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Teacher responsibility from the teacher's perspective



Fani Lauermann*

University of Michigan, 5108 ISR, PO 1248, 426 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248, USA

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ABSTRACT

The present study employed an adaptation of Lenk's six-component model of responsibility to conduct a systematic analysis of teachers' conceptualizations of professional responsibility. A qualitative analysis of data from elementary and secondary teachers in the U.S. revealed specific categories of responsibility for each of the six components: who is responsible, for what, in view of whom, who is the judge of responsibility, according to what criteria, and in what realm of responsibility and action. Teachers' reports indicated that responsibility has important motivational implications in terms of effort investment, persistence, and commitment to students, but can also come at a personal cost such as hard work, lack of sleep, and less family time. Implications for teachers' professional lives are discussed.

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Personal responsibility has important motivational implications, as individuals often engage in behaviors not because these behaviors are necessarily enjoyable, but because they feel an internal sense of obligation and duty to do so (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, *in press*). For instance, in order to fulfill their professional responsibilities, teachers may invest considerable effort to prepare high quality lessons, do their very best to help struggling students, and may continuously strive to improve their teaching to support student learning (Broadfoot, Osborn, Gilly, & Paillet, 1988; Fischman, DiBara, & Gardner, 2006; Halvorsen, Lee, & Andrade, 2009; Schalock, 1998). Although responsibility has been studied from a variety of perspectives, research focusing on teachers is scarce and often plagued by conceptual and operational ambiguity. For instance, recent reviews of the literature (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, *in press*) indicate that teacher responsibility has been operationalized in terms of internal locus of control—i.e., teachers' attributions of classroom outcomes to internal and presumably controllable factors such as the teacher's behavior (Guskey, 1981), and teacher efficacy—i.e., teachers' belief in their capability to influence classroom outcomes (Guskey, 1987; Lee & Smith, 1996). Yet responsibility is a distinct construct that has been defined as “a sense of internal obligation and commitment to produce or prevent designated outcomes or that these outcomes should have been produced or prevented” (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 127). The distinction arises because neither the perceived control over an outcome nor the perceived capacity to influence an outcome necessarily imply a sense of responsibility to produce or prevent it (Ames, 1975; Lauermann & Karabenick, 2013, *in press*; Silverman, 2010; Weiner, 1995). Systematic reviews also indicate that existing theoretical frameworks of responsibility have not been sufficiently applied to teachers' self-ascribed responsibility, thus leaving uncertainty regarding its conceptual status and educational implications (see review in Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, *in press*).

To help resolve this ambiguity we recently adopted Lenk's six-component model of responsibility to organize the extant literature's relevance in educational contexts (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011). Described subsequently, Lenk's model

* Correspondence to: Achievement Research Lab, 5108 ISR, University of Michigan, 426 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248, USA.
Tel.: +1 734 763 0452.

E-mail address: fanim@umich.edu

specifies the factors that should be taken into consideration when analyzing judgments of responsibility (e.g., who is responsible, for what, and according to what criteria). Although it provides a comprehensive analytical framework, the model requires additional considerations about how teachers themselves view their professional responsibilities. This includes such important questions as: For what types of outcomes are teachers willing to assume responsibility? What criteria do teachers use to determine whether they are responsible? What factors contribute to teachers' sense of responsibility? and What are the perceived consequences? Accordingly, the objectives of the present study were to understand: (a) how teachers conceptualize responsibility along each of the six components in Lenk's model, and (b) the perceived antecedents and consequences of responsibility. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture teachers' unique perspectives. I begin with an overview of our adaptation of Lenk's model, as well as a discussion of possible antecedents and consequences of teacher responsibility.

