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Self-determination theory as a lens to explore motivational factors and leadership influences in sustainable school improvement: A South African case

CP van der Vyver  and BW Geduld 

School of Professional Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
cp.vandervyver@nwu.ac.za

Many South African schools are underperforming academically and are labelled as trapped or yo-yo schools. The motivation and commitment of school leadership and educators play a critical role in realising improved academic results and sustainable improvement. In the study reported on here a 2-fold perspective was used to explore the problem of motivation: (a) motivational factors influencing sustainable improvement in performing, trapped and yo-yo schools and (b) how the self-determination theory (SDT) can cast light on the issue of motivation and sustainable improvement in schools. Following a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive design, purposive sampling was used to select 6 secondary schools. We conducted individual and focus group interviews with the 6 school principals and 36 educators and heads of department who participated in the study. The findings reveal external factors that operate as negative and positive influences on the participants' controlled motivation, amotivation and autonomous motivation. Reactions to the labelling of the schools and the motivation brought about by the school leadership styles enabled the participants to internalise the goals of the interventions of the Department of Basic Education for school improvement. One-size-fits-all interventions for school improvement are not effective in all trapped schools. Interventions should be based on individual analyses of root causes of problems and not on the symptoms.

Keywords: motivation; school improvement; school leadership; self-determination theory; underperforming schools

Introduction

The South African government has allocated the largest share of its budget to the education sector, yet only 20% of schools perform at acceptable levels; 10% of these are former advantaged schools and 10% are unique township and village schools (Westaway, 2015). The challenges with underperforming schools are not unique to South Africa. Across England there are, as of August 2019, for example, 415 stuck (underperforming) and 65 recently unstuck schools. Campbell, Heyward and Jochim (2018) as well as Ushomirsky and Hall (2010) report that in the United States of America (USA) schools in, for example, Boston, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland and Washington, District of Columbia (D.C.) are persistently underperforming due to factors such as resources, politics, and leadership. Globally many underperforming schools have socioeconomically diverse populations. However, the severe damage and long-term consequences of educational failure are similar on the lives of individual learners, societies, as well as on the country's long-term economic growth (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Teachers are regarded as one of the essential pillars of education and play a vital role in combatting underperformance to realise national and international education goals. It is thus imperative that in cases where schools are underperforming and the educational goals are not realised, the motivation levels of teachers should be considered in efforts to combat underperformance.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) measures the performance and functionality of secondary schools in terms of their National Senior Certificate results. Secondary schools with a pass rate of less than 60% are labelled as underperforming schools (Umalusi, 2011). The North-West Department of Education and Sport Development applies its own threshold of 70%. Schools performing under this threshold are commonly referred to as "trapped."

The DBE distinguishes between four types of schools in terms of functionality. The first type is schools that have never underperformed and have sustained their performance over the years. Secondly, there are schools that used to underperform but were able to change this underperformance and have remained performing or functional schools. The third type is schools that used to be underperforming and dysfunctional schools, then improved briefly but dropped back to being underperforming and dysfunctional. This category of schools is often referred to as "yo-yo" schools. The fourth type is schools that remain underperforming and trapped. Although all these types of schools have the same contextual challenges, some seem to improve while others do not.

The causes of underperformance of schools are attributed to various overlapping factors. Msibi (2013) attributes the dysfunctionality of most schools to educators' inadequate pedagogical content knowledge, professionalism and work ethos, which consequently result in inadequate curriculum delivery. These problems are compounded by uncommitted school leaders and educators, and little support and inadequate monitoring at the district level. Duke (2011) and Mthiyane, Bhengu and Bayeni (2014) attribute poor academic performance to school decline. For Duke (2011), school decline is synonymous with, among other things, educators' ineffectiveness to implement new policies, failure to adapt to frequent curriculum changes and the lack of effective, democratic leadership to provide focus, vision and direction. Leadership involves school leaders and school management teams who influence educator control, power, educational initiatives and innovations to

create conducive teaching and learning environments. Mthiyane et al. (2014) emphasise, among other causes, the low morale of educators and inadequate support from the Department of Education (DoE).

