

International School Principals' Insights and Experiences with Teacher Motivation

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Through a basic qualitative approach, this study examined the insights and experiences of elementary principals and teacher motivation. This research was completed in private international schools in Europe where the language of instruction is English. Self-determination theory was the theoretical basis for this examination of teacher motivation. Data were collected through nine interviews and one focus group with elementary principals. Evidence from this study shows that principals have a critical role in supporting and increasing teacher motivation in their schools and providing teachers with autonomy, a sense of competence, and professional and personal support to support teacher motivation. Additionally, the researcher provides specific recommendations that practicing educational leaders can implement in their schools.

Keywords: teacher motivation, elementary principals, self-determination theory, international schools, leadership

In recent years, the research community is focusing more attention on understanding how teachers can maintain high levels of motivation as professionals in their work to help students. As many studies now cite, understanding the importance and impact of increasing teachers' motivation for the hard work of teaching has been an overlooked area of educational research (Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018). The role principals play in developing and maintaining the motivation of the teachers in their schools is also becoming more of a focus in research on student learning (Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Supovitz et al., 2010). When principals develop teachers' perceptions of autonomy, competence in their work, and connectedness to their colleagues, these teachers tend to have higher levels of motivation for their work and higher levels of student performance.

This study applied the self-determination theory (SDT) to explore how elementary principals of international schools understand their role in motivating teachers in Europe to perform their work.

Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

While there is evidence of teachers' direct impact on student learning and principals' indirect impact on achievement, there is a specific need to better understand the role principals have in developing and maintaining teachers' levels of motivation (Hipp & Bredesqn, 1995; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007; Leithwood, 2005; Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018). Eyal and Roth (2011) as well as Han and Yin (2016) pointed out that while much is known about the positive effect teacher behaviors have on student learning, more research is needed to understand the effects of principal behaviors and leadership strategies on teachers' motivation and performance.

Current research on specific leadership practices that are in alignment with the self-determination theory show increased levels of teacher motivation (Yavuz, 2020). Pelletier et al. (2002) posited that when teachers are provided autonomy in their work environment, they more likely develop teaching strategies that enhance students' motivation and learning. In their work to better understand the effects of different leadership styles on teachers' motivation, the researchers noted that there is a need for more research with "a diversified sample of teachers with regard to characteristics such as age, tenure, education, school type, subject matter specialization, attendance in ongoing professional development programs, and designated roles in school" (p. 269). This statement provides a strong rationale for the need for similar research in the international school context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the insights and experiences of elementary principals of international schools in Europe on how to support and increase teachers' motivation and to provide insight into how elementary principals can create school and working environments that foster the motivation of their teachers. The specific focus of this research was to uncover the processes employed by elementary principals in international schools in Europe to improve the motivation levels of the teachers they work with regularly. A research target was on the development of autonomous motivation, also referred to as internal motivation, a critical form of motivation for educators (Deci et al., 2017). The results of this research led to a pragmatic theory of action with recommendations for practicing principals.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature in that it sought to understand methods by which school principals of international schools in Europe understand and increase teachers' motivation. This research was intended to parse out what action principals can take to

increase teachers' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—three determinants of motivation as explored by self-determination theory. How principals of international schools can work to support teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the three core elements of internal motivation as seen through self-determination theory have needed to be better understood in the research community and schools.

This research involved elementary principals working in international schools in Germany, Austria, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Switzerland.

Review of the Literature

The body of literature reviewed in this study illuminated the direct impact of teachers' self-perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness on their levels of motivation, their job performance, as well as student achievement. The analyses of the research provide clear and consistent assessments of the link between particular leadership practices that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness and teachers' motivation. The studies examined the school leadership of teachers in multiple grades, in hundreds of schools, and in different countries.

