in relation to the various stakeholder groups to whom they feel accountable when performing their daily work, and why they feel accountable to those particular individuals or groups.

## 1 The Rise of Accountability amid Work Intensification

Recent research reaffirms that principals' work is intensifying. They are constantly submerged in an intensified work environment in which they have to cope with increased volume and complexity of the job, long work hours, multiple responsibilities, and conflicting demands (Canadian Association of Principals (CAP), 2014; Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014; Pollock & Wang, 2019, 2020; Riley, 2014, 2015, 2017; Wang & Pollock, 2020). One alarming aspect of work intensification is expanding duties and responsibilities that principals have, which makes the role of school principals more overwhelming than ever (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Eckman & Kelber, 2010; Hancock & Müller, 2014; MacBeath et al., 2012; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013). Increased duties and responsibilities often come with increased accountability. Not only are principals expected to fulfil a wide range of job responsibilities, they are also held accountable for them. Amid intensified work conditions, principals are often facing unprecedented levels of accountability that do not end around the school premises but extend far beyond (Ball, 2016; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Goodman, 2019; Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018; Norris, 2017).

Accountability has taken on a large role in the work of public service professionals and organizations over the past 30 years (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Leithwood, 2005; Normore, 2004), but there is no single, agreed-upon definition (Qian & Walker, 2019). At the organizational level, accountability is often seen as a system that measures the organizational effectiveness on specific outcomes (Widmann, 2019), a mechanism that aims to achieve organizational goals (Leithwood

& Earl, 2000), or a process that ensures appropriate conduct as per the organization's regulations (Argon, 2015; Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018). These definitions either focus on control and compliance (Læg Reid, 2014) or describe the process of being accountable as a positive organizational trait (Bovens, 2010). At the individual level, accountability is viewed as an individual obligation or expectation for a certain action (Norris, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2017). This view of accountability allows principals to construct their own conceptions of accountability—to whom they are accountable, for what, and how—as an enabling agency (Norris, 2017). Such agency is used for purposes that are meaningful to principals (Norris, 2017; Olaso & Baja, 2019).

The role of school principals often comes with both responsibility and accountability: who is responsible? And who should be held accountable? These are two key questions that are useful to understand principals' role in their workplace. Nevertheless, the two terms are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing (Norris, 2017). Although accountability is suggestive of a sense of social responsibility, there is a fundamental difference between the two (Wang, 2012). Responsibility is “a sense of internal obligation and commitment to produce or prevent designated outcomes” (Lauer mann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 127). It derives from internal processes and relies on inner commitments that may be individual or collective, action-oriented or moral, whereas accountability is often associated with external factors with laid down rules and involves a commitment to meeting regulations and standards (Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). When principals are taking their job responsibility to exercise their power/authority for the intended purpose (accountability), they are meanwhile held accountable to ensure the power is exercised responsibly in the course of achieving the desired goals (Wang, 2012).

In the past three decades, increasing job demands and expectations from a wide spectrum of stakeholders further complicate the notion of accountability and add to its complexity. Accountability in the K–12 education sector becomes a multilayered concept (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Pollock & Winton, 2016; Walker & Ko, 2011). In this article, we understand accountability as any situation or circumstance where an individual, group, or entity is required to report their actions, decisions, and/or results to another party or parties (Adams & Kirst, 1999). This definition reflects contemporary principals' daily realities, and the multiple—often competing or overlapping—accountabilities that define their role (Ball, 2016; Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Møller, 2009; Moos, 2005; Pollock & Winton, 2016).

## 2 The Multiplicity of Accountability and Its Influence on Principals' Work

Amid work intensification, contemporary principals are shouldering multifarious accountabilities, which places an unprecedented amount of pressure on themselves—pressure that fundamentally influences their work and decision-making (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015; Ball, 2016; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Ladd & Zelli, 2002; Ryan, 2002, 2016; Shipps & White, 2009). The sheer volume of accountabilities that principals are expected to manage often

plays out in duties and responsibilities that add pressure to school principals. Principals must balance or juggle pressures related to political, legal, bureaucratic, performance-based, moral, professional, and market accountabilities when conducting their daily work (Marks & Nance, 2007; Normore, 2004; Shippo & White, 2009). Table 1 below summarizes these differing forms of accountability that underlie principals' intensified work.

