Teachers' Motivation in Maldives – Influenced by Cultural Aspects

Abdul Raheem Hasan, Lex McDonald, and Anne Hynds

Abstract

Internationally the demand for effective teachers has grown, because effective teachers strongly influence student outcomes. This largely depends on the levels of teachers' motivation to carry out the tasks associated with teaching. Hence, the sources of teachers' motivation are under continuous scrutiny as the sustenance of motivation at a high level is imperative.

The research reported here explored stakeholders' perceptions of the motivational influences for successful indigenous teachers to stay on in Maldives, a small island state in the Indian Ocean. This case study employed qualitative methods of interviewing, focus-group meetings and questionnaires to collect data from school principals, leading teachers, successful teachers, parents, and students. Analysis of data via qualitative approaches indicated that the participants' perceptions of what motivated successful teachers to remain as teachers were largely influenced by cultural aspects that were contextual, inter-related, inter-dependent and multifaceted.

These findings highlight the importance of conducting habitual, specialized and localized studies to understand teachers' motivational influences. This implied the need for educational policy-makers, school managers and supervisors of teachers to understand the complexity of contextual motivational influences to maximize teachers' positive impact upon student development. The scope of this study is limited to the perceptions of natives even though a large proportion of expatriate teachers including Sri Lankans are in service. Future research could include foreign teachers' perceptions to create a wider spectrum for a fuller understanding of the motivational influences for teachers to stay in these uniquely vulnerable islands.

Keywords: culture, development, teacher-motivation, student-achievement, Maldives

Introduction

Education is a key instrument for national development (Alam, 2008). The progress of a society can be judged by its educational institutions. The majority of educational institutions are schools. Schooling contributes immensely for individual skills and human capital development (UNESCO, 2007). A school is

as good as its teachers and "at their best, they tap into the hopes and talents of young people and help them grow into productive citizens" (Ban Ki-moon, 2012).

The demand for teachers and/or for that matter the demand for quality teachers in schools has never been more prominent when the world is losing hope of achieving the second of the 8 Millennium Goals agreed and signed by 189 nations of the world in New York on the 8th of September 2000, to achieve universal primary education for all children by the year 2015. Even though the progress made in increasing primary school provisions was considerable the rate of increase has slowed down since 2004. However, the demand for more and quality teachers has never lessened due to the increase in demand for the secondary and tertiary education. Many countries including the rich, poor, developed, developing and least-developed countries suffer the consequences of a lack of teachers or at least a lack of quality teachers in schools.

Teachers instrumentally exert the strongest direct influence on student outcomes provided that they function well in schools (Hanushek, 2011). Often members of the communities complain of teachers' under-performance. Poor performance by teachers may be attributed to a number of different reasons (VSO, 2002). A lack of motivation could be one of the key causes (Davidson, 2007). Hence, the sources of teachers' motivation are under continuous scrutiny as the sustenance of motivation at a high level is imperative for schools (Ruthankoon & Ogunlana, 2003). The levels of teachers' motivation to carry out the tasks associated with teaching make a vast difference in terms of student achievements and thereby attracting other teachers, students and parents to the school (Hayden, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to carry out research on teachers' motivation to determine the factors that contribute, so that appropriate measures can be taken to enhance and sustain their enthusiasm (Hayes 2008; Zhao, 2008). The exploration of successful teachers' reasons to continue teaching will help exemplify the clues that make conditions conducive for such teachers to remain in the teaching profession. This article is based on the findings of a PhD project that explored various stakeholders' perceptions of what motivates successful teachers to remain in the small and remote islands of the Maldives. Specifically, this article looked into the 'sense of belongingness and relationship' as motivational influences within the social and cultural aspects of the findings.

Conceptual Framework

Motivation is a hard concept that is suffering from a lack of clarity and consensus not only in terms of definitions but also in understanding (Rhodes, 2006). No definition of motivation has gained universal acceptance. While

Conroy (1994, p. 50) defined motivation as 'a person's active participation and commitment to achieved the prescribed results', Robbins (1998, p.355) came up with the opinion that it is 'the willingness to exert high levels of effort towards organisational goals, conditioned by the effort's ability to satisfy some individual needs. Santrock (2004, 414) defined this as the 'processes that energize, direct and sustain behaviour'. In general terms motivation can be referred to as the forces that make someone to 'act or not act'. Hence, in this article, teachers' motivation is assumed to be the forces that energize successful teachers to join and remain in the teaching profession.

