

# Exploring the Accountability Relationships of Turkish School Principals: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

*In developed countries, accountability mechanisms, external control and standardized testing to increase student academic achievement have fundamentally influenced school principals and their management styles. On the other hand, much is unknown about the Turkish principals' experiences in their accountability environment. This is significant because accountability relationships might be even destructive for principals and the school learning environment despite the intended formative and supportive purposes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the accountability relationships of Turkish K12 school principals. The data of seventeen purposefully-sampled Turkish school principals were collected through in-depth phenomenological interviews. Data analysis yielded five major themes with supporting sub-themes: bureaucratic accountability environment, market accountability environment, professional accountability environment, accountability intensity, and accountability impacts on principals, teachers, schools, students and parents. Knowing the nature of context-dependent accountability environments can help principals adopt new roles and help policymakers improve their ill-natured accountability relationships, principal preparation and development programs.*

**Keywords:** Accountability, Principals, Control, Expectations, Responsibility, Phenomenology.

## Öz

*Gelişmiş ülkelerde, öğrencilerin akademik başarısını artırmak için uygulamaya konulan dış kontrol ve standartlaştırılmış testler gibi hesap verebilirlik mekanizmaları okul müdürleri ve yönetim stilleri üzerinde önemli etkiler üretmiştir. Buna karşın, Türkiye'de okul müdürlerinin hesap verebilirlik ortamlarına ilişkin tecrübeleri hakkında yeterince bilgi sahibi değiliz. Bu eksiklik önemlidir, çünkü hesap verebilirlik ilişkileri ne kadar iyi niyetle tasarlanmış olsalar da müdürler ve öğrenme ortamları için yıkıcı etkiler üretebilir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın amacı Türkiye'de okul müdürlerinin hesap verebilirlik ilişkilerine ilişkin deneyimlerini ortaya koymaktır. Amaçlı olarak örneklenen on yedi okul müdüründen derinlemesine fenomenolojik görüşmeler yoluyla veri toplanmıştır. Veri analizi sonucunda destekleyici alt temalarla birlikte beş ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: bürokratik hesap verebilirlik, piyasa hesap verebilirliği, profesyonel hesap verebilirlik, hesap verebilirliğin yoğunluğu ve okul müdürleri, öğretmenler, okul, öğrenciler ve veliler üzerindeki hesap verebilirlik etkileri. Okullardaki hesap verebilirlik ortamlarının doğasını bilmek, müdürlerin yeni roller geliştirmelerine, politika yapımcıların ise olumsuz sonuçlar üreten hesap verebilirlik ilişkilerinin düzeltilmesine, okul yöneticisi hazırlama ve gelişim programlarının geliştirilmesine katkı sağlayacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hesap Verebilirlik, Okul Müdürü, Kontrol, Beklenti, Sorumluluk, Fenomenoloji.

## Introduction

As a social system, the ability of schools to produce the desired results depends on the harmony between their structure and human elements. School accountability policies aim to ensure this harmony for efficient and effective school processes and outcomes. In this sense, accountability is considered as a control system in organizational life, or as a reward or punishment system that ensures compliance with organizational standards (Frink & Ferris, 1998). It is also reflected as organizational mechanisms that monitor and evaluate policies and practices as a response to the expectations of various stakeholders. Accountability ensures the coordination of the organizational actions, control of the organizational processes and results, and enables the organization to function in an orderly, efficient, effective and fair manner (Enzele & Anderson, 1993; Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Hall et al., 2007; Yarnold et al., 1988).

Regarding the international accountability literature, it is seen that rapid changes after the 1980s and new concepts in economic, political and social environments, learning and school management changed the general environment of schools, and created a new task environment that includes a new demand for increasing student achievement. It is stated that there is great pressure on schools to develop new practices that will enable students to access high-level academic skills (Cranston, 2007; Fullan, 2001), and principal leadership has become one of the most emphasized factors in the discussions on school improvement since it was revealed in school effectiveness research that it is the second most powerful factor after teachers who have indirect or direct effects on student achievements (Branch et al., 2012; Dufour & Marzano 2011; Louis et al., 2010; Niesche, 2010). Therefore, external expectations and pressures on the school principal have increased, and the roles of the school principal have changed radically (Thomson, 2009). School principals started to work under the pressure of various formal and informal accountability relationships with bureaucracy, teachers, teacher unions, parents and students. New accountability mechanisms were established

such as “state testing, standardized and audited curricula, school rankings, school funding through competitive grants, and new forms of educator performance evaluation” (Cohen, 2014, p.1). In this emerging context, the focus has shifted from the school community to external accountabilities, and educational discussions became more curriculum, data, student achievement, teacher development, and teacher leadership oriented than management issues. Therefore, principals are now held responsible for having many context-sensitive (Hallinger, 2018) different roles of “instructional leader, human resource manager, financial planner, strategic advisor, counselor, staff and parent mediator, mentor, [and] coach” (Wicher, 2017, p. 24).

