


The motivational roles of heads of department in learners' performance and quality of schooling in South Africa

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Background: The Global Competitiveness report shows that the quality of primary education in South Africa ranks 132 out of 144 countries. Statistics released by the Department of Basic Education in South Africa reveal that the average mark for Grade 3 learners in the Annual National Assessment (ANA) was 35% for literacy and 28% for numeracy.

Aim: We seek in this article to share the voices of the Foundation Phase heads of departments (HoDs) regarding their motivational roles and responsibilities in learner performance. We also aim to understand their role in tandem with other contributors, as well as all stakeholders in the Department of Basic Education who are responsible for teacher development and curriculum delivery.

Setting: Ehlanzeni, Bohlabela, Gert Sibande and Nkangala in Mpumalanga.

Methods: A quantitative research approach was used, where questionnaires were distributed to 274 Foundation Phase HoDs in all four districts in Mpumalanga.

Results: The findings indicate that HoDs have a moderate perception of their responsibility in motivating learners; moreover, they do not recognise the role of parents as motivators of learners. They seem too busy teaching in their classrooms and lack the time and skill of supervising their subordinates and involving parents in the education tripod. The legislative framework (PAM document), it can be argued, does not allow sufficient time for HoDs to efficiently perform their tasks.

Conclusion: Retraining of HoDs to work collaboratively with teachers and parents will enhance the quality of schooling offered in South Africa.

Introduction and background

South Africa's per capita income ranks 25 out of the 195 countries surveyed in 2013 (CIA Worldfact Book 2013:1). Similarly, the 2013 budget indicates that the Department of Education gets an allocation of R164 billion which is 5.6% of the GDP and 14.3% of the government expenditure (National Treasury 2013:5). However, the Global Competitiveness report (2012–13:13), which looked at the 12 pillars of competitiveness, show that the quality of primary education in South Africa ranks 132 out of 144 countries. This finding indicates that the scores obtained by South African students on international tests are much lower compared to countries that spends proportionately much less on schooling (Crouch & Fasih 2004:1).

More broadly, the statistics released by the Department of Basic Education (2011:40), reveal that the average mark for Grade 3 learners in the Annual National Assessment (ANA) was 35% for literacy and 28% for numeracy. In Mpumalanga, Grade 3 learners scored 27% in literacy and only 19% for numeracy.

These statistics reveal the extent of the problem of low levels of literacy and numeracy, particularly in Mpumalanga. This becomes a challenge especially in the Foundation Phase of private schools, former model C schools, township or rural schools and lastly farm schools (Nkabinde 2013:1). What can be expected of heads of department (HoDs) in addressing this crisis? Along with other contributors, HoDs must be able to perform their roles and responsibilities to ensure that learners progress positively in the Foundation Phase, especially in literacy and numeracy.

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The role of the heads of department

Given the dual roles of the HoDs, their dilemma of simultaneously managing a department whilst being a class teacher are evident (Blandford 1997:13). The focus of this paper is to investigate the motivational role and responsibility played specifically by HoDs in learner performance. Its aim is also to understand better this role in tandem with other contributors, as well as all stakeholders in the Department of Basic Education who are responsible for teacher development and curriculum delivery, especially in the General Education and Training band. The findings highlight important aspects to be considered by Foundation Phase HoDs, educators, curriculum implementers in the districts, deputy chief education specialists in the provincial office and the Department of Basic Education, in ensuring the proper execution of roles and responsibilities of HoDs in the Foundation Phase.

