

## Research Article

# Motivation strategies for enhancing teacher performance and wellness in post-COVID-19 rural South African schools

Godfrey Mutesasira<sup>1</sup> and Newlin Marongwe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Walter Sisulu University, South Africa (ORCID: 0000-0002-2986-1782)

<sup>2</sup>Walter Sisulu University, South Africa (ORCID: 0000-0002-1354-7107)

The sudden eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the performance of employees and had an impact on their psychological wellness. Its gravity and forceful nature disrupted and activated emotions of demotivation in employees which requires managers to use motivation as a tool for stimulating the high performance of employees in any organisation. This paper explores how motivation can be used as a strategy to improve rural secondary teachers' work performance and wellness for their job satisfaction in Amathole East Education District of South Africa. Herzberg's Two-Factor theory was adopted for the study. The current study was grounded on a qualitative approach with a case study research design. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to choose three schools and twenty-eight participants used in the study. Focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews were used to gather data from the participants. The study discovered that recognition for teacher performance and offering psychological support stood out as sources of motivation that could be used to improve their work performance and wellness. The study recommends that schools design rewarding models and form community of practice groups post-COVID-19 to improve teachers' morale to perform satisfactorily at work.

Keywords: Job satisfaction; Motivation; Teacher; Job performance; COVID-19

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## 1. Introduction

It is in the public domain that job attitudes and productivity or work performance cannot be separated and ignored for any successful organisation to achieve its set goals. Teachers and other employees come to work with different feelings, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, etc., to which employers need to pay attention to improve job production as suggested by Herzberg's two-factor theory (as shall be explained below) that was adopted for this study (Nickerson, 2023; Herzberg, 1968; Gawel, 1996). It is without doubt that COVID-19 created a lot of anxiety, stress, etc., that had lasting effects on employees post-COVID-19. Such employees need to be motivated by leadership that has an art of engaging and understanding them to take employees into the 'flow state' to get the desired results (Goleman, 2000).

The effects of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and the early part of 2022

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### Address of Corresponding Author

Newlin Marongwe, PhD, Walter Sisulu University, Nelson Mandela Drive, Mthatha, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

✉ [nmarongwe@wsu.ac.za](mailto:nmarongwe@wsu.ac.za)

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affected people's lifestyles and work performance. The economic and social lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic not only paralyse the economy but killed also employee motivation in many sectors including education because of employment uncertainties and other related conditions (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Education can be employed for improving a country's economy and creating cultural and social cohesion, equity, and justice (Leow et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, the teachers' work performance and psychological wellness should not be downplayed, hence the need for their morale to be boosted for learners to enjoy their right to education. Tsolou et al. (2021) view education as a fundamental human right that enables people to be free from all forms of domination and discrimination. We argue that psychological well-being has an impact on employees' work attitudes, commitment, and job satisfaction. Hence, the guiding question for this study was, *'How could motivation be used as a strategy to enhance teacher performance and wellness in post-COVID-19 rural South African schools?'*

## 2. Literature Review

In the current study, motivation and job satisfaction were used interchangeably as they are interwoven. Motivation is employed by employers to the humanisation of the working conditions for employees in the organisation (Zhang & Liu, 2019; Marongwe et al., 2020). As a result, even though several scholars have supplied their own distinct but somewhat comparable definitions, there is still no agreement on what motivation and job satisfaction are (Koebel et al., 2021). Motivation has been described as the teacher's will to teach, whereas job satisfaction is defined as the pleasant or positive emotional response obtained by evaluating one's work experience (Wang et al., 2020).

According to Pepe et al. (2021), motivation can be defined as the degree to which an employee likes or dislikes their job. Pepe et al. (2021) expanded their definition of job satisfaction to include an employee's attitude and aspects of passion for work. Among the aspects that can affect teacher motivation and job satisfaction are development (Lee & Bruvold, 2003), work improvement, the availability of teaching and learning materials, teamwork, appreciation, communication, colleagues, benefits, working environment, and safety. It is important to understand that these and many other factors influence how teachers view and commit to their work.

According to Wang et al. (2020), senior secondary school teachers play an essential part in the delivery of education, the creation of knowledge, the enrichment of national culture, and the deployment of the most effective educational skills and strategies, and thus need to be highly motivated to perform at their work. Teachers must be additionally able and creative, but also dedicated and well-rounded to achieve these goals (Leow et al., 2020).

