

Developing a Cognitive Model to Motivate School Principals in South African Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT The need to conduct the study was necessitated by a lack of motivation among South African principals. This paper reports on the findings from a formal study designed to develop a cognitive model to motivate the principals in the Mpumalanga province in South Africa. That was done by identifying and explaining factors impacting on the motivation of principals. A qualitative study was selected while semi-structured interviews, field notes and official documents were used for the data collection. An interpretative approach was employed to analyse principals' experiences about motivating or demotivating factors. The findings indicated that the motivation of school principals was influenced by both cognitive and systemic factors. It was recommended that intrinsic outcomes and employing cognitive abilities might improve their motivation when facing challenges in their leadership role.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals' conceptualisation of and orientation to work have an influence on their work behaviours and outcomes (Shea-Van Fossen and Vredenburg 2014; Thahier et al. 2014). Studies indicate that a lack of motivation among principals has a negative impact on the functioning of schools worldwide (Bush et al. 2009; Clarke 2007; Sikhwivhilu 2003). The study by Bush et al. (2009:167) in South Africa indicated that "most principals lack the capacity, or the motivation, to develop, sustain and monitor teaching and learning effectively". According to their findings principals tend to blame external forces for their lack of motivation and performance, rather than accepting personal and collective responsibility for the poor student outcomes (Bush et al. 2009). On the contrary Belle (2007) found that a well-resourced school might still fail to achieve its goals if the principal is not motivated.

A number of studies were done on teacher motivation (Belle 2007; Chindanya 2002), but few studies were conducted in South Africa. The study could therefore provide practical suggestions to schools, in enabling them to attain a deeper level of understanding of the factors principals perceived to be motivating or demotivating.

The Mpumalanga province in South Africa has been academically underperforming since

the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Mabuza 2011; Motshekga 2011). The findings from the Mpumalanga Systemic Provincial Evaluation Report, Grade 6 (2005) indicated that more than 64.3% of principals would like to change their careers on account of demotivating working conditions. Moreover, the Bohlabela District in which the study was done had been contributing negatively on the overall Grade 12 performance of the Mpumalanga Province (see Table 1). The challenge of demotivated principals, particularly in this district, was therefore a serious cause for concern and substantiation for the study. This paper reports on the findings from a formal study designed to develop a cognitive model to motivate the principals in this province (Mashaba 2012). The following main research question emerged in this study: What cognitive model of motivation can be developed to motivate principals in the Mpumalanga province?

Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this study cognitive theories of motivation were selected as a conceptual framework. The approaches chosen as a conceptual framework for the study included Locke's goal-setting theory (1968) that specifies the processes and mechanisms that link goal-setting to a person's performance improvement; Vroom's

Table 1: Bohlabela district's grade 12 performance for the past six years

<i>District</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>
Bohlabela	46.22	49.5	30.17	28.2	40.1	52.7
Ehlanzeni	68.6	68.4	59.6	58.2	67.6	72.1
Gert Sibande	67.5	63.0	56.3	52.2	59.3	65.4
Nkangala	64.9	62.3	59.2	53.6	59.0	67.9
Provincial average	65.3	60.8	51.8	47.9	56.8	64.8

expectancy theory (1964) that focussed on motivational explanations of performance; Adam's equity theory (1963); Rotter's locus of control theory (1954); and, Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1986) which states that self-efficacy beliefs affect people's cognitions, motivation and ultimately their behaviour.