The causes mentioned above relate to ineffective leadership and educators' low motivation to sustain academic performance. Heystek and Terhoven (2015:625) aver that labelling South African schools as "failing" (trapped) or "underperforming" could be extrinsically motivating and a catalyst for more dedication to improve academic results. Conversely, such labelling might be intrinsically demotivating, resulting in decreased commitment. Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma and Geijsel (2011) report for example, that educators' performances are detrimentally influenced by a lack of motivation, self-efficacy, autonomy and their perceived control to improve academic results. Geduld (2017) avers that educators in underperforming schools attribute their low motivation to their associations with a labelled, underperforming school, pressure by superiors to produce higher pass rates, insufficient monetary support from the DoE and the grade progression practices at schools.

None of the previous studies explored the phenomenon of the motivation of educators in trapped, yo-yo and sustained-performing schools. In an attempt to understand the sustained motivation for school improvement in these schools, two questions guided the study:

- 1) What motivational factors influence the sustainable improvement of performing, trapped and yo-yo schools in the Ruth Segomotsi Mompati district of the North-West province?
- 2) What light can the SDT cast on this issue?

The process of finding answers to the two research questions was contextualised by the following conceptual and theoretical framework.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

To conceptualise motivation, sustainable school improvement and the phenomenon of yo-yo schools and trapped schools, the investigation drew on the concept "motivation" and on the Self-determination theory (SDT) of Ryan and Deci (2002).

Motivation and sustained school improvement

Motivation energises and gives direction to behaviour and can, therefore, be inferred from a person's actions, effort, persistence, goals and verbalisations (Schunk, Meece & Pintrich, 2015). Motivational beliefs are fundamental in all the thoughts, feelings and behaviour that individuals apply daily and are interlinked with their outcome expectations, self-efficacy beliefs, interests, intrinsic motivation and task value. Individuals with high levels of motivation are thus beneficial

for the development of personal potential and for the organisation in terms of higher productivity (Dobre, 2013).

Sustained school improvement is influenced by individuals' motivational beliefs. Performing schools may have positive outcome expectations when the school leadership and educators envision the probability of improving results. On the other hand, amotivated personnel in trapped and yo-yo schools, who believe they are making little or no improvement, may become demoralised and give up altogether.

Higher self-efficacy resulting from performance success will motivate schools, which makes future performance success more likely. Alternatively, trapped and yo-yo schools, where the personnel have low self-efficacy and outcome expectations, may show resignation, apathy and an unwillingness or inability to exert much effort (Schunk et al., 2015). Self-efficacy is also strongly related to goal setting and goal commitment. If educators, for example, believe in their capabilities to make progress towards improved performance, they will become more motivated to achieve that. On the contrary, it is unlikely that educators will try to attain goals that are beyond their actual skill levels or previous performance (e.g. underperforming schools with a long history of poor results setting a goal of a 100% pass rate).

Self-determination theory

Ryan and Deci (2002) distinguish between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation, which each reflects varying levels of self-determination on a continuum. The SDT asserts that individuals' motivation is influenced by three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy. These three basic psychological needs must first be met before individuals will experience the intrinsic motivation to learn, to engage with others, to perform in academic and organisational settings and to grow psychologically (Ryan & Deci, 2002). The continuum of motivation includes autonomous motivation on one side and controlled motivation at the other end. The difference between autonomous and controlled motivation was informed by initial research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which formed the basis for the distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

Intrinsic motivation manifests when the drive behind a person's actions lies in the execution of a specific task, when the task is inherently interesting or enjoyable, even when no external rewards are required. Extrinsic motivation is observable when an activity is performed to attain a specific outcome, not because of inherent satisfaction but in reaction to some external stimulus or reward (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which may be in the form of negative or positive reinforcement. Positive

reinforcement includes rewards, while negative reinforcement includes punishment (Lai, 2011). An individual may internalise extrinsic motivation to the extent that it becomes autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this instance, there is an inner acceptance, and the goal becomes self-endorsed. The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation then becomes vague. It is for this reason that Ryan and Deci (2017) indicate the distinction in SDT as not between internal and external motivation but, instead, as between autonomous and controlled motivation.