Authors such as Koebel et al. (2021) have well documented that teachers are still confronting issues such as a lack of job security, low motivation, a lack of gratitude from leaders, poor leadership, poor working interpersonal interactions in the workplace, substandard workplace conditions and job execution, a lack of sense of self, and a lack of personal development. According to the mentioned authors, teachers' job satisfaction is generally dependent on the quality of people they work with, wage structure, nature of the profession, respectful treatment, a balance between personal and professional learning and growth, long-term career opportunities, and flexible working. Wang et al. (2020) believe that educational leaders' decision-making style, self-determination, transparency about roles, participatory decision-making, incentives (Bairagi & 2019), communication, and connection with peers all contribute to employee motivation and job satisfaction.

Increased workload and stress cause teacher demotivation and lower performance levels (Tortella et al., 2021). Teachers, particularly those in rural areas, suffered the most because they had to expend extra effort to design and deliver online lessons, manage virtual classrooms, provide technical support to students, and assess their work remotely, a practice about which many had little knowledge, skills, or experience (Dastgheib et al., 2022). Teachers were stressed

and exhausted because of the increasing workload demand and pressure to learn new digital technologies, and this compromised teachers' confidence, motivation, and performance.

Teachers faced emotional issues as they handled the uncertainties and fears related to the pandemic (Fragkaki et al., 2022). Concerns about personal health loved ones' health, and job stability added to their stress levels, potentially hurting motivation and performance in the classroom. Furthermore, the psychological stress induced by extremely severe lockdown restrictions transformed teachers' usual social lives into house arrest captivity. The era of lockdown due to COVID-19 is thought to be the worst period in educational history when teachers endured the most horrible working conditions (Kush et al., 2021). It should be mentioned that the impact of emotionally traumatised stress on teachers may take years for some to heal and return to their original motivation and performance levels.

Traditional professional development paths, such as conferences and workshops, were affected by the epidemic (ZappalaPiemme et al., 2023). In this regard, all district education offices were forced to close for a period, and even when they reopened, they were unable to provide all the essential logistics for the organisation of teacher development workshops that would be appropriate at the time. Teachers' motivation to improve their skills and keep up with the current teaching approaches may have been hampered by limited access to such chances.

Tortella et al. (2021) state that support and recognition from school administration, colleagues, and parents can have an impact on teacher morale. During the pandemic, support and recognition systems for teachers differed across educational institutions, which may have influenced their motivation and performance differently (Fragkaki et al., 2022; Asaari et al. (2019). Most of the effort was concentrated on health issues and the delivery of medical logistics to combat COVID-19, but instructors did not receive the support and recognition they deserved in a normal classroom atmosphere. In some African countries, such as Uganda, schools were closed for two years and instructors were not paid during that time (Fragkaki et al., 2022). Most teachers in South Africa, where unemployment is high, use their meagre earnings to assist their personal and extended families (Poli et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic wave is gone but it is the authors' view that it created and left another wave that exerted pressure on the mental wellness or psychological well-being of teachers (Leal-Filho et al., 2021) among other employees. Globally, teaching has been perceived as one of the most demanding and stressful professions. A study that was conducted by the University of Missouri (MU) in Walker (2018) indicated that most people were aware that most teachers were feeling a high level of stress but were still underestimating the magnitude of the problem (Kasprzak & Mudło-Głagolska, 2022). Statistics on teacher stress released by The Graide Network (2020) reported that, when describing stress in their own words, 61% of educators said that their work was always or often stressful and over 50% said that they did not have the same enthusiasm as when they started teaching. Another survey that was carried out in 2017 revealed that 58% of educators characterised their mental health as "not good". These figures are scary because they are very high and now even higher following the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence the justification for the study focuses on how motivation could be used as a strategy to develop teachers' wellness for them to perform effectively at work in some rural secondary schools of Amathole East Education District of South Africa.

Given the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe, recent research has found that the stress levels of teachers have increased because the epidemic forced thousands of schools to close indefinitely and the very sudden shift to distance learning has placed an unprecedented type of stress on teachers to quickly adapt their curricula to an online format that is accessible for all learners (Dayagbil et al., 2021; Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2023). This exerted more work demands than before using a mode that demanded technological skills (Litwińczuk et al., 2023), developing content that was fit for purpose, etc. Barker et al. (2021) and Gómez-Domínguez et al. (2023) agree that teachers had to adjust their teaching and assessment styles, working from home and now back to working full time in schools again. This occupational stress to a great extent affects the wellness

of teachers and impacts negatively on their work attitudes and job performance (Aktan et al., 2021; Olsen, 2017).