Locke's theory postulates that for goals to be effective, aspects such as feedback, task complexity and support are critical (Locke and Latham 2002). Moreover, task complexity also moderates the effect of goals because more complex goals require the review of more complex strategies that lower difficult goals (Locke and Latham 2002). Adam's equity theory states that motivation is determined by individuals' perceptions of fairness in the awarding of rewards compared with what others have received (Kreitner and Kinicki 2001). This theory argues that inequity causes psychological discomfort which, in turn, motivates the taking of the corrective action, while equity causes the psychological comfort. According to Rotter, motivation is determined by the "locus of control", that is, a perceived as an internal location of control (Shivers-Blackwell 2006). The theory seeks to explain how individuals' perceived reasons for past successes or failures contribute to their current and future behaviour (Shivers-Blackwell 2006). The motivation process according to his theory is further strengthened by both intrinsic (self-efficacy and locus of control) and extrinsic (supervision, resources and information) factors. Vroom's theory hypothesizes that human motivation is mainly determined by valence, coupled with the combination of two core factors: expectancy and instrumentality (Kreitner and Kinicki 2001; Locke and Latham 2002). The motivation process is further strengthened by both intrinsic (self-efficacy and locus of control) and extrinsic (supervision, resources and information) factors. In terms of Bandura's theory, self-efficacy refers to individuals' perceptions of their capabilities, competencies, and skills in organ-

ising and executing the type of action that is required to successfully perform a task (Bandura 2000).

In terms of the cognitive approach to motivation, people consciously use their cognition to understand, evaluate, and make future decisions regarding challenges and events posed by environmental conditions. This could therefore result in an increased interest, greater effort, improved performance, and ultimately greater motivation (Shivers and Blackwell 2006) which is required from principals to improve school performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology, in particular a case study, was employed to gain an in-depth understanding on factors constituting the motivation of principals (Creswell 2007). Purposive sampling strategy was considered to be appropriate for the study (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). Principals whose schools were declared "no-fee schools", had sufficient administrative facilities, and participation in the school nutrition program (Mpumalanga Department of Education 2010) were selected for the study. From these principals 18 principals with the desired characteristics such as being knowledgeable, informative and willing to talk were hand-picked for the study. The initial target of 18 participants was adjusted to 15 since the data reached saturation after these fifteen visits (McMillan and Schumacher 2010). The profiles of these 15 principals are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the details of 15 principals from nine primary and six secondary schools across the Bohlabela District of the Mpumalanga Province. The size of schools in terms of student enrolment ranged between 187 (the smallest) to 1 440 (the biggest). Concerning staff provisioning, the smallest school had six educators while the biggest school had 54 educators. The table further shows that quintile 1 schools

Table 2: Profiles of participating schools

<i>Principal</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>School phase</i>	<i>Total students</i>	<i>Total educators</i>	<i>Quintile</i>	<i>State allocation in 2010</i>	<i>Feeding scheme participation</i>	<i>Sufficient classrooms</i>	<i>Administration offices</i>	<i>School libraries</i>	<i>Computer laboratories</i>	<i>Science laboratories</i>	<i>School kitchens</i>
Principal A	School A	Secondary	868	32	2	R 784	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	x
Principal B	School B	Primary	1199	35	2	R 784	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓
Principal C	School C	Primary	916	27	1	R 855	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓
Principal D	School D	Primary	985	29	1	R 855	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x
Principal E	School E	Secondary	1123	42	1	R 855	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
Principal F	School F	Secondary	515	19	2	R 784	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
Principal G	School G	Secondary	646	23	2	R 784	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	X
Principal H	School H	Primary	409	12	1	R 855	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
Principal I	School I	Primary	347	10	2	R 784	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	X
Principal J	School J	Primary	358	11	2	R 784	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓
Principal K	School K	Secondary	1440	54	1	R 855	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓
Principal L	School L	Primary	963	28	2	R 784	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
Principal M	School M	Primary	522	16	1	R 855	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x
Principal N	School N	Primary	187	6	2	R 784	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓
Principal O	School O	Secondary	627	24	1	R 855	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x

receive R855.00 whereas quintile 2 received R784.00 per student annually. Lastly, as per the table, it can be observed that the majority of schools are well-resourced when it comes to classrooms and administration offices, but less resourced with the specialised classes like libraries, laboratories and kitchens. However, all schools participated in school nutrition programmes.