Being aware of, monitoring and responding constructively to students' motivation signals during instruction is an important teaching skill. This is because classroom motivation is a reliable predictor of students' subsequent engagement, learning and achievement (Pintrich & De Groot 1990:33; Ryan & Deci 2000:3). The instructional problem with monitoring students' motivation, however, is that it is difficult to do, largely because motivation is a private, subjective and difficult-to-directly-observe experience. Estimating students' motivation is made even more difficult for teachers (who may also be HoDs) because classrooms are densely populated, multitask environments (Dislen 2013:37). This is not to say that estimating student motivation is beyond teachers' capacities, as one study showed that teachers of late elementary-grade students were able to judge students' self-reported 'learning goals' (i.e., mastery goals) reasonably well (average $r = 0.26$ across multiple assessments) (Givvin et al. 2001:213). Overall, little empirical research exists to confirm that teachers can reliably infer their students' classroom motivation. In the school setting, motivation is the process whereby students initiate and persist in classroom activity (Schunk, Pintrich & Meece 2008:2). However, for Foundation Phase learners, this may be a challenge as they are too young to exert or receive such influence.

The role of a Foundation Phase HoD is a multilayered one: to improve communication and establish a collaborative relationship with teachers, ensuring that teachers should contact parents early in the school year to explain class and homework procedures and to learn about their concerns, views, talents, interest and availability. Whatever the nature of the contact – phone calls, e-mails, small or large group meetings, or newsletters with invitations to call – they need to keep in mind that home-school collaboration is an attitude, not simply an activity.

Motivation

Motivation occurs when parents and educators share common goals, are seen as equals and both contribute to the process.

It is sustained with a 'want-to' rather than an 'ought-to' or 'obliged-to' orientation from all individuals (Christenson, Rounds & Gorney 1992). Heads of department need to follow the initial contact with ongoing interaction, through checklists, newsletters, informal notes, phone calls, private meetings and parent discussion groups. Contact should define roles; communicate expectations; be clear, positive and non-threatening; inform parents about their child's progress and about what happened and will happen in class (Allington & Cunningham 2002:304); and give parents easy accessibility to teachers and HoDs. Such contacts usually go beyond homework and can significantly influence parent cooperation and academic achievement (Allington & Cunningham 2002:304). Schools that have a relationship with the community are more likely to receive support from the community in difficult periods (Harris & Chapman 2002:6). Parents should feel free to enjoy the opportunity to come into the school to talk to teachers, to use the school facilities and to utilise the school as a resource to help improve their children and themselves. Hargreaves (1995:23–46) describes this as a 'cultural relationship' with the parent community and grounded on principles of openness and collaboration to collaborate in the achievement of good learner performance.

The quality of education

The quality of education is impacted by many factors delivered in the Foundation Phase. The inequalities that are experienced in schools will also persist if parents are not equally empowered in enhancing and promoting the education of their child. The study also indicated that social capital is important in educational success and will have a positive effect on school success when school capital is combined with social capital. A study by Msila (2004) explained the advantages of the presence of social capital in education and also how the participation of communities in education can promote the quality of education. The effect of social networks on the child usually reflects in the schooling of the child, and it is essential to include the family in the education of the child.

Coleman and Hoffner (2002:71) describe 'functional deficiency' as the situation in which there is absence of a strong relationship between parents and children, even when they are physically present. The authors conclude that for the school to have a solid educational success, it must admit the importance of social capital. Recommendations made by Coleman and Hoffner (2002:71) follow:

- parents need to be empowered;
- shadow education should be introduced in historically disadvantaged schools; and
- more social networks need to be built.

The *South African Schools Act* of 1996 specifies that parents should be more involved in the education of their children. Parents are empowered to assess their children, even when they do not have the social capital. Parental skills are enhanced by community-based organisations, Department of Education and stakeholders in the education industry,

most especially because many learners are taken care of by single guardians in historically disadvantaged areas.

Shadow education could empower learners. Shadow education entails offering learners more classes after school with the sole aim of empowering them. In a Kenyan study, Buchmann (2000) discovered that disadvantaged children could most likely learn much about social networks if they can benefit from extra-mural classes. The same author claims that shadow education shows learners the need to connect the social structures in their educational experience, which helps in enhancing social capital. If a school wants to build social capital, it has to connect to societal institutions. Coleman (2002:71) cited by Wong (2002:164) states that not all the social relations and structures are important resources for achieving educational success. It is the schooling-focused relationships that are useful for building the child's social or cognitive development and also the relationship inside community organisations (Wong 2002:165). Success can be established when learners develop social ties between the school and the community. The development of social capital can be established through the shared norms, values and expectations by many societal institutions such as clubs and churches. Communities must be able to participate in the decisions made in the school whilst the school also contributes to the development of the community.