It's worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented obstacles for educators, especially in some rural parts of South Africa. Specific techniques and interventions may have arisen in reaction to the pandemic, but very few studies have the most recent information on *Motivation Strategies for Enhancing Teacher Performance and Wellness in Post-COVID-19 Rural South African Schools*. Many studies on teacher motivation before and after the COVID-19 pandemic relate to wealthy places in South Africa and countries in Europe, the United States of America, China, etc. Against this background, the purpose of the study was to explore how motivation could be used as a strategy to enhance teacher performance and wellness post-COVID-19.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the two-factor theory propounded by Frederick Herzberg (Herzberg, 1966). The theory is also referred to as Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory and dual-factor theory. In this theory, Herzberg argues that in a workplace, on the one hand, certain factors give job satisfaction and, on the other hand, are factors that cause dissatisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). The theory places importance on motivating employees to increase job enrichment and satisfaction. His perception is that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are independent and affected by totally different factors. The factors are categorised into two groups known as hygiene and motivational factors (Herzberg, 1966; Shujahat et al., 2018). Herzberg argues that job satisfaction is heightened by motivation factors while job dissatisfaction is reduced by the presence of hygiene factors (Nickerson, 2023; Gawel, 1996). Herzberg's perception is that employees can be satisfied with certain aspects of their jobs and be dissatisfied with other elements of the job.

Herzberg's theory was deemed suitable for this study because it addresses both the satisfiers and dissatisfiers that are normally experienced by workers in different workplaces. The purpose of the study was to explore how motivation could be used as a strategy to boost secondary teachers' work performance and their psychological well-being. The researchers are aware of some of the criticisms levelled against Herzberg's theory, such as a methodological flaw that this study is not going to focus on. Despite such criticism, this theory advocates for the employer to focus on both satisfiers and dissatisfiers, especially post-COVID-19. For instance, the employer can pay attention to the nature of the work such as creating opportunities for gaining status, assuming responsibility and workplace environments such as policies, procedures, working conditions, and supervision to intensify motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959; Shujahat et al., 2018). As alluded to earlier on, the theory places importance on motivating employees to increase job enrichment and satisfaction which speaks to what this present study seeks to explore, and hence the theory was considered fit for the study. The theory was used to present and discuss the findings of the study.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

The study employed an interpretive paradigm that aimed to understand the participants' experiences of the world regarding the phenomenon under study (Cohen et al., 2011). Furthermore, a qualitative case study design was utilised to explore how motivation could be used as a strategy to enhance teacher performance and wellness post-COVID-19 pandemic in rural South African schools. research was used for this investigation. Harrison et al. (2020) note that qualitative research is used to understand the meaning that individuals or groups give to a social or human situation ascribed to their actions based on lived experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The phenomenon of motivation under study is a sensitive issue that can best be addressed by a qualitative approach. The phenomenon deals with feelings, emotions, attitudes, anxiety, etc., that can be captured by the qualitative research approach helping researchers gain an insight into the reality of how teachers feel about motivation as a tool that could be used to boost their morale post-COVID-19. Concerning the use of a case study design, Cohen et al. (2011) and Gustafsson

(2017) state that a case study design is an intensive study aiming to depict the reality or real-life context of a group of people, a person, an event, unit, etc., and the findings are confined to that specific group or person(s) used in the study. However, the findings can be transferred to a similar event, person, or context under certain circumstances.

#### **4.2. Participant Selection**

The study's sample was chosen from all 35 public high schools in Circuit B of Amathole East District in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. To identify the high schools and participants for the study, a purposeful sampling technique was used. Three high schools were purposefully chosen based on their previous performance in the Grade 12 final year examination, size, and student and staff population. The three high schools chosen were similar regarding the socioeconomic environment, and their educational achievements did not differ significantly. Purposive sampling was then utilised to pick three teachers per school, six staff members from the school's management teams (SMTs) per school, and one departmental official who had rich information relevant to the study (Cohen et al., 2011, Rule & John, 2017). A total of 28 participants were used in the study. This figure was chosen because a case study needs to have a small figure that is manageable to produce quality findings and the sample size of that nature suits a qualitative study. Paton (2002) argues that in qualitative research, researchers can use single cases of N=1 (only one participant). Also, Creswell (2011) and Leedy and Ormrod (2005), suggest the use of 5-25 cases, which have direct experience of the phenomenon under study. Slavin (1984, p.104) states, "A carefully done study is better than a large, sloppy one".

#### **4.3. Data Gathering Instruments**

One-on-one individual interviews with teachers and a departmental official and focus group discussions with SMTs were administered to help in finding first-hand information from the participants. One-on-one interviews and group discussions were utilised to complement each other and for crystallisation purposes. Appointments were made with all the participants and teacher participants were interviewed during lunchtime and others after the participants' official working hours. This was done as a measure to avoid disturbing tuition time. The researchers requested for a private space (an office for the duration of the interview period) from each school to interview the teachers. The interviews lasted approximately between 30 and 40 minutes because of the probing that was done to get under the skin as suggested by Mncube (2012). The interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure that the researchers were able to remember exactly what was said by the participants. The departmental official was interviewed in his office after having followed the same procedure of making an appointment as with the teachers.