Autonomous motivation includes intrinsic motivation and some forms of extrinsic motivation, where the value of an activity is internalised (Ryan & Deci, 2002). This type of motivation emanates from the self in terms of intrinsic goals or outcomes that direct self-determined behaviour (Hagger, Hardcastle, Chater, Mallett, Pal & Chatzisarantis, 2014).

Controlled motivation includes both external regulation (punishment and reward) and introjected regulation. Introjected regulation describes individuals who are influenced by feelings of pressure to avoid guilt and anxiety or to attain ego-enhancements or pride. If controlled goals are set, the individual experiences external or internal pressure to achieve those goals, to receive approval from others or to avoid punishment or feelings of guilt (Hagger et al., 2014). Controlled motivation leads to the achievement of goals in the short term, if the external contingency is present. However, autonomous motivation leads to more effective performance as well as greater long-term persistence (sustained persistence) (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Autonomous and controlled motivation both lead to achieving goals, whether they have a long- or short-term effect.

Amotivation is observed when individuals lack motivation, interest and value to perform an activity. Amotivation may occur as a form of oppositional behaviour when the autonomy of an individual is threatened (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Influence of school leadership on autonomous and controlled motivation

Leadership in schools plays an immense role in educational change, the motivation of educators and maintaining sustainable school performance (Thoonen et al., 2011). Democratic school environments and autonomy-supportive leadership styles greatly contribute to the autonomous motivation of educators (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Autonomy-supportive leadership styles are characterised by vision, ethics, consideration of individuals' ideas, inspiration and intellectual stimulation, which in turn contribute to the autonomous motivation of personnel (Ahmad, Abbas, Latif & Rasheed, 2014). This leadership style furthermore enhances autonomous teacher

commitment and collegiality by communicating clear visions and high academic goals for sustained school improvement (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Intrinsically motivated educators, likewise, demonstrate autonomy-supportive styles that meet learners' psychological needs and enhance their motivation to learn and perform academically (Froiland, 2015).

On the other hand, controlled teacher motivation is experienced when leadership styles emphasise rewards, monitoring, control and punishment. In such instances, low self-determination occurs among educators, and motivation is not internalised (Eyal & Roth, 2011). When teachers' motivation is controlled, they are usually pressured for high pass rates or are controlled by their superiors, the education system or society (Froiland, 2015).

It is thus evident that autonomous motivation is most appropriate and desired for sustainable performance of educators and school leaders in trapped and underperforming schools. Controlled motivation will provide short-term performance, which is not sustainable over extended periods of time. Principals and educators of trapped schools mainly focus their efforts on complying with bureaucratic administrative demands and with rules and regulations set by departmental and district officials (Clarke, 2011). Intervention strategies of the DBE for trapped schools are characterised by constant visitation from departmental officials to monitor, evaluate and make recommendations for improvement (Gauteng DoE, 2015). These intervention strategies from the DBE act as forms of controlled motivation for school leaders and educators.

In addition, the DBE exerts controlled or extrinsic motivation of educators through the integrated quality management system (IQMS), which provides educators with monetary rewards in the form of salary progression if they perform (Education Labour Relations Council, 2003:6). Another example of controlled motivation is the recommendations made by Modisaotsile (2012), namely better incentives, recognition and monetary rewards for teachers, especially those who teach in rural areas, good working conditions, adequate resources and support, better teacher training, and job satisfaction.

The following sections contain a report on the empirical investigation that was launched.

Research Methodology

Insight into the everyday lives and experiences of participants was gained conducting a basic interpretive qualitative study within an interpretivist paradigm (cf. Maree, 2016). This research approach was suitable since the purposively selected participants (principals and educators at the six schools) formed part of the

educational process and had lived experiences regarding motivation to sustain improved performance.