Theoretical Perspectives

Many researchers have considered why and how people get motivated. A number of them have come up with theories which were time-tested and accepted as seminal. Some of these, particularly, the hierarchy of needs theory of Maslow (1954), Hertzberg's (1959) two-factor theory, the theories of x and y of McGregor (1957, 2006), and Ouchi's (1981) theory z of motivation informed this research. Within these theoretical parameters we investigated teachers' motivation in the Maldives from a constructive stance with a qualitative lens.

Literature Review

The cause of performance or the cause of improvement in performance is thought to be dependent upon the continuous motivation of doers. 'Self-evaluation, perceived self-efficacy and self-set goals', according to Bandura and Cervone (1986), have been shown to affect the level of motivation. Subsequent to the intensified or diminished motivation, a 'complex interplay between the [doers], the group and the society in which they are placed' foster or hinder actions (Tadajewski 2006). Actions, to a large extent, are influenced or determined by the individual's attitudes and beliefs towards the action, the amount of perceived control over the move and the subjective norms or circumstances that govern/surround that behaviour (Ajzen 1991). So, 'how can people increase their motivation or that of others' to ensure they 'work more productively?' is frequently asked questions (Elkin, Jackson et al. 2004; Halepota 2005).

Research on teachers' motivation indicates that the motivational influences for teachers are dependent upon a complex array of personal, social, cultural, economic and geographical conditions that dictate the working environment (Donelson 2005; Hynds and McDonald 2010; UNESCO 2000). According to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) 'motivation is inseparable from culture' and hence, culture influences motivational practices (Crow 2009; Helou and Viitala 2007). Geographical isolation and social factors also interfere with teachers' motivational beliefs, but teacher motivation researchers do not usually consider

these factors (Klassen, Foster et al. 2010). Hence, continued research in different settings is warranted to determine what contributes to teachers motivation and enhance their inputs for better student achievements/outcomes (Schepers, De Gieter et al. 2005; Zembylas and Papanastasiou 2004).

Research Setting

This research was carried out in the small island state of Maldives located in the vastness of the Indian Ocean. The islands are small with no island longer than 8 km and only 10 larger than 2km^2 (Gischler 2006). They are low-lying with rarely any ground reaching over 2.5 metres above sea-level (Riyaz, Park et al. 2010). A population of nearly 300,000 Maldivians are scattered in 196 of approximately 1190 islands that stretches across the equator (MPND 2006). The highest concentration of population is on the nation's capital; Male' (MPND 2008). Male' is a 1.8km long island which harbours about one-third of the population (Aboobakur, Latheef et al. 2010). The majority of the islands have less than 750 people with 55 as the smallest population residing on one single island (MPND 2007). The Maldives population is predominantly Muslim and has been so for almost 900 years (Ahmed 2001). It is different both religiously and culturally from its physically closest neighbours; Sri Lanka and India (Maloney 1976).

Given the geographic conditions of Maldives, where the population is dispersed into tiny islands where most of them have too little populations to justify profitable economic activities (Muaz 2010), only a handful of people are permanently employed by another person and/or companies. The central government is the major employer (MPND 2007). Hence, job opportunities are scarce and a high demand prevails for the few jobs available. Teaching is one of the main areas in which jobs are available on most of these small islands.

Maldives has never achieved self-sufficiency in training and retaining teachers. It is heavily dependent on expatriate teachers. Severe shortages have existed ever since the introduction of English-Medium education over a half-century ago.

Teachers' Trends in Secondary Levels 2002-2012

Data: School Statistics 2012 MoE/ Male, Maldives
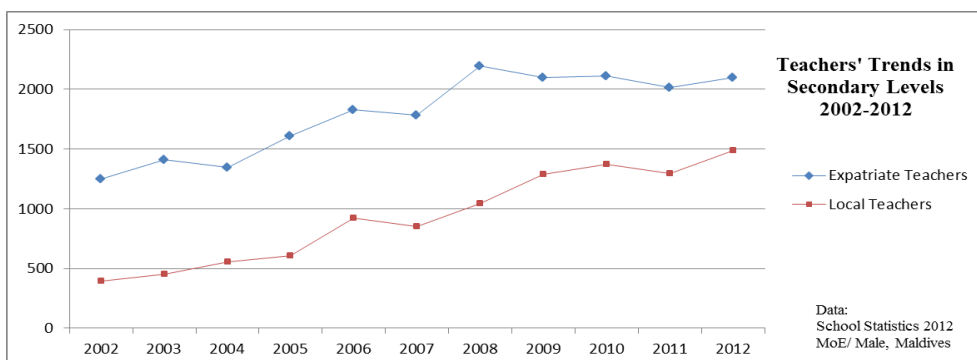
Feguer : English-Medium education over a half-century ago