Focus group discussions were organised for the SMTs. The SMTs were comprised of six staff members per school which included the principal, deputy principal, two heads of department, a senior teacher, and one School Governing Board (SGB) member. The group discussions were held in the principals' offices on dates and times that were indicated to the researchers by the principals. It was not easy to organise times for discussions for SMTs because of the principals' tight work schedules.

#### **4.4. Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used for evaluating data for the current study. According to Patel and Patel (2019), analysis of data is the process of examining, cleansing, manipulating, and modelling data to identify usable information, informing conclusions, and assist decision-making. This strategy was utilised by the researchers to analyse data from one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions.

#### 4.5. Ethical Considerations

Permission to carry out the study was sought from all three schools that participated in the study and the participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy because of the sensitivity of the phenomenon under study of motivation, wellness, and work performance. Hence the use of codes for schools and participants was necessary. Consent forms were completed after the researchers had explained to the participants what the study entailed.

#### 4.6. Data Trustworthiness

A pilot study was carried out to test the methodologies and gather information before the main study to improve the study's quality (Light et al., 1990) and pilot studies are worth the time and effort as they point to areas that might need explanation. The running of the pilot study revealed that the number of participants was too large because participants' responses were similar data saturation was reached. To get rich information we reduced the number of participants from 43 to 28 to avoid redundancy. We also, re-structured some of the questions that were attracting repetition and the number of questions was reduced to avoid exceeding 1 hour when interviewing the participants. Thick descriptions were used to interpret data ensuring accuracy for purposes of data credibility. Furthermore, credibility was achieved by doing member checking where we asked the participants to verify their responses and interpretations given for them to confirm the statements.

### 5. Findings

The findings that emerged from the analysed data generated are presented in this section. In response to the key question that was solicited to explore how motivation could be used as a strategy to improve teacher performance and wellness post-COVID-19 in selected secondary schools in South Africa, several themes surfaced, such as recognition for good performance, career development improvement, counselling, support in the form of community of practice, capacitation and skills training in information and communication technologies.

#### 5.1. Recognition for Good Performance

Findings from the analyses of the data gathered from the teachers and SMT participants contradicted that recognition for good performance is still lacking, especially post-COVID-19, given the economic hardships caused by the pandemic. The teachers and the SMTs did not agree on some claims raised by teachers that SMTs were biased toward other teachers who were seen as more important or equal than others. Other views showed that there were no rewards in the form of bonuses or salary adjustments, or if a reward was there it was marked with favouritism.

The following excerpts show the teachers' views from three different schools that participated in the study (only a few highlights are captured). Participant 1, a teacher at High School A stated:

The challenge is that I feel demotivated and do not know how to rekindle my enthusiasm to perform excellently after the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers work very hard but there is little or no recognition for good performance in the form of a reward such as a salary increment, bonus, job promotion, awards, etc., that serve as good alternatives to motivate me to perform better and better.

Also, Participant 3, a teacher at High School C, mourned the unfair practices she felt were exercised by the school leadership despite working too much. She had this to say with sadness on her face:

The job is too much yet the leadership carries out favoritism when it comes to recognising individual contributions. Recognition for good performance especially before COVID-19 though now schools complain that they do not have resources but are and is always reserved for those teachers who teach Grade 12 learners. We cannot all teach Grade 12 at the same time, but it is possible for us all to be recognised in other grades, this demotivates us.

Similarly, Participant 2, a teacher at High School B, raised a complaint and mentioned that:

Because of how they retain certain teachers on post level one, temporary posts, and School Governing Bodies' arranged posts that pay less with little or no bonuses and allowances that are only reserved for a few permanent staff members, How am I expected to perform well when I cannot afford basic goods given the high cost of living, we are experiencing after the COVID-19 pandemic?.

From the above extracts, it can be depicted that teachers are not happy, and this affects their morale and is likely to harm their work. These issues form part of hygiene factors that act as dissatisfiers as per Herzberg's two-factor theory adopted by the study. All three excerpts have an element of disgruntlement because of too much work but not being recognised, favouritism, and being kept in posts that do not enable teachers to get benefits. Similar responses were shared by other teacher participants.