On the other hand, principals are challenged by these diverging and even conflicting expectations, and they have to understand their nature and the ways to meet them (Tamadoni et al., 2021). This has also raised the concern that the principal role has become unmanageable. This is significant because the pressures created on school principals have the power to shape their feelings, attitudes, thoughts and actions, determine their management philosophies and styles, and produce positive or negative effects on learning environments. Furthermore, these changing external and internal expectations could create challenges that hinder school daily functioning (Huber, 2004; Oplatka, 2004).

Reviewing Turkish education literature reveals that academic discussions focus more on teacher accountability (Çalmaşur & Uğurlu, 2021; Erdağ, 2013; 2021; Karagöz, 2017; 2021; Kardaş, 2016; Öztuzcu & Balkar, 2021; Yenipınar, 2021). A small number of studies conducted specifically for school principals focus rather on accountability and organizational justice relationship (Kalman & Gediklioğlu, 2014), school principals' understanding of accountability and the benefits expected from accountability practices (Himmetoğlu et al., 2017), accountability as a leadership standard and assessment (Aslan & Karip, 2014), school principals' accountability for school processes and results (Çalmaşur & Uğurlu, 2021; Abdurrezzak & Uğurlu, 2018), inequalities in school principals' accountability (Çetin &

Demirbilek, 2018), school stakeholders' access to a right of information and its effect on school management (Eski et al., 2019; Işık & Bahat, 2019), school principals' conceptualizations of accountability, ideal accountability relationships and the characteristics of accountable school principals (Argon, 2015), and school principals' experiences of accountability for student achievements (Yıldırım & Yenipınar, 2019). On the other hand, these studies mostly focus on the accountability relationships between the school principal and the senior management and inspection units and include discussions about how it is and should be while the nature of principals' current accountability environment is not systematically addressed. In this context, the purpose of this study is to explore the Turkish school principals' experiences in their accountability environment, and to seek answers to these research questions: (i) what statements describe these experiences?, and (ii) what themes emerge from these experiences? This study is significant in its potential benefit to researchers that present a new perspective on understanding principal accountability relationships. Additionally, it will allow school principals to recognize the different expectations and pressures on schools and adapt to new roles, and help policymakers restructure school accountability relations and improve school principal preparation or development programs.

## Method

### Research design

This study follows the phenomenological design to get the detailed understanding of principal accountability in Turkish education context. Phenomenology emphasizes the experience itself (Merriam, 2015). Following the principles and processes of the hermeneutic paradigm and phenomenological approach, this study explored how school principals experience the accountability phenomenon in their natural environment. Because the researchers have experience in school administration and school accountability research and familiarity with the accountability data from the school

administration, this research design is appropriate to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2017; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Principal accountability, nevertheless, is limited to the experiences and opinions of the participating principals.

### Participants

Participants in the study were diversified based on gender, education and school level, experience and school socio-economical level, informed by the assumption that principals' individual and environmental factors may influence their experiences with their accountability environment (Breux et al., 2009; Creswell, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001; Merriam, 2015). In the period between April and June 2019, 17 school administrators, the number of which is considered sufficient for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2017), participated in this study from different gender (females: 4; males: 13), education levels (2-year college: 1; Graduate: 13; Post-graduate: 3), school levels (Primary s.: 5; Middle s.: 10; High s.: 2), total experiences (5y and less: 4; 6-10 years: 2; 11-15 years: 2; 16 years+: 9), and school socio-economical level (Low: 4; Middle: 12; High: 1). It was assumed that school principals, who were informed about the study in advance, were willing to provide information. Demographic information of the participants is given below in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

<i>Participants' demographics</i>					
<b>Variables</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Gender</i>	4	13	-	-	17
1: Female; 2: Male					
<i>Education level</i>	1	13	3	-	17
1: 2-year college; 2: Graduate; 3: post-graduate					
<i>School level</i>	5	10	2	-	17
1: Primary S.; 2: Middle S.; 3: High S.					
<i>Total experience (year)</i>	4	2	2	9	17
1: 5y-; 2: 6-10y; 3: 11-15y; 4: 16y+					
<i>School socio-economic level</i>	4	12	1	-	17
1: Low; 2: Middle; 3: High					

### Data Collection

The data were gathered from school principals through six questions prepared following the holistic accountability environment framework developed by Hall et al. (2007) and improved by Frink et al. (2008). It describes accountability

environments on four different dimensions; (i) sources of accountability pressures, (ii) their focus, (iii) their intensity, and (iv) accountability salience. After pilot study for testing comprehension and confirmation by two education faculty members who are experts on educational accountability, final interview questionnaire consists of two parts; questions about participants' demographics, and questions for exploring principals' experiences of their accountability environment. Participants were asked to answer these open-ended questions: (i) who asks you for an explanation or justification about your decisions or actions? (ii) to whom do you feel to explain or justify your decisions or actions?, (iii) on what issues do they ask for your explanation or justification, what are the expectations or pressures on you while performing your duty, and what is the focus of their expectations, (iv) how do they evaluate whether you are effective at your duty or not? (v) does any expectation conflict with another? do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by the expectations? (vi) what is the impact of your account-giving? On yourself? On teachers? On parents and students? Any negative or positive impacts on school processes, outcomes, or stakeholders? The interviews were conducted face-to-face in principals' office rooms because they might feel and talk most comfortably. School principals were first given a sample interview form and prepared for the interview where the school principal's answers were audio-recorded, each of which was 40-50 minutes long on average. School principals were requested to check and correct the mistakes in the content of the interview transcribed.