In South Africa, all quintile 1 - 2 schools have been declared 'no fee schools' on account of being poverty-stricken (Mpumalanga Department of Education 2010). According to Mbatsana (2006:52), a quintile is a category into which a school is classified in terms of its poverty index. Consequently, schools within those categories are ranked the poorest and therefore targeted to benefit the most from the available financial resources. Hall and Manson (2006) and Mbatsana (2006) explain that such schools are not expected to charge school fees because they receive a large state allocation per student to make up for the fees that would have been charged, as well as a high allocation for non-personnel, non-capital expenditure. As is evident in Table 2, quintile 1 schools in the Mpumalanga Province were allocated R855 per student while quintile 2 schools received R784 per student in 2010 (Mpumalanga Department of Education 2010).

Since the study attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of the cognitive factors

that impact on the motivation of principals, an interpretative approach, particularly the constructive-interpretative paradigm, was deemed appropriate for the study. On that score, Weber (2004) points out that an interpretative approach is directed towards understanding the participants' subjective perspective on their everyday lived experience with the phenomenon.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with principals, field notes, observational notes and official documents within a bounded system, the Bohlabela District (Creswell 2007). This included follow-up interviews to probe certain interesting points raised by the participants. Official school documents such as the vision statement, strategic plans, operational plans, instructional plans, control journals, school policies, registers, assessment schedules and students' portfolios were also collected that provide a clear internal perspective regarding the functionality of the school. The data reached saturation level after 15 participants in the district were interviewed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Since data analysis in the interpretative approach occurs simultaneously with data collection (Creswell 2007; McMillan and Schumacher 2010), data analysis started during the course of the site visits. The data were obtained from interviews with principals, field notes, observa-

tional notes and official documents were inductively segmented that ultimately assisted with the development of themes, categories and sub-categories (Suter 2006). Multi-method techniques such as the semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, field notes during interviews and written documents analysis allowed for the triangulation of data (Maxwell 2005:106). In this study, data collected through document analysis was used to confirm, corroborate and augment the data collected through semi-structured interviews.

Ethical measures included approval from the Mpumalanga Department of Education before commencing with the study, informed consent by participants and ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The schools in the study were adequately resourced, but average-resourced with regard to administration offices (except Schools A, D, F, and X) and classrooms (except Schools A, B, K, N, and O). However, all the schools experienced a dire shortage with regard to specialised physical resources, such as libraries (only seven schools had one), computer laboratories (only four schools had one) and science laboratories (only two schools had one). As illustrated in

Figure 1, the motivation of principals in the study was influenced by two main variables, cognitive and systemic factors.

Cognitive Factors Impacting on Principal Motivation

This group comprising cognitive factors included the possession of a strategic focus, a passion for student success and satisfying principals’ self-esteem needs which generated their motivation intrinsically.

Possessing a Strategic Focus

Participants agreed that a strategic focus was important. Regarding the school vision, a principal from School O remarked: “Our vision is to provide quality education to our learners. Our learners should be given an opportunity to receive the best education so that they are able to compete equally with other learners everywhere”. Concerning the motivational effects of such a focus, a participant from School E remarked: “We are highly encouraged by the plans and programs the school adopted this year for improving reading and writing skills.” A similar sentiment was expressed by the principal from School A, who said that, “... unlike previous years, we adopted progressive programs that will assist in improving our Grade 12 results. This motivates us a lot.”