The interplay of multiple accountabilities described above has changed the nature of principals' work and pressured them to approach their work in different ways (Ball, 2016). First and foremost, driven by legislated policies and initiatives, bureaucratic accountability is becoming increasingly demanding. Its requirements have overburdened school principals with increasing administrivia and managerial tasks (Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014; UNESCO, 2017) and left principals little time to prioritize "nonmandated forms of accountability" (Ball, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, there is a growing conflict between bureaucratic accountability and professional accountability in terms of what principals are required to do (e.g., paperwork) versus what principals believed they should be doing (instructional leadership) (Ball, 2016). Failure in compliance with certain bureaucratic accountability requirements (e.g., health and safety issues) may undermine principals' professional accountability or even render them in violation of their legal accountability (Ball, 2016). Legislation and principals' defined roles and duties require them to oversee accountability measures, even when their personal views deem these policies as unjust. Such competing accountabilities make it difficult for principals to practice social justice and fulfil their self- or moral accountability (Pollock & Winton, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Ryan & Tuters, 2015; Wang, 2015, 2016). Furthermore, when principals engage in leadership practices directly tied to bureaucratic and performance-based accountability, these activities can detrimentally impact student learning: test scores may increase, but student learning does not always follow suit (Walker & Ko, 2011). A lack of time and resources, the unpredictable nature of their work, and the increased reliance on email can present challenges for principals attempting to meet accountability expectations (Ball, 2016).

### 3 Conceptual Framework—Accountability to Whom?

Underlying the multiple accountabilities imposed on school principals are the increasing expectations and demands from differing stakeholders. Principals are essentially held accountable to anyone who is playing an active role in education, including students, parents/guardians, teachers, staff members, general public, government, and the school system. The wide spectrum of stakeholders forms a hierarchal web that influences principals' work in the forms of political, legal, bureaucratic, performance-based, moral, professional, and market accountability (see Table 1). This study utilizes the "accountability web" (Bracci, 2009; Wallenius et al., 2018) as a framework to conceptualize the question of "accountability to whom." This framework sees the accountability as a relational and hierarchical web composed of different layers of specific stakeholders. The accountability web involves "an actor or an agent in a social context who is subject to observation and

**Table 1** Types of accountability

Types of accountability	Focus	Accountability to whom	Scholars
<i>Self-accountability</i>	Is responsible for one's own choices and actions with a purposeful commitment Is often interchanged with responsibility	Self Family	Norris, 2017
<i>Political accountability</i>	Refers to the obligations and responsibilities principals have to the general public; Is connected to legal accountability as political actors develop laws that govern and control principals' work	General public Political actors Government	Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Leithwood, 2005; Normore, 2004
<i>Legal accountability</i>	Refers to legislated roles and responsibilities principals must perform, such as sustaining proper order and discipline, developing co-operation among staff members at the school, registering students, recording attendance, preparing the timetable, maintaining the school's physical plant, and reporting the existence of a communicable disease	Parents/guardians Students Teachers Staff members	Darling-Hammond, 2004; Leithwood & Azah, 2014
<i>Bureaucratic accountability</i>	Is related to the managerial aspects of contemporary principals' work, including compliance with district and jurisdictional policies—such as monitoring and reporting school-based suspension and expulsion data—as well as following mandated procedures for hiring new teachers and other staff members	Government School districts Teachers Staff members	Firestone & Shipps, 2007; Onwuegbuzie, 2010; Pollock & Winton, 2016; Schulte et al., 2010, & Shipps & White, 2009;

Table 1 (continued)

Types of accountability	Focus	Accountability to whom	Scholars
<i>Performance-based accountability</i>	<p>Focuses on student performance, using indicators rooted in student test performance to measure school effectiveness;</p> <p>Often uses standards and stakes (high or low) to motivate students and/or educators;</p> <p>Is presented in a five-dimensional model with components including a testing structure; setting of jurisdictional standards; consequential use of data; the use of reporting mechanisms; and professional involvement to generate buy-in from principals, teachers, and other educators</p>	<p>Students</p> <p>Parents/guardians</p> <p>General public</p> <p>Teachers</p>	<p>Elmore, 2012; Fuhrman, 2003; Jaafar &amp; Anderson, 2007; Jaafar &amp; Earl, 2008</p>
<i>Moral accountability</i>	<p>Is rooted in one's personal value commitments, ethical reasoning, and decision-making;</p> <p>Is entrenched in notions of fairness, bearing resemblance to contemporary notions of social justice</p>	<p>Self</p> <p>Students</p> <p>Parents/guardians</p> <p>General public</p>	<p>Knapp &amp; Feldman, 2012; Normore, 2004; Shipps &amp; White, 2009</p>
<i>Professional accountability</i>	<p>Upholds the standards and regulations that guide the profession;</p> <p>Follows mandated policies and procedures, as well as display leadership, obedience, and compliance when working toward district-level or jurisdictional goals, objectives, and procedures</p>	<p>Self</p> <p>Teachers</p> <p>Staff members</p> <p>School districts</p> <p>General public</p>	<p>Darling-Hammond, 1989, 2004; Knapp &amp; Feldman, 2012; Leithwood, 2005</p>