### Data Analysis

Following the data analysis steps by Moustakas (1994), each transcript generated as a transcribed version of the audio recordings for each interview using the MS Word program and checked for the data inter-compatibility, was open-coded, axis-coded and selective-coded, respectively, by the researchers based on the text meaning, and then common codes were determined comparatively and finalized based on the common codes collectively discussed and confirmed. Sub-themes were then inductively generated based on the

abstractions and inter-relations between the codes. Emergent sub-themes were grouped again and presented in tables by comparing and matching with the theoretical themes as depicted in the conceptual framework. Direct quotations were identified to best support the sub-themes.

### Validity and Reliability

In order to validate the study, the following strategies were implemented, recommended by Creswell and Miller (2000). First, interview questions were created based on the accountability environment framework developed by Hall (2007) and improved by Frink et al. (2008). Interview data were triangulated to provide corroborating evidence from different sources of principals of different genders, education levels, school levels, and work experiences. Two researchers, one experienced as a principal and the other as a supervisor, coded the interview transcripts. Last, for credibility and accuracy of the account, participant principals and two external experts on educational accountability were asked to check interview data, codes, themes, interpretations and conclusions.

For the reliability of the study, each researcher conducted the first three transcript coding independently and discussed and reconciled the inconsistencies between the codings in a following collaborative session to create a common codebook for the coding of the rest. After coding all transcripts, agreement ratio of 77% was established on coding between the coders, very close to the recommended ratio of 80% by Miles and Huberman (1994).

### Findings

Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts were found five main themes, and presented below according to the data representation approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). They describe the principal accountability environments and their direct and indirect impacts on Turkish K12 school principals and school stakeholders. They are (i) "bureaucratic accountability", (ii) "professional accountability", (iii) "market accountability", (iv) "accountability intensity", and

(v) “Other impacts of total accountability environment”, namely. Each theme of accountability environments, bureaucratic, professional and market, is composed of ‘accountability source’, ‘accountability focus’, and ‘principal-specific impacts’. These sub-themes describe various accountability pressures and their influences on the principals. The theme, accountability intensity, describes how school principals manage various surrounding accountability pressures. The last theme, other impacts of total accountability environments, describes the total impact of accountability pressures on schools in general, and on teachers, parents, and students.

### Bureaucratic accountability

Table 2 summarizes the principal experiences with the bureaucratic accountability environment and its impact on the principals.

**Accountability source:** Principal interviews revealed that bureaucracy is the dominant environment of principal accountability at Turkish K12 schools. Especially, local educational administrators at province or county levels (17) and inspectors (10) are the first two sources of accountability pressures. National education ministry (7), branch administrators (3), province (2) and district governors (2) are other prominent sources of accountability. On the other hand, the least frequent bureaucratic sources of accountability are courts (1), board of ethics (1) and discipline boards (1). One of the participant principals (P1) stated that *“inspection agency, higher administrative authorities, provincial and district directors of national education, district governorship, inspectors and parents are among the people and institutions to whom we are accountable and to whom we make justifications.”*

**Table 2. Sub-themes and Codes Included under the Theme of ‘Bureaucratic Accountability’**

1. Bureaucratic Accountability		
Accountability source [f]	Accountability focus [f]	Principal-specific impacts [f]
provincial/district directorate of national education [17]	Compliance with regulations [14]	Provides me with feedback [6]
Inspector [10]	School outcomes [11]	I work more meticulously [5]
National Education Ministry [7]	Student success [4]	Makes my work easier [5]
Branch administrators [3]	Student satisfaction [4]	Reduces my mistakes [4]
Province Governor[2]	well-being of school stakeholders [3]	Helps me comply with the regulations [4]
District Governor [2]	Parent satisfaction [3]	Makes me more transparent [4]
Discipline boards [1]	Compliance with ethic principles [3]	Makes me trustworthy [4]
Courts [1]	School activities planned for the new term [2]	Guides me [3]
Board of Ethics [1]	School expenses [2]	I constantly evaluate what we do [3]
	School climate [2]	Increases my motivation [2]
	Primary education institutions standards [2]	I feel safe [2]
	Physical conditions of the school [2]	Help me comply with ethical rules [2]
	Effective teaching [2]	I don't take risks [2]
	personnel satisfaction [2]	Creates stress and fear in me [2]
	Socio-cultural and sports activities [1]	Creates status quo [1]
	Documentation of work done [1]	I hold meetings constantly [1]
	Relations with NGOs [1]	I monitor student achievements [1]
	Activities for parents [1]	I ask my superiors' approval [1]
	Academic activities [1]	Increases my self-confidence [1]
		I consult my decisions [1]
		Audit sometimes turns into a puposeful search for my mistake [1]

