

Principals' perceptions about performance agreements as motivational action: Evidence from South Africa

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Abstract

Principals, as one of the professional leaders in a school, are accountable for the quality of education in the school. This is a part of the normal job description and expectations for the person in such a post. In the South African context with a large number of underperforming schools, there is an intention to have an additional performance agreement as a part of performance management, to be signed by principals to hold them accountable for the expected examination results. This article investigated the understanding of principals of the possible motivational implications if the performance agreement is implemented. It also focuses on the issue of what may motivate principals to improve their performance towards sustainable quality education. Motivational theories are used as the lens to understand the principals' perceptions of this performance agreement process. The focus group interviews indicated that most principals are not in favour of the intended implementation and that it may rather have a negative influence on their motivation levels.

Keywords

Performance management, leadership, motivation, accountability, professional

Introduction

This article is predominantly concerned with the principals and deputy principals of underperforming schools – approximately 70% of a total of 25,000 schools in South Africa.

Underperformance in this context is based on examination results as well as grade 3 and 6 literacy and numeracy (litnum) results. There are two assessment instruments already in use at schools, namely Integrated Quality Measurement System (IQMS) and Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA). The implementation of IQMS has not proved to be an effective means of motivating teachers to improve their performance (Mahlaela, 2012; Mbulawa, 2012).

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In order to address the underperformance referred to above, in 2010 the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa started working on a performance agreement document to be signed by principals and deputy principals as an accountability measure. The rationale was that this performance agreement would lead to change and development that would improve the academic results in underperforming schools. This agreement and the process of developing it had to be negotiated in the Education Labour Relation Council (ELRC) by the employers (the DBE) with the teachers' unions as representatives of the principals and their deputies. By July 2012 the DBE and the unions could not reach an agreement and the result is that the performance agreement is still being revised by the DBE. The draft of the performance agreement is not available to members of the public, but the teachers' unions have copies on their web pages. Their members are also able to contact them via their web pages for information. I managed to obtain a copy from one of these unions, hence the references in the text to specific issues that were potentially problematic for the principals.

During 2010 and 2011 I was one of the lecturers presenting an academic programme to about 250 principals and vice-principals. The majority of these principals were negative about the possible implementation of the performance agreement. This suggested that the introduction of this form of accountability could have an unintended consequence: instead of it serving to motivate principals and vice-principals to achieve better results at their schools, it could demotivate them. Since it seemed important to test this anecdotal evidence, I decided to do research on some of the possible implications of introducing this performance agreement. I was also concerned to discover what would motivate principals to raise the level of their schools' performance. This research project was therefore not based on or dependent on the actual implementation of this specific performance agreement. The possible implementation of this performance agreement was merely the catalyst to explore the relationship between performance agreements as a possible motivational factor. The underlying assumption was that long-term motivation is needed to achieve sustainable improvement of quality education in most schools: dedication and commitment do not result from being promised a bonus or threatened with performance agreements.

In this article, I report on some aspects of that research. First, I will first outline the conceptual relationship between performance agreements and motivation in general. Next, I will focus on performance agreements in the South African context to explore the relationship between the two concepts more specifically. I will then explore some of the salient issues that emerged during the interviews conducted in South Africa.

The research question used was: what will be potential motivational factors to drive principals for enhanced performances, and to what extent do principals perceive the performance agreements as motivational in the process of improving quality education? The purpose of the research was to ascertain what principals and deputy principals contemplate will motivate them, and whether they felt that performance agreements may have some motivational influence on them.

The underlying assumption of the research question is that motivated principals are more likely to achieve better academic results than non-motivated principals over a sustained period. It follows that long-term and internal forms of motivation lead to long-term success; motivational tricks such as carrot-and-stick motivation, external motivation in the form of reward or punishment and threat, enjoy only short-term success.

Background to the research

Forrester (2011: 7) referred to the English context where performance management and pay have been in place for about two decades. There are divided opinions about the positive effects of

performance management. Many educators view it only as extra paper work and more control, not as something that contributes to improved or better education. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate if this form of performance management could have a positive influence on principals and so improve education. In the proposed South African context there would be few if any incentives for principals to sign the PAs. Principals would not be given any financial reward for improved results; better results would merely be seen as a confirmation that they (the principals) were doing what they are supposed to do. It therefore appears to be merely a control mechanism. As such it could have a negative effect on the principals' emotions and would thus be unlikely to result in a sustainable improvement of education. It is worth noting that, during the interviews, principals commented that teachers would react negatively if principals were the only ones to receive incentives.