**Table 1** (continued)

Types of accountability	Focus	Accountability to whom	Scholars
<i>Market accountability</i>	<p>Considers the needs and perspectives of parents/guardians when making decisions;</p> <p>Creates conditions where students and parents can choose the school(s) and/or education programs they deem most appropriate;</p> <p>Creates a competitive environment that sparks new job demands for principals: e.g., being tasked with competing for students and resources through recruitment activities, fundraising, and writing grants</p>	<p>Parents/guardians</p> <p>General public</p> <p>School districts</p>	<p>Darling-Hammond, 1989, 2004;</p> <p>Knapp &amp; Feldman, 2012;</p> <p>Leithwood &amp; Azah, 2014;</p> <p>Leithwood, 2005; Normore, 2004; Shipps &amp; White, 2009</p>

evaluation by some other actors” at various levels (Bracci, 2009, p. 298). The competing accountability demands from various actors complicate principals’ work and render it more contextual and unpredictable. Gonzalez and Firestone’s (2013) study provided evidence on how principals ranked the sources of accountability in their work. In addition to self-accountability, principals generally felt accountable to their staff, superiors, and even the legislation that guided their work (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). With some accountabilities taking on greater significance than others, principals have to prioritize while managing/juggling accountabilities from multiple stakeholders who influence their work (Ball, 2016; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Pollock & Winton, 2016). The hierarchical web of accountability is appropriate to help unpack how principals perceive the influence of stakeholders that reflects the differing form of accountability.

## 4

## Methodology

The review of literature suggests that the sources of accountability can impact how principals go about doing their work. Thus, we utilized an online survey to investigate the changing nature of principals’ work. The survey contained 60 questions and 12 areas of principals’ work. One major area is on the accountability and external influence that investigated groups and individuals to whom principals feel accountable in their daily work and why. The results of the survey helped us gain an understanding of the factors that impact principals’ work and how contemporary accountability mechanisms that involve layers of stakeholders influence what principals actually do on a daily basis.

In an effort to increase the validity and reliability of the survey research, we held three focus group sessions with eight in-service principals prior to launching the survey. The focus groups, lasting approximately 2 hours each, provided participants with an opportunity to complete the draft online survey, and provide comments and feedback about its content and structure. The refined survey was then distributed to all elementary and secondary school principals working in Ontario’s public school system (approximately 2701 at the time of research)., we collected over 1821 surveys, resulting in a response rate of 52.68% after eliminating incomplete surveys.

In this article, we focus on how participants responded to a Likert-style question (Springer, 2010) that asked them to rank the stakeholder groups to whom they feel most accountable in their work as a principal. The response scale included the following stakeholder groups that principals were asked to rank:

- The students they serve at the school;
- Their staff and faculty;
- Parents/community;
- Their employer (the school district or superintendent);
- The Ministry of Education;
- Themselves or their own family; and
- God/church/synagogue/mosque.



A total of 1507 principals ranked the top three stakeholder groups to whom they feel most accountable in their daily work, while only 1212 respondents ranked all seven. The accountability question also asked participants to explain their rankings, which provided us with qualitative data on why principals feel more or less accountable to different stakeholder groups.

#### 4.1 Description of the Survey Sample

The survey sample reflected the overall principal population working in Ontario's secular school system (principals working in Ontario's Catholic schools were not included). In the sample, approximately 16.4% of respondents were employed in secondary schools, with 77.3% working as principals in elementary schools. A further 2.9% of survey respondents worked as principals of both elementary and secondary schools. Only 36.3% of principals who responded to the survey self-identified as male, with 62.8% of the survey respondents self-identifying as female. The survey sample was quite diverse in terms of the highest level of education these principals completed prior to the launch of the survey. For example, 54.3% of respondents had earned a master's degree, 41.6% held a bachelor's degree, 2.4% had obtained a professional degree such as a Bachelor of Laws (L.L.B.) or Juris Doctor (J.D.), while 1.3% of the sample completed an advanced terminal degree, such as a doctorate. The average school size for principals participating in the survey was 493 students, though school sizes ranged from serving as few as 25 students to large comprehensive secondary schools serving over 2200 students. Although the survey sample was reflective of the Ontario principal population, it did not reflect the demographics of Ontario's general or student populations or (Statistics Canada, 2011). For example, principals that self-identified as white accounted for 92.5% of the sample, which is a significant overrepresentation.