Involving parents at school level is imperative because most of the needs of a reform in education orbit around the joint effort of the parties concerned, which could be by playing an active or passive participation in activities of the school (Bezzina 2006). Teachers and parents should be involved in the improvement of the education of the learners. Educators are aware that parental involvement plays a significant role in improving the performance and achievement of the learner and the social, intellectual and emotional development of the learner. Therefore, the family should make an effort to ensure that they participate in the formal and informal aspect of the education of their child. The building of a school's capacity for sustained improvement should have as the core, collective learning and collegial relations (Bezzina 2006).

Against this background, Foundation Phase HoDs have to address issues far more onerous than time constraints. Problems related to drug use, crime, poverty, poor nutrition, high rates of transience and other by-products of socio-economic disadvantage are addressed, as well as community belief that the school has a limited role to play in their lives and aspirations (Louis & Miles 1990:219). Thus, the role of HoDs in such schools supersedes that of teacher. The HoD has the responsibility to build bridges within the school and community by embracing the parents into the school community.

Research methodology and participants

To explore the responsibility and the motivational role played by the HoDs in learner performance, a structured questionnaire

was utilised to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of five questions on biographical data (Section A) and 15 questions about the demographics of the school and the tasks performed by Foundation Phase HoDs (Section B). The questionnaires were distributed to 274 Foundation Phase HoDs in four districts, namely, Ehlanzeni, Bohlabela, Gert Sibande and Nkangala in Mpumalanga (see Tables 1 and 2, respectively). Heads of department converged in one sitting in different districts and circuits in Mpumalanga Province to complete the questionnaire. The Statistics Department at the University of Pretoria calculated the Cronbach Alpha measures confirming the reliability and validity of the questionnaire.

Mpumalanga Province consists of four regions: Bohlabela, Ehlanzeni, Gert Sibande and Nkangala. Mpumalanga is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. It is situated in the north-east of South Africa and encloses 6.5% of the total land area of the country (Statistics South Africa 2003). The province is predominantly rural and culture plays a significant role in the day-to-day lives of the people. Although political activities are evident, traditional leadership still plays a significant role.

The different schools that participated in the assessments during November 2008 are shown in Table 1. Although ANA started in 2008, the tests were not written in 2009 and 2010.

The following items were posed in Section B of the questionnaire: (1) Type and location of the school; (2) Learners' background; (3) School management or leadership workshops; (4) Time spent by HoDs annually on the different activities as outlined by Personnel Administration Measures (PAM); (5) Familiarity with the PAM document; (6) Class teaching and supervision; (7) Time they spend in a week performing HoD duties; and 8) Additional tasks they perceive they perform beyond HoD duties.

Circuit managers and district were tasked to administer and collect the questionnaires, with appropriate consent and ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria. After completion of the questionnaires, respondents' written words

TABLE 1: Research methods used in this research study.

Method	Research tool	Tool design	Data analysis
Quantitative method	Questionnaire for pilot project	Structured questionnaire distributed to 10 Foundation Phase HoDs in the Ehlanzeni District as a pilot project.	Descriptive statistical analysis
-	Questionnaire	Structured questionnaire distributed to 274 Foundation Phase HoDs in the Mpumalanga Province, in all four districts: Ehlanzeni, Bohlabela, Gert Sibande and Nkangala	SPSS 20

Source: Adapted from Nkabinde 2012:25.

TABLE 2: Background of the Annual National Assessment conducted in Mpumalanga Province.

Regions	No. of schools	Captured	Not captured
Bohlabela	214	191	23
Ehlanzeni	306	224	82
Gert Sibande	484	268	216
Nkangala	419	264	155
Total	1423	947 (67%)	476 (33%)

Source: Nkabinde 2012:21.