**Accountability focus:** These pressures mainly seek compliance with educational regulations (14) set by the central Ministry of Education and the quality and quantity of school outcomes (11). Other foci of the pressures are student success (4), student satisfaction, parent satisfaction (3), stakeholders' well-being (3), and compliance with ethical principles. For example, the principal (P10) stated that:

*“The biggest factor in our national education is compliance with the rules rather than standards. In other words, you have to comply with the regulations, the constitution, the circulars and the regulations of the primary education authority. You have to comply with the internal regulations and circulars. That’s all. These*

are the expectations of our biggest controllers. Compliance with the rules is at the forefront." (P10)

Additionally, one of the principals (P2) also drew attention to the school outcome reports sent to the senior management regarding the results of the school programs prepared at the beginning of the year and put into practice with the approval of the senior management. He stated that:

"There are programs and activities planned at the beginning of the year. We are asked for reports on whether those activities have been carried out. We prepare those reports. It's about health, hygiene, etc. Apart from those, there are also plans for many educational issues related to social and cultural activities. Again, we prepare a report on whether the plans made are realized or not." (P2]

Another participant principal (P16) emphasized schools' self-evaluation reports within strategic planning programs since 2010. He stated that:

"Strategic planning [is] where we give an account of whether we have achieved the goals set four years ago. You need to foresee the next four years in advance, the work you will do for parents, academic activities, sports activities, and school physical improvements. In the end, you have to report how much you have gained after four year period of work." [P16]

Another school principal (P1) also focused on inspections. Pointing to its financial and instructional functions, he stated that their school is audited for "school expenditures, the decisions made at branch teachers board meetings and teacher board meetings, and their implementation and the results produced." He also added:

"Some [inspectors] focus on the quality of the work. For a determined achievement level, they look at how much the students have gained that achievement. Others make assessments on paper. They care how many students have gained that achievement rather than how much is gained. For these people, even if that achievement gain is very low, it is not seen as a problem." [P1]

**Principal-specific impacts:** Principals also report that the bureaucratic accountability environment has both positive and negative impacts on their work. On the positive side, they most frequently state that it provides feedback (6), forces them to work more meticulously (5), facilitates their work

(5), reduces their mistakes (4), forces them to comply with the regulations (4), and increase their transparency (4) and trustworthiness (4). On the other hand, some school principals also state that the bureaucratic accountability pressures cause fear and stress in them (2), and create a status quo (1). Some quotations from the principal responses are as below:

"This is how we can show what we do, how much we do, in which subjects we progress and in which subjects we regress." (P9)

"A person who thinks he has to give an account tries to avoid mistakes as much as possible. It works in a planned and programmed manner, and more importantly, it keeps the plan and schedule of every work he does. For school principals unprepared, auditing and accountability can be perceived as frightening events. We do not encounter such a situation. Unprepared people shy away from control." (P1)

"[...] For example, when there are people who do not want to take risks, they work to a certain standard in these tasks. Only when compliance with the procedure is important and there is a thought that I do not take risks and just follow the procedures, and the rest is not my concern, it is not possible to rise above a certain standard. Change doesn't happen, no development takes place, and it just depends on bureaucracy, on paper." (P14)

**Table 3. Sub-themes and Codes Included under the Theme of 'Professional Accountability'**

2. Professional Accountability		
Accountability source [f]	Accountability focus [f]	Principal-specific impacts [f]
Teachers [12]	compliance with regulations [2]	I make my decisions together with the teachers [5]
Branch teachers' board [3]	Teachers' well-being [1]	I inform the teachers about the decisions made [2]
Teacher Unions [3]	Teacher rights [1]	Teachers provide me with feedback [2]
Teachers' council [2]	Student rights [1]	Teachers support me [2]
Other school principals [2]		I care about the happiness of teachers [2]
		I explain the rationale behind my decisions [1]
		Teachers trust me more [1]
		I feel peaceful [1]

## Professional accountability

Table 3 summarizes the principal experiences with the professional accountability environment and its impact on the principals.

**Accountability source:** Principals report that the teaching profession is the second accountability environment. It consists of teachers (12), teacher boards (3) and teacher unions (3) as the source of accountability. Some quotations from the principal responses are as below:

*"[...] we have a Board of Teachers. We have board meetings at the beginning and end of each term, where the school activities carried out are evaluated. If there is a situation that needs to be accounted for, it is asked there. In other words, it is asked from the school administration as well as from the teacher. Whoever is in charge and responsible." [P2]*

*"Of course, our branch committees and teachers' committees are provided with information by the school administration, if requested." [P2]*

**Accountability focus:** Professional accountability pressures mainly focus on principals' compliance with educational regulations when making decisions and their implementations (2), and teacher and student well-being (1). For example, the participant principal (P10) stated that teachers are "scrutinizing" their all decisions and practices, and they "discuss" the educational practices with the school administration. Additionally, the participant principal (P15) emphasized teacher and student rights at schools, and the role of teacher unions as below:

*"Teacher unions are non-governmental organizations that protect the right of the teacher, defend the right of the students, and make an effort to contribute to education in schools. If there are any problems with the schools, we discuss and make the necessary negotiations for a more successful education life." (P15)*