#### 4.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis for the survey involved two distinct phases. We conducted descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions, as part of Phase 1 of the analysis process. The purpose of conducting these analyses in Phase 1 was to gain an overview of how principals prioritize stakeholders involved in their work. The results may reflect their daily interactions at work and the changing nature of their work amid their intensified work conditions. Phase 2 of the survey analysis process involved analyzing the qualitative data gathered from the open-ended survey question related to why principals feel accountable to some stakeholder groups more than others. A total of 857 of the 1434 survey respondents provided additional information to qualify their responses. Guided by the conceptual framework of the accountability web, we first categorized the open-ended responses according to the various forms of accountability and key stakeholders involved in each form. Then, we analyzed these categorized qualitative responses using the cross-comparative method (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012; Springer, 2010) to capture the nuances in their reasoning process on the question of accountability to whom and gain insights on why principals prioritize one

form of accountability over the other and for what purpose. We first read the qualitative responses with an openness to any emergent themes in the data, before coding the responses according to the scale in the initial question about accountability (Merriam, 2009; Springer, 2010). Then, we examined the principals' rationale and views about how they prioritized the stakeholders to whom they believed they were accountable for. The analysis results from the principals' open-ended responses provide a valuable addition to the previous studies (Ball, 2016; Hanisch-Cerda, 2017; Norris, 2017; Olaso & Baja, 2019; Wallenius et al., 2018). The results, presented from the principals' perspective, illustrate their priorities in their daily interactions and the complexities and nuances of the accountability web that is consisted of stakeholders at different levels.

## 5 Research Findings

Our findings show principals were expected to provide an account of their practices, actions, and decisions to a wide range of stakeholders, which suggests a rise of accountability in its scope and sources. Many principals who participated in the survey had difficulty ranking the stakeholder groups, as the multiple accountabilities involved in their work tend to overlap and intersect in practice. How to manage often competing and overlapping accountabilities becomes critical in their daily operation of schools. For example, one principal explained their rankings by stating:

[It is] difficult to rank as accountability to several stakeholders continuously overlaps. Accountability to self is ranked low however personal integrity ranks high (i.e., doing the right thing for the right reason guides all decisions). Keeping all stakeholders satisfied is an ongoing challenge, one that produces considerable stress. The responsibility for meeting multiple, often conflicting demands is another.

The overlapping nature of principals' multiple accountabilities made it difficult for some principals to figure out which groups or individuals to whom they feel most or least accountable in their daily work. Such difficulty reflects the changing nature of principals' work and increasingly competitive nature of stakeholders' demands. Other principals explained that all of the accountabilities in their daily work are not only individually important, but are also interconnected. Another principal expanded on their decision-making processes:

We are here first and foremost for the students. The staff is our partner for our students. My superintendent guides and supports our efforts. I need to take care of my family and myself in order to be effective. The Ministry of Education leads the direction for the province and is guided by the needs of the parents.

Although principals indicated that the multiple accountabilities of their role overlap and are interconnected, there was wide variation in the groups and people to whom the principals felt most accountable in their daily work. Despite this

variation, the counts and percentages in Table 2 demonstrate that participating principals overwhelmingly felt most accountable to the students who attend their school. However, the results presented in the table do not indicate other stakeholders are less important, instead they reveal whose interest principals prioritize over the competing demands in order to stay focused in their daily work.

### 5.1 I Am Here for the Students

Students were the stakeholder group to whom the principals in this study felt most accountable in their daily work. For example, as displayed in Table 1, 50.5% of the principals who responded to the accountability question ranked students as the number one stakeholder group. According to this number, principals feel most accountable to stakeholders within their schools (e.g., staff). One principal justified ranking students first by stating that being involved in student learning is why they chose a career as an educator, which implies that moral accountability can be prominent in contemporary principals' work:

The students are the reason for my choosing the profession—to make a difference in the lives of children. I would like to think that when I make a decision, whether it's staffing, facilities, parent requests, teacher request etc., that I make my decision based on "Is this helping children learn?" Too often, however, I feel as if I am being reactive, and putting out brush fires, to promote the school as a caring and safe place to parents who are suspicious, or at least wary and watchful.

Many principals echoed this idea: they feel most accountable to students in their daily work because they pursued a career as a principal to serve students to the best of their abilities. The principals repeatedly expressed the sentiment that students "come first." For example, another principal who ranked students first said, "Ultimately, I believe we are all here for our students first and foremost. Without them, we would not be in education...we (admin, school board, Supervisory Officers, staff) serve them and their parents/community." Even the principals who felt that they should be more accountable to other groups in practice still recognized that students come first in the role:

The students always come first. However, I believe myself and my family should, but that can't happen based on the job. It takes you away and you have no choice but to attend to it. In that attention, however, the students always take first priority.