Now, more than ever, governments around the world are calling on school leaders and teachers to make reforms to how students are educated and prepared for their fast-changing futures (Guglielmi et al., 2014). These demands for change are putting even more pressure on teachers to develop new pedagogical skills and to serve students more effectively, while at the same time, in most parts of the world, levels of compensation and status remain the same. This creates an even greater need for principals to have the skills and knowledge to motivate teachers to remain committed to the difficult job of teaching children and being motivated to work hard over long periods. The evidence is clear: teachers with higher levels of motivation are more likely to meet their students' needs and to comply with the ongoing and changing demands of teaching (Han & Yin, 2016).

Understanding the importance and impact of increasing teachers' motivation for the hard work of teaching has been an overlooked area of educational research (Robinson, et al., 2008; Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018). Higher rates of teacher attrition, or teachers moving from one school to another and/or leaving the profession before retirement age, is one of the leading causes of shortages of educators in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and across Europe (Han & Yin, 2016). Research from Sutchter et al. (2016) in the United States showed there has been an 8% annual attrition rate of teachers in recent years, and more than two-thirds of teachers leaving the profession before retirement age. Reducing attrition rates by identifying means by which to increase teachers' motivation for their work is of critical importance.

According to Sutchter et al. (2016), job dissatisfaction is the primary reason given for leaving teaching. High levels of teacher burnout or exhaustion from teaching have also been documented as a critical concern for the stability of the teaching profession. The evidence for focusing on supporting teachers' levels of motivation is clear and prescient. Shepherd-Jones and Salisbury-Glennon (2018) reported that the primary reason for teachers in their study who moved schools or left the profession was the lack of autonomy in their work.

Developing higher levels of educators' motivation in their work has been an ongoing and vexing topic of concern and interest for researchers in education, psychology, and leadership for decades (Gagné, & Deci, 2005). There is ample evidence of teachers' direct impact on student learning and principals' indirect impact on achievement. However, there is a specific need to better understand the role principals have in developing and maintaining teachers' levels of motivation