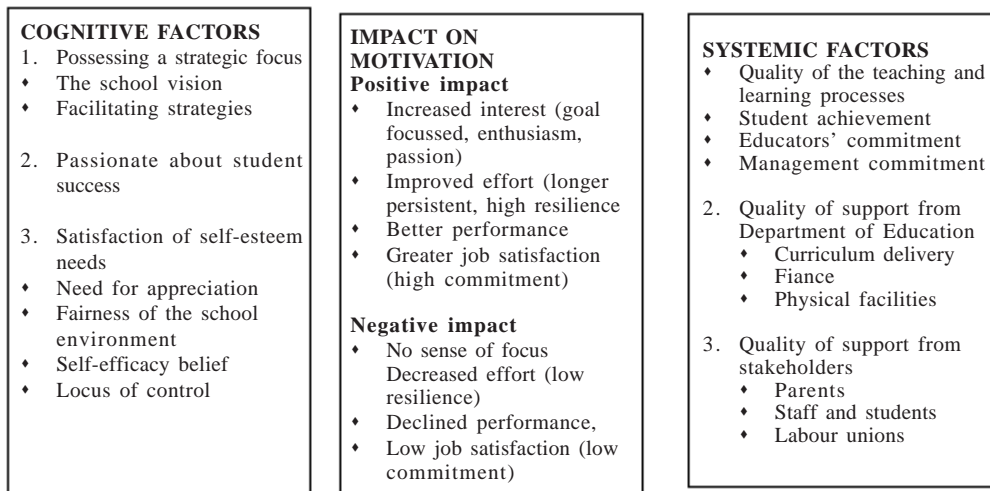


Fig. 1. Factors impacting on motivation

These views confirm Locke's goal setting theory that set goals (Locke and Latham 2006), and have a strong motivational effect. Subsequent studies (Athanasoula-Reppa and Lazari-do 2008; Khuzwayo 2008) concluded that principals who proactively establish and pursue a clear vision for their school were able to make a positive impact on school performance.

Passionate About Student Success

Passion for student success was found to generate a deeper sense of focus, enthusiasm and commitment among principals. There was consensus among them that students deserved a bright future. They would like the students to be "responsible adults", "successful" and "marketable in the globe". Principal C explained it succinctly as follows:

"I draw my motivation from the fact that as a teacher, I have passion for teaching... I feel obliged to have this dream [learner success] so that at the end these learners should be saying; 'yes, they [the staff] did something for us.'"

Principal D elaborated on this view by focussing on the future of learners:

"We want to see our children being able to live a better life when they go anywhere and throughout the world. Our learners must have a goal life; reading, writing and counting so that they could become teachers, doctors and leaders."

The passion on the part of the principals confirmed McClelland's achievement motivation theory (1961) that an individual's passion, desire, and wish for success, is the primary determinant of human motivation in the workplace (Kreitner and Kinicki 2001). This is further elaborated on by Pintrich and Schunk (2002), whose findings also support the conceptual framework of this study which holds that the morale of principals is boosted when there are opportunities for learner achievement.

Satisfaction of Principals' Self-esteem Needs

The need for appreciation, fairness of the school environment, self-efficacy beliefs, and locus of control, were found to be important determinants with regard to the motivation of principals. Regarding the need for appreciation and recognition, data indicated that the morale

of principals improved when they felt appreciated by role players. Moreover, participants expressed their satisfaction for receiving trophies, certificates and prizes from the education department. The principal of School H explained that he felt "very honoured and great" when his school "got position 1 in the circuit and district" in 2004 and 2005.

On the one hand participants were sensitive to unfair treatment. Principal N explained how it demotivated him when his school was unfairly identified as a quintile 2 instead of a quintile 1 school, which negatively affected the finances of the school. On the other hand, principals felt satisfied when they were being fairly treated by the education system. The principal from School A expressed his satisfaction when his school "shifted from quintile 3 to quintile 2 like our neighbouring schools". The participants' perceptions confirm Adams' equity theory that principals' fairness within the work environment influenced their motivation (Chindanya 2002).

Regarding the impact of self-efficacy, the data revealed that principals who believed in themselves were more motivated than those who did not. Principal K felt that her school's performance was a product of her diligence and hard-work and not merely "luck". She asserted that it could result in motivation and that it had to "start with you [the principal]; you must be a hard-worker". These findings are supported by Bandura's self-efficacy theory which states that high self-efficacious principals were found to be persistent in order to pursue their goals. Subsequent studies concur that high self-efficacious principals believe in their abilities, rather than believing in external forces such as luck or chance (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis 2004; Woods and Olivier 2004).