Based on this evidence, students were the stakeholder group to whom the participating principals felt most accountable in their daily work. In this way, students influence how principals navigate the multiple accountabilities of their daily work, as prioritizing students provides an anchor point for their work without principals' feeling being pulled in various directions when they are faced with multiple stakeholders' demands. Principals often feel compelled to prioritize the needs of students above others, including themselves and their families. It is noteworthy that after

**Table 2** Principals' accountability rankings

Rank	The students	Your staff	Parents/community	Employer (school district/superintendent)	Ministry of Education	Yourself & family	God/church/synagogue/temple	Response count
#1	761 (50.5%)	36 (2.4%)	63 (4.2%)	237 (15.7%)	12 (0.8%)	327 (21.7%)	71 (4.7%)	1507
#2	390 (25.9%)	414 (27.5%)	303 (20.1%)	184 (12.2%)	58 (3.8%)	135 (9.0%)	23 (1.5%)	1507
#3	185 (12.3%)	509 (33.8%)	437 (29.0%)	254 (16.9%)	45 (2.9%)	73 (4.8%)	4 (0.3%)	1507
#4	107 (7.1%)	332 (22.1%)	402 (26.7%)	418 (27.8%)	76 (5.1%)	163 (10.8%)	6 (0.4%)	1504
#5	51 (3.4%)	166 (11.1%)	220 (14.7%)	345 (23.1%)	389 (26.0%)	307 (20.5%)	16 (1.1%)	1494
#6	12 (0.8%)	35 (2.3%)	72 (4.8%)	64 (4.3%)	738 (49.4%)	446 (29.9%)	87 (5.8%)	1494
#7	4 (0.3%)	5 (0.4%)	9 (0.7%)	7 (0.6%)	148 (12.2%)	39 (3.2%)	1000 (82.5%)	1212

students, staff comes as the first choice in both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ranking, which further confirms that principals' priority is within the schools and has a greater focus on their professional accountability at work.

## 5.2 Self-Accountability and Family Support

Participating principals rated themselves and their families as the second stakeholder group to whom they feel most accountable in their daily work, which indicates that they rely on their families for work–life balance. For example, one respondent expressed: “My family are my touchstone. They help me to try to maintain the balance in my life as they know I am a workaholic and that the role of principal consumes a huge portion of my time.” Despite managing an intense workload, many principals tried to maintain their personal health and wellness while also spending time with their families to recharge. Similarly, another respondent explained that they also need to maintain their personal health and wellness to succeed in the principalship, stating, “Family always comes first. Must also look after [my] own personal wellness in order to be an effective principal.” In this way, principals can demonstrate professional accountability by making efforts to maintain their physical and mental well-being—they can strive to ensure they are adequately rested and able to perform at a high level.

A total of 21.7% of the principals who responded to the accountability section of the survey felt most accountable to themselves and their family in their work as a school principal. According to our data, it seems many contemporary principals either choose to be accountable to themselves and their families, or they allow the importance of their work to supersede personal relationships and their own health. For example, one principal indicated that work takes priority over all other commitments by simply stating: “Sadly, my work regularly comes before my own family and myself.” The contemporary principalship often does not allow for adequate work–life balance, as principals tend to prioritize their work over their own needs and the needs of their families. Similarly, another principal mentioned, “Because of the expectations of the job, I am forced to rank myself last. There is no time to make the balance I need to address job needs and family needs equitably.” Expectations for contemporary principals, including their duties and responsibilities, are either mandated by or negotiated with their employer—the school district and superintendent.

## 5.3 Their Employer (School District and Superintendent)

Many respondents indicated feeling most accountable to students, themselves, and their families. However, 15.7% of the principals who responded to this survey question ranked their employer—in the form of the school district and their superintendent—as the third stakeholder group to whom they feel most accountable in their daily work. For the most part, the principals indicated that they cultivate positive and collegial relationships with their employer and supervisory officers. For example, 31.9% of participants felt *very respected* while 41.7% felt *respected* by supervisory

officer. Many principals in this study (73.8%) also indicated feeling respected or very respected by other district office staff.

Principals who ranked accountability to their employer first generally trusted their school board to interpret Ministry policies and regulations in ways that put them in a position to succeed. For example, one principal stated:

I trust my school board to set appropriate direction after having filtered through the Ministry of Education's policies so I feel most accountable to the system. And I trust that the system directions/supports will filter through to the Ministry of Education's policies so I feel most accountable to the system. And I trust that the system directions/supports will filter through to provide me with the tools and resources I need to help my students and community.