**Principal-specific impacts:** School principals also state that these pressures forced them to make decisions together with teachers regarding school processes to alleviate teacher criticism and doubts (5), and keep them informed about the decisions (2) and the rationale behind them (1). They also

state that their professional environment provides principals with feedback (2), they support (2) and trust them (2), and care more about teacher happiness (1). Some quotations from the principal responses are as below:

*"We strive to make decisions together for the organization to work better and for transparency. Even if we have made a decision ourselves, we inform the teachers of our decision and its reasoning by organizing a meeting or by any other means." (P1)*

*"Transparency is always good. If you are making a mistake that you think is right, your stakeholders around you will warn you and make you turn from the wrong you have done." (P15)*

*"...after all, the exchange of ideas is always important. You are the only person, you hear with two eyes and hear with two ears, but if you consult one, you see with four eyes, hear with four ears, and think with two brains. Therefore, it gives you strength in your decisions and activities." (P2)*

## Market accountability

Table 4 summarizes the principal experiences with the market accountability environment and its impact on the principals.

**Accountability source:** Principals report that the third accountability environment is the market. Parents (10), school-parent partnerships (3), and students (3) are the ultimate sources of accountability pressures.

**Accountability focus:** Market accountability pressures mainly focus on social, cultural and educational activities at schools (4), student success (3), students' well-being (3), student safety (2), and student discipline issues (1) as much as school budget (2) and outcomes (2). Some quotations from the principal responses are as below:

**Table 4. Sub-themes and Codes Included under the Theme of 'Market Accountability'**

3. Market Accountability		
Accountability source [f]	Accountability focus [f]	Principal-specific impacts [f]
Parents [10]	Educational activities [4]	I make decisions together with parents [1]
Students [3]	Student success [3]	I care about students' happiness [1]
Parents-School Association [3]	Students well-being [3]	I involve students in decision-making processes [1]
Local people [2]	Student safety [2]	I inform students about our decisions [1]
Press [2]	School results [2]	I inform parents about teaching activities [1]
	School budget [2]	
	Student discipline issues [1]	

*"If the student is in peace, there is no disruption, and there is no environment that will pose a danger to the children, then the parents trust to school. They do not want their child to experience negative things, he does not want a stone to touch his foot or fall. Or he doesn't want a problem in his education life."* (P10)

*"One of the most important things parents want from school is of course academic success [...] they also want to know that the school is a safe environment. One of the things they pay attention to when they come is how safe is the school, whether can we leave our children with peace of mind, how are the teachers, how are their behaviours, and how are the administrators. That's all they care about."* (P14)

*"[...] we have parent meetings where we provide explanations and information about the activities we do."* (P2)

**Principal-specific impacts:** School principals also state that these pressures specifically forced them concern with students' happiness (1), involve both students (1) and parents (1) in decision-making, and inform students about the decisions made (1) and parents about the teaching activities (1). One of the participant principals stated that he *"make[s] school decisions together with parents"* [P14]

### Accountability intensity

Table 5 summarizes the principal experiences with the various accountability relations and the total impact on the principals.

School principals state that their surrounding accountability environment is not that impressive in total (12). A participant principal emphasized

the weakness of accountability pressure, and stated that:

*"[...] there is no one who asks for an account because there is no one. I wish they would ask, I think they will be more committed to school, and they will be much more involved in the school both financially and emotionally, but I think they are away because they do not hold accountable and do not know what is going on where."* (P11)

On the other hand, participant principals also state that, despite their weakness, demands come from different sources (3), and complain that some conflict with each other (5), especially parent demands with central regulations (4) and ethical principles (4), whereby parent demands become tensing (2) and difficult to meet (3). The principal P1 stated that they are surrounded by *"various pressures"*, but they are having difficult times because *"conflicting demands are coming in."* Some principals exemplified this difficulty as below:

*"Of course, there are conflicting demands that come on me. For example, there are 10 classrooms and 10 teachers. During the enrollment, we try to equally distribute the children enrol per teacher, but all students concentrate on one teacher. A political elder calls and says 'that teacher will teach this boy. Contrarily, the law does not say so. When we do what they want, one class becomes 20 students and another 40. This time they ask why we did so and did not distribute equally [...] Then you become the scapegoat."* (P3)

*"Parents want a lot, whether it is legitimate or not. They want the impossible. To exemplify, one parent comes and says that their child should go to this or that class [...] should get high scores, and become first in every assessment [...] They want a high score even if the child cannot do it either, instead they force you to give a high grade. They even want to have an impact on their written exams."* (P10)

The least frequent principal statements are family shift of responsibility (2) and purposeful auditing for a principal mistake (1). Some supportive quotations from the principal responses are as below:

*"One of our biggest problems [...] is that families not caring for their children blame us for troubles their child involved and hold us accountable. They expect too much from us. Although they do not fulfil their parental duties, they want us to take care of them more."* (P4)

*“After all, since we are administrators, every decision we make is questioned. Checking the decisions is a must, but constant questioning by the audience damage the accountability relationship, [...] and checking turns into an investigation for my mistakes.”* (P6)

