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Satisfied And Dissatisfied Commitment: Teachers In Three Generations

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Abstract: This paper explores the self-appraisal of teacher commitment and their associated emotional experiences in the first ten years of teaching among three generations of Hong Kong teachers. Findings affirm previous view that high commitment level of teachers is characterized with psychological attachment to the commitment objects. However the relationship between increased teacher commitment level, time investment in work and psychological attachment to teaching is found uncertain in the changing contexts, leading to our conceptualization of satisfied and dissatisfied commitment among teachers staying in the profession. Implications from the new understanding of teacher commitment are discussed.

Introduction

The phenomenon of teacher commitment has attracted research attention in different parts of the world because of its implications for teacher retention (Ingersoll et al., 1997; Kelchtermans, 2005; Mayer, 2006; Smethem, 2007; Troman, 2008; Yu & Leithwood, 2002). Some researchers suggest that novice teachers in the 21st century show less commitment in teaching (Ha, et al., 2008; Mayer, 2006), and in the West there is evidence that the attrition rate among beginning teachers is around 40% to 50% (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

The phenomenon of high teacher retention in Asian countries is less

conclusive (OECD, 2005). In terms of attrition rate, teachers in Hong Kong appear to be highly "committed", with a wastage rate of only 3.9% - 9.3% between 2001-2009 in the primary sector and 3.9% - 6.6% in the secondary sector (Education Bureau, 2010). Nevertheless, job dissatisfaction and low morale among teachers have also been widely reported since the turn of the 21st century in Hong Kong (Cheng, 2009). Thus it is our intention to explore whether Hong Kong teachers who remain in teaching perceive themselves to have a high level of teacher commitment, and to what extent commitment is aligned with a "psychological bond" to teaching (Firestone and Pennell, 1993, p.491).

We employed the life history method to study teachers who entered teaching from the 1960s to 2000s in Hong Kong, with dual foci on teachers' self-rated commitment level and their emotional experiences in the first ten years of teaching. Findings not only shed light on the question of teacher retention and commitment, but also point to the existence of satisfied and dissatisfied commitment among teachers staying in the profession.

Teacher Committment

Since 1980s, *teacher commitment* has been a topic of interest in education discourses (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). However, the word *commitment* is a slippery term. The notion *committed* teachers, for example, has been used interchangeably with *quality* teachers (Abd Razak, Darmawan & Keeves, 2010), or as a synonym of teachers with dedication (Frankenberg, Taylor & Merseth, 2010). Some literature refers commitment to characteristics of being or behaving as a professional (Helsby, Knight, McCulloch, Saunders, & Warburton (1997). Although the meanings of commitment are hardly conclusive, it is generally regarded as a desirable attribute and a committed teacher is considered to be coupled with a sense of professionalism. Thus some teachers suffered from bad feelings when they perceived themselves to be less committed (Day, Elliot & Kington, 2005; Easthope & Easthope, 2007).

Firestone and Pennell (1993) maintain that commitment "is a psychological bond or identification of an individual with an object that takes on a special meaning and importance" (p. 291). The psychological bond is

considered to have effect on one's attitude and behaviour. Buchanan (1974) suggests that a committed person complies with expectations voluntarily, exerts considerable efforts for the benefits of the commitment object which goes beyond calculative involvement. Therefore teacher commitment has been typically studied to anticipate teachers' attrition tendency (Fresko, 1997) and attitudes towards classroom performance or educational quality (Tsui & Cheng, 1999).

However, there are multiple objects of commitment for a teacher and teachers' commitment objects may also change across different life and career phases and in different contexts (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Rosenholtz, 1989; Huberman, 1993). A teacher who is committed to students and makes efforts to create a supportive learning climate in the classroom, for example, may not have affective affiliation to the school organization due to the lack of identification with school goals (Choi & Tang, 2009). Thus a teacher highly dedicated to student affairs but resistant to school reforms may be regarded as committed when her/his attitude towards students is assessed. She/he may not be considered a committed teacher if the assessment is taken from the perspective of school organization. Thus the relationship between teacher commitment, teachers' psychological attachment and efforts is far from a simplistic equation.

When people engage in certain lines of activities, some of them enjoy successful commitment but others are confined in unsuccessful commitment (Henjum, 1992). People with successful commitment involve voluntarily in activities, which entails a purposeful direction they define. People engaged in unsuccessful commitment suffer from a feeling of being trapped and compelled by a line of activities which are not of their own free choice. Thus appraising whether teachers are committed or not by an overt observation of how much time teachers spend on certain activities or their retention rate in teaching without understanding their emotional experiences could be problematic.