TABLE 3: Frequency table showing the gender of respondents in the sample.

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	27	9.9
Female	247	90.1
Total	274	100.0

Source: Nkabinde 2012:73.

TABLE 4: Frequency table showing the age groups of respondents in the sample.

Age	Frequency	Percent
≤45	78	28.5
46–49	65	23.7
50–53	77	28.1
54+	54	19.7
Total	274	100.0

Source: Nkabinde 2012:73.

were converted into figures and symbols using SPSS 20 statistical package to analyse the data.

The biographical details of the study are presented in Tables 3–6.

Gender

The gender of respondents is provided in Table 3. The findings indicate that the ratio of female to male respondents was nine female respondents for every one male respondent. The Department of Basic Education (2012:15) indicates a ratio of 1.5:1, although that figure includes educators at secondary schools. However, more women prefer the task of teaching Foundation Phase learners.

Even if one assumes that there are three female educators for every one male educator (3:1) in the Foundation Phase of primary schools, then this sample is still over-representative of female educators in primary schools, and hence not representative of the gender distribution in the Mpumalanga Province.

Age of respondents

The educators were grouped into four age groups, as displayed in Table 4.

The mean age was 48.8 years, with a minimum age of 27 and maximum age of 64. The median value was 49 years of age. If one assumes that most educators start their teaching career at around 23 or 24 years of age, then this sample could be said to consist of experienced educators, as one would expect for HoDs.

Highest qualification attained

The original seven categories were collapsed to four and the frequency distribution is given in Table 5.

Only 29.6% of the samples do not have at least a Bachelor's degree, whilst 50% have an Honours degree or higher qualification. As the respondents were HoDs, one would expect them to be well qualified.

TABLE 5: Frequency distribution of the highest educational qualification.

Variable	Qualification	Frequency	Percent
Valid	Teacher's diploma	81	29.6
	Bachelor's degree	40	14.6
	BEd/BEd(HONS)	100	36.5
	BA(Hons)/Masters	37	13.5
	Total	258	94.2
Missing	System	16	5.8
Total	-	274	100.0

Source: Nkabinde 2012:74.

TABLE 6: Number of years served as heads of department.

Variables	Year	Frequency	Percent
Valid	≤5	97	35.4
	6–8	47	17.2
	9–13	63	23.0
	14+	65	23.7
	Total	272	99.3
Missing	System	2	0.7
Total	-	274	100.0

Source: Nkabinde 2012:76.

Number of years served as heads of department

The number of years served as HoD was grouped into four categories, which are given in Table 6.

The mean number of years as HoD was 9.4 and the median was eight. The mode was 5 years, whilst the minimum value was 1 year and the maximum 28 years. Thus, the sample can be said to consist of educators who were mostly experienced as HoDs.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework consists of the self-fulfilling prophecy (SPF).

Self-fulfilling prophesy

The term 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (SPF) was first coined by sociologist Robert K. Merton (1948). As part of his explanation of the SFP, Merton drew upon the theorem: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas 1928:257). The following five-step model explains how the SFP works: (1) the teacher forms expectations; (2) based upon these expectations, the teacher acts in a differential manner; (3) the teacher's treatment tells each student (loud and clear) what behaviour and what achievement the teacher expects; (4) if this treatment is consistent, it will tend to shape the student's behaviour and achievement; and (5) with time, the student's behaviour and achievement will conform more and more closely to that expected of him or her.

Longitudinal studies (Jussim & Eccles 1992:947–961) support the SFP hypothesis that teacher expectations can predict changes in student achievement and behaviour beyond effects accounted for by previous achievement and motivation. Teachers, including HoDs, who effectively use the SPF can, and should, help students to perform to the best of their ability.