That principals must be accountable to their employer and subject to organizational policies and social norms speaks to the nature of bureaucratic and professional accountability in contemporary principals' work. Another principal also stated that they feel "most accountable to the school board and feel that by being accountable to them that they are accountable to the Ministry." Not all principals were as positive about feeling most accountable to their employer, however. For example, one principal explained, "Most of the decisions I make are first filtered through my perception of my employer's expectations due to a perceived lack of job protection and security." Feeling accountable because of a lack of job protection and security also highlights the role of compliance and legal accountability in the relationships principals have with their employers.

#### 5.4 Parents/Guardians and the Community

Only 4.3% of participants ranked accountability to parents and the community first. Explaining their rationale, one principal stated:

I work in a community where parents are very involved. therefore, I always feel I'm accountable to them or communicating information, rationale, defending. In working to appease everyone this would be the way I rank the stakeholders.

Another principal expanded on this point by noting, "Most of my time is spent engaging parents through phone calls and meetings—Identification Placement and Review Committees—behaviour, etc....parents are very demanding." Principals also indicated that accountability to parents and the community is interconnected with being accountable to students. For example, one principal explained, "We have a responsibility to our students foremost and then parents to provide a safe learning environment where students can be successful." Accountability to parents is also rooted in market accountability, which relies on ensuring that the school is a safe and enriching place for students—otherwise, parents/guardians will find another school for their children to attend. Furthermore, our findings indicate that principals play what can be described as a front-line customer service role for parents/guardians, and that parents expect principals will act on their concerns in a timely fashion. For

example, another principal mentioned, “Parents are usually happy if you are doing the best for their children and if you respond to concerns quickly.”

## 5.5 Their Staff

Accountability to teachers and staff is a form of political and professional accountability in principals’ work. Even though 88.3% of respondents indicated they feel respected or very respected by the teachers at their school, staff was ranked as fifth out of the seven stakeholder groups to whom participating principals felt most accountable in their daily work. Principals who ranked staff higher than other stakeholder groups discussed how staff can have a positive impact on students’ academic and nonacademic outcomes:

I think most principals rank their students and staff as the top two, because we do this job for both of them. We feel strongly that we can have an impact on student achievement, buy supporting, mentoring and leading our teachers.

Principals wanting to support and mentor their staff members because of the positive impact they can potentially have on student achievement was a theme in the qualitative data; this means that engaging in activities related to accountability to teachers and staff is connected to professional accountability for contemporary principals. Another principal further explained: “My accountability to staff would really be equal to that of students. After all, a staff that feels supported performs on a higher level.”

Another reason why some principals highlighted the importance of being accountable to teachers and staff at their school is work intensification: increasingly, principals feel the need to distribute a growing and intense workload. For example, one principal noted, “I need to have my staff on board so that we can have a true shared leadership as it is impossible to do it all in a large school like mine with five system classes.” Even though principals reported that their accountability to their staff is related to the need to distribute leadership and delegate a growing workload, only 2.4% of the participating principals indicated feeling most accountable to staff. This low ranking may be due to the organized labor unrest and turmoil in Ontario when we collected our survey data, which may have also impacted how accountable principals felt politically to the provincial Ministry of Education.

## 5.6 Ministry of Education

Only 0.8% of participating principals indicated feeling most accountable to the Ministry of Education. One principal stated, “Immediate issues are based on board policies and procedures. Overall the Ministry’s expectations and policies affect everything I do. I feel responsible to both students and staff to provide a good educational experience and workplace.” However, the clear majority of principals ranked the provincial Ministry of Education as one of the stakeholder groups to whom they feel least accountable in their work, which indicates the lack of importance these principals placed on compliance and bureaucratic accountability. For example, one

principal mentioned, “I believe that, although the Ministry oversees what we do, they are the least of this accountability.” Similarly, another principal who ranked the Ministry of Education low on their list of stakeholders noted, “While the Ministry tells me what to do, they are at arms-length to my everyday world.” Out of all seven groups, a faith-based category including God/church/synagogue/mosque was the only stakeholder group principals ranked as having a lower impact on their work than the Ministry of Education.

### **5.7 God/Church/Synagogue/Mosque**

The faith-based category was ranked as the stakeholder group to whom participating principals felt least accountable in their daily work, which may be due to the fact that we designed the survey for principals working in the secular school system in Ontario. Further studies are needed on principals’ accountability in the Catholic school system in Ontario.