The majority of expatriates helping to cater for these deficiencies are Sri Lankan and Indian teachers. Therefore, locals trained as teachers readily get employed. Hence, one may become a teacher for the sake of getting a job. That is, a teacher may not necessarily be in the teaching profession because of intrinsic motivation; the circumstances may have demanded the person to be in this profession irrespective of the level of intrinsic motivation. Motivation to perform well as a teacher may not be a priority for some of the teachers.

Methodology

As this study was on a selected group of people directly involved in educational services in Maldives it fits within Stake's (1995, 2005) descriptions of case studies. The study was conducted in four sub-cases selected from three regions across the Maldives. Many authors described case study as a qualitative method (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008, 2012; Richards and Morse 2007, 2013; Stake 2005). In case study research 'there is a commitment to qualitative techniques, to methods seeking to understand how those under study experience their world' (Richards and Morse 2013, pp. 77). One of the strengths of qualitative research design is that it often allows greater (theoretically informed) flexibilities than quantitative research designs do (Silverman 1998). Therefore, this research used qualitative methods of interviewing and focus group discussion meetings as the major forms of data collection.

Selection of Participants

The participants or the embedded cases for this case study were selected from the stakeholders in each of the four sub-cases (Stake 2006). For this purpose, education policy makers/administrators, school principals, supervisors, successful teachers, students and parents were considered to be stakeholders (Bradley and Durbin 2013).

For qualitative research there are 'no statistical grounds for guidance' to determine the number of participants but 'it tends to be small' (Miles and Huberman 1994; Punch 2005). Hence, the number of participants for this study was purpose-determined in the light of practical logistical constraints (Miles and Huberman 1984). Purposive or 'purposeful sampling' or 'judgemental sampling' techniques were employed (Babbie 2013; Coyne 1997; Patton 1990). The intention was to select participants who 'can speak from first-hand experience' and were information-rich to be able to contribute to the central issue under exploration (Creswell 2008; Patton 1990).

Policy makers from MoE and principals from three schools were selected by virtue of their positions. Supervisors (leading teachers) were selected on the recommendations of the principals. Successful teachers were recruited from a list of such teachers generated by an advisory committee meeting after deliberations for over an hour to come up with a localised definition of a successful teacher in each of the three (excluding MoE) sub-cases. Each of the three advisory committees comprised of school principals, leading teachers, members of Parent-Teacher Associations and School Boards, and students holding recognised titles like school captains or members of prefect board.

When the successful teachers were identified they were contacted to request to participate in the research. Those who agree to participate were individually requested to nominate the most appropriate students and parents based on their personal judgements. Once a few names were received from one successful teacher another teacher were also asked to nominate some. When their opinions were common such parents and students were contact to request participate. The embedded cased selected through these procedures contributed the data for this research.

Findings

Analysis of data via qualitative approaches indicated that a dynamic interplay of factors contributed to the understanding of what motivated teachers to remain in the teaching profession in the Maldives. Findings indicated that the motivation of successful teachers was perceived to be largely influenced by the cultural aspects that were contextual, inter-related, inter-dependent and multifaceted. Important dimensions of motivational influences were the sense of belonging and relationships among stakeholders. Engendering a community spirit and reviving the sense of belongingness among all in the community were found to be essential ingredients for teachers to remain on a particular island. Fostering meaningful relationships among the stakeholders was identified as an important contributor to influence teachers' motivation.

There are many things that can be done to stop them leaving. Strengthening the relationship of the community and parents with the teachers may be one.

Ali, Student

Having a good relationship with the parents is the other important thing in the parents' view. There need to be a cordial relationship among parties concerned.

Shafraaz, Leading Teacher

The cordial relationship with the parents and other stakeholders in the community was perceived to serve many purposes. It was observed to help develop a sense of belonging in to the community which consequently helps to resolve frictions among stakeholder groups easily and informally. Absence of a cordial relationship was thought to have negative consequences or hindrances for the teachers to succeed.

Why did I stick to being a teacher? Because of the family feelings that I had in [there].....So, it's an ongoing attraction ……….. a sense of belonging to that. And I think on a small island many teachers would feel like that, if they have had a good feelings about being a teacher and good feeling about what they are doing and how well they are valued.