Motivation and power are fundamental elements of successful change and development. The word motivation is derived from the Latin verb 'movere', which means to move or be able or willing to move: simply phrased, your motivation level is what moves you to participate in an activity and affects your desire to continue with the activity (Enhanced Motivation, 2004). An important, associated concept is 'power', which is derived from the Latin word 'potere' meaning 'to be able or having the ability to do or act, or having the capability of doing or accomplishing something' (Dictionary.com, 2011). It is therefore important to understand what would make the principals feel willing and able to move or to lead the rest of the staff to improved performances. This requires knowing how principals perceive these agreements in terms of their own power and motivation. Martin and Dowson (2009: 327) define motivation as a set of interrelated beliefs and emotions that influence and direct behaviour. They argue that relationships have an effect on achievement motivation because they directly influence the constituent beliefs and emotions of motivation. Interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships could thus affect the motivational levels of principals who have to sign agreements. Having a positive self-relationship and positive relationships with superiors and followers may significantly reduce the potential demotivational effect of having to sign these agreements. The influence of relationships and emotions was therefore investigated during the interviews with the principals.

Another important factor is that performance agreements or performance contracts should not be a deterrent or have other negative effects. This has direct implications for the way the performance agreements are implemented or applied. Any performance agreement has an official purpose, for example to improve the employees' performance and to optimise employees' output (Education Labour Relation Council [ELRC], 2008). There is also the unofficial, hidden or implicit purpose (Fredericks, 2012). This means that the people involved and influenced by the agreement might be unaware of it. The comments during the interviews made it clear that, in the case of the South African performance agreement, the principals were aware of the unofficial or hidden purpose; they saw the Minister of Education's comments as confirming that the performance agreements would provide the opportunity to get rid of what he saw as low-performing principals.

Denisi (2011) points out that it is not the criteria nor the content or the scale that is the problem with appraisal documents; it is the underlying motive, or why it is done, to achieve what, which is the real problem. It is thus vital to take account of how principals perceive the possible implementation of the performance agreement. Emotions can powerfully influence people, especially when they work exclusively with people, as in this case where principals work with teachers (Penny et al., 2011: 301). When humans feel threatened they adopt a defensive or survival mode. This may mean that they are unable to take the initiative and/or use their creativity; they can lose the drive to develop the new ideas that are necessary to lead an underperforming school to sustainable improvement (Hallowell, 2011; Kressler, 2003).

The managers (in this case the national and provincial ministers of education and director generals) wanted to know whether their plans to improve the quality of education would achieve the desired goals and standards. The result of this 'want to know' was a set of control mechanisms in the form of evaluation, assessment, inspection or similar activities to determine if the plans were correctly executed. A performance agreement is thus an example of a control mechanism that focuses on the task rather than the person (Crawford, 2009; English, 2008) or the context. The pre-determined and externally developed performance criteria, in this case the examination pass rates or numeracy and literacy levels, are to be achieved regardless of the context and circumstances of the contracted principal.

If performance agreements are not the most appropriate mechanism or tool to motivate principals to attain higher levels of performance, the question to ask the principals is: what would motivate you?

Performance agreements and motivation

The essence of the argument is that internal or intrinsic motivation has the potential and propensity to work in the long term while goal-determined motivational situations, e.g. performance agreements, are shorter term, external motivational factors. For sustainable and long-term development of educational quality, intrinsic motivation is a strong prerequisite.

Busch et al. (2013) indicate that the intrinsic form of the implicit achievement motive predicts the experience of flow. The achievement flow motive is a subconscious activity; a person does not consciously decide to do it; it is an activity in which there is inherent emotional goodness and the person will do it without thinking about it. Since implicit motivation predicts long-term behavioural trends and flow predicts quality of performance, the achievement flow motive should lead to the achievement of a long-term goal such as educational attainment.

Pintrich and Schunk (2002) indicate that intrinsic motivation also links directly with internal control or the locus of control. The locus of control is motivational to the extent that you feel in control of your own situation. With a performance agreement, specifically when terms are determined from outside, the locus of control shifts. The result is that motivation to perform may also be reduced. It is possible for an extrinsic motivational factor such as a performance agreement to become an intrinsic motivational factor. However, this is largely determined by the context in which the factor operates and the personality of the person involved.