Teacher commitment has been studied in relation to job satisfaction, which Locke (1976) refers to as an employee's positive affective state resulting from the assessment of one's job experiences. Job satisfaction is found contributive to organizational effectiveness (Cheng & Tsui, 1996) and a lack of it has been often cited as a major reason for teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001; Weiss, 1999). The study of teacher commitment and emotional experiences such as satisfaction, joy, frustration and anger, etc. has received increased research attention in the global contexts of education reforms (Kelchtermans, 2005; van Veena., Sleegersb & van de Vena, 2005). Better self understanding of emotions and changing cultural and structural working conditions help teachers meaningfully deal with their job situations (van Veen & Lasky, 2005)

Teacher emotions can be positive or negative. Satisfaction is a positive emotion which occurs when one is making progress toward a goal (Sutton & Wheatly, 2003). Teachers' satisfaction mostly comes from children's progress in learning and the excitement associated with students' unpredictable responses in learning (Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1989). Leithwood and his team (1999) point out that satisfaction has motivational value when it is connected with a personal goal, thus sustaining teacher commitment.

Job satisfaction and the lack of it have been recently studied from the perspective of overall life satisfaction, suggesting that job satisfaction is only one source of life satisfaction (Lent & Brown, 2008). Life satisfaction involves the alignment of what people expect from their global life and what they get out of it (Yilmaz, 2008). Day & Gu (2007) find that tensions of more experienced teachers may arise from the workplace and personal life situations. A Work-Life Balance Survey of Hong Kong shows that people in education choose "workload" as the core factor for unhappiness about the job (Chung, Pang, & Chan, 2006).

Negative emotions, such as anger and frustration, are associated with goal incongruence, which often reduce teachers' intrinsic motivation (Sutton & Wheatly, 2003). Beginning teachers often experience frustration and anxiety because of the gaps between anticipations and realities (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1991; Tickle, 2000) and, in recent years, a sense of job insecurity (Day, et

al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2005). In Australia, government intervention in school governance and curricula has made teaching increasingly performance-oriented and intensified (Easthope & Easthope, 2007; Mayer, 2006). Goodson and his research team (2006) argued that mandatory new initiatives in the UK triggered loss of commitment, energy and enthusiasm among mid- and late- career teachers.

Commitment in terms of engagement in activities is not necessarily associated with positive emotions. Henjum (1992) makes a distinction between successful and unsuccessful commitment. People with successful commitment involve voluntarily in activities, which entails a purposeful direction they define. However, people engaged in unsuccessful commitment suffer from a feeling of being trapped and compelled by a line of activities which are not of their own free choice. Thus appraising whether teachers are committed or not by an overt observation of teachers' engagement on certain activities or their retention rate in teaching without understanding their related affective or emotional states could have missed something important. It is the purpose of this paper to explore teachers' emotional experiences and the relationship with self-rated commitment level in teaching.

Life History Method

Following research which considers teacher commitment involves a complexity of internal and external factors in teachers' career (Day et al., 2005; Huberman, 1989), this study employed a life history method to study the informants' subjective commitment intensity and related emotional experiences in their career paths against the changing social, educational and workplace contexts (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The life history interview stimulates informants' introspection, which has been queried by some as a reliable way of gathering empirical data. However our beliefs are in line with Coser's (1992) view that "…we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated" (p.47).

Teachers' subjective experiences as shown in the life stories were given full recognition in our study. Life history researchers also conduct

comprehensive documentary analysis of the school organizational and broader social historical contexts so that teachers' self-rated commitment level and associated emotional experiences could be understood in the wider systemic contexts (Choi & Tang, 2009).

Purposive sampling strategy, which takes into consideration variables such as teachers' years of teaching, types of schools, gender, marital status, professional qualifications and career development, was employed. Twenty-three teachers who entered teaching in different periods of Hong Kong school education from 1960s to 2000s participated in the study. The focus was on participants' commitment and sense of satisfaction in their early- and mid-careers as commitment in earlier career phases is more vulnerable (Fraser, Draper & Taylor, 1998; Smethem, 2007). Following Hargreaves (2005) and Rosenholts and Simpson (1990), teachers with one to five years of teaching experience were classified as early-career teachers, those with more than six years as mid-career teachers, and those with more than ten years of experience as veterans.