We conducted the study in the Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati educational district in the North-West province of South Africa. The sample comprised two schools with a pass rate of 70% or more for 3 years, two schools with fluctuating performance and two underperforming schools with an average pass rate less than 70% for the past 3 years. These three types of schools are representative in terms of their performance and functionality relating to the National Senior Certificate results. One of the research aims in this study was to explore what motivational factors influenced sustainable improvement in the three different types of schools. Six school principals, one of each school, and six educators per school, which included heads of departments, voluntarily participated. In total, there were 42 participants. Since qualitative studies require a small number of participants to ensure in-depth understanding of the phenomenon explored, we decided that the sample size would be manageable to collect data to address the research questions.

Individual interviews were conducted with the principals and focus group interviews with the educators and heads of department. The following are examples of interview questions asked: What has motivated you to change and improve your school in the past or currently? Which factors may have had a negative effect on the motivation of teachers? Which factors may serve as motivation in the future to lead to further improvement? Which of these factors play the most important role to motivate you? Which factors may have had a negative effect on the motivation of teachers? What influence does the school leader have on your motivation towards school improvement?

The data were analysed through content analysis, open coding and a thematic approach. The participants' responses were coded by school and type of interview (e.g. S2FG – S2 represents School 2 and FG represents focus group interview). The principals' responses were coded according to their school and their position as principal (e.g. S1P).

Trustworthiness was ensured by a systematic approach for data collection, member checking and independent coding of data. All ethical issues were taken into consideration (cf. Maree, 2016). Ethical clearance was obtained from the university we are associated with and permission to conduct the research was obtained from the North-West DBE and Sports Development.

Presentation of Findings

The results are presented through six themes that emerged from the data as major motivational factors that influence the sustainable improvement

of trapped and yo-yo schools. These are as follows: (1) External factors impacting negatively on teacher motivation; (2) External factors impacting positively on teacher motivation; (3) Signs of amotivation; (4) Signs of internal (autonomous) motivation; (5) Signs of controlled motivation where external motivation was internalised; and (6) School leaders' influence on educators' motivation for school improvement.

Theme 1: External Factors Impacting Negatively on Teacher Motivation (Controlled Motivation)

The DBE was perceived as a negative external factor in the participants' controlled motivation. The participants mentioned the DBE policy on grade progression, constant curriculum changes, incompetence in implementing new curricula, and bureaucratic red tape that results in administrative burdens. It can be concluded that many participants struggle to adapt to constant changes in the curriculum and new policies, and they, therefore, experience it as stressful and demotivating (Duke, 2011; Geduld, 2017). This is how one participant expressed his view:

In the first place, OBE [Outcomes-Based Education] was introduced, and that was difficult for the teachers and change[d] to NCS [National Curriculum Statement] and now it is changing to CAPS [Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement]. It is coming from bad to worse ... since the Department says these learners must progress. (S4FG)

The participants mentioned the allocation of resources, late delivery of textbooks, the shortage of classrooms, broken photocopiers (cf. Clarke, 2011), insufficient funds provided by the government to effectively run schools (cf. Duke, 2011) and delayed payments for feeding schemes (cf. Geduld, 2017). Other negative factors mentioned were newly appointed educators who waited for months to receive salaries, job insecurity, the high educator-learner ratio and post provision at schools (cf. Mthiyane et al., 2014). Two participants voiced their frustration as follows:

We have schools that are congested, but there is nothing that is been [sic] done so all the classes range from 50 up to 55 (S1FG).

The Department demotivates us; [we] struggle to get textbooks; top-ups are not made; stationery is a problem. The Department does nothing. They just appreciate [sic] in their corner and don't come to school to praise us (S2FG).

Many participants accused the DBE of offering ineffective and irregular in-service training and professional development. The participants expressed scepticism about the quality of the in-service training and professional development to provide them with the required skills and knowledge to implement new curricula (cf. Duke, 2011). The participants claimed that academic performance was negatively affected by learners' late coming, absenteeism, general ill-discipline,

substance abuse and general lack of commitment to their schoolwork (cf. Mthiyane et al., 2014). This is how two participants expressed themselves:

... substance abuse increases a lot (S1P).