Control also affects self-determination or autonomy. People are likely to be internally motivated if they have the feeling that they enjoy some autonomy and control over the context and their own actions. Performance agreements that are perceived as 'threatening' are likely to have a rather negative or demotivational influence and therefore the expected improved performance may not be achieved.

Recent work in this field has explored the complex relation between emotions and motivation levels. Reeve (2009) indicates that emotions are a trigger to motivations, e.g. 'I am angry about the unfair agreement therefore I am motivated to act by demonstrating against it'; but emotions are also the readout (reaction to) from motivation, e.g. 'my demonstration makes me feel good (the emotion) because the agreement will not be implemented'. Ryan (2012) even indicates that a perceptibly negative motive, e.g. not signing the agreement may make me feel good; therefore motives may drive a person to act or even not to act. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) also link this feeling to a more cognitive process; it is not only raw feelings and emotions. What and how we think (cognition) about the issue (agreements) have a direct link with how we experience emotions and

thus influence how motivated we may be to act or not act to support the implementation of a performance.

The emotional influence on role-players in this context, e.g. teachers' unions, was not sufficiently considered because in the initial performance agreement for the school principals it was suggested that the principals might be rewarded if they achieved the predetermined goals. The unions were against this part of the proposed document, but motivational theory also indicates that it is not a good strategy to achieve longer term sustainable achievements. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) indicate that activity and participation driven by internal motivational factors may be reduced if the person starts to do the activity for an external motive, e.g. a salary increase or a bonus or car.

Performance agreements are an integral part of the managerial approach in organisational management. In broader management it is part of control; to determine if the plans, aims and goals were achieved. Performance agreements or performance management as a broader managerial terrain is consequently a normal management process: from the planning of agreements, with aims, to the organisational aspects of actually carrying out the performance assessment actions, with all of the supposedly leading functions such as communication and interaction (Evans, 2011). It is therefore a rather simplistic management function; but it is rather a complex system or process because humans (individually and in groups) are involved in a complex and ever-changing environment. The motives behind performance management and the agreement also play an important role in implementing the performance agreement to the satisfaction of all the participants and role players. This will then also potentially determine the possible motivational effect of the performance agreement.

In the South African case there is a potential threat or danger in the performance agreement since senior Departmental officials suggested that principals might be removed if they did not comply with the expected requirements and goals (Gernetzky 2011). These kinds of threats have a direct influence on the principals' emotions and, because it is a negative emotion (anger, worrying and threatening), they may not act as expected (Ryan 2002). The expectation is that they will work harder, but the context in schools where they are working is in their view not positive, hence they feel they do not have control over the circumstances. According to Reeve (2009), when a person experiences any action such as the signing of an agreement that may be threatening, the amygdala in the brain reacts; this part of the brain is reacting on emotions of fear, anxiety and anger. These are all motivational actions but they are negative because there is a focus on survival or fighting reactions rather than on positive and creative actions in the work situation, e.g. on improving the quality of education with new teaching methods or motivating teachers positively.

Denisi (2011) emphasises that for appraisal to be a performance-changing instrument, the process and criteria and purpose of the appraisal must be fair, valid and reliable. Otherwise the appraisee will change only to a limited or small extent or may not change his or her behaviour at all. The process, including the document, has to be legitimate and it must be accepted by the appraisee. A performance agreement (as indicated above, not specifically the case of the South African performance agreement for principals) is not inherently problematic if the agreement is properly negotiated and accepted by all involved. Control, assessment, appraisal, inspections or however the actual process is labelled, does not matter. It is what is behind it, the motive behind the control functions that is the important aspect. This motive may make control an acceptable and positive process for the employer, but with positive or negative emotions for the employee; this may have an influence on the actual performance of the people involved, namely the principals. Woolfolk (2010) links this to Badura's concept of self-efficacy: people feel positively motivated when they feel competent to achieve a specific task in a specific area.

The underlying world philosophy for this form of performance agreement may be explained in terms of McGregor's X and Y approaches to people and management (Maslow et al., 1998). The basic supposition is that people are not all inherently driven to work hard (theory X) and, on the other hand, people are highly motivated and dedicated. It is specifically the theory X attitude that instigates the lack of trust and 'must know and control' attitude that leads to performance agreements. If principals are professionals why is it necessary to control and manage them with performance agreements as though they were workers in industry? It would seem that this kind of low-trust management style may have a negative influence on the performance of the people involved in the performance agreement. The case of Finland indicates that trust is an important factor in the intrinsic and long-term motivation of teachers; this is the opposite of the fundamental philosophy behind performance agreements (Sahlberg 2010).