Contrary to the above views expressed by the teacher participants, the SMTs contradicted those views during the focus group discussions. The SMTs acknowledged the challenges associated with keeping the teachers' morale ignited but alluded to the fact that excelling teachers were recognised, COVID-19 or no COVID-19. The below excerpts represent the views of some SMT members and surprisingly most of the views shared were similar as if the groups had had a session before holding discussions with the researchers. A principal from SMT Focus Group B at School B (with emphasis in his voice) thus expressed:

As managers, we always think of how to motivate our teachers. Good performance should be recognised. Yes, we have challenges of resources that have been exacerbated by COVID-19 though we are off the hook now, but the effects are lingering with us. Some forms of recognition are guided by policy at this school and rewards such as promotions, bonuses, etc., are not decided at the school level.

Concurring, though slightly different from the above extract, a participant from SMT Focus Group A at School A indicated:

The truth is that schools do not have enough resources and funding to provide financial awards and recognition to all teachers. In as much as we would like to do that it's not sustainable given the economic challenges we are facing as a school. Besides financial rewards, teachers are always complimented for their good performance.

Of all the three SMT Focus Groups, it was only Focus Group A that said openly that schools were struggling to have resources that could be channelled toward rewarding teachers for their good performance. It can be gleaned that recognition for good performance at the school level as indicated by teacher participants is minimal or not done at all. Views shared by Focus Group A also show that schools need to strategise sustainable ways of recognising good performance.

It is noteworthy that Focus Group C at school C shared the same sentiments as expressed by the other two focus groups but went further to talk about the process of rewarding teachers for good performance. The group also dismissed the issue of bias and favouritism as a myth that is meant to jeopardise and tarnish the image of the school leadership. A participant from Focus Group C said:

The process of recognition for good performance is handled by a selection committee that works closely with SMT. The committee's decision is independent and not influenced by SMT but by policies and the availability of resources.

Another participant from the same focus group added:

There is no bias or favour only that teachers who teach Grade 12s are the face of the school and their morale needs to be boosted for us to get good results. Favouritism is an unfounded myth that needs to be dismissed, our practices are fair.

From the analyses of all the views expressed from interviews and focus group discussions, it can be inferred that teachers are not happy that they are not recognised, and where recognition is done it is not done fairly.

## 5.2. Career Development Improvement

Participants were satisfied with career development opportunities for teachers. The responses given by the Department of Education official responsible for the staff development of teachers concurred with the responses that were given by the teachers and SMT participants. The official indicated that the department was allocating funds that were meant for skills development which they regarded as a strategy to motivate teachers. The teachers who participated in the study also confirmed that they were involved in different workshops and were supported to attend even short training courses or further their studies as long it was in line with their job description.

Participant Education Development Officer thus explained:

The Department of Education offers many professional development programs and bursaries to teachers who want to progress their academic careers to master's and doctorate levels, although few teachers seem to take advantage of such chances.

The verbatim quotation above shows that the Department of Education (DoE) had financial resources to fund the studies of teachers. However, the Participant indicated that only a few teachers were interested in pursuing their studies. The Participant Education Development Officer further revealed:

Teacher development programs are determined by how a particular school principal identifies the content gap and other skills teachers may require in his/her school. As a department, we are also planning to have developmental programmes that accommodate old teachers in the system for them to be very well conversant with the use of technology to ensure that if pandemics such as COVID-19 break up again, all our teachers will be ready to have the necessary skills despite age.

In the above extract, the Participant Education Development Officer indicated that the principal of the school was also key in ensuring that teachers were motivated to advance their studies. The participant further highlighted that in the current system, a career development plan exists even though they feel it does not make provision for the old teachers who are accustomed to the old system in which there was no career development plan. It is also evident from the extract that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had taught people to prepare for the future and not to be caught up again in situations where some teachers would not be ready because of issues of age.

Data gathered through focus group discussions corroborated data that were solicited through interviews from the departmental official. A participant from SMT Focus Group A at school A participant who was a holder of a master's degree in education and had 18 years of work experience in education thus said:

The Department of Education needs to be applauded for the significant strides it has taken to support teachers to further studies before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I am a product of that. Professional development facilitates a teacher to remain up-to-date and to grow as a teacher in the teaching field.

Concurring, a participant from the SMT Focus Group C at school C added:

The District Education Office organises teacher profession workshops, and schools' subject moderations where education experts come to provide expert knowledge to sharpen teachers' skills.