**Table 5. Codes Included under the Theme of ‘Accountability Intensity’**

5- Accountability Intensity
Accountability intensity [f]
Pressures do not force me [12]
Demands sometimes conflict with each other [5]
Parent demands conflict with the regulations [4]
Some demands do not comply with ethical principles [4]
I find it difficult to meet parent demands [3]
Different demands come from different sources [3]
I am constantly trying to justify my decisions [2]
I sometimes take the initiative even if it does not comply with the legislation [2]
Some parent requests make us nervous [2]
Families shift their responsibilities to school [2]
Audit sometimes turns into a puposeful search for my mistake [1]

### Other impacts of total accountability environments

Table 6 summarizes the principal observations on the total impact of all school accountability relationships on schools, teachers, parents and students, respectively. Principals state that there are other school-, teacher-, parent-specific and student-specific influences on surrounding accountability environments in addition to those principal-specific impacts.

Among the most frequent accountability impacts on schools are improvement of school transparency (5) and performance (3), maintaining order (3) and peace (2) at schools, improving school climate (2) and school culture (2) and also cultivate democracy culture (2) at schools. Some participant principals stated as below:

*“[...] it increases the willingness and performance of my fellow teachers who will take part in various academic activities [...] increases the number of social and cultural activities and the number of participants in our school.”* (P1)

*“[...] we also evaluate our teachers. We assess student achievements and evaluate student and class achievements. It’s like this. So what can be done to increase it? Many measures can be taken at work, such as homework, more lectures, course repetitions, practice exams or one-on-one lessons. Then, we assess students and compare them and compare to other school*

*achievements. Accordingly, we understand how well our measures work or not.”* (P5)

The most frequent accountability impact on teachers is the raise in teacher responsibility (5), improvement in teacher collaboration between teachers and administration (4), increased performance (2), and school reputation (1). Below is an example from the principal responses:

*“Account giving and making justifications also play an active role in the creation of an environment of trust. Teachers who are used to this feel more belonging to the institution they work because they know that their own opinions will be taken in future decisions and that even if they are not taken, the decisions will be conveyed to them with their justifications. The feeling of self-confidence grows, even more, to be better and more productive.”* (P1)

Principals also state that accountability environments have impacts on parents, too. The most frequent ones among them are the increase in parents' trust (3) and support (2) for school. Others are the raise in parents’ commitment (1), recognition of school values and norms (1), increase in parents-school communication (1), and parents’ participation in decision-making (1). One of the participant principals stated as below:

*“For example, if parent-teacher association invoices and documents its expenses, and the way they spent, and shares with its stakeholders in a transparent environment, both the trust and support to the school increase. In such a case, parents will be more behind the school and will support the school both financially and emotionally at school activities.”* (P15)

Principals report that an accountability environment leads schools to involve students in decision-making and increase student discipline (1), and students’ commitment to school (1). A principal stated that:

*“Students and parents also feel a sense of confidence in the school. They feel safer in this institution, and even more, so do their children. They have a sense of belonging.”* (P1)

**Table 6. Sub-themes and Codes Included under the Theme of 'Other Impacts of Total Accountability Environments'**

4. Total Impacts of Accountability Environments	
On teachers [f]	On parents [f]
Help teachers act more responsibly [5]	Increase parents' trust in school [3]
Increase teacher collaboration with school administration [4]	Increase parents' support for the school [2]
Increase teacher performance [3]	Increase parents' commitment to school [1]
Increase teacher participation in decisions [2]	Raise parent awareness of school values and norms [1]
Raise teacher awareness about school goals [2]	Increase teacher communication with school [1]
Increase teacher self-assessment [2]	Involve parents in decisions [1]
Help teachers adopt an acceptable behavior [2]	
Increase teacher compliance with regulations [1]	
Increase teacher awareness of school norms and values [1]	
Create stress in teachers [1]	
Supervision out of purpose wears out teachers [1]	
Punishment for minor mistakes makes the teacher unhappy [1]	

**Table 6. (continued) Sub-themes and Codes Included under the Theme of 'Other Impacts of Total Accountability Environments'**

4. Total Impacts of Accountability Environments	
On students [f]	On School [f]
Increase student discipline [1]	Make the school transparent [5]
Increase students' commitment to school [1]	Maintain order in school [3]
Involve students in decisions [1]	Improve school performance [3]
	Provide peace at school [2]
	Improve the school climate [2]
	Develop a culture of democracy [2]
	Improve school culture [2]
	Provide unity at school [1]
	Develop morality at school [1]
	Increase motivation at school [1]
	Increase social and cultural school activities [1]
	Increase school reputation [1]
	Improve the school [1]
	Lead to school comparisons of student success [1]
	Lead to evaluate school processes [1]