Performance agreements and appraisals are associated with goal-orientated and expectation motivational theories (Pintrich and Schunk, 2002; Sheppard et al., 2006). Fisher and Noble (2004: 149) indicate that most research on motivation and performance is based on the more cognitive and rational approaches to motivation, e.g. goal-orientated and expectation theories, like the performance agreements. Anderson et al. (2010: 92) have shown that participative goal-setting processes have planning, coordination and motivational benefits. The proposed performance agreement for South Africa makes provision for participation but it is vague, e.g. leading the learning at school and shaping the direction and development of the school. There is nothing in the specific document that refers to examination results; hence it is still vague about what will be the actual criteria to determine if a principal is successful in the performance agreement. This will receive more attention in the analysis of the data.

Moreland (2009) mentions that when performance management is experienced as being focused on the individual as well as a part of organisational management and goals, the participants feel positive about it. Conversely, people who feel that the same performance management system is just a paper exercise will not deliver any real long-term effects for the school or the individual: an individual's values and attitude determine the motivational level to accept the process of performance management. Woolfolk (2010) refers to this situation as the expectancy-value motivational theory. A person (in this case a principal) has to have certain positive expectations to be able to complete the task successfully. But this has to be weighed against the value it will have for the person and also the effort it will need to attain the expected goals. When principals distance themselves from performance agreements, the possibility that they or the school may benefit from the activity of performance agreements is reduced.

Research design

A qualitative design was used to gather rich data and deep information from the most knowledgeable and informative participants. Focus group interviews were the means of gathering the data. Focus groups seemed preferable to individual interviews because the themes and issues were likely to present difficulties if the questions were discussed in an individual interview. Being in a group gave the participants the confidence to speak their minds openly. They were also able to draw on each others' ideas, making the discussion a building process of gathering data. Participants could also support each other and thus emphasise the importance of a particular point; but that they could also disagree with each other was an indication that the issue was as contentious as the project assumed it to be.

Since there are different groups associated with the different unions and geographical areas, the focus groups were purposefully selected to have representatives of all possible role players. Clearly, this qualitative study could not be generalised to all principals and schools in South Africa; I would argue that representivity makes it more likely that groups and individuals will find it useful. The different groups were:

Nine principals predominantly from the former white schools, as representatives of the South African Principals' Association (SAPA).

Principals and deputy principals in the Western Cape, which is regarded as one of the two best-performing provinces from the point of view of academic performance. Most principals in the Western Cape have Afrikaans or English as their first language, while in the rest of the nine provinces in South Africa most principals have one of the other nine official languages as their first language.

Three focus groups were conducted. Two groups were selected from a group of 180 principals and deputy principals attending a leadership qualification at the university. The 180 students were clearly informed about the overall thrust of the research project and the aims and research questions. They were also given the firm assurance that they were under no obligation to participate and it would not be held against them if they did not. The interviews were conducted after the classes ended in the venue where the principals were being housed. Two smaller geographical areas were identified and students from those areas were invited to participate in the focus group interview. The first group, named Group A, is located about 400 km from the capital city of Cape Town. The centre of this area is a large town, with surrounding rural areas. The second group, named Group B, resides in a large town or its adjacent rural areas 200 km from Cape Town and about 200 km from where Group A lives. The members of Group C were selected from a small group of 20 principals and deputies who attended a departmental workshop conducted by the university. I followed a similar process to that described above for briefing the group. I then invited the principals who wanted to participate to meet me in the venue after the end of lectures. These students live in a small rural town or its rural environs, more or less midway between the two other towns and about 180 km from Cape Town.

A fourth focus group was conducted in the north of the country, about 1800 km from Cape Town. This group of principals was presenting a programme on behalf of another university. I also teach in this programme. After the initial briefing process, I invited the principals in the group of 24 part-time lecturers to participate in the focus group on the next evening. I felt this would give them enough time to decide whether they wanted to participate. They were different from the previous groups because they had higher academic qualifications and some of them did not have Afrikaans or English as their first language. They were from provinces that in general do not have good education results, and the management and administration in these provinces are also sometimes problematic.

