

ACCOUNTABILITY OF WELLBEING: EVALUATING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT FOSTER ETHICAL, INCLUSIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE EDUCATIONAL WORKPLACES

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Abstract

This seminar paper explores the growing need for accountability in relation to staff wellbeing within educational institutions, with a particular focus on leadership practices. It argues that school leaders play a decisive role in shaping the organisational culture, policies, and interpersonal relationships that directly impact teacher and staff wellbeing. Leadership accountability extends beyond ensuring academic results or administrative efficiency; it also encompasses the ethical obligation to safeguard the health, motivation, and professional fulfilment of staff members. Drawing on organisational theory, leadership studies, and empirical educational research, the paper synthesises insights into three major pillars of wellbeing-driven leadership: ethical behavior, inclusive policies, and psychologically safe work environments. By integrating these principles, the paper develops an accountability framework that can guide leaders in fostering healthier educational workplaces. Furthermore, practical and policy-oriented recommendations are provided to help school leaders, district managers, and policymakers translate theory into practice. Ultimately, the paper argues that protecting wellbeing is not a peripheral responsibility but a core accountability measure for sustainable and effective leadership in education.

Keywords: wellbeing, accountability, ethical leadership, inclusive leadership, psychological safety, teacher wellbeing, educational leadership

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of the most innovative technologies of the 21st century that has transformed industries, human engagement with technology, and the economy and social structure. Fundamentally, AI is computer hardware or software that is designed to execute tasks that otherwise need human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and natural language understanding. Its uses are no longer confined to laboratory settings or industry but have now pervaded nearly all sectors, such as healthcare, finance, transport, manufacturing, agriculture, and, most importantly, education. Education here is perhaps one of the most important sectors where AI adoption can not only facilitate greater efficiency and performance but also transform teaching, learning, and educational leadership in fundamental ways (Obizue, Abu, Agba & Babatunde, 2025). The integration of AI into the curriculum is not just an issue of technological developments; it is part of the broader argument about how societies equip future generations to prosper within an age of automation, globalization, and accelerated innovations of the digital domain. Educational administrators, policymakers, and leaders alike are better positioned to understand now that AI can be a driver of sustainable development, equity, and inclusion based on its capacity to support adaptive learning solutions, personalized learning, intelligent tutoring systems, automated testing, and data-driven decision-making informed by data. Outside the classroom, AI provides educational managers with tools to forecast enrollment patterns, optimize resource usage, and design inclusive systems to meet different needs in increasingly complex worlds. Yet, with all this promise are enormous challenges and ethical dilemmas. AI applications in education leadership and administration raise serious issues of data confidentiality, transparency, equity, and responsibility (Obizue, 2022). For instance, the deployment of algorithms to grade students or make administrative decisions could perpetuate or even exacerbate existing inequalities if not managed carefully. In addition, teachers are faced with a dilemma between welcoming technological innovation and maintaining the humanistic character of learning. The challenge is thus to create conceptual frameworks that reconcile efficiency with equity, innovation with ethical responsibility, and adoption of technology with human values.

The notion of ethical transformation in education becomes the focal point. It calls for the use of AI not to be possible without due deliberation over matters of justice, fairness, and human dignity. Organizations are challenged to move beyond perceiving AI as a neutral tool and, instead, critically examine its design, deployment, and influence over all the stakeholders; the students, teachers, administrators, and society in general. Eco-efficient management of education in the AI era thus demands a reflective and participatory approach that choreographs technology for the collective

benefit instead of specific economic or institutional interests. Set against this background, this seminar paper delves into the nexus between Artificial Intelligence and moral change in education, its management implications, leadership, and evidence-driven decision-making in spearheading sustainability. The discourse is situated within prevailing subthemes: the use of AI in education administration; conceptual paradigms informing AI adoption; the dilemma and ethical implications involved; and the future direction of AI in informing educational systems globally. By operating across these dimensions, the essay seeks to make a contribution to current discussions about how and whether education leaders can responsibly use AI to meet both short-term performance goals and long-term sustainability in governing education systems.

Conceptual foundations

Wellbeing in education

Educational wellbeing is a multicomponent construct. It includes physical and mental health, job satisfaction, professional development, and quality social relationships within the workplace (Viac & Fraser, 2020; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Teachers' wellbeing is also strongly connected with cognitive and emotional resources that determine the capacity to motivate students and manage classroom difficulties. Systematic reviews establish that teacher wellbeing has a direct impact on student outcomes, better retention levels, and increased teaching quality (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Dreer, 2023). In this scenario, wellbeing is not only an individual entitlement but an institutional responsibility.