Learners come late – second period. This is a problem. When educators come late, learners come late (S2P).

The participants attributed the learners' demotivation for education to various socioeconomic ills common to rural and township areas, such as low parental involvement and interest in their children's education, and learners living in foster care or with their extended family (cf. Geduld, 2017). Closely linked to poor parental involvement was the ineffective functioning of the school governing bodies (SGBs), which lack the knowledge and skills to make practical suggestions and support educators in terms of maintaining infrastructure (cf. Modisaotsile, 2012). One principal made this remark: *"In terms of governance, our SGBs, are not up to scratch ... They cannot read the documents and so people become a burden for the school rather than to assist the school"* (S4P).

The participants' motivation is controlled as they are externally pressured to perform to avoid their schools being labelled negatively.

Theme 2: External Factors Impacting Positively on Teacher Motivation (Controlled Motivation)

The participants perceived equipped libraries and computer classes, conducive working environments, acknowledgement, and respect of colleagues, learners, parents and school leadership, and collaboration and socialisation among colleagues as positive influences on their motivation for sustained school improvement. This is how they explained their views:

The team that we have here at this school that motivates me ... it's enhanced by collaboration from all direction[s]; all colleagues are working together (S1FG).

The principal shows ... acknowledgement of our work because there was a time when she gave us a small token of appreciation to show that she is happy (S3FG).

A few participants mentioned that the possibilities of promotion, extra remuneration and rewards are positive external motivational factors (Modisaotsile, 2012).

Theme 3: Signs of Amotivation

A lack of focus on academic work and an external locus of control in the absence of autonomous motivation was most apparent in the trapped and yo-yo schools. The participants' feelings of paralysis and expressions of hopelessness were striking when they explained that their colleagues and leadership did not care about the functionality of the schools any longer (cf. Duke, 2011; Mthiyane et al., 2014). This is how one principal of

a trapped school described the amotivation of some educators:

The school was called 'yizo' (unruly school). After break, you would not find any learners here, and the educators did not worry whether the learners had left or not. I charged one HoD [Head of department] for science and maths, who arrived here drunk. I charged the other one for failure to carry out his duties properly. I was very shocked that educators sit in the staff room without going to classes.... (S2P)

Where signs of amotivation were evident among the educators, they did not take ownership and responsibility for the dysfunctionality of the school but felt that it was the duty of the DoE to intervene and bring about change. The following response encapsulates the views of many other participants who had given up hope: *"The Department must come and motivate the learners. The motivation to learn is not there. Our environment is not good; we are really not interested. There is nothing that motivates our learners"* (S4FG).

This response implies that the DBE is solely responsible for learner motivation, even though teachers also influence learner motivation to varying degrees (cf. Froiland, 2015).

Educators' late coming, absenteeism and unwillingness to adopt strategies and change for improvement are detrimental for learner achievement. These factors were mentioned by various participants in trapped schools:

I think the Department must come to the teachers and ask the teachers what they want. They must inform them what they are trying to do (S4FG).

The Department must come and motivate the learners from the lower grades, like Grade 8, and not only motivate at the climax point of Grade 12, so that they're knowing [sic] what to do when they are going to the higher grades. (S4FG)

Participants' reliance on the DBE for initiative in the form of corrective measures, vision and sustainable support is clear in the following response: *"Yes, when the monitors came after making their own research, they will give us a way forward"* (S6P).

Theme 4: Signs of Internal (Autonomous) Motivation

The participants of performing schools exhibited more signs of internal (autonomous) motivation. Their views were congruent with ideas advanced by Ryan and Deci (2002) and Schunk et al. (2015) regarding autonomy-supportive, intrinsically motivated teachers. These participants revealed their self-satisfaction and pride to be instrumental in the success of their school. Their motivational beliefs influenced their level of effort and persistence as well as their sense of belonging (Schunk et al., 2015). They voluntarily taught learners after hours, without any rewards. This is how one participant expressed his/her passion and

commitment: *“That wonderful face of a learner that he grasps something. He understood, you explained and explained and then that ... that’s a big motivation to me. Passion for your work, passion; it’s all about passion”* (S3FG).