Discussion of findings

The concurrent existence of low quality, high inequality and deep segregation in South African schooling has serious implications for justice and educational equality. This study carried out in a rural province such as Mpumalanga is characteristic of a South African society. The findings indicated that HoDs have a moderate perception of their responsibilities in motivating learners; moreover, they do not recognise the role of parents as motivators of learners. The Public Administrative Measures indicate that part of the role of HoDs is to involve parents in the education of their children. This important function of motivating Foundation Phase children is beneficial to help students perform to the best of their ability. If Foundation Phase HoDs are aware that they can make a difference in learner performance, moving towards greater equality could perhaps be achieved.

Access to management and leadership training

The majority (67.2%) of the participants have no qualification or in-service training in terms of management or leadership capacity. As HoDs are expected to take the lead in the management of their departments, one would expect that many more of them should have some form of leadership and management training.

The inference that can be drawn from this is that with such a large number of HoDs without management or leadership training, the leadership and management in primary schools in Mpumalanga, and the resulting learner performance, can be expected to be poor.

Extent that the leadership or management course provided benefits

From the 90 HoDs who responded to this question, 62.2% felt that their management and leadership course benefitted them greatly in enhancing their management or leadership capacity, whilst 37.8% indicated that these qualifications only partially enhanced their capacity. These statistics show that the beliefs, values and actions of HoDs are contradictory, because the low performance of learners in ANA may be evidence of a lack of leadership by HoDs in the Foundation Phase in Mpumalanga.

Item 14 (questionnaire) probed the perceptions of the HoDs about certain aspects related to the motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase. The construct was operationalised by means of a 5-point interval scale where one represented *to a very high extent* and five to *a very low extent*. The construct consisted of seven-scaled items and hence it could be tested for reliability and construct validity via exploratory factor analysis.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.776 with a chi-squared value of 535.27 and Bartlett's

sphericity of $p < 0.0005$. All these values indicated that a factor analytic procedure would reduce the seven items to a more manageable number of factors. Principal Axis Factoring and varimax rotation resulted in two first-order factors that explained 61.89% of the variance present. These factors were named:

- F1.1 – *The school's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase* which contained five items and had a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.76.
- F1.2 – *Parent's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase* which had a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.81.

As both these first-order factors had reliability coefficients greater than 0.7, they could be used in inferential testing. The items and their distributions are presented in Tables 7 and 8 and Figures 1 and 2.

The mean score of 3.03 indicates a medium or moderate characterisation by the respondents. One would have expected a lower mean score as the school should be more involved in motivating learners with respect to their learning performance. The histogram indicates a normal distribution of the data as does the box plot. However, respondents 1, 24 and 83 were more positive than the rest of the respondents. They were all women, single, HoDs with Honours degrees.

The mean score of 3.56 tends towards a low value for parental motivation of learner performance. This is, however, the HoDs' perception; no doubt parents would not agree with this value as they probably believe that they do motivate their children to a greater degree than educators believe. Respondents 89, 121, 203 and 240 do believe that parents motivate their children to a high to a very high extent.

A factor plot of the two first-order factors provided in Figure 3 also clearly shows the grouping of the items.

TABLE 7: The items, their loadings and mean scores contained in the factor 'The school's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase' (F1.1).

Item	How would you characterise each of the following within your school in the Foundation Phase?	Loading	Mean
Description			
V14.2	Teacher understanding of curriculum goals	0.711	3.12
V14.3	Teacher degree of success implementing the school's curriculum	0.706	3.05
V14.1	Teacher job satisfaction	0.615	3.03
V14.4	Teacher expectation of learner performance	0.510	2.76
V14.7	Learner's desire to do well in their studies	0.467	3.17

Note: Average 3.03.