Lastly, locus of control was found to have a significant motivational effect on principals. A number of participants blamed various external factors, such as "insufficient books from the Department of Education" (Principal E), or the poor cooperation of parents (Principal N) instead of taking personal responsibility. These findings confirm Rotter's locus of control theory that individuals who take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their efforts are more motivated than those attributing the outcomes to environmental factors only. The studies of Shivers-Blackwell (2006) and Graffeo and Silvestri (2006) also found that internally-oriented principals exhibit greater confidence, and deliver a better performance than do externally-oriented principals.

Apart from the cognitive factors, systemic factors also impacted on the motivation of principals.

Systemic Factors Impacting on Motivation

Systemic factors are comprised of the quality of teaching and learning processes, the quality of support from the Department of Education and quality of support from stakeholders, which may impact on the motivation of principals extrinsically.

Quality of the Teaching and Learning Processes

It was found that the quality of teaching and learning, particularly academic performance of students and commitment of teachers, were a critical motivational factor impacting on principals. Principals' motivation was very low when students were not committed to their studies and when they did not perform satisfactorily. However, it also became evident that principals felt satisfied when their students showed an interest in their own learning as the principal from School L remarked "...It [the good performance of students] is very encouraging".

Principals were motivated when teachers were committed and performed their duties satisfactorily. However, principals were quite dissatisfied with the tendency of teachers to "dodge" their periods, "drag" their feet when going to their classes, fail to discipline students, and generally being uncommitted. The commitment of school management teams was found to be an important determinant of motivation of principals. The willingness of this team to confront challenges in the school was highly appreciated by the respondents. Good teamwork enabled principals to perform their duties satisfactorily which impacted the performance of the school.

The study confirms Locke's goal setting theory regarding the motivational effects of goal commitment on motivation (Locke and Latham 2002). Belle (2007) further found that the commitment from students and teachers has a significant motivational impact on the morale of principals.

Quality of Support from the Department of Education

The quality of the support from the Department of Education, particularly on curriculum

delivery, allocation of financial resources, provision of physical facilities, and the provision of staff, had a highly motivational effect on the morale of principals. Participants concurred that the on-going curriculum review was a source of frustration. *"It is changing nearly every day. When one tries to grasp, the curriculum changes to another...this demotivates us"* (Principal H). They were also concerned about the quality of the support received from curriculum implementers which they required for curriculum implementation. Regarding the allocation of financial resources, the data showed that principals' motivation was very low when their financial resources were unable to address the financial needs of the school.

Insufficient physical facilities at schools impacted negatively on the morale of principals. The participants agreed that the shortage of physical facilities at their schools, especially administration offices, classrooms, libraries, and laboratories had a negative effect on their motivation. For them its effect was inter alia "worrying", "de-motivating", "discouraging" and "disturbing". Insufficient classes led to overcrowding in classrooms. They blamed the Department of Education for being unreliable in the provision of sufficient physical facilities at schools which was "really discouraging".

The shortage of staff at schools had a significant negative motivational effect on the morale of principals. Principal I said: *"I must be in class and teach while at the same time I must control the whole school. I find this really stressful."*

The findings of this study are supported by those in other studies (Maxwell 2006) which highlight that curriculum changes affect principals' motivation. The studies of Mbatsana (2006) and Mestry (2006) confirm that the availability of human and physical resources has motivational effects on the morale of principals.

Quality of Support from Stakeholders

The quality of the support from the stakeholders, particularly parents, school governing bodies and labour unions, was found to be a crucial motivational factor impacting on the morale of principals. The challenges regarding the support of parents demotivated principals. Principals also referred to laziness on the part of parents which influenced parental involvement. Principal of School F complained:

“I feel discouraged when the community [parents] is unable to assist in the challenges we are facing... I am referring to students, who are drinking alcohol, students who are engaging in drugs... there are parents in the community who promote teenage pregnancy because students in the end will get child support grants.”