The ethical procedures were explained to them. With the exception of the SAPA principals, I was either their lecturer or their former lecturer at different levels in education management and leadership programmes. I therefore acknowledge that they may have been influenced by my presence or the ideas I had presented to them during the programme. I attempted to ensure sufficient validity of the information by inviting them to present their own opinions. I also made sure that I did not ask any leading questions or challenge some of their statements, even when it seemed that the principals were just saying what they thought I wanted to hear.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured interviews. There were a few basic questions and then the discussions developed as the participants added to the ideas of others in the group to present their explanations and understanding of the proposed performance agreement. The prompting questions for the discussion focused on their knowledge of the performance agreement and how they felt about it as well as the possible motivational value of the proposed performance agreement.

The sections below will discuss the data and issues addressed by the participants.

Principals' knowledge of the proposed performance appraisal

The official negotiations about the possible performance agreement were in the ELRC between the DBE and the unions. It seems as if neither DBE nor the unions had communicated with the principals about the performance agreement and the possible implications. Although the majority of the principals had heard something about the performance agreement, few of them had seen the draft performance agreement or had any official information about it. This was a particular concern in the Western Cape because the Department wanted to implement it before there had been public or interest group meetings to clarify all the issues the participants mentioned during these interviews. This does not reflect well on the motives and actions of unions and the DBE in a democratic and open society: these issues will have a significant influence on the people to be affected by this proposed change. The SAPA participants had the opportunity to discuss the document in detail because they had been asked to give official feedback to the Western Cape Department of Education (WCDE) as well as the national DBE. One of the principals in Group B who is actively involved in South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) indicated that he had received information about the performance agreement from the union. A few other principals indicated, after significant hesitation and short discussion between the members of the group, that there had been some information sessions organised by the local districts where the performance agreement had been just mentioned in passing. Neither the DBE nor the WCDE seemed to have a structured plan to inform principals about or promote the implementation of the performance agreement. Most principals described their knowledge about the performance agreement as information that they got via the informal grapevine. A principal (an active union member) in Group D mentioned that at a union meeting 'they just touched on the document' about the performance agreement, but there was no specific meeting to inform them or discuss the possible implications. Another principal in this group (not actively involved with any union but with a PhD in Education management and policy) first read about it in a newspaper and then heard about it from her district.

Although most participants had not seen the official document and had limited detailed knowledge about the proposed performance agreement, their attitude to the performance agreement was negative. Generally, the participants' initial reaction was that the performance agreement would be viewed as a threat rather than as a motivational factor. It is important to note that their views were based on informal or unofficial information, e.g. news in newspapers or on the radio or from colleagues in informal discussions (grapevine). This information may therefore have been distorted or been very selective.

The fact that the participants' perception of the proposed performance agreement was not based on formal and detailed, accurate information had direct implications for the discussion of the data. This discussion had to recognise that the feelings and opinions of the participants were based on personally constructed knowledge and ideas. It is as well to note that people construct their own reality even when an official document is made available and public discussions are held. The

discussion also had to recognise that a potentially far-reaching change in the employment contract of principals was intended to be enacted with limited official information and communication. The very negative attitude to the performance agreement will be discussed in the remainder of the article under thematic headings.

The performance agreement as a perceived threat

A Group D principal (active union member) expressed this group's feelings best when reflecting on how they felt when they heard that the performance agreement might be implemented:

'Mmm, . . . I think it brought us a little bit of fear because it is not clear what will happen to yourself if you underperform. Your performance is based on the number of stakeholders like the parents and governing body, learners, yourself and teachers and it is easy to be sabotaged. For example, if the governing body does not want to improve the buildings but you as a principal will be measured on the buildings.' (16: 11–48).

A principal working on his PhD research said 'it was a mixed feeling because there was a lot of uncertainty and I thought we will get clarification about it'.

A Group A principal said:

'To me it is a threat especially with us in the disadvantage[d] schools. We do not have resources and therefore our conditions are differently [sic] and therefore we have problems. I do not think we can be treated equally than others, than previous Model C schools. The principals and deputies may lose their job and that is unfair to me'.

It is not abnormal that different role players are against the official performance agreement. Knapp and Feldman (2011: 670) note that many externally driven changes were met with resistance, confusion and denial. In the South African case there are similar examples from the individual principals during the interviews and also from the teachers' union that informed its members not to sign any performance agreement.