The teachers who participated in the study also confirmed the views that were shared by the departmental officials and the SMTs regarding supporting teachers to further their studies and to engage them in workshops and other short training courses. Teacher Participant 2, from School B, expressed that: In line with the views shared above by Participant 2, Teacher Participant 3 from School A said:

In my opinion, professional development is resourceful, especially for new teachers who may still want to gain experience in the teaching field. We are provided with the opportunities to continue upgrading ourselves but sometimes as teachers, we feel so comfortable or too busy that we don't see the need for us to keep studying. I know that the DoE needs educators to have masters and PhDs.

It is evident as told by all participants that they have access to professional development programs organised by the DoE. Furthermore, knowledge received from the workshops prepares



teachers for existing and unforeseen challenges in the execution of their work. It can further be depicted that the DoE does support teachers to continue studying though some educators are reluctant to grab the opportunity. It was also clear that staff development motivates teachers to perform their duties with ease and this speaks directly to what Herzberg's two-factor theory advocates.

### 5.3. Teachers' Psychological Wellness

The data analysed from the interviews and focus group discussions concurred that teachers' psychological well-being deteriorated during COVID-19 and that the effects are still being felt. The teachers' well-being contributes either positively or negatively towards work attitudes and job satisfaction. The study participants highlighted that the promotion of the psychological wellness of teachers benefits both the employer and the employee. Participants further revealed that support in the form of counselling, support groups, empathy, etc., is needed post-COVID-19 to ease the teachers' tension, anxiety, stress, feelings of loss, fear, etc. as reflected below.

Teacher Participant 3 from school A had this to say:

I wish our school management could find ways of reducing the effects COVID-19 had on us. Very few leaders can read that mentally we are not sound. It is like another wave that is attacking us. A sound mind gives birth to a sound work performance. We are not just right mentally because of loss and grief and now floods are hitting us too and there is a lot of pressure at work.

In line with the above excerpt, Teacher Participant 1 from school B expressed the pains and sufferings that were weighing down her mental well-being and how it was affecting her work performance. She thus said:

"I still need to heal from the trauma I experienced when I lost more than five beloved family members due to COVID-19. I come to work but I am not myself. The memories are still fresh as if it happened yesterday. The SMT should pay attention and support us to overcome and distress. Collegiality and counselling services are needed as well as teamwork and stop working in silos but sharing the burdens and even the huge workload we are having."

Additionally, Teacher Participant 2 from School C reiterated the issue of the declining psychological well-being of teachers because of COVID-19 but went further to highlight problematic learners as another source contributing to the stress levels of the teaching workforce. He had this to say:

The school should devise ways of keeping staff motivated because our learners are so stressing us, that we are not a happy workforce. We fear COVID-19, we fear floods, we fear war and now we fear our learners. This creates anxiety and uncertainty and hampers how we execute our duties as teachers. Unfortunately, some of our principals lack the skill of dealing and relating with employees. It needs a principal with a clear vision and mission and to lead by example. Visionary leadership is key.

It can be noted that teachers are not happy because of different factors and that some principals do not have good relational skills to deal with teachers. This depicts a lack of emotional intelligence skills that managers are expected to possess for the institution to prosper.

Data gathered from SMTs through focus group discussions corroborated the revelations above submitted by teachers who participated in the study. The SMTs acknowledged that the teachers' morale and attitudes are no longer the same as before. They pointed out that some staff members were tense, easily angered, losing tempers, emotionally unstable, reserved, etc. Through probing, the SMTs indicated a strong need for them to find ways of reinvigorating staff wellness.

In the Focus Group of School B, one of the participants indicated this:

It is a fact that some of us are psychologically unhealthy because of many factors, and this affects the day-to-day running of school activities. As management, we need to restore the psychological wellness of our teachers by showing compassion, understanding, and listening to their challenges, and providing support.

It is also noteworthy that an SGB member from the same focus group above supported the idea. He thus highlighted, "When people go through horrific experiences and challenges, the managers should find ways of building a positive attitude in employees. Motivation is one of them."

It can be concluded from the SGB member who is part of the SMT at school B that today's workforce is faced with challenges that stress them and motivation should be used to rebuild a positive work attitude. Maintenance of a positive attitude instills a spirit of enjoying the job. Similarly, a deputy principal who was also one of the SMT Focus Group members from school A mentioned how a sick workforce could cost the department because two teachers would be paid against one post. It was highlighted that:

Stress can cause teachers to be sick and they will apply for sick leave. The department will substitute the teacher and pay two people against one post. The learners will end up changing teachers from one to the other and are likely not to perform well. Teachers' health should be our priority as leadership.

From the above excerpt, it can be deduced that the school leadership is aware of the financial implications the department will incur if teachers' health or wellness is ignored. Learners will also be affected in that their academic performance may be compromised. It is important to mention that data gathered in focus group discussions confirmed data that were gathered through interviews. The focus is now on discussing the findings that emerged from the analysis of data that was done above.