## Conclusion, Discussions and Implications

This study, which aims to explore school principals' accountability environment in Turkey, reveals that school principals are in formal and informal accountability relations with bureaucracy, parents and professional units. As the foremost of these relations, bureaucratic accountability includes formal or informal expectations of senior management (provincial or district directors of National Education, branch managers, district governorships, governorships,

and ministry units) and inspection units (education inspectors) on school principals regarding both school processes and school results, such as monitoring activities and asking reports and justifications. The most frequent foci of this relationship are compliance with the regulations and ethical principles, stakeholders' well-being and satisfaction, school results, school climate and school expenditures. Senior management or education inspectors request pieces of evidence from schools such as information, statistics, reports, or documents related to the teachers' board and the group teachers' board meetings, to prove whether the school activities comply with the educational regulations. School-related information is mostly quantitative and consists of numbers for the physical and psychological health of learning environments, student and parent satisfaction, physical structure and academic achievement (university placement rates, etc.), number of books read, number of social activities, and project applications. In addition, schools are expected to prepare a four-year strategic plan, which includes setting strategic goals, creating a work plan, evaluating the improvement, and reporting the results to senior management. It is stated that bureaucratic relationships have strong effects, especially on school principals. Principals report that the bureaucratic expectations provide guidance for themselves about what they need to do and feedback on what they do, thus facilitating their work and increasing their motivation, helping them behave following the regulations and ethical rules, making them feel safe and more reliable and transparent while a few school principals report bureaucratic accountability pressures cause fear and stress.

These results are largely in line with the results of other studies conducted in Turkey. Erdağ (2013) and Kardaş (2016) stated that they do not think that schools are held responsible for their academic success towards their senior management units and that there is no academic success-oriented accountability relationship between the school and senior management; Yıldırım and Yenipinar (2019), on the other hand, report that school principals have the highest demand for accountability in terms of the school physical

structure and the regulations, and there is no expectation for the quality of education. Instead, schools think that, with formal or informal interactions, senior management expects them to fulfil the provisions of the legislation, not to cause parent complaints and to ensure parent satisfaction (Kardaş, 2016). Additionally, Engin (2013) reports that senior management and inspection units focus on schools' compliance with regulations and ethical codes, and school principals are requested for reporting regarding school processes and outcomes under some school improvement programs such as Strategic Planning, Total Quality Management, School Development and Management Teams, and Primary Education Standards, while some principals report that they are not implemented properly in practice and related reports are even fake, provided no feedback, and its availability but not functionality is questioned, they yet have functionality in terms of guiding school principals. When evaluated as it is in the accountability relationships with the schools, the senior management units seem "not having any expectation for academic success, and not having an agenda for school quality improvement, sending direct and indirect messages saying no expectation for student success, even lowering their expectations for high standards of student achievement" (Kardaş, 2016). Instead, the central government, which contends having the necessary educational knowledge, expects schools to rationally obey and act following the processes, rules and legislative provisions set for the schools. As Kardaş (2016) states, the pressure for compliance with the centrally-set regulations on the schools seems to make school principals turn their attention and efforts away to management issues from teaching, the technical essence of education. Therefore, school principals consider themselves responsible for technical regulations regarding school processes and fulfilment of administrative duties, and leave the academic field to the responsibility of teachers (Kardaş, 2016). After all, failure to monitor and produce information regarding school processes and results, messages that ignore student achievement, and not providing feedback and support to schools

mean the loss of opportunities for change and transformation for the school.

The second is professional accountability relations, and it includes the teachers' and teacher unions' expectations and demands created on issues at schools such as the compliance of school decisions and practices with the government regulations, and the protection of teacher and student rights and well-being. It is understood that these relations lead school principals to be responsive to teachers, and become more caring for teachers, be open to teacher feedback on their decisions and practices, allow teachers to participate in decision-making. Argon (2015) reports that school principals make great efforts to be accountable to their superiors for compliance with the regulations, while they do not care much about being accountable to school stakeholders, so teachers expect school principals to be accountable to them, to make decisions and act following government regulations, and expect a fair, honest, democratic, transparent, participatory, collaborative, and innovative work environment. On the other hand, Güçlü & Kılınç (2011) and Özken (2020) found that primary school administrators are not prone to be supportive of teachers, provide feedback, face and accept reality and take responsibility, care for teacher well-being and transparency, participate in decision-making, and disseminate information. On the other hand, Atar (2018) reports that pre-school principals are transparent and honest in their relations with teachers, justify their decisions and keep them informed about those decisions, ask them for their feedback. Likewise, Özken (2020) states that an accountable school principal contributes positively to the school climate, to both teachers' and students' commitment to school, and builds trust at school while those principals who make decisions alone and refuse criticism force teachers to their obedience, weaken and devalue teachers, alienate them from the profession and even force them to leave.