Most of the participants felt that there is limited motivational value and power in the performance agreement. One of the principals in Group D explained their feelings about the performance agreement as follows:

'It [the performance agreement] is a threat because we think it will be the same as with the directors – if you do not perform, you will be recalled.' (25: 10). [In the South African context 'recall' means that you are removed from a post and either employed at another school or in a district or circuit office.]

This indicates a negative attitude towards the performance agreement; and a negative attitude, even before a new policy is implemented, may indicate problems with the implementation process. Bruch and Vogel (2011: 38) refer to this situation as corrosive energy in an organisation. This refers to energy or negative emotional and motivational feelings that erode the positive growth in the organisation. There were, however, some principals who indicated that the performance agreement might have some positive aspects. The SAPA participants as well as the South African Teachers Union (SATU) representatives said they did not have a principled objection to such a document and process but they felt that there are many problems with the current document and

format. They presented their concerns and suggestions, especially the Western Cape Department of Education. The WCDE wanted to pilot the performance agreement with the blessing of the DBE although the official agreement was not signed in the ELRC. In December 2011 the agreement in the ELRC was that the document had to be revised by the DBE before the unions, especially SADTU, would discuss the issue again.

Group B and C commented that the performance agreement was not motivational because teachers could 'sabotage' the principal if they wanted the principal to leave the school. In this kind of situation, teachers might purposefully not comply with the principal's leadership and efforts to improve the school. This could lead to the dismissal or replacement of the principal. This is another indication that principals feel that there are too many factors outside their control that could have a negative influence on their future careers if they signed the performance agreement. This evidence of a lack of cooperation between leader and teachers is in sharp contrast with what Knapp and Feldman (2011: 685) report. They indicated that where principals also stood to lose their jobs if the schools performed badly, teachers put in more efforts to make sure that the principal would not lose his job if they underperformed. According to research participants, the teachers' union is responsible for a lack of collaboration and team effort. Either the teachers and principals do not belong to the same union or the principals are seen as departmental representatives and therefore the teachers do not treat them as part of the group.

The performance agreement and its potential to motivate principals

Most participants agreed that this specific performance agreement does not have the potential to motivate them because of its negative aura. They mentioned external factors outside their control that make it impossible for them to feel motivated to take responsibility for the personal performance of each teacher and therefore for the examination results of the school. The participants mentioned all the usual factors such as lack of facilities, teachers' qualifications, learners' abilities and socio-economic conditions.

What is important is that these people applied for their posts, well knowing what would be demanded of them. Their basic job description in the personnel administrative measure document refers explicitly to their responsibilities and accountability; therefore they cannot claim that they did not know they would be held accountable for the quality of education in their schools.

The largest section of the South African population belongs to a more collectivist society. This may explain why the interviewees indicate that teachers would find it unacceptable for the principal to be the only one to receive remuneration when the school performs well; teachers want to share in the incentives. Group C indicated that if the principal was the only one to get more money, there might be conflict and tension between them and their colleagues. A principal in Group B was more specific about the possible repercussions:

'If the teachers realise that you as principals get extra money that is where the sabotage will begin' (33: 38)

Significantly, most of them were adamant that money, for example an increase in their salary, was not necessarily an important motivational factor. In their view, for money to be a motivational factor; all the teachers involved had to share in any financial benefit. That would have to go along with a willingness on the part of teachers to share in the consequences should the school not perform. The principals, however, acknowledged that the national department of education had not made the additional funds necessary to reward all.

On the other hand, the participants mentioned that factors such as better facilities at the school and better support from the departmental officials at the local level would act as a motivation. This would be a more effective means of motivating them to work harder than a performance agreement aimed at forcing them to work harder. They also acknowledged the great importance of parental support. This could help to empower the principal to motivate the teachers to embrace development.

The performance agreement and improved performance

Legitimate and coercive powers are closely aligned with the performance agreement approach that is in essence a managerial and task-orientated tool. As a result, the performance agreement approach may force principals to choose the legitimate and coercive tools available, at all costs, as opposed to the people-orientated attractive, expert and reward tools.

Most of the participants did not believe that the performance agreement would be a powerful tool to inspire the principal and most of the staff members to improve their own performance. In contrast, the performance agreement was perceived as a negative action that might have very different consequences from what was initially planned and expected from the different departments of education initiating this process. The principals said that the performance agreement does not provide them with any powers to use if and when teachers do not meet the agreed levels of performance.