## 6. Discussion

This section presents the discussion that emanated from the findings on motivation as a strategy for improving teacher performance post-COVID-19 in selected rural secondary schools in South Africa. The investigation found that high school teachers were somewhat content with their employment, but much more must be done to reinforce their motivation and job satisfaction following COVID-19. Job security, working environment, leadership and support, compensation, promotion, job recognition, and teachers' psychological wellness are all important considerations. It must be realised that, as stated below, recognising exceptional job performance, retention of existing employees, good working conditions, encouraging a healthy workforce, and many other elements can be used to foster hard work, employee motivation, and job satisfaction.

It emerged from the findings of the study that teachers need to be recognised for good performance and for working hard. Recognition for good performance is a booster of motivation. It also inspires other teachers to work hard until it becomes a norm or culture of a particular school to work hard. A good pay system fosters remuneration and innovation (Bairagi & 2019). Teachers and other employees may be motivated to enhance their work efficiency if they are certain that their extra effort will be compensated monetarily. This finding is in line with Herzberg's two-factor theory that guided the study. Herzberg believes that a good salary is seen as a hygiene factor. If the employer pays attention to it this can make employees work harder and stay longer in the service and/or in an organisation or school. The finding is further in line with Asaari et al.'s (2019) views that recognition of employees for outstanding performance acts as a very good way of motivating employees. Recognition is a way of giving employees feedback and thanking them for achieving well and can be done in the form of celebrations, giving them vouchers, promoting them, salary rises, or any other benefits as established by Asaari et al. (2019). Given the economic paralysis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers would welcome this as a good move that would motivate them to go the extra mile.

It also emanated from the findings of the study that leadership that leads by example, is committed to supporting staff, has a clear vision and mission, has a high emotional intelligence, and is flexible motivates teachers to improve their work performance and wellness. This finding implies that such behaviour by the school managers draws teachers closer to them, instills a spirit of commitment and loyalty, and energises them to give their best to fulfill the vision and mission of the school. The teachers who took part in the study recognised the importance of the vision

statement and its function in encouraging them to attain high performance. This will positively challenge teachers to improve their performance, settling their psychological well-being and their work attitude. The finding is supported by Pepe et al. (2021) who found that such behaviour contributes to factors that measure how teachers perceive and are dedicated to their work. It is considered a motivating factor that school managers can use as a strategy to get things done without compelling teachers. This increases job satisfaction and hence principals should possess high levels of emotional intelligence skills.

It emerged from the findings of the study that in today's world career development and education advancement could be used as a strategy to motivate teachers to improve their work performance and wellness. It further stemmed from the study that schools that push their teachers to attend developmental workshops and further their studies have a chance for the schools to thrive. The teachers will be more skilled and knowledgeable and become experts in their fields. The teachers in the study indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, most teachers did not know how to conduct online classes and they were briefly trained, and this increased their morale and confidence. This finding is in line with Litwińczuk et al. (2023) who established that a properly trained workforce in new technologies is more productive, adopts changes, and is less stressful. This finding implies that staff development workshops and advancing their education are a good recipe for raising the teachers' motivation, confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, and competence and reducing anxiety and stress. It is supported by the views raised by Asaari et al. (2019) that when the employer invests in upskilling, upgrading, and training staff and exposing them to new knowledge and skills this motivates the workforce because they would feel motivated. Lee and Bruvold (2003) state that employees will feel motivated as it would be sending a signal from the employer that they value them and are committed to their growth and development as employees.

It is important to remember that being satisfied with work enhances motivation and may increase the employee performance level. According to the present study, anytime employees believe there is a chance for progress at work promotions must be made on time and following a clear and transparent policy. This finding concurs with the views of Asaari et al. (2019) and Lee and Bruvold (2003) that career development training sessions should be mandatory, and educational leadership should grant scholarships, study leave, and loans to teachers. Another significant part of teacher motivation and job satisfaction in all educational institutions is peer interaction. As the English proverb goes, "Work without play makes John a dull boy." This proverb observes the importance of taking a break from work for a moment of recreation and family. It is vital to hold social gatherings for all employees to engage in recreational activities. Participating in non-work-related activities such as weekend trips, picnics, sports and games, cultural activities, and contests boosts teachers' motivation and job satisfaction.