Accountability and its double-edged nature

Education accountability entails policies and systems that oversee, assess, and report performance, most often through mechanisms such as inspections, performance targets, and data-driven decisions. These mechanisms are meant to hold schools accountable for the provision of quality education and to be answerable to stakeholders. When exclusively concentrated on results, however, accountability can produce unsustainable workloads, increased stress, and compromised professional autonomy among teachers (Jerrim & Sims, 2021). There is also evidence that accountability influences wellbeing in multifaceted ways: external accountability pressures are frequently associated with stress and job dissatisfaction, but caring and capable leadership can moderate these effects and frame accountability as a developmental, rather than punitive, process.

Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership has been conceptualized as leadership based on fairness, transparency, integrity, and respect for the dignity of all stakeholders. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) believe that ethical leaders are role models who institutionalize normative behaviour, promote fairness in decision-making, and safeguard workers' rights. In schools, ethical leadership renders

accountability with a moral compass so that staff evaluation, workload distribution, and conflict resolution are driven by justice and care, not by prejudice or pressure. By mooring accountability in ethical values, leaders can avert harm and foster trust among staff.

Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership broadens the definition of accountability in leadership through diversity and belonging. It is comprised of deliberate attempts to involve a diverse number of voices in decision-making, to eliminate blocks towards participation, and to promote the distinctiveness of each member (Korkmaz, van Engen, Knappert, & Schalk, 2022). Evidence indicates inclusive school leaders create environments where equity thrives and teachers are valued and supported irrespective of who they are or where they come from (European Agency, 2018). This, in itself, enhances wellbeing by minimising feelings of being marginalised, isolated, or abandoned at work.

Psychological safety

Psychological safety is defined as a work environment in which individuals can feel comfortable opening up, making mistakes, and admitting mistakes without penalty or jeopardy (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is important in the education community as it fosters collaboration, learning from others, and experimentation as a profession. When educators believe their managers will be supportive instead of chastising them for errors, they are more likely to innovate, provide feedback, and accept accountability in positive manners. Psychological safety then serves as a buffer against accountability pressure systems, allowing professional development to occur in an environment that is supportive instead of threatening.

Literature Synthesis: Leadership Practices that Promote Wellbeing

A close reading of recent literature suggests that leadership behaviors that actually improve wellbeing are those that integrate care with accountability. School leaders are under pressure at all times to perform to standard, to demonstrate outcomes, and to be accountable while also being responsible for safeguarding the psychological well-being and professional dignity of their staff. This dual responsibility necessitates leadership practices to be designed in such a manner that they create a balanced, participatory, and supportive environment and yet exert the necessary control. Six interrelated practices are identified through the literature:

1. Ethical modelling and transparent decision-making.

When leaders conduct themselves with integrity, they establish the behavior expected in the school community. Consistently acting in a predictable fashion, applying rules fairly, and giving the reason for decisions reduces bias or backroom agenda perceptions. Research shows fairness and openness are effective antidotes to workplace stress because they prevent staff members from feeling powerless or victimized by arbitrary decision-making (Brown et al., 2005; Óskarsdóttir et

al., 2020). That is, if decisions are made openly and honestly, staff and teachers can feel secure and safe.

2. Participative and distributed decision-making.

Decisions made top-down make teachers feel under-valued, excluded, or simply like "cogs in the machine." Distributed leadership shared responsibilities and shared decisions puts voice and ownership for change in the hands of educators. When teachers themselves are engaged in the design of assessment procedures or curriculum decision-making, accountability does not quite seem like such an external constraint and so much more as a collective responsibility (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020; Korkmaz et al., 2022). Such participatory practice not only increases wellbeing but results in more efficient implementation of school policy.

3. Psychological safety practices.

Most important to a healthy work environment is psychological safety, or the ability to speak up, experiment, and make mistakes without repercussions. Managers who create a culture of failure, request upward feedback, and are humble make it safer for employees to speak up and provide suggestions (Edmondson, 1999). These practices contain fear-based action, facilitate innovation, and offer opportunities for career development. In a culture of accountability, psychological safety doesn't encourage employees to think that errors will be turned against them.

4. Inclusive policy and targeted supports.

Equity consideration is critical for well-being. Those leaders who take the effort at structural barriers, e.g., through affordable professional development, underprivileged workers' mentoring schemes, or diverse workload support, prevent any group from getting overwhelmed or disenfranchised. Belonging and inclusion policies diminish chronic stressors and lead workers to perceive that identity and status are respected in work (European Agency, 2018; Korkmaz et al., 2022).

5. Learning over blame.

Perhaps one of the most impactful shifts leaders can make is to move away from a culture of blame to a development culture. Rather than employing performance measures as a rod to beat people with, leaders who utilize accountability for learning purposes develop a culture in which feedback enhances growth over fear (Viac & Fraser, 2020; Jerrim & Sims, 2021). Coaching, peer learning, and professional reflection all transform information into development tools that buffers wellbeing but maintains high standards (Obizue, Chukwuemeka & Iwezu, 2025).