1. Conceptualization of responsibility

1.1. Six components of responsibility

Lenk (1992) proposed one of the most comprehensive frameworks designed to examine the complexity of responsibility judgments. The model consist of six components: "*someone*: the subject or bearer of responsibility (a person or corporation), is responsible *for*: *something* (actions, consequences of actions, situations, tasks, etc.), *in view of*: *an addressee* ("object" of responsibility), *under supervision or judgment of*: a judging or sanctioning instance, *in relation to*: a (prescriptive, normative) criterion of attribution of accountability *within*: a specific realm of responsibility and action" (Lenk, 2007, p. 180). Accordingly, the present analysis of teachers' conceptions of responsibility included the following components: (1) a subject of responsibility (who is responsible), (2) an object of responsibility (for what), (3) an addressee of responsibility (for/to whom), (4) a judging or sanctioning instance, (5) a prescriptive/normative criterion of responsibility, and (6) a realm of responsibility and action. Although single components have been examined in prior research with teachers (e.g., Broadfoot, Osborn, Gilly, & Paillet, 1987; Broadfoot et al., 1988; Fischman et al., 2006; Halvorsen et al., 2009), there has been no systematic analysis of all six components focused on the teaching profession.

1.1.1. Component 1: who is responsible?

Who is responsible refers to a person or a group of individuals who assume responsibility or are being judged responsible; individuals (e.g., teachers) but not situations (e.g., the neighborhood) can bear or assume responsibility, since a situation cannot have intentions or implement actions (e.g., Weiner, 1995). Although the main focus here is on teachers' *personal* sense of responsibility, they may also perceive their professional responsibility as *shared* with others. For instance, teachers' collective responsibility—i.e., teachers' beliefs that their colleagues feel responsible for students' educational outcomes—has been linked to student achievement (Lee & Loeb, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1996). Yet a qualitative study conducted by Fischman et al. (2006) found that teachers in high schools that were identified by educational experts as "exemplary" rarely ascribed responsibility for their students to others and felt personally responsible for a broad range of student needs. Some teachers viewed themselves as "a student's only salvation" (p. 386). The present study thus examined both perspectives: teachers' self-ascriptions of responsibility and teachers' perceptions of other agents with whom they share responsibility.

1.1.2. Component 2: responsible for what?

Responsible "for what" incorporates a broad range of outcomes for which teachers feel responsible, such as actions, consequences of these actions, actions of others for whom one is vicariously responsible, and tasks. Examples of outcomes identified in prior research include teaching-related activities (e.g., being creative, having content knowledge, investing time in professional development, relating classroom material to the wider world), student outcomes (e.g., students' academic and social development), interactions with students (e.g., being a role model for students, having high expectations), classroom outcomes (e.g., providing a comfortable and supportive classroom atmosphere), and following contractual obligations (Broadfoot et al., 1988; Fischman et al., 2006; Halvorsen et al., 2009).

In addition to concrete educational outcomes for which teachers feel responsible, there are more general ways that outcomes can be categorized. These include distinctions between *feeling* responsible for something versus being *held* responsible for something, being responsible for a problem versus for finding a solution, and being responsible for positive versus negative outcomes. According to self-determination theory, the first distinction is important because someone who feels responsible is self-determined and likely to take personal initiative, whereas those who are held responsible but do not consider themselves as such are likely to invest minimal effort and to fulfill this responsibility only under the pressure of external control (Bacon, 1991; Bovens, 1998; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Lauermaun & Karabenick, 2011). Second, teachers may feel responsible for causing a problem (e.g., student failure), for finding a solution (e.g., help a student to prevent academic failure), for neither or for both (Brickman et al., 1982). This implies that a teacher may reject responsibility for causing a problem (e.g., student failure), while feeling highly responsible for finding a solution. Finally, although judgments of responsibility have been studied primarily in relation to negative outcomes (e.g., Bovens, 1998; Weiner, 1995), some research suggests that teachers are more likely to take credit for positive educational outcomes than to attribute negative outcomes to their own actions (Guskey, 1982, 1988), although the obverse has also been found (Ames, 1975; Ross, Bierbrauer, & Polly, 1974).

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