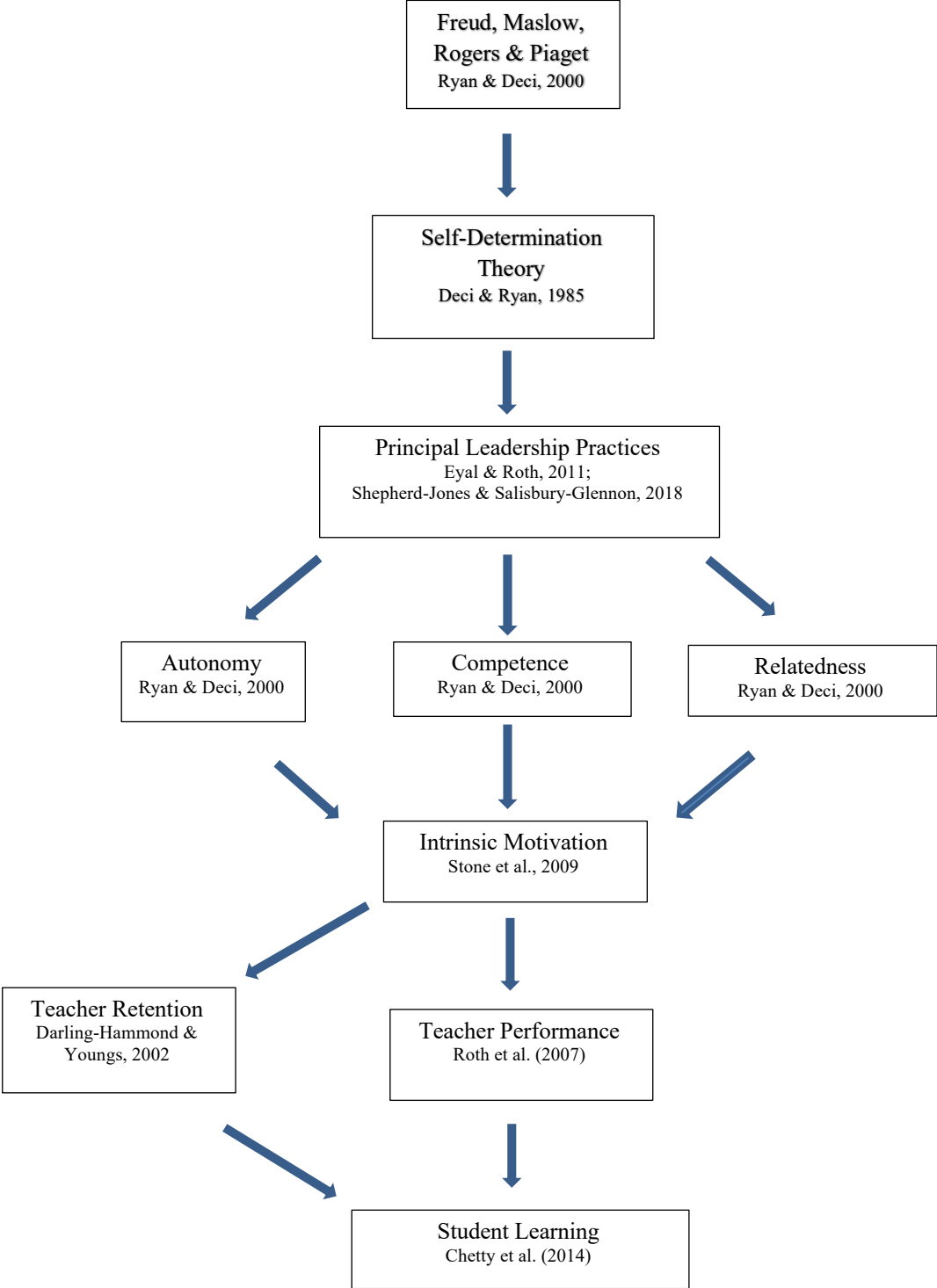
(Hipp & Bredesqn, 1995; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007; Leithwood, 2005; Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018). Eyal and Roth (2011) as well as Han and Yin (2016), pointed out that while much is known about the positive effect teacher behaviors have on student learning, it is evident more research is needed to understand the effects of principal behaviors and leadership strategies on teachers' motivation and performance.

Theoretical Framework

Much of the current research and understanding about how motivation develops in adults and children evolved from and is founded in the self-determination theory (SDT), originally posited by Deci and Ryan in 1985. Deci and Ryan's theory of human motivation evolved from the writings of psychoanalytic theorist Freud, and the humanist and developmental psychologists Maslow, Rogers, and Piaget (Deci & Ryan, 2002). There are two main components of self-determination theory that positively or negatively influence people's innate and positive drive towards psychological fulfillment, intrinsic motivation, and actualization (Eyal & Roth, 2011).

Attention and focus were directed toward understanding the role elementary principals in international schools have in shaping the levels of teacher motivation in their schools. The actions and strategies they employ are rooted in the concepts of self-determination theory. The primary importance of this study is the lens by which their work as school leaders is viewed, and how such leadership behaviors in turn influence student learning. The theoretical framework that was integral to this research is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Theoretical Framework



Research Methodology and Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to understand the insights and experiences principals at international schools in Europe have about the motivation of teachers and the practices they employ to support it:

R1: How do international school principals support teacher motivation?

R2: How do international school principals increase teacher motivation?

R3: What challenges do international school principals have with improving teacher motivation?

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study because it provided the researcher with the most powerful means to understand the insights and experiences the principals have supporting and increasing motivation of teachers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Worthington, 2013). Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) selected basic qualitative research for their research in educational structures because it provided, “a strong methodological framework for understanding multiple socially-constructed realities and the individual organizational dynamics” (p. 101). In another qualitative study, Sahin (2013) explored the ideas principals have about school improvement through extensive interviews which led to the documentation of specific strategies and the approaches the participating principals implemented. Similarly, this study sought to provide valuable insight and practical suggestions for implementation by other principals working in the field.