6. Nurturing wellbeing with respect.

Lastly, wellbeing responsibility implies that leaders should treat wellbeing seriously as something to be measured and to value. Taking data sporadically; surveys, focus groups, or interviews implies that the organisation cares for employees' welfare. But the data need to be treated with caution, in secret, and with respect, or else they can either be abused or add additional stress. Well done wellbeing surveillance gives leaders hard evidence on which to make interventions and policy changes (Viac & Fraser, 2020; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Together, these six practices highlight a clear message from the literature: wellbeing and accountability are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they can reinforce one another when approached thoughtfully.

An Accountability-for-Wellbeing Framework for Educational Leaders

Building on the foregoing evidence, this article presents a composite framework that places staff wellbeing at the heart of accountability. The framework is structured around four overlapping pillars: Principles, Practices, Evidence, and Safeguards. Each of the pillars provides a foundation for school leaders to create accountability systems that are fair, humane, and sustainable (Obizue, Enomah & Onyebu, 2025).

1. Principles (the moral core).

The principles are the moral compass of accountability. Leaders must begin from the premise that employee well-being is not a luxury but a moral necessity. Moral obligation entails handling employees with respect and fairness in a way that decision-making processes protect rather than infringe upon their sense of justice (Brown et al., 2005). Inclusivity must be the default setting norm, and policies must be designed to foster equity and belongingness for all (Korkmaz et al., 2022; European Agency, 2018). Lastly, psychological safety must be a governing value, wherein speaking up, owning up to mistakes, and expressing concerns are safeguarded and promoted (Edmondson, 1999).

2. Practices (what leaders do).

Principles remain hollow until enacted into daily practice. Open workload distribution and dispute-resolution mechanisms that clearly demonstrate to staff that fairness is put into practice in the day-to-day work. Distributed leadership, as well as substantive teacher involvement in decisions, generates ownership and minimizes alienation. Continual reflective practices, such as getting 360-degree feedback or coaching from leadership coaches, hold leaders self-aware and answerable. Similarly, performance information should be used developmentally and not punitively, framing answerability as a means to improvement and not as a means of control (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

3. Evidence (what to measure).

For leaders to make answerability work, they need trustworthy evidence. Wellbeing needs to be measured using validated measures, such as levels of burnout, job satisfaction, and teacher retention or intention to leave (Hascher & Waber, 2021). School climate surveys can also identify if psychological safety and inclusiveness are being experienced (Edmondson, 1999; Korkmaz et al., 2022). Process measures such as the degree of time spent on collaborative planning or participation in professional learning also provide concrete data about how wellbeing is being carried out in practice.

4. Safeguards (protection of personnel from accountability harms).

Finally, accountability must be protected from its potential abuse. Independent oversight of wellbeing data is critical to prevent punitive applications that can harm staff trust. Strong whistleblowing policies and confidential support networks allow staff safe channels for raising concerns. Leaders must also institutionalize recovery-oriented practices, such as protecting time for professional development, rest, and restorative activities. Such protections ensure that accountability systems enhance wellbeing rather than amplify stress.

Policy and Practical Recommendations

Basing on the literature synthesis and the framework presented, there is no question that wellbeing cannot be left to chance or be an afterthought. For its meaningful integration in schools and systems, critical steps must be taken at educational governance levels. The recommendations below lay out specific actions for policymakers, leaders, and researchers, and how wellbeing can be protected and strengthened without losing accountability.

1. Recommendations for School Leaders

School principals have the most immediate influence on the day-to-day experiences of teachers and staff. The way in which they appraise, assign tasks, and talk to their teams affects wellbeing directly. The initial step should be to steer appraisal systems away from summative judgement toward formative coaching conversations. Instead of employees fearing that reviews are merely a critique of their competence, leaders can frame them as positive discussions that focus on strengths, encourage self-reflection, and map paths for professional growth (Viac & Fraser, 2020). Another actionable step is conducting periodic, anonymised wellbeing "pulse" surveys that provide leaders with a snapshot view at a glance of how their teams are coping. Such surveys, coupled with open publication of aggregate results and action plans, show the staff that they are heard and listened to. Along with measurement, leaders must invest in senior and middle leader training so they can build inclusive approaches and develop psychologically safe spaces. There is evidence to show that leadership at all levels is responsible for whether or not personnel feel

respected, valued, and able to be themselves (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Edmondson, 1999). By ensuring that leaders possess such abilities, schools are able to establish a culture of care that permeates through all levels of their organisation.

