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# **Motivation and High-Stakes Certification Assessment: Secondary School Students' Perceptions**

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# Abstract

Senior secondary students' future social and economic well-being is significantly affected by their performance in high-stakes certification assessment. Motivation plays a key role in students' academic performance. In light of the dearth of literature examining students' motivation in high-stakes certification assessment, in the domain of English, and from the students' perspective, this study examined Year 12 students' motivation to achieve the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) level 2 English achievement standards over the period of an academic year. A contemporary person-in-context perspective was adopted in recognition that motivation is influenced by the interplay of personal, social, and contextual variables.

A mixed methods research methodology was employed in this longitudinal two-phased study. In the first phase participants completed a series of questionnaires, and in the second phase a subsample of the participants was interviewed. Students' motivation was examined primarily through the lens of self-determination theory. Self-efficacy, attribution theory, goal theories, and interest were also drawn on to explain facets of students' motivation.

Findings indicate that most students expected to pass a number of NCEA level 2 English achievement standards and they believed it was important to pass these. Most valued English for utility reasons. Students' interest in English varied markedly across different aspects of the English programme. Gender differences in students' motivation were not apparent in relation to students' motivation-related attitudes.

External and introjected regulation were the most prevalent types of motivation influencing students' performance in NCEA English. However, their impact was not as detrimental as theory and research would have predicted. Teachers played a pivotal role in many students' motivation to achieve, especially in relation to feedback, expectations, and student-teacher relationships. Past performance was also an important influence. Difficulties with or a dislike of aspects of English and academic demands from other school subjects were identified as negatively impacting on students' motivation to achieve in English.

Overall, students' motivation was found to be complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and situation dependent. *Matthew effects* were particularly evident for high and low achievers, highlighting the bi-directional relationship between motivation and achievement. Implications for educators and researchers are discussed.

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