The data for this research was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with nine principals conducted through an online platform and a focus group of four elementary principals. All of the participants were principals from international schools in Europe.

Study Population and Sample Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select participants with five years of leadership experience from international schools in Europe, specifically, Austria, Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, and Switzerland where the language of instruction is English. The researcher identified principals of elementary schools that were fully accredited in the United States, United Kingdom, or the Council of International Schools, which offered the International Baccalaureate curriculum or a comparable curriculum framework.

Table 1 provides a graphic representation of the participating principals’ gender, nationality, years of experience as a principal, and the country in which they live and work.

Table 1

Elementary Principal Participants

Name	Male/ Female	Nationality	Years’ Experience	Country
Principal A	Female	British	6	Germany
Principal B	Female	British	5	Switzerland
Principal C	Female	American	6	Austria

Principal D	Female	Canadian	18	The Netherlands
Principal E	Female	Dutch	18	The Netherlands
Principal F	Male	British	8	Belgium
Principal G	Female	American	6	Germany
Principal H	Male	British	10	Germany
Principal I	Female	Australian	5	Germany
Principal J	Male	American	5	Germany
Principal K	Male	Australian	6	Germany
Principal L	Female	Irish	10	Germany

Results

The questions asked in the one-on-one interviews and the focus group led to a rich and varied collection of ideas, insights, and experiences from the participating principals about how they support and increase teacher motivation as well as the challenges they encounter in this aspect of their work which led to the discovery of five major themes and multiple sub-themes that directly answered the three research questions. Table 2 shows the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 2

International School Principal Themes and Sub Themes

Theme	Sub Theme
1. Autonomy	1.1 Innovation Support
2. Competence	2.1 Team Building
3. Support Teachers	3.1 Personal Level 3.2 Know Your Teachers
4. Challenges	4.1 Different Backgrounds 4.2 School as Family

The data collected for this research were provided in response to questions asked during the one-on-one interviews and questions asked during the focus group with four participants. The analysis of the responses to the interview and focus group questions led to the results.

R1: How Do International School Principals Support Teacher Motivation?

Theme 1: Autonomy

Many of the participating principals spoke at length about the need to provide teachers with a sense of agency and the autonomy to make decisions to improve their instructional practices, the curricula, their professional development, and the overall program of study.

The principals had a range and variety of responses to the interview questions on supporting teacher motivation. After an analysis of the data, the researcher found the three main approaches international school principals take to support teacher motivation in their schools are to provide teachers autonomy, develop their sense of competence, and support each teacher on a personal level.

All of the principals spoke about the positive effects of autonomy on teacher motivation. It is clear from the data that principals frequently provided the conditions in their schools for teachers to have autonomy in decision making, planning, and choosing which teaching methods and curricula are to be used. Because these principals are all working in private international schools that have few government mandates for curricula and methodologies, the teachers must be involved in this work and these decision-making processes. The benefit of having the teachers directly involved in this work is that it not only supports the school's need for curricula development, it also supports the teachers' motivation because they have the autonomy to carry out this important work.

Interestingly, many of the principals spoke of the positive effect providing teachers with autonomy had on the amount of innovation, invention of new methods, and teaching in their schools. In other words, when teachers have ownership over the decision-making processes that affect their day-to-day work, they are more inclined to think creatively and innovatively. This is a valuable benefit for the principals of these schools because they are all dependent on teachers to develop materials and ideas that would normally be provided in public or state schools. Furthermore, as leaders of private schools, which are often in competition for students, these school leaders must continually enhance their teaching and learning methods and materials to be perceived by prospective parents as innovative and highly effective.

Theme 2: Competence

The participating principals recognized the importance of teachers maintaining a sense of competence in the work they do. Additionally, professional development that led to competence was often indicated as a means to motivate teachers, especially when teachers have autonomy in the process of choosing the learning they took on.