2. District and Regional Policymaker Recommendations

At the policy level, accountability systems must concentrate on student test performance and institutional performance goals, but these do not capture the whole picture of school health. Policymakers should therefore design accountability systems that positively incentivize staff wellbeing as a result alongside student attainment (Jerrim & Sims, 2021). For example, districts could require schools to report on wellbeing metrics along with reporting on student achievement so the people side of education isn't lost in the numbers. In pursuit of this, governments and districts need to budget for leadership training programs addressing explicit training in ethical leadership and inclusive practice. All too often, leadership development focuses on administrative or technical skills and overlooks the relational and ethical dimensions of leadership. By investing in training to equip leaders for managing workload equity, inclusivity, and psychological safety, policymakers can create the conditions for healthier, more resilient school systems.

3. Researcher and Evaluator Recommendations

The responsibility to advance wellbeing-focused accountability also rests on researchers. Researchers and evaluators should implement mixed-method designs that allow for understanding of more profound depths of leadership practice effect on teacher wellbeing and eventually student achievement outcomes (Dreer, 2023; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Quantitative data could provide broad trends, while qualitative knowledge entails capturing lived experiences among leaders and teachers as they navigate accountability pressure. Another important contribution from researchers is the validation of culturally appropriate wellbeing measures, particularly in regions that have been under-researched. Too often, wellbeing tools are developed in Western contexts and applied without adaptation elsewhere. This risks overlooking important cultural differences in how stress, satisfaction, and belonging are experienced and expressed (Dreer, 2023). Developing and validating context-specific measures will ensure that evidence is meaningful and applicable across diverse educational environments.

Limitations

While this paper offers rich conceptual integration of theory and existing research, note should be taken of the limitation to its contribution. The research effort presented here is mainly conceptual in nature; it integrates knowledge from systematic reviews, cross-national studies, and theory without novel empirical evidence. This suggests that claims made here are interpretative in nature and not founded upon original field research or direct measurement. Another limitation is heterogeneity of school systems around the world. Learning contexts vary widely in policy

settings, resource availability, cultural values, and habits of leadership. For example, leadership behaviors successful in well-resourced, high-income countries may not be easily applicable to lower-income nations' schools whose infrastructure, training opportunities, and institutional capacities are less advanced. Similarly, concepts such as psychological safety or distributed leadership may refer to something else and be understood otherwise as a function of school power bases and cultural norms. Furthermore, wellbeing is a complex, multidimensional construct which is affected by personal, social, and cultural factors. Indicators and frameworks employed to assess wellbeing will not necessarily capture the nuance of the construct when applied across regions. As Viac and Fraser (2020) and Dreer (2023) remind us, context is not an afterthought but a determinative consideration that informs how accountability and wellbeing come together in practice. That is the reason why any framework or set of recommendations arising from this paper need to be read as a guide rather than a prescription. Local adaptation is not only advisable but indispensable if the concepts are to be effective and relevant in specific school settings.

Conclusion

The general thesis of this paper is that wellbeing and accountability are not mutually exclusive, but can be complementary objectives in educational leadership. Far too often, accountability systems have been associated with surveillance, pressure, and control, and this has led to climates where staff feel overworked and underappreciated. But as research suggests, when leaders put staff wellbeing at the heart of their accountability strategies, they create healthier organisational cultures that consequently enhance staff satisfaction and student learning gains. This must come with a shift in fundamental premises regarding how accountability is obtained. Instead of seeing accountability as something to do with judgment and punishment, it can be reframed as a learning and development process. When performance data is allied with mentoring, coaching, and reflective discussion, it is a catalyst for professional development, not a tool of terror. Likewise, if schools are tracking wellbeing as well as more traditional measures of performance, then they are sending a very clear message that the human side of education is equally valuable as test results or institutional ranking. The leadership implication is obvious: their job is not only to deliver measurable outcomes but to safeguard the dignity, motivation, and resilience of the people who deliver the outcomes. Ethical leadership, inclusive policies, and conscious building of psychological safety are not nice-to-haves; they are construction blocks that determine if or how schools can thrive in the long term. In practical terms, embedding accountability-for-wellbeing into school cultures and policy frameworks creates an environment where teachers feel supported, students experience better learning conditions, and education systems as a whole move toward sustainability and resilience. Such an approach offers a pragmatic pathway to building schools that are not only higher-performing but also humane, equitable, and future-oriented. In conclusion, the challenge for educational leadership today is to hold together two essential responsibilities: meeting the demands of accountability while ensuring the wellbeing of staff. By recognising these as interconnected rather than conflicting goals, leaders and policymakers can design systems that

foster both human flourishing and academic excellence. In doing so, they secure the foundations for healthier schools and stronger societies.

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