Most principals that provided additional comments related to this faith-based category indicated that they felt God did not belong in public education, and/or that God/church/synagogue/mosque does not impact what they do at work or how they do it. For example, one principal stated, “In terms of principals’ workload, I do not feel family or religious beliefs are relevant and therefore will not be completing the ranking inclusive of those.” However, 4.5% of the sample did rank God/church/synagogue/mosque as the stakeholder to whom they felt most accountable in their daily work. For these principals, their faith was connected to their sense of moral accountability and social justice, as these can originate from or be influenced by religious teachings. For example, one principal mentioned: “My faith in God is first and foremost and hopefully everything else follows with the care of students.” This principal seemed to view moral accountability to students through a religious lens. Similarly, another principal expressed, “Accountability to God requires the lens of love and caring. All other levels of accountability are contingent upon achieving the above.”

In the sections above, we have detailed our findings on how principals rank the various stakeholder groups to whom they feel most and least accountable in their daily work. The findings provide some valuable addition to studies that focus on the expectations of the stakeholders rather than principals’ perspectives on their accountabilities. In the section below, we discuss the relevance of our findings.

## **6 Discussion**

The study conceptualizes the “accountability web” in a Canadian context and sheds light on the complexities and nuances of the accountability systems amid principals’ intensified work conditions. The principals’ perceptions of the accountability expectations reveal their daily struggles and the unrealistic demands imposed on school principals. They also illustrate how the accountability system has changed principals’ (and/or stakeholders’) perceptions of the purpose of education and how such change impacted our education system and principals’ work.



The principals who responded to our online survey overwhelmingly indicated that they feel most accountable to students when conducting their daily work—a stance consistent with moral and/or professional accountabilities (Leithwood, 2005; Normore, 2004; Shippy & White, 2009; Walker & Ko, 2011). These findings also indicate that Ontario principals feel that the principalship is a moral calling, especially as principals have been found to prioritize the needs of students over themselves and their family (Wang, 2015; Ryan, 2016). At first glance, these findings might seem to conflict with the findings reported in similar studies elsewhere. For example, in Gonzalez and Firestone's (2013) study, principals felt most accountable to themselves. When the authors further investigated why principals felt most accountable to themselves, however, they concluded that the principal participants in their US study were responding to an internal accountability as opposed to an external accountability, which was comprised of four components: "Personal responsibility, an obligation to the children in the school, the use of one's conscience as a moral compass and a personal connection to the school" (p. 391). As demonstrated in our "Research findings" section, principals in this study had similar motivations.

Our participants ranked being accountable to themselves and their family second out of the seven groups. Accountability to oneself is often referenced and referred to as being accountable to one's moral compass, fulfilling obligations to children, and so forth, but in this case, principals understood accountability to themselves and their family to mean striving for a reasonable work–life balance and being well. This is a novel insight, as 86% of principals in this study also reported that their number one way to cope with an emotionally draining day at work was to spend time with family. It may very well be that principals feel that if they are not healthy and well they cannot effectively lead schools or promote student success.

Gonzalez and Firestone (2013) categorized various accountability approaches as either internal, external, or a combination of both. Although they did not explicitly define these terms, their research inferred that internal accountability occurs when the principal is accountable to someone or a group within the school site (e.g., oneself, teachers, students) whereas 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.). Our findings challenge these concepts—especially the notion of internal accountability, as the principals in this study extended internal accountability from notions of professional accountability to personal accountability—they consider being accountable to themselves and family as self-care, work–life balance, and being well.

Principals ranked accountability to their employer third out of the seven options. This ranking is unsurprising for two reasons. First, district school boards employ principals in Ontario and are responsible for enacting the policies and mandates of the Ontario Ministry of Education: External accountability approaches, such as those legally and bureaucratically created, are enacted through the district school boards. These legal and bureaucratic accountabilities play a large role in contemporary principals' daily work (Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Leithwood, 2005). Second, some of these board policies and practices are neoliberal in nature, which forces principals to engage in practices based on market accountabilities as well (Darling-Hammond,

2004; Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Leithwood, 2005; Normore, 2004; Shipps & White, 2009).

Including parents in students' education has proven to improve student achievement (Jeynes, 2007; LaRocque et al., 2011). Although it is unsurprising that principals indicated that they feel accountable to parents, it is indeed surprising that parents were ranked or prioritized before teachers; we are not sure why this is the case. We do know that, in the Ontario context, parental engagement has been one of the provincial government's priorities. For example, Ontario implemented the Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools and the Parent Engagement Office in 2010. We believe this is an area that requires additional research; a subsequent study could determine why parents were ranked before teachers.