The second means of supporting teachers was expressed by the principals as improving the perception of teachers' sense of competence. According to the interview comments and descriptive stories, when the teachers in their schools felt competent and prepared in their work, they were more motivated and confident. Principals spoke at length about the need to provide teachers with the professional development they needed to enhance not only their skills but also their sense of competence in taking on new methods of teaching or implementing new curricula.

Comments and responses to the interview and focus group questions pointed to the value of having groups or teams of teachers working together to develop new skills and knowledge. Group work had a multiplier effect because teachers' levels of motivation increased more when they shared new learning with their colleagues or worked together in professional development work.

The most prevalent means of supporting teachers' motivation was at the individual and personal level. The principals spoke emphatically and at length about the need to know the teachers they work with, both personally and professionally in authentic and caring relationships. According to the principals, it was through such relationships that teachers feel valued not only as teachers but also as people. The principals asserted that teacher motivation evolved from a sense of connectedness and feeling valued.

R2: How Do International School Principals Increase Teacher Motivation?

Theme 3: Support Teachers

Nearly all of the participating principals spoke about the importance of supporting teachers on a personal level by developing authentic and caring relationships with them. The need for this was even more pronounced when principals talked about the personal and professional challenges teachers have encountered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that was greatly affecting schools and communities throughout Europe at the time of this study. Principals also mentioned that knowing teachers very well can lead to more direct and honest conversations as a means of developing their professional practices.

During the interviews and focus group, the principals provided many anecdotes and stories of how they have increased teacher motivation. The principals increased teacher motivation in their schools as an extension and refinement of the methods they use to support teacher motivation.

Interestingly, the principals' efforts to increase motivation were most often at an individual teacher level and not directed to the entire staff nor groups of teachers. They repeatedly asserted that to increase a teacher's motivation, a principal must know the teacher at a personal level well enough to be able to, as Principal G stated, "...know what makes them tick." By having a close and in-depth understanding of the teacher, a principal can better determine how to provide that individual with a new challenge or project to get them excited and more motivated in their work. Principal B described this approach as trying to make a teacher recognize an area for improvement in their practice in a positive way which can then inspire them to be more motivated.

Providing teachers with autonomy was also repeatedly shared as an effective means of increasing teachers' levels of motivation. Allocating time for teachers to work on a new project or challenge of the teachers' choosing, and the autonomy to carry out this work was discussed as a powerful means of increasing teachers' motivation. Additionally, when teachers were given the license and autonomy to be innovative in their work, this further increased their motivation to create a new way to teach or implement new technologies.

R3: What Challenges Do International School Principals Have with Improving Teacher Motivation?

Theme 4: Challenges of Principals in International Schools

To answer the third research question about the challenges international school elementary principals have with improving teacher motivation, the researcher asked the participating principals to reflect and consider this aspect of their work as leaders. They spoke about the effect of having teachers from different countries with a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds working in the same school. They also spoke frequently of the challenge of leading many teachers who are living and working far from their home country and their families. The negative effect of this distance has been exacerbated by the travel restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the principals, a diverse teaching staff has great value; teachers can learn from each other's beliefs, values, and experiences. On the other hand, the range of educational backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs about education can also result in disagreements among the staff that are not easily resolved. Principals provided several descriptions of the challenges they have encountered in resolving conflicts between teachers, which involve their culturally biased perceptions. In one case, a principal described how she recognized how her leadership style was culturally biased and is sometimes less effective outside of one's home country.

The other significant challenge these principals described is how the schools they manage must also serve the function of family support because many of the teachers live far away from their home countries and families. Nearly all of the teachers are from English-speaking countries but live in Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. This presents the principals with the challenges of maintaining and increasing the motivation of their teachers, especially when some were experiencing homesickness or feeling sad that they cannot be closer to their families.

While homesickness and sadness can be a challenge in a normal school year, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this effect and has meant that many of the teachers on the staffs of their schools have not been able to return home for months and possibly more than a year to visit or stay with family and friends. The principals must contend with this challenge of supporting their teachers' motivation while they are far from home.