Semi-structured interview and documentary analysis were the major methods for data collection. The first interview of the informants was conducted during 2005/06 to collect teachers' full life histories. An interview with the informants' significant others such as colleagues, friends or spouse, was arranged for a supplementary perspective of the informants' lives. The second interview, a thematic life interview, was conducted during 2006/07 to gain an understanding of teachers' commitment to teaching over the course of their life. Teachers were asked to indicate their commitment level across their professional lives by plotting a commitment graph, with 0 representing the lowest and 10 the highest teacher commitment intensity. The commitment graph was a probing strategy to help informants tell their stories of commitment change. The figures elicited were not used for comparison of commitment intensity between teachers, but were subjective indicators used to track changes of commitment level and emotional experiences in their career courses. The information was triangulated with a review of the data collected in the first interview and information provided by their significant others. Education documents were examined to enable setting the individuals' professional lives against the appropriate historical periods of educational

changes in Hong Kong.

The interview schedule was first set in English and translated into Chinese in the pilot interview. The teachers' understanding of terminology such as "teacher commitment" was crossed-checked and clarified before the first interview took place. Interviews were conducted in spoken Chinese and transcribed verbatim into written Chinese. Data collected in the full life history interview were transcribed and preliminarily analyzed to inform the later thematic life history interviews. A computer package, N-vivo, was used to assist the storage and retrieval of data for coding. Inter-rater reliability was achieved by having two researchers trial code a couple of transcriptions (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman & Marteau, 1997).

Interpretations of data were grounded on what informants and their significant others reported and were triangulated with the comprehensive analysis of documents, knowledge informed by the existing literature, together with understanding based on our experiences as teacher educators. In our data analysis, we were mindful that increased or decreased commitment was a subjective assessment of an individual's commitment level against the spectrum of that individual's professional life. It is not the intention of this study to compare teachers' commitment levels across cases. We do not aim at finding out whether the commitment level of early-career teachers in certain periods of Hong Kong school education was higher or lower than in other periods by comparing the commitment indexes teachers provided. Rather, we are interested in understanding teachers' subjective appraisal of their commitment to teaching and the emotional experiences associated with those levels of commitment in different phases of their careers. Analysis in these ways allowed us to produce narrative as well as explanatory representations of our interpretation to address two research questions:

- What characterized the first ten years of teacher commitment among teachers in various periods of Hong Kong school education?
- What were the teachers' emotional experiences relating to changes of teacher commitment in teachers' first ten years of teaching?

Contexts of Teacher Emotions and Commitments

Analysis of education related documents, relevant literature and the life stories of the informants allows us to have a comprehensive understanding of the broader social, educational and workplace contexts for teachers. These are broadly in line with Sweeting's (2004) three periods of educational change in Hong Kong.

Number-oriented Period (1965-1984)

The major trend of employment conditions for Hong Kong teachers in late 1960s was stable and teaching was a well-respected occupation. As Hong Kong was beginning to revitalize its economy in the aftermath of WWII, population in Hong Kong increased dramatically. Total school enrollment rose from 4000-7000 at the end of the Japanese occupation to over 800,000 in 1964 (Sweeting, 2004, p.142-143). In a time where the number of school places was of the paramount concern, eight teachers in our sample started their teaching careers in this period.

Teaching was an excellent means for upward social mobility, especially among female teachers in this period. Professional qualification requirements were relatively relaxed. Teachers in our sample such as Rebecca and Kim took up their first teaching posts in private schools with just secondary school qualifications. They went on to a full-time or part-time teacher education programme afterwards and transferred to government-aided schools, which offered better remuneration and service conditions.

There was a steady decline in the birth rate from the 1970s (Census and Statistics Department, 1978) and some primary teachers were under threat of redundancy in mid-70s. Nevertheless, few serious employment problems occurred because "the government offered various measures to ease the tensions" (Steward, Full-life history Interview). Compulsory education was extended from six to nine years. New posts such as 'teacher librarian' and 'student guidance officer' were established to absorb surplus teachers (Pamela and Wendy, Full-life Interviews).

There was little structured mentoring or collaboration apart from

groupings in subject areas. However, teachers generally responded to the needs of their students, colleagues and the school spontaneously, often in the form of a "friendship-based" group (Steward and Rebecca, Full-life Interviews). Some teachers, for example, Rebecca and Pamela even rented a house or a flat together with their colleagues near their schools and had plenty of time "sharing their personal interest and professional dreams about their students and teaching". Teachers could make a difference not only to the lives of the students and their parents but also for the teachers' own families. These contributed to their sense of teacher commitment and satisfaction.

Quality-oriented Period (1984-1997)

From the early 1980s to 1997, government's focus shifted from the provision of school places to the quality of education (Llewellyn, 1982) and this period is deemed the "Quality-oriented Period". Seven Education Commission Reports were released during this period, initiating discussion on a wide range of policies on quality education. Policies on language teachers' proficiency standards (Education Commission, 1996; Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, 2003; Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004) and school quality assurance mechanism (Education Commission, 1997) were measures closely related to heightened demand for teacher professional competence.