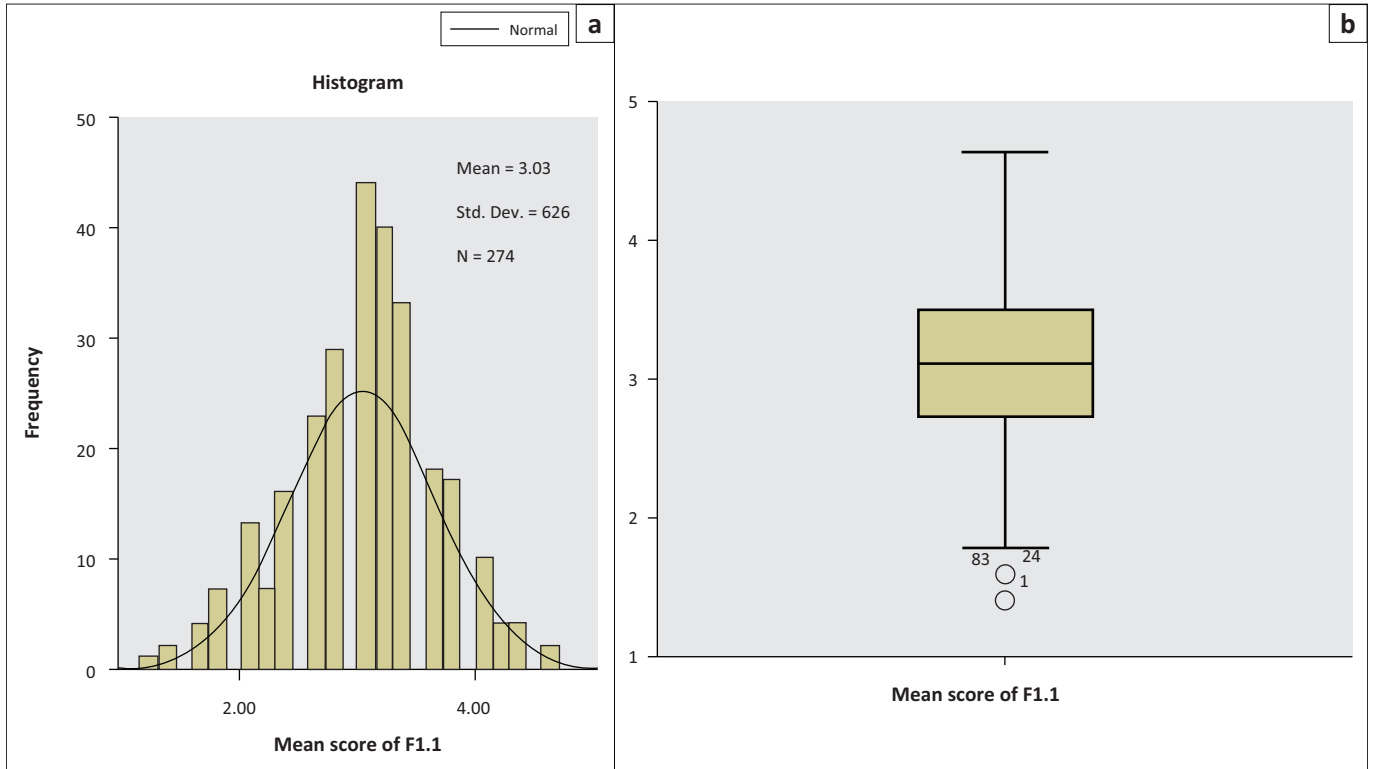
Source: Nkabinde 2012:91.

TABLE 8: The items, their loadings and mean scores contained in the factor 'The parent's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase'.

Item	How would you characterise each of the following within your school in the Foundation Phase?	Loading	Mean
Description			
V14.6	Parental involvement in phase activities	0.808	3.59
V14.5	Parental support for learner performance	0.802	3.52