Conclusion

This study investigated how elementary principals in international schools supported and increased teacher motivation as well as the challenges they encountered in their work. An in-depth understanding of teacher motivation in the school setting was limited in the research literature as noted by (Ryan & Deci, 2019). A qualitative approach was chosen because it was deemed to be an effective way to understand the insights and experiences that principals in international schools have supporting and increasing the motivation of teachers.

An in-depth analysis of SDT and its implication for teacher motivation was detailed in the review of the literature section in this paper. The research evidence presented showed that autonomy, competence, and a sense of connectedness were the fundamental components of autonomous motivation as per Eyal and Roth (2011) and Shepherd-Jones and Salisbury-Glennon (2018).

Teacher motivation is a critical component of successful schools (Bogler, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005). The data collected during the interviews and focus group and the subsequent analysis demonstrated the high value principals of international schools placed on developing teachers' sense of autonomy, competence, and connectedness in their schools. This in-depth qualitative study of principals working in European international schools provided evidence-based recommendations on how to support and increase teacher motivation most effectively.

Principals of international schools must also recognize the importance of creating a sense of connectedness and a family-like atmosphere for the teachers who may be negatively affected by living far from their home countries, parents, and family members. As shown in this research, principals in these circumstances need to prioritize providing additional personal support and care while creating a sense of family and community in their schools.

Implications of the Research

The implications from this study will inform leadership practices for school leaders. The first is the importance of developing management systems and leadership practices that provide teachers with ample autonomy in their work. Principals should provide autonomy to teachers to enhance the selection and development of new curricula materials and methodologies. It is critical for principals of international or independent schools, which are not often mandated to implement state or country-issued curricula materials but instead must supervise the development or selection of their own.

The second implication for practicing principals is the need to support teachers' perceptions of competence in the work they do to educate students. A sense of competence can be enhanced by providing high-quality professional development for teachers. Notably, teachers will develop greater perceptions of competence when they have a voice, or autonomy, in the professional development activities they select and participate in. Evidence from this study also points to the high value of having teachers engage in professional learning with their grade-level or subject teams and colleagues. The professional sharing that takes place in a group and the sense of connectedness and collective responsibility teachers feel to improve their practices can be effective means of supporting teachers' sense of competence and thus motivation.

The third implication concerns the need for principals to dedicate ample time and energy daily to developing and fostering strong interpersonal connections with the teachers they work with. Evidence from this study showed that principals need to prioritize getting to know their teachers, understanding what their interests and motivations are, and forming strong professional and personal bonds with them. Principals who have strong connections with teachers can support and improve their motivation.

Lastly, the implications from this study are specific to principals working in international schools with diverse teaching staffs where many are living far from their home countries and families. Principals in schools with teachers from diverse cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds need to dedicate time to create a sense of common purpose and beliefs about how best to educate the students in their schools. Principals need to recognize the importance of honoring teachers' understandings of education while also forging a common set of approaches and values which can guide decision-making practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study provides valuable data about how principals supported and increased teacher motivation in international schools. While this study provided evidence about the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which supported the main tenets of SDT, more research is needed on principals' roles in supporting teacher motivation in international schools. Specifically, similar research is needed when there are no restrictions on travel. This would help determine the importance principals place on providing personal and professional support to their teachers. The effects of the global pandemic may have influenced the data collection. Additional studies are recommended to determine the baseline of support principals provide.

A second recommendation for future research would be to investigate the topic of teacher motivation from the perspective of the teachers. Researchers could gain additional insight and understanding into teachers' perceptions of the most effective means of supporting and increasing motivation. Quantitative data could be collected through surveys to determine whether principals' actions support their autonomy, competence, and connectedness. This would be invaluable as a means of developing a better understanding of the complexities of supporting and increasing teacher motivation.

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