Ameena, MoE Official

Receiving the cooperation of the management and parents and understanding how the teacher treats children and talking to teachers and sharing with teachers and having good relationship are good things. So that the problems that arises with teachers can be easily solved. That will encourage the teachers to go forward.

Shafia,Parent

When there isn't a good relationship they cannot share their thoughts with each other, so even if they are unsure of something they feel reluctant to express those concerns even in the coordination meetings due to inferiority complexions (mediocre)

Shafraaz, Leading Teacher

Due to the cultural practices and the prevalent attitudes in the community certain factors were found to serve as motivational influences to develop the desired relationships. The following is diagrammatic illustration of major influences.
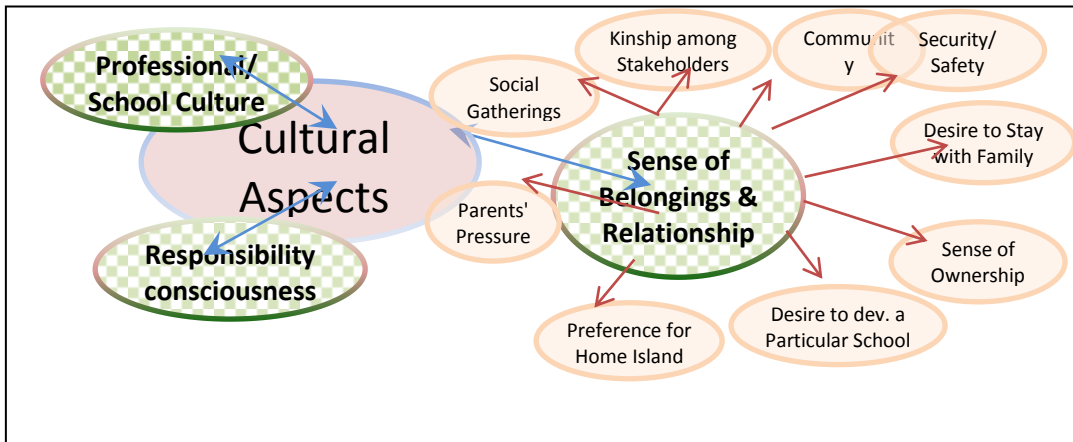
Diagrammatic Representation of Sense of Belonging and Relationship as Motivational Influences

Desire to Stay with Family

For various reasons teachers were perceived to crave to stay with their extended families. Some of them needed to stay with the family in order to secure support of the extended family while fulfilling teaching and related responsibilities in school.

In my opinion, family support is very much required for such teachers to continue their profession even after parenthood

Rifqa, Successful Teacher

Teachers survive in the school with great support from their family………. A teacher can become committed and dedicated teacher by spending a lot of time in school. ………. firstly, good teachers can only come and spend these times with the backing from home……..Good teachers do a lot of school related work at home too. For example, they prepare lesson notes and sometimes they get assistance from other members of the family in preparing worksheets and other things………. So the support of the people behind those committed teachers who spend a lot of time in school work has to be noted.

Hazlaan, a school principal

The desire for teachers to stay with their families was quite evidently expressed by some of the participants. Such desires may have resulted from parental pressure for children to return to their home island after completing their qualification.

Parents' Pressure

Since the provision of education in the country's capital, Male' was considered superior to that in other islands, families who have got the means send their children to Male' for their education. But parents often wished their children, particularly girls, to become teachers so that they can come back to jobs in their home-island.

…….and parents want their, particularly girls, to become teachers with the hope that they will stay on the island.

Ameena, MoE official

Having a reasonably well paid job on their home-island for their children was something most parents aspired. Teaching ensured a more stable income than that from fishing or any other common employment. However, some teachers argued that the pay for teachers was not appropriate for the work they do.

They maintained that a person with similar qualification in other areas could earn better than a teacher. Even the fishermen with no formal qualifications seemed to earn better than a teacher.

For example, what I'm saying is, for example, my father-in-law; he is a fisherman, and he get for a month around 15 or 14 thousand Rufiya. But for us; our profession is teaching, but we get maximum 9 thousand Rufiya, nowadays which is not worthwhile.

Salman, an Accounts Teacher in a small school

Despite the differences in opinions about the pay, it was observed that young people preferred to return to their home island upon completion of their teacher training.

Preference for Home Island

The younger generation was still observed to pay heed to the expectations of the old to return to home-island, even though many believed that this culture was diminishing. By having come to the home-island, the newly trained teachers have the opportunity to work within their extended family.