Furthermore, principals were highly motivated when their school governing bodies were supportive. The principal of School K commended her school governing body for being very involved in the education of their students.

The unions had a negative impact on the motivation of principals when it was perceived as disruptive and “interfering”, especially during “strikes”. However, their motivation improved when principals perceived the role of unions as constructive and when they were both addressing problems in schools.

The research findings support Vroom’s expectancy theory that organisational support strengthened motivation of people. The studies of Bush et al. (2009) and Mestry (2006) stress that a harmonious relationship between the schools and communities impacts positively on school performance. Moreover, the study of Mbatsana (2006) substantiated the findings that parental support plays a crucial role in school performance.

A Cognitive Model of Motivation

The cognitive model is grounded from both the theoretical research findings as well as the empirical findings indicated above. The model comprises four related steps namely; intrinsic goal, facilitating strategies, action, and performance. These stages, as depicted in Figure 2 below represent critical steps that principals need

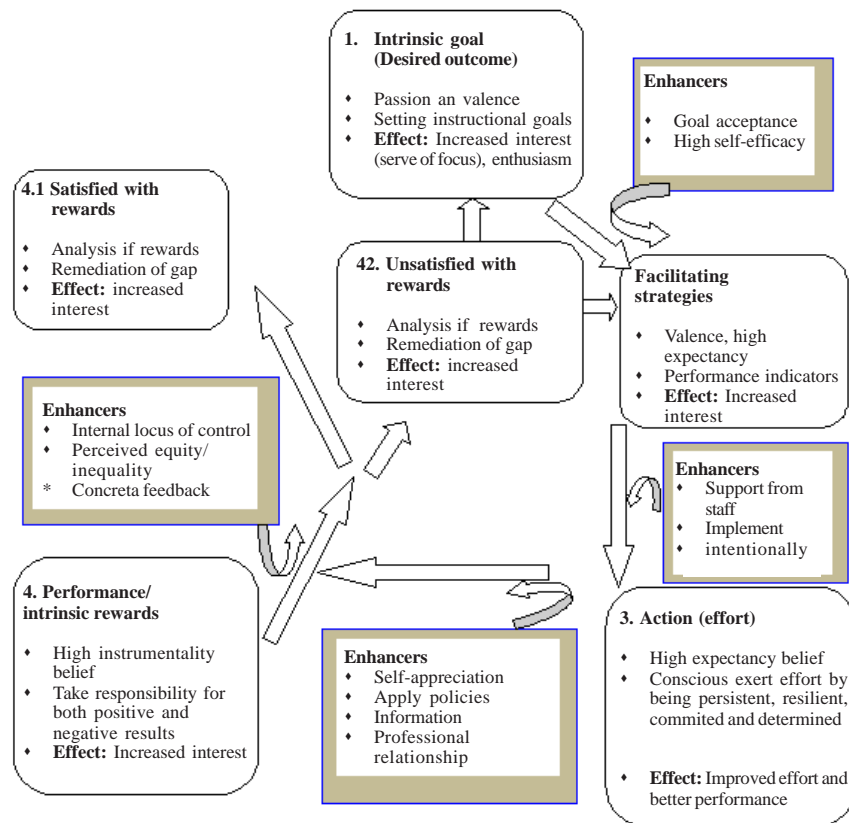


Fig. 2. Cognitive model of motivation of school principals

to consider when executing their leadership and managerial tasks. For each step, certain conditions need to be consciously considered in order to generate maximum motivating effects. Between each step, there are facilitators that play a crucial role to maximise motivation.