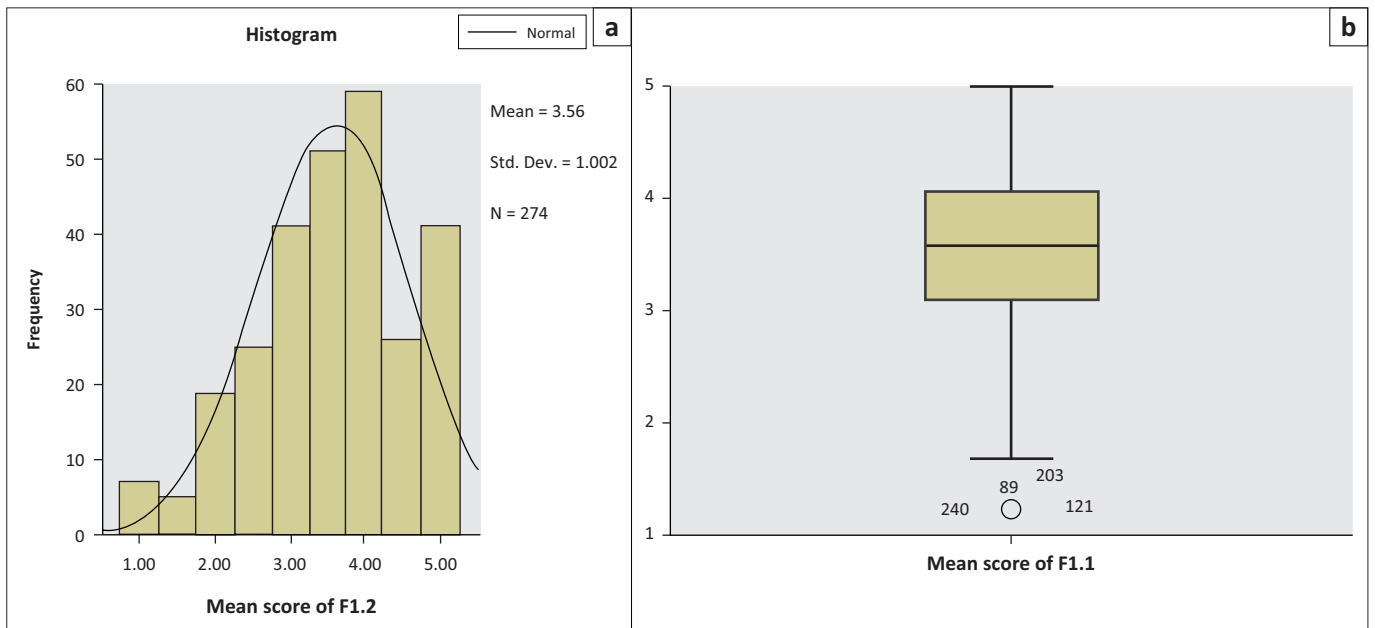
Note: Average 3.56.

Source: Nkabinde 2012:93.



Source: Adapted from Nkabinde 2012:92.

FIGURE 1: The histogram(a) and box plot (b) of the items in 'The school's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase'.



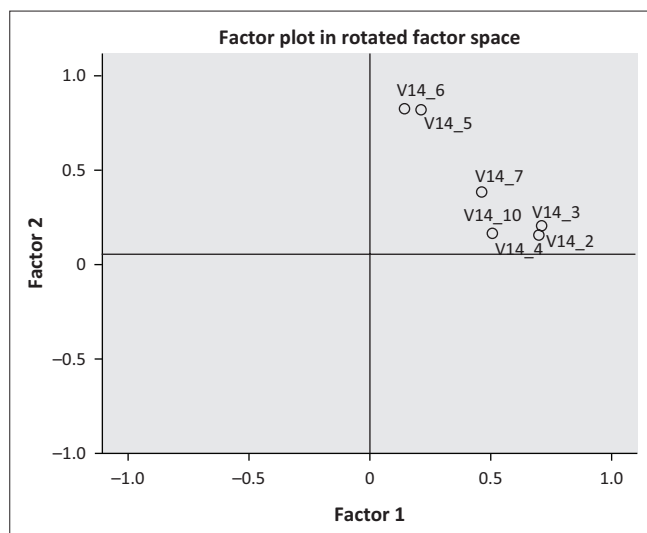
Source: Adapted from Nkabinde 2012:93.