Ouh... may be working in home-island, for me, ………for me, my concern is that working with my family members here. That's the main factor.

Salman, teacher

Unless there were family grudges with other stronger families in the island the likelihood was that they build strong holdings in the job. They easily got settled back into the island's culture when they came back to their own island. This was also a way of getting the much needed approval of the community easily to succeed as a teacher.

Security and Safety

Security and safety within the island community were also noted as one of the motivational influences for teachers to stay in a school.

Security in the community is also another factor.

 Nazeem, School Head

Sticking together as one population on an island could be considered a way of ensuring their own security and safety. The island-populations managed most of their own safety and security issues in the absence of an organised police force on most of the island until recently.

The community has to provide protections for the teachers. Who will protect the teachers if the community does not? Unless they have proper security they will not be there. They might have to leave the profession. So the community can ensure the security of the teachers in a way that they feel the place as a safe one. So the teachers will feel very happy.

Faiz, School principal

So I think we have to show them that it is a safe place for those teachers to live in this school.

Nazeem, School Head

Most of the people on any given island (except on very few populous islands) were related to each other by blood or marriage. If a teacher got support or approval of a large family in the island that teacher was likely to get approval from many others. Hence, when unmarried teachers were sent to remote islands, they sometimes marry into families of the island. Often, then the family members become protective of that person, particularly if that that person achieved the blessings of the whole family. By this way they made their positions stronger in the island whereby increasing their chances to succeed in teaching. In Maldives requires the approval of the community in order to succeed in the field.

Community Reception

The community's support was observed as a strong force for teachers to remain in the profession. Teachers' decision to stay on or leave the profession was noted to be influenced by the reception they receive from the community when they were posted to various islands.

The other would be that the, what do you call this, the reception he has received from the community would have been, probably he would have liked it, the reception he received from the community, that means he is accepted as a society as a person who is, who is here and well respected.

 Ikram, MoE Official

The community reception was perceived to be highly influential on the chances of the teacher thriving on a particular island or school. Such reception is largely influenced by the relationships the teacher developed and maintained with the community.

The teachers must always remember that the teacher is a member of the community, even though he/she comes to teach in school. Therefore, he/she must not only have relationships with parents and students. They must have relationships with each and every person in the community.

 Azma, Teacher

The bond that forms among the many stakeholders with teachers within the community was found to be a binding force to remain in the island and in the school.

Kinship among Colleagues and Stakeholders

The kinship that forms within a school setup or (for that matter in the whole community due to the smallness of the islands) was noted to be a similar force for teachers to remain in school.

Teacher morale in terms of how the students are relating with you, how the parents when given the opportunities, you interact with them, how do they accept you, how do they treat you, then the gel, the kinship and the camaraderie between belonging to a school, belonging to a group of teachers, again coming from my own experience, for example last night, I called for my family for a dinner party and within that family you wouldn't be surprised there were …… teachers, because I consider them, because I have been with them for over 30 years of my life. So I mean, who else could be……

Ameena, MoE Official

When such connexions develop between teachers and all others concerned many other motivational influences emanate from them to stay on in the school. Cordial relationships among the various stakeholders provide completely new dimensions to their working environments.

If the parents, management and students have a very cordial relationship among themselves all will feel that that they are living in big world of their own and if a teacher told something to a child the parents will feel that is like been said to the parent……. So, there should be similar relationships among all the parents, management and teachers. The important thing is to have a holistic environment shared by everyone.

Fikry, Parent

To sustain interest and motivation one has to maintain the close friendliness among the colleagues. Speaking with friends sustains interest.

Abbas, Teacher/Parent

School were perceived to practise various activities to develop and sustain the feeling of kinship among the various stakeholder groups. Visiting the sick and providing emotional and material support for the needy serve were noted as some of the activities that were seen to serve as motivational influences.

When the people are actually in sorrow, we have to talk to those people and we have to give them some support, the moral support that we have to give that we are doing already. And even if somebody is sick I think it is something very important to visit them. We have a culture here always, something like, if a teacher gives a birth so we will visit and when we go visit the particular teacher we go with some gift collectively we collect from all the teachers. Those teachers will be very happy with that. So they appreciate what we are doing.

Nazeem, School Head

Nazeem also highlighted the fact that they supported through donations the expatriate teachers whose families suffered floods and other natural calamities abroad.