Intrinsic Goal –Facilitating Strategy Relationship

The findings in the study confirm the theories of McClelland (Locke and Latham 2002) and Locke (Locke and Latham 2006) that difficult, but realistic goals provide direction for an action; in this context, the development of a goal facilitating strategy. Locke's theory simply states that specific and difficult goals direct attention, regulate effort, increase persistence, and foster strategies and action plans. Therefore, setting intrinsic goals is the first crucial step in generating an interest for the development of facilitating strategy. Intrinsic goals (passion and school visions) generate a deeper sense of focus, enthusiasm, and commitment to an action; which according to literature studies (Clarke 2007) assisted in the development of precise and clear facilitating strategies.

Facilitating Strategy–Action Relationship

The findings support Locke's contention that goal facilitation strategies need to be developed in order to generate motivated behaviour and increased effort. It has been revealed by the findings in this study's and also congruent with other studies (Bush et al. 2009; Clarke 2007; Garber 2006), the facilitating strategies must be simple, precise and clear in order to generate and sustain the highest motivational effects. However, principals need to consider facilitators like support from the staff, and the conscious implementation of the performance strategies in order to strengthen the facilitating strategy–action relationship.

Action–Performance Relationship

The findings regarding the implementation of strategies and plans, and self-efficacy belief confirmed McClelland's theory; taking an action, and Vroom's theory; high-expectancy belief, that by taking conscious and personal responsibility for the set goal could lead to im-

proved task performance. As found by Locke and Latham (2002) and confirmed by the findings in this research paper, principals should exert improved effort through persistence, commitment, determination and resilience in order to maximise highly motivated behaviour and better task performance. However, principals should take into cognisance that the strengths of the motivational effect between action–performance relationships depends on facilitators like self-appreciation, application of policies, information and professional relationships as illustrated by the model (Fig. 2). Based on the above, it can be concluded that principals could improve task performance by consciously taking personal responsibility for implementing goal facilitating strategies.

Performance–Intrinsic Goal Relationship

The findings in the study regarding academic performance supported Vroom's theory; high instrumentality belief that principals should take full personal responsibility for the outcomes of their performance, both positive and negative. This would increase a deeper sense of interest, enthusiasm and passion. The studies of Aliég-Mielcarek (2003), Belle (2007) and Bush et al. (2009) confirm that principals should first analyse the outcomes before taking an action: be it enrichment or remediation. That would assist in identifying gaps and deviations that would inform the steps to be taken.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that both cognitive factors and dominant systemic factors influence the motivation of principals. The ability of principals to take personal responsibility for the attainment of their goals including their passion for student success, the established school visions, and the developed performance strategies has an intrinsic motivational effect on principals. Similarly, the tendency of principals to rely on appreciation, recognition and acknowledgement from others may have an impact on their intrinsic motivational level. It implies that the ability of principals to consciously and proactively apply their cognitive abilities, to positively respond to perceived inequity and to confront challenges imposed by extrinsic environment, enhances their motivated behaviour. It

means that if principals are able to take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their efforts and performance, particularly negative outcomes, it could have a significant motivational effect; particularly as regards increased effort and improved performance.

However, once principals blame extrinsic factors for poor performance, it could have significant demotivating effects on principals and their performance. Extrinsic factors include the lack of basic and up-dated information regarding curriculum issues, allocation of state finances, provision of physical facilities and staff and the management of stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In dealing with challenges imposed by extrinsic factors, principals are in a position to consciously and pro-actively make use of their controllable cognitive abilities in pursuing their goals; rather than solely depending on uncontrollable extrinsic forces. Based on the study, the following recommendations are made:

- ♦ Principals should take full personal responsibility for the outcomes of their efforts and performance; particularly negative outcomes.
- ♦ Principals should develop and focus on the intrinsic outcomes, rather than the extrinsic outcomes, on account of their higher motivational value.
- ♦ In dealing with challenges imposed by extrinsic environment, principals should consciously and pro-actively make use of their controllable cognitive abilities and effort in pursuing their goals, rather than solely depending on uncontrollable extrinsic forces like powerful others, fate, luck, and chance.

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