All these participants’ responses exemplified how their previous good performance and the labelling as a performing school influenced their positive motivational beliefs (cf. Schunk et al., 2015). The participants from performing schools are motivated by healthy personal relationships with learners and act as mentors and role models. Their motivation can be inferred from the initiatives they take to benefit learners’ progress and potential, which consequently improve and sustain the academic performance of the school (Dobre, 2013). The following participant’s response is supported by the work of Eyal and Roth (2011):

My motivation is based on the fact that I really feel that we will be regarded as best teachers if we can unleash the potential even in the weak learners; that motivates me. We must stand up and teach them, even if it means that we have to teach them double. (S3P)

A few participants highlighted the acknowledgement and gratitude of previous learners who experienced success in tertiary education and beyond. One participant said: *“... create a sense of love and acceptance towards them so that they can feel that with us, they are safe”* (S5FG).

This response encapsulates the altruistic attitude towards the school community of many of the other participants from performing schools.

One principal of a performing school explained his motivation from a leadership perspective: *“Since we have got 89.4%, I immediately requested the deputy principal that we must call the teachers. I initiated it, we have never had anything below 90%”* (S3P).

The actions of this participant are congruent with the views of Duke (2011) and Eyal and Roth (2011) who argue that leadership should take the initiative and implement educational innovations to improve performance once they identify warning signs of lowered performance.

Theme 5: Signs of Controlled Motivation where External Motivation was Internalised

In trapped schools where the participants were externally regulated to perform, sustain and achieve the goals of the DBE, they valued these goals and regulations to such an extent and eventually accepted it as personal goals. These participants were externally motivated to escape the label of a trapped school because of the negative reflections it had on their perceptions of personal capabilities, professionalism and the image of the school. In these cases, participants’ external motivation was internalised (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2017) albeit from

pressure and expectations for school improvement by the DBE, the community and parents (cf. Clarke, 2011). Two participants clarified their motivation for sustained school improvement:

Knowing that your name will be in the trash; my name will be in the trash if I do not wake up and stand up and fight to sustain (S3P).

One might become demoralised by the term ‘trapped’ because it can have a negative connotation, but in other ways, it might be a measurement to [sic] which to make sure that you move away from a classified position as being trapped. (S1P)

Theme 6: School Leaders’ Influence on Educators’ Motivation for School Improvement

The participants perceived strong leadership and support by school management as reassuring and motivational for school improvement (cf. Ahmad et al., 2014; Eyal & Roth, 2011). They maintained that effective, timely and relevant communication from school leaders regarding important information sustained their motivation. They further identified democratically, shared and inclusive leadership styles (Duke, 2011) as sources contributing to their autonomy and motivation (cf. Eyal & Roth, 2011). One participant said: *“Appreciation of good work done ... He involves everyone, he’s inclusive ... To tell the truth, myself, I was motivated by the principal himself”* (S2FG).

Laissez-faire and autocratic leadership styles did not contribute to educator motivation. Participants characterised them as a lack of support, no trust, withholding of important information and a lack of vision (Duke, 2011).

Discussion of Findings

It was evident that the SDT could be applied in explaining the role of motivation in the different schools. The findings are summarised in the following table.

Table 1 Findings

Type of school	Type of motivation	Result
Trapped schools	Amotivation	No improvement (trapped)
Trapped schools	Controlled motivation	No improvement (trapped) Unsustained improvement (yo-yo school)
Trapped schools	Autonomous motivation (extrinsic but internalised)	Sustained improvement
Performing schools	Autonomous motivation (intrinsic)	Sustained performance

The findings firstly indicated that all the schools in the study faced the same external factors impacting negatively on teacher motivation.