Possible powerful tools are legislation or policy that could allow the principal to act swiftly against a teacher who does not respond positively to support offered from the principal or other colleagues. This is strongly linked to the autonomy of principals and their feeling of being in control. This type of power is strongly associated with coercive power where the principal may use some kind of force to inspire or motivate teachers to improve their performance. The current legislative processes are too cumbersome and time-consuming to act against a non-performing or underperforming teacher. The teachers' unions were especially singled out as a major stumbling block to swift action against underperforming teachers. The Group D principals put it this way:

'We as principals are exposed [by the performance agreement] because you know the teachers are protected by the unions; we may be recalled but because of the union's power an underperforming teacher will [be] stuck with you forever' (26: 30) [meaning that underperforming teachers will rarely or never be disciplined or have action taken against them].

Another potential power tool is the knowledge base of the principal. Principals who are well trained and who have additional qualifications, especially in management and leadership, seem to be able to use the knowledge to support and motivate their teachers. These principals (specifically the Group D principals with master's and even doctoral degrees) have better knowledge about change processes and how to lead and manage teachers during change; they also have the expert subject knowledge to offer support to teachers with limited subject or teaching knowledge. These knowledgeable principals therefore potentially have a high status in the eyes of the teachers and community. Consequently, they will be able to use this power to motivate teachers to improve their qualifications and also the academic results of the schools. The Group D principals said that their knowledge did not give them total power, but it did help them. If these highly qualified and knowledgeable principals do not have sufficient power to motivate the teachers, less able and

knowledgeable principals are likely to have serious problems, as was confirmed by the interviews with the other group of principals.

Conclusions

During the interviews it became evident that it is predominantly the hard-working, caring and dedicated principals who are threatened rather than motivated by the proposed performance agreement. It therefore becomes an instrument of punishment rather than motivation. Instead of being motivational, it seems to be demotivational.

There are potentially many problems with the motivation of individuals such as a principal, but then a principal must motivate individual teachers; but these teachers must also function as a team. There are too many factors, both external (environment or fellow human beings) and internal (personality, values), that are likely to influence the motivational levels of a person or the ability of a person (e.g. the principal) to motivate all the teachers in a school and to the same level to get them to improve their performance significantly (Kressler, 2003; Sheppard et al., 2006). Motivation is therefore a complex process; it is contextual, which includes the individual as well as the structure in which the individual must act and function.

Each individual, as a cognitive, emotional and religious (values)-driven entity will influence the kind of motivation needed to make the person achieve or do what is expected. The circumstantial effects, external to the individual, are also determined in the type and level of motivation. Hence, the internal and external influences as well as the individual group activities, make it difficult to motivate other people. External factors such as the school's socio-economic environment or infra-structure are often outside the principal's sphere of influence; and these factors may have an important influence on the academic achievements of learners in the school. Consequently, if the principals feel that external factors outside their control could influence their performance negatively, the performance agreement is unlikely to be acceptable as an instrument of accountability. The performance agreement as a motivational instrument or action is thus embedded in the issues in discourse about the agency and structure – is it possible for an individual or group (agent) to overcome obstacles in the environment (structure); or do principals (agents) experience the structure (e.g. social community and school infrastructure) as outside the locus of control?

This research project focuses on a proposed performance agreement for principals in South Africa. The general discussion about performance agreements as a potential motivational factor indicates that the success of performance agreements is directly related to context. Principals see the context in the South African education system as problematic. Consequently, the performance agreement is viewed as a rather demotivational process. It does not mean that performance agreements are not capable of motivating people. It might even be motivational in the South African context if it was a short-term project to get the wheels rolling in many of the underperforming schools. The potential threat could have been turned to a positive if there were some form of acknowledgement or reward for the principals and teachers. Training by the principal could then become a longer term internal motivational process to get more, or preferably most, teachers internally motivated to deliver a service rather than to just be a teacher for the salary at the end of the year.

In the South African context the performance agreements could become a political symbol of the government's promise to deliver quality education to all. It is a political accountability tool for the government and, consequently, at every level in the management hierarchy.

A school culture of accountability in which each person is accountable not only for his or her actions but also has a deep sense of accountability to the children, their parents and the broader community may be a much stronger driver of sustainable performance than externally driven accountability instruments like the performance agreements. This is a moral accountability, not a legally accountability. But it is moral accountability that stems from a firm expectation from parents, community members and learners that teachers will produce high quality work.

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