Young people could get access to higher education easier than before and university graduates had more occupational choices in the commercial and service sectors in this period. The economic situation in Hong Kong bloomed remarkably, albeit with some hiccups during the Sino-British talks in early 80s. Hong Kong became a commercialized and highly materialistic society and the social status of teachers was no longer as high as before. It was a common view that only those who failed to get into other better-paid occupations became teachers (Cheung, 2008). Nine teachers in our sample began their teaching career in this period. Teaching remained attractive to people who took it as a means of upgrading their socio-economic status (for example, Fred), or to those who were more drawn to teaching as a vocation than to other occupations

(for example, Karen).

The work conditions for teachers in this period were very different from the previous period. Schools switched to a more functionally differentiated, vertical, scientific management model in the 1980s, and further towards a more flexible, decentralized, school-based management model (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, 1991) in the 1990s. During these years teacher roles became increasingly complex. The evacuation of middle and senior management among veteran teachers because of the 1997 political concerns created the need for education leaders among younger teachers. Teachers who entered the field in Quality-oriented Period had more promotion opportunities and professional responsibilities (for example, Karen and Charles). All these changes affected individual teachers' commitment and emotions. .

Performance-oriented Period (1997-2007)

Six teachers sampled in our study entered teaching in the period 1997-2007 when Hong Kong was beset with unprecedented challenges after its reunification with China in 1997. Economic globalization, together with the changing political and economic identities after the handover, have made the SAR government anxious to develop talents to sustain the competitiveness of Hong Kong (The 1997-98 Budget Speech, 1997 para. 50). Its open financial system was hit hard by the Asian financial turmoil in 1998, and the weakened economy was further shaken by the outbreak of SARS in 2003. The overall unemployment rate in Hong Kong soared from 2.2 % in 1997 to 8.5 % in mid-2003 and deflation persisted for nearly six years (The 2005-06 Budget Speech, 2005). The economy only began an upturn in 2004 when tighter integration with the Mainland's vibrantly expanding economy was developed. Up to 2007 the Hong Kong economy was strong but was beset with the US sub-prime mortgage problem and credit crunch in the latter half of the year (The 2007-08 Budget Speech, 2007 para. 4).

Similar to many education systems in the world, education is seen as a means to global positioning in international competition (Wong, 2000). In

many aspects, the career context of teachers who began their career in this period resembles their counterparts in many aspects including the move towards marketization in education, intensification of continuing professional development and the enforcement of an early retirement policy (Tse, 2002). Education reforms gathered speed and spurred a quest for excellent performance. Market strategies such as performance indicators, benchmarking, managerial and consumerist accountability, school self-evaluation and external school review etc. were transplanted into education to accelerate school performance.

Teaching as a stable occupation became a myth when redundant teachers no longer enjoyed referral to another school or other jobs by the government. Many beginning teachers (such as Lawrence, Ann and Eva) served on contract terms and could not secure tenure (Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, 2000). Education policy makers, until 2008, declined to introduce small class teaching in primary schools to address the constantly falling birth rate (Education Bureau, 2008). Instead, school downsizing and eventual closure of "under-performing" schools were administered (Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, 2007). The general increased unemployment rate during late 1990s and early 2000s, coupled with the shrinking number of primary students, further intensified the keen competition for a teaching post.

The performativity culture created a climate that was very different for both novice and mid-career teachers in the Performance-oriented Period compared with the previous two periods. In 2004, a seven hundred million dollar Early Retirement Ex-gratia Payment Fund was introduced to tackle the problem of surplus teachers who, under the upgraded professional qualification requirements for language teachers, were no longer eligible for the original post. The rapid change of qualification requirements within a couple of years caused intensive teacher investment on further studying (Choi & Tang, 2005). Feelings of doubts about their teacher identities and time use challenged their sense of teacher commitment among teachers in this period.

Three Generations of Teacher Commitment

In the study, teachers indicated their level of commitment on a 0 to 10 scale. Point 5 was considered to be the cut-off point between a positive and negative state of teacher commitment. Teachers might have multiple objects of teacher commitment at a certain point of their career course and they understood that the figure was a representation of their self-evaluation of their general commitment to teaching.

It was also understood that teachers indicated the commitment changes at the critical points of their career path in the light of their entire professional lives. In other words, their commitment level in previous career phases was constantly assessed against their current level of commitment. In table 1, commitment levels in the early-career phase (1st - 5th year) and the mid-career phase (6th - 10th year) are highlighted. Individual teachers' commitment levels towards the end of the first ten years of teaching were also compared with their own initial commitment at career entry.