FIGURE 2: The histogram (a) and box plot (b) of the items in 'The parent's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase'.

A second-order factor analysis resulted in one factor only being formed which contained seven items, explained 69.80% of the variance present and had a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.78. It was named 'School and parental influence on learner performance in the Foundation Phase'. In the interests of dimensionality and because the first-order factors were sufficiently reliable, it was decided to use them for any inferential testing procedures.

Inferential tests for two independent groups

When testing for significant differences between the factor mean scores of two independent groups, the Levene's *t*-test can be used. Levene's test is used to see whether the variances are different between the two groups involved. If the variances are similar ($p > 0.05$), then equal variances are assumed; if they are significantly different ($p < 0.05$), then equal variances are not assumed. Only those groupings in



Source: Adapted from Nkabinde 2012:94.

FIGURE 3: A factor plot in rotated space of the two first-order factors involved in learner motivation.

TABLE 9: Significance of differences between the two management or leadership groups with respect to the two first-order factors.

Factor	Group	Mean	t-test (p-value)	Effect size (r)
The school's motivation in learner performance in the Foundation Phase (F1.1)	Yes	2.95	0.16	-
	No	3.06		
Parent's motivation of learner performance in the Foundation Phase (F1.2)	Yes	3.31	0.004**	0.17
	No	3.68		

Source: Nkabinde 2012:95.

**Statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$).

Effect size < 0.5 is large; 0.3–0.49 is medium; 0.1–0.29 is small.

which statistically significant differences were found between the independent groupings are discussed.

From the data in Table 9, it can be seen that respondents who indicated that they have no qualification in or attended no in-service training regarding school management or leadership had a *less positive perception* (a statistically significantly lower mean score) about the parent's motivational role in their school than did respondents who had attended or had a qualification in leadership or management. Respondents who had such a qualification were also more positive about the school's motivational role than were respondents who did not have such a qualification. However, this difference was not statistically significant and could be the result of chance factors. The effect size was small.

The study's findings revealed that in the evaluation of the school as motivator for learner performance, by rural South African HoDs in the Foundation Phase, their mean score was 3.03, which displays a moderate inclination to believe that they or the school plays a role in the motivation of the child. Heads of department have already underestimated their role in motivating the learner. They believe that they do not have a role in the motivation of learners to achieve, and thus, their Self-Fulfilling Prophecy has come true. They have proven that they are unaware of their roles as managers who involve teachers and parents to enable learners to achieve to their full potential.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy declares that teacher expectations can predict changes in student achievement and behaviour beyond effects accounted for by previous achievement and motivation (Jussim & Eccles 1992:947). In this quantitative research carried out in Mpumalanga, South Africa, 274 HoDs doubted their belief in motivating learners to achieve. They underestimated the role that parents played in motivating learners to achieve. They seem too busy teaching in their classrooms and lack the time and skill of supervising their subordinates and involving parents in the education tripod. The legislative framework (PAM document), it can be argued, does not allow sufficient time for HoDs to efficiently perform their tasks. They are not trained or inducted into their roles and lack knowledge of their responsibilities. If HoDs believe that they can provide the necessary guidance and support for educators and parents to collaboratively motivate learners to achieve, they have thus provided themselves a self-fulfilling prophecy to improve quality of education.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of HoDs (who also teach) in improving learner success and their awareness of their other responsibilities, such as motivating learners to achieve better. It can be concluded that much needs to be done to remedy perceptions and capacity of HoDs.

If motivation of a learner during Foundation Phase was a flame, the fuel being the belief and support from the educator and parents, why should the HoDs in the Foundation Phase not be trained and workshopped on their roles and responsibilities to be the spark in the educational tripod? It is indeed time for the HoDs to perform the job effectively; hence, training for HoDs to be efficient and trust in themselves is essential. They can be the cog in the wheel for improving learner achievement in the Foundation Phase, which can be argued is key to success in South African education.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

K.B. was responsible for the project design and writing of the article. M.M.B.N. collected the data and contributed to the findings.

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