The third is market accountability relationships. It includes parents' expectations of information about and practices related to social, cultural and educational activities at schools, student achievements, student well-being and safety, school outcomes, and disciplinary issues. Parents

monitor school processes and outcomes through formal relations established as specified in the legislation, and in this context, they request information about school expenditures, school decisions and practices regarding teaching and learning, and students' academic achievements, especially at parent meetings and parent-teacher association board meetings. These results are supported by other studies in Turkey. Kardaş (2016) points out that Turkish schools are under the control of "an implicit market-based accountability structure", and that they can directly exert strong pressure on schools through the formal complaint mechanisms they have and the extra responsibilities they undertake within the schools, therefore, the focus of the accountability relationship between the school and the senior management turns into parent satisfaction. In addition, senior management can often make very harsh legal interventions because they are afraid of political pressures, based on the information carried by parents, who are also seen as political voters (Kardaş, 2016). Therefore, not only school principals but also senior management units are very sensitive to parents' complaints (Yağ, 2019), and school principals mostly make an effort to be responsible for, open and responsive to parents (Fırat, 2015), and they feel accountable to parents mostly for student achievements (Çalmaşur, 2019). School principals, who feel responsible to parents and care about their satisfaction, attach great importance to their feedback and make academic interventions to please parents (Kardaş, 2016). Because school principals know that parent satisfaction is an important tool that will ensure the survival of the school and prevent investigations from the senior management (Kardaş, 2016). In this sense, it is of great importance for the school principal's safety and well-being to respond to the academic, social, cultural, and financial demands from parents, who are strengthened by the complaint mechanisms.

Fourth, principal interviews revealed that they are not challenged by different accountability relationships, and the total pressure they feel is not intense and overwhelming. For example, Argon (2015) points out that official inspections of school principals are quite inadequate, and expectations

for academic success from senior management are also quite low (Erdağ, 2013; Kardaş, 2016). At the same time, school principals are reported to be stuck between the demands of teachers and senior management units, in other words, they experience dilemmas between education and management, and they are obliged to fulfil administrative demands despite being contrary to their educator identities (Kardaş, 2016; Özken, 2020).

On the other hand, the participating school principals state that principals' accountability environment produces positive and negative effects not only on themselves but also on the school, teachers, students and parents. First of all, it is stated that there are radical changes in school processes under the influence of accountability relationships. School principals who think they are accountable report that schools turn into a more successful, popular, transparent, orderly and peaceful learning environment where warm and collaborative relations in a democratic culture prevail, and various rich school learning and assessment activities are carried out. Argon (2015) points out that principal accountability creates an atmosphere of trust at school, transforms the school into a peaceful, sincere and democratic, transparent, participatory and collaborative environment, and increases motivation, teaching and learning. According to Himmetoglu et al. (2017), school principals believe that an accountable school will become a popular place due to its orderly and effective learning environment built on various feedback inputs.

In addition to these, school principals state that there are some changes in teachers as well. Principal interviews revealed that teachers share school values, act more responsibly, participate in decisions, collaborate with school administration, self-evaluate, and comply with regulations. Özgan (2011) reports that a transparent school administration increases school teachers' trust, commitment to school, cooperation, motivation and performance, and job satisfaction. In their study on accountability practices in Texas, Skrla et al. (2001) found that teachers had high expectations of success due to accountability, and

for this reason, they tended to cooperate more with other teachers by working in teams.

Similarly, school principals argue that in this context, parents also develop feelings of trust and dedication, adopt the values of the school more, increase their communication with the school, become more participative in school decisions and give more support to the school. Such an environment surrounded by various expectations also connects students to school more.

To conclude, Turkish school principals have a strong accountability relationship with bureaucracy compared to those with parents and teachers. While the senior management and inspection units closely monitor the school principals in their decisions and practices for compliance with regulations and school outcomes, their expectations of student achievements, shareholders' well-being and satisfaction remain very low. On the other hand, while parent expectations from the principal focus on educational activities, student success, and student safety and well-being, the focus of professional expectations is only on compliance with regulations and defending personal rights in principal decisions and practices. As Kardaş (2016) points out, this situation directs the attention and actions of schools and educators away from teaching and learning activities, distances them away from the essence of education, avoids taking responsibility and risks for instruction, and going beyond the regulations, leads them staying in a safe area, and poisons the school culture. A bureaucratic accountability environment therefore physically and mentally isolates educators from instruction and abandons the control of instruction and student achievements to parents' and teachers' conscience.

There is a need for a more detailed examination of the accountability relations of schools located in different contexts with certain characteristics, and to reveal the associations between these relations and effective school factors. In particular, revealing the correlation between the quality of the school-specific accountability relationship and the school's social, technical and human capacity is of great importance in creating effective learning environments in schools. In this sense, the relationship between the school and the

bureaucracy, parents, and members of the profession should be described in more detail depending on the school context. There is a need for studies and observations that will reveal how accountability relations are established in the education legislation that determines the structure and behaviour in schools.

The accountability environment framework presents a new approach to solving the quality problem at schools. This approach argues that the source of the current quality problem in education is government, and it separates management from learning through educational regulations, and formal or informal expectations, and shifts the entire focus from learning to management. Therefore, schools cannot touch the essence of education. So the solution is to fix this corruption. The responsibility of policymakers should be to renew the regulation that will focus the attention and effort of stakeholders on academic success and its founding elements. Inspection should also be responsible for guiding schools and supporting principals and teachers in seeking solutions for instructional issues and modelling an effective learning environment, as Sadrettin Celal Antel stated a hundred years ago (Karagöz, 2018).

School principals, senior management units and inspectors can contribute to schools' social, technical and human capacity and produce improvement in schools by establishing healthy and effective accountability relationships with bureaucracy, parents and teachers.

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