However, externally motivated educators and school leaders in trapped or underperforming schools seemed to be more influenced by the negative, external factors. In the trapped and yo-yo schools, the educators' and school leaders' externally regulated motivation was evident in their inability to initiate change and their reliance on the DoE to intervene. Responses revealed signs of amotivation among colleagues, which manifested in a lack of commitment to uphold discipline, frequent late coming, and absenteeism (See Table 1). These results allow the assumption that the motivational levels of educators in many other trapped and yo-yo schools might be even lower or non-existent and less promising for sustainable school improvement.

The results show that the intervention efforts of the DBE in trapped and yo-yo schools had a trivial influence on educators and leadership that exhibited amotivation. Efforts exerted by the DBE seemed to have only short-term effects on educators' motivational levels. If there is no constant and continuous involvement through support and monitoring by the DBE, no improvement is made and the little progress cannot be sustained. In some of these schools, the only solution of the DBE was to replace the principal.

Secondly, the findings show that the external factors impacting positively on schools, for example, good infrastructure, collaboration among colleagues and so forth, also had a positive influence on the motivation of teachers and principals. If these external factors had an impact, the teachers or school leaders remained motivated; however, this remains controlled (extrinsic) motivation and is not sustainable over a longer period (See Table 1). The external influence motivated teachers and principals to such an extent that the school improved in the same year that the influence was exercised. However, if this support is not sustained over longer periods, some schools drop back to being trapped in the next year; this is where the yo-yo effect becomes evident. Thus, when external motivational efforts are not internalised by school leaders and teachers, it remains controlled motivation, which seems not to contribute towards sustaining the improvement that was initially achieved.

The findings thirdly reveal that some schools were able to sustain their improvements after the interventions of the DoE. School leaders and teachers in these schools with sustained performance understood the benefits of the intervention and were able to internalise the external motivational efforts from the DoE, which ultimately resulted in their autonomous motivation (See Table 1). One of the external factors that had a significant impact on the motivation levels was the mere fact of being labelled as a trapped school. These participants internalised the motivation as a

result from being labelled, to the extent that it became autonomous motivation. This motivation resulted in an inner acceptance of the goal to improve and sustain performance.

Fourthly, the findings show that the participants in schools with sustained performance over the years that had never been labelled as trapped schools, showed clear signs of autonomous intrinsic motivation (See Table 1). These participants were primarily motivated by the success of the school to attain academic goals, high self-efficacy beliefs, feelings of self-worth and accomplishment in developing well-rounded learners.

Finally, the results show that school leaders played a significant role in the (external) motivation of teachers that could turn into autonomous motivation, influencing the sustainability of school improvement. Leadership style is one of the leading factors with the most significance.

Conclusion

The results illustrate the need for renewed awareness among school leadership of the immense role they play in educator motivation and sustained school improvement. School leadership should create positive environments through caring, participative, shared, democratic, inclusive and value-driven leadership. These leaders should become catalysts for the development of intrinsic motivation through support, effective communication, empathy, vision, maintaining discipline, acknowledgement of effort, trust and the empowerment of staff.

The DBE should reconsider their one-size-fits-all interventions, which are not working in all underperforming schools. Interventions should be based on an individual analysis of the root causes of identified problems in schools and not on the symptoms.

The SDT explains not only the existence of trapped and yo-yo schools in the North-West province but also the inability of these schools to change to sustained performance levels. Thus, the notion that a person or body cannot sustainably motivate another person externally becomes untrue, with the identification of autonomous motivation in the SDT, since the internalisation of extrinsic motivation into autonomous motivation creates the opportunity to sustain performance.

While the SDT provides an excellent theoretical framework for explaining the role of motivation in sustainable school improvement, unfortunately, it does not indicate which aspects involved in extrinsic motivation have the potential to be internalised to the extent that they become autonomous. If such aspects or external actions could be identified and isolated within this theory, it could provide a tremendous opportunity for

leadership to enhance the autonomous motivation of teachers. This aspect provides an opportunity for further research.

Authors' Contributions

CP van der Vyver collected the data. Both authors analysed the data, wrote the article and reviewed the article.

Notes

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