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Caught in the "nest" : teachers' experiences of layered regulation of quality improvement : a case study of teachers working in five "achieving" public secondary schools in Gauteng.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates in what ways a relevant and reliable accountability system that supports and strengthens the professional responsibility of teachers could improve quality. The study explores three issues: why teachers believe their professionalism is under attack, what they believe can improve the quality of learning outcomes in their schools, and what model of teacher regulation emerges from their accounts. The study is conducted by means of a case study of five individual "quality teachers" and five focus groups of teachers from five diverse "achieving schools" in Gauteng, South Africa. The beliefs and experiences of these teachers are investigated by means of an interview using a semi-structured interview schedule, a written questionnaire and a drawing. The data is analysed using grounded theory analysis. The study finds that the teachers' professional identity is fragile. There are factors operating mostly at the internal level of the school and at the level of teachers' capacity that strengthen their professional identity but others, particularly from the external environment, tend to fragment it.

The study finds that if teachers, who are embedded in a nest of contractual obligations, do not have capacity and the other layers of the nest do not support the teacher, neither the teacher nor the school can improve quality regardless of the amount of pressure placed on them. To deliver quality teachers require a balance between autonomy and control. This is best attained by ensuring that teachers' internal capacity/accountability is aligned to external accountability demands. A teacher-centred model of accountability that recognises the moral obligation of all parties, understands that the teacher is at the centre of the process of quality education and consequently invests in building their instructional capacity, and ensures institutional alignment, emerges as an appropriate model for quality improvement. This model respects and strengthens the professionalism of teachers.

Key words: quality, accountability, professionalism.

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