Another detail that stands out for us is that, even though principals in this study reported in the qualitative data how essential teachers were for public school and student success, teachers were ranked fifth. This finding provides meaningful insight for several reasons. In general, leadership is a social process that includes substantial interactions with the adults within a school building (Ryan, 2005), and, in Ontario, there is currently a significant emphasis on principals being instructional leaders (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013) who work collaboratively (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Because of these provincial policies and framework, principals are expected to spend much of their leadership both focused on instruction and with teachers (School Effectiveness Framework, 2013; Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013). For example, Ontario principals are expected to build relationships and develop people by providing support and demonstrating consideration for individual staff members; stimulating growth in the professional capacity of staff; building trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents; and establishing productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013). We know from our research that, in terms of the people with whom principals spend their time, 70.7% of principals indicated that they have *high* or *very high* levels of interaction with classroom teachers (Pollock et al., 2015). It surprised us that teachers were not ranked higher on the list; this led us to infer that the amount of time principals spend with a particular stakeholder group does not determine the degree to which they feel accountable to said group. There are two possible explanations for this finding. As mentioned in our "Research findings" section, the Ontario public education system was experiencing labor unrest with the teacher workforce at the time of our study. Principals are not part of teacher unions and associations in Ontario and as such are considered management and administration. For many principals, this period was stressful because some of the principal directives from their employer (the district school board) conflicted with teacher expectations. As a result, some principals may have felt more accountable to their employer than their teachers. The second reason may be that the teacher workforce is highly educated and professional. In this study, we understood accountability to mean any situation or circumstance where an individual, group, or entity is required to report their actions, decisions, and/or results to another party or parties (Adams & Kirst, 1999). Perhaps, principals did not prioritize teachers because the teacher workforce in Ontario is a highly educated professional workforce with a fairly high level of autonomy. For this reason, some principals may rely on teacher

professionalism and professional knowledge and practices to deliver the appropriate education for students to succeed. However, prioritizing teachers less than their students, themselves and family, their employer, and parents does not mean principals do not work with their teaching staff. As mentioned earlier, principals spend most of their time interacting with teaching staff. A similar study also determined that many principals engage in practices that professionally support teachers. One such practice is that of buffering teachers from outside initiatives and pressures (Pollock, 2015).

Another possibility is that principals rely on the OCT to regulate the profession. The OCT “sets ethical standards of practice, issues teaching certificates and may suspend or revoke them, accredits teacher education programs and courses, and investigates and hears complaints about members” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017). Because teachers are regulated by the OCT, perhaps principals feel less accountable to them because they are competent in their work and accountable to an outside agency, freeing principals up to concentrate on other work expectations. We would like to again point out that this does not mean that principals interact less with teachers or do not support them. As mentioned previously, principals actually spend considerable amounts of time with teachers and do support them in many ways. However, it is troubling that principals ranked teachers and staff as the fifth stakeholder group, as the success of instructional leadership depends on principals and other school-level leaders supporting teachers (Leithwood, 2012; Marks & Nance, 2007).

The provincial Ministry of Education was ranked low by most participants. It is the school districts that are tasked to carry out the education program legislated by the Ministry of Education, so principals appear to be once removed, or “at arms-length” from the Ministry and vice-versa. It is also worth reiterating that this study was conducted in the wake of labor unrest between the government and teacher unions in the province, the climate of which may further explain why accountability to the Ministry of Education was ranked lower than accountability to employer. Participating principals also indicated that, on average, God/church/synagogue/mosque has little impact on how they engage in their daily work. As briefly mentioned earlier, this finding may be difficult if the same survey was conducted with principals in Ontario’s publicly-funded Catholic school system.

## 7 Conclusion

Accountability is a fundamental aspect of contemporary principals’ work, but the question of accountable to whom and why becomes paramount amid intensified work conditions. The answer to the question not only reveals the complexity of principals’ accountability in its nature and scope, but also sounds an alarm about the harsh reality principals are facing. The opportunity to serve student needs and interests is why most of the principals pursued a career in K-12 education. However, balancing competing accountabilities concerning students has become a daunting task for school principals. The competing, if not conflicting expectations from (federal and state/provincial) educational authorities, teachers, parents, students, and various interest groups often pose significant challenges to principals’ work and

add to the complexity of principals' role. Principals sometimes find themselves torn between different types of accountabilities, such as moral, professional, and bureaucratic accountabilities, and are sometimes in "conflicting situations when system's demands (i.e. contractual accountability) are indicating one course of action and their personally held values about what is the most equitable way of meeting students' needs (i.e. moral accountability) are suggesting another" (Ehrich et al., 2015, p. 199). The continued rise of accountability renders it unrealistic to expect principals to be adept at negotiation and mediation between groups. It is imperative to critically examine the changing role of school principals and identify essential and legislatively mandated duties and responsibilities of principalship to better reflect and address their intensified work realities. It is equally imperative to use research evidence to better support school principals in dealing with competing and overlapping accountability demands from layered stakeholders.

### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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