Social Gatherings

Social gatherings among teachers and other stakeholders were found to be strong sources of motivation for teachers. Social gatherings seemed to have

served for many purposes. They included the formations of various forums for stakeholders to appreciate, celebrate teachers work.

They can do so much to motivate the teachers. Like, appreciating their work, having a get-together, talking about the umm……things that could be improved, and those teachers who have improved, sharing their ideas among all, every month, something like that.

Shafu, Leading Teacher

According to Shafu they have get-togethers like picnics, trips, fun camps and other social gatherings for students, parents, teachers and their families. Such gatherings really help iron out discontent among all stakeholders through discussions in informal settings where everybody feels relaxed.

And another thing is that the friendliness that we are having in the school. So it should be a very friendly environment that everybody can talk and they can express their feelings in the school without any hesitations. So I think that's very very important thing to motivate the teachers. If they feel that if they say something if they suggest something so they will be penalised or something will happen, I think we have to avoid those things to motivate the teachers.

Nazeem, School Head

In such informal settings parents can talk about what were good or bad about the teachers rather than talking about teachers in town. When teachers and parents have a social bond and were friendly they could express their concerns in manners that do not offend each other.

Developing relationships among themselves. Having a teachers' social club and carrying out various programmes. They all can enhance motivation by having a mechanism of exchanging knowledge among teachers, by having a very close bond between all the people…………Unless there is a close bond when one makes a suggestion for improvement, it is likely that the other person gets angry.

Fikry, Parent

Having mechanisms to exchange knowledge and opinions among stakeholders in friendly environments through informal social gatherings were observed to serve in creating opportunities to enhance and sustain teachers' motivation.

The sense of ownership and the desire to develop a particular school were also shown to be motivational influences. When the teachers teach in schools on their home island they were observed to have a feeling that they must put in

their best efforts to bring fame to the island through academic as well as no-academic achievements by contributing with their expertise to develop the school of their choice if given the chance.

Limitations and Delimitations

The scope of this study limited this to the perceptions of the indigenous stakeholders on what motivates successful local teachers to continue in this role. But due to the high percentage of expatriate teachers, some participants tangentially touched the issue of how strongly the sense of belonging in this culture had influenced the expatriate teachers to glue-down to particular islands or schools.

Yes, we have even had expatriates, who probably stayed there because it's [this school] and they would say that if they moved elsewhere they don't necessarily want to be in the Maldives they would kind of go away. So there is something about [this school] that holds a lot of people there.

 Ameena, MoE Official

It was evident that these cultural motivational influences have impacted expatriates too. Some of the Sri Lankan teachers who joined the Maldivian teaching cadre early on after the introduction of English-Medium schooling have devoted their entire careers in Maldives and have drawn pensions when they returned home at the end of very successful teaching careers. Future research could include foreign teachers' perceptions to create a wider spectrum for a fuller understanding of the motivational influences for the teachers to stay in these uniquely vulnerable islands.

Implications

The Maldivians for a long time have lived remote isolated island situations. Until recently, these islands were very little known to the external world. They have managed their affairs by themselves internally and externally. Even now there is no organised formal police service present in all inhabited islands leaving the islanders for their own devices to manage their internal security. Togetherness was seen to give them strength and comfort in managing their affairs. This was seen to be reflected in the motivational influences to become a teacher and remain as a teacher on the islands.

When relationships and togetherness were so highly valued it can be assumed that the island communities expect the teachers to reciprocate the same towards the communities. While these communities recruit large numbers of expatriate

teachers these are important issues for expatriate teachers to bear in mind if they aimed to succeed as teachers.

Clearly the participants of this study acknowledged the importance of security for teachers who do not have their families to extend them security. They also highlighted the significance of the familial bonding that needs to be developed between and among teachers and the community. This implied that the local community upheld the value of relationships and were conscious of the importance of security for expatriates as well.

Since teacher motivation was so much embedded in the cultural and social norms of the society, efforts to motivate teachers had to be very much targeted and calculated with a special emphasis on the societal norms. The activities to enhance teachers' motivation had to be holistic rather than fragmented and ad hoc. Such activities needed to be based on empirical evidence as the society as a whole at the moment is transforming. Continuous research in various island communities had to be conducted to get enlightened about the social and cultural influences on teachers' motivation and their implications for teachers and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Motivational influences for successful teachers to remain as teachers in the remote and isolated islands are highly contextual, inter-related, inter-dependent and multifaceted. They are hugely dependent upon social and cultural aspects. Hence, they need to be continuously researched to understand what motivates teachers and the possible implications they might have on the small island communities.

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