It stemmed from the study findings that teachers' psychological well-being declined during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and that the aftermath is still taking a toll on them. The study participants indicated that it takes a school management that has a high emotional intelligence level to undo or reduce the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' well-being and work attitudes. The study revealed that teachers' well-being, if not taken care of, generally leads to burnout that will impact negatively on the learning environment (Kasprzak & Mudło-Głagolska, 2022). This finding is consistent with the views of Olsen (2017) that teachers' psychological well-being was not only important for the professional impact teachers were having in the learning and teaching environment, but also for the wellness of learners too. This implies that the SMTs should help the teachers live a balanced life where they are supported to handle the challenges of life and work-related issues. Seppälä and Cameron (2015) opined that the psychological well-being of employees emanates from a positive culture. It can be inferred that a positive workplace nurtures and enhances positive emotions, wellness, and work attitude subsequently increasing teachers' abilities, potentialities, and creativity in the classroom (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). This can be used as a strategy for teachers to regain and reignite their motivation to improve on their wellness.

One of the findings that emanated from the study that could motivate teachers to improve their psychological wellness was to have a community of practice groups and to receive counselling timeously. There was a proposal from the participants that sometimes the workload becomes huge, and some topics are difficult to tackle by one person, and that creates anxiety, fear, and a feeling of incompetency. Teachers' suggestion from this finding is that there should be social interactions in the form of groups (community of practice) where teachers share ideas, and help each other to solve problems to do with teaching and learning as well as personal and professional related issues. This confirms what was established by Marongwe and Chisango (2022) that community of practice groups helped employees during the COVID-19 pandemic and that should be encouraged post-COVID-19. In support of that finding, Seppälä and Cameron (2015) indicate that various empirical studies acknowledge that positive social connections at work produce highly desirable results and reduce stress and that employers should be compassionate towards employees. The finding is further supported by Leal-Filho et al. (2021) who argue that it is the nature of human species to interact and form relationships. Leal-Filho et al. (2021) carried out a study on the impact of COVID-19 on academic staff and students at universities and found that they were affected psychologically and emotionally because of a lack of personal interactions with colleagues.

## **7. Implications**

A study on "Motivation Strategies for Enhancing Teacher Performance and Wellness in Post-COVID-19 Rural South African Schools" is of great importance, as it addresses critical issues related to education in a specific context. The primary implication of implementing effective motivation strategies for teachers is the potential for improved educational outcomes. Motivated teachers are more likely to engage students and provide high-quality instruction, ultimately leading to better student performance. Rural schools in South Africa often face challenges in retaining teachers due to various factors. Motivation strategies can help reduce teacher turnover rates, ensuring continuity in the educational process and providing students with consistent role models and mentors. This study will also assist in dealing with teachers' wellness and long-term commitment to the profession. This study could lead to the development of wellness programs and support systems for teachers, helping them cope with stress and mental health issues brought about or exacerbated by the pandemic. Rural South African schools often serve as the heart of the community. By enhancing teacher performance and wellness, these schools can become even more significant community assets, leading to greater community engagement and support. The study might highlight the need for resource allocation, both in terms of professional development and infrastructure, in rural schools. This can lead to more targeted investments and policy changes to address the unique challenges faced by these schools. The findings of the study could have implications for education policies in South Africa. It might lead to the development of policies that support and incentivize teacher motivation and wellness in rural areas. Last but not least, while the study focuses on rural South African schools, its findings may have relevance and applicability in other rural and underprivileged settings globally, as many regions face similar challenges in education and teacher motivation.

## **8. Limitations and Recommendations**

The present study employed a case study design. Thus, the sample size was limited to only three schools in Amathole in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The findings of this study are confined to the schools that participated in the study. However, schools that have a similar context can also use the findings to help teachers improve their work performance and wellness. It is recommended that a similar study should be carried out on a larger scale for generalisations of results. The study recommends the recognition and appreciation of teachers to boost their motivation and job satisfaction. Clear policies on a reward system should be drawn up and adhered to. Furthermore, based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that the school

principals undertake an Emotional Intelligence training course that will enhance their skills of relating well with employees. Teachers are still grappling with the effects of COVID-19 and that harms their wellness; therefore, counselling services should be put in place for teachers. The paper further recommends forming a community of practice groups by teachers for them to get support from their peers.

## 9. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a lot of gaps in teachers' motivation and job performance, even though individual teachers' experiences and impacts may vary due to differences in contexts, resources, and support systems. Motivation is linked to job satisfaction, good performance, creative thinking, competition, and a love of one's profession. To improve teacher performance and psychological well-being in high schools, motivation should be used as a strategy to get the work done by teachers. Furthermore, a community of practice groups should be formed in secondary schools for teachers to share experiences and to help each other. The paper concludes that motivation can be used as a strategy to enhance teacher performance and wellness in post-COVID-19 rural South African schools.

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