Teacher entrants in the three periods

Six female and two male teachers began their teaching in the Number-oriented Period. Most of them had been teaching for more than 25 years when they were involved in the study. Three (Tony, Wendy and Pamela) entered their mid-career phase when Hong Kong school education was entering the Quality-oriented Period. All teachers in this group had positive initial commitment and six out of eight teachers were able to maintain or experience increased teacher commitment in comparison with their initial commitment after ten years of teaching.

Five female and four male teachers started their teaching career in the Quality-oriented Period. The teaching experiences of this group of teachers ranged from 11 to 23 years. All teachers in this cohort had a high initial teacher commitment. The majority maintained or increased their commitment in their early- and mid-career phases. One-third of the teachers in this cohort, namely, Karen, Joe and Janice, gained their first promotion during the fifth to the seventh year of their teaching. Although two of them reported decreased commitment in their mid-career phase, the figures indicated that they

were still able to exhibit a high level of commitment (7 and 8). In fact all teachers of this cohort either showed increased commitment compared to their initial commitment or sustained their high level of initial commitment (8 and 9) when moving towards the end of the tenth year of teaching.

	Name (entry year to the year under study	Commitment indexes in times			Changes of commitment level in times[a]		
		1st -5th yr	6th -10th yr	1st - 10th yr	1st -5th yr	6th -10th yr	1st-10th yr
Performance-oriented Period (1997 – 2007)	Ann (2005-2007)	8.5 - 9.5		8.5 - 9.5	↑	-	↑
	Eva (2005-2007)	7.5 - 5.5		7.5 - 5.5	↓	-	↓
	Lawrence (2003-2007)	9 - 6		9 - 6	↓	-	↓
	George (2002-2007)	6 - 7.5 - 6		6 - 6	→	-	→
	Benson (2001-2007)	8.5 - 9.5 - 6.5	5 - 3.5	8.5 - 3.5	↓	↓	↓
	Ian (1998-2007)	4.5 - 7.5	4.5 - 7.5	4.5 - 7.5	↑	↑	↑
Quality-oriented Period (1984-1997)	Karen(1996-2006)	6.5 - 7	7.5 - 8	6.5 - 8	↑	↑	↑
	Charles (1995-2005)	9 - 8 - 9 - 7	9 - 8.5 - 9	9 - 9	↓	→	→
	Alice (1995-2005)	7 - 8	8 - 7 - 9	7 - 9	↑	↑	↑
	Joe (1994-2004)	7 - 8	8 - 8	7 - 8	↑	→	↑
	Cecilia(1992-2002)	6 - 7 - 8 - 9	8 - 8	6 - 8	↑	→	↑
	Leo(1987-1997)	7.5 - 9	9 - 9	7.5 - 9	↑	→	↑
	Janice	8 - 8	9 - 8	8 - 8	→	↓	→

	(1986-1996)						
	Martha(1986-1996)	6 - 5.5	6.5 - 7.5	6 - 7.5	↓	↑	↑
	Fred (1984-1994)	8 - 8	8 - 8	8 - 8	→	→	→
Number - oriented Period (1965-1984)	Pamela(1977-1987)	9.5 - 5	6 - 6.5	9.5 - 6.5	↓	↑	↓
	Wendy(1976-1986)	8 - 9	6 - 9	8 - 9	↑	↑	↑
	Tony(1975-1985)	9.5 - 9.8	9.8 - 9.8	9.5 - 9.8	↑	↑	↑
	Ophelia(1973-1980)	6.5 - 8	8 - 9	6.5 - 9	↑	↑	↑
	Rebecca(1970-1980)	7 - 7.5	7.5 - 7.5	7 - 7.5	↑	→	↑
	Lily(1969-1979)	5 - 7	7.5 - 8	5 - 8	↑	↑	↑
	Steward(1967-1977)	7 - 8	8 - 9	7 - 9	↑	↑	↑
	Kim(1965-1975)	7.5 - 7	7 - 7	7.5 - 7	↓	→	↓

Table 1 Teachers' first ten years of commitment in three periods of Hong Kong school education

[a]changes of commitment level: ↑: increased ; : → maintained ; ↓: decreased

Four male and two female teachers entered teaching in the Performance-oriented Period. They had one to nine years of teaching experience when they participated in our study. Like their counterparts who entered teaching in the other two periods, most of these beginners had a high level of initial commitment. However, half of these teachers reported decreased commitment in their early career phase. Benson and Ian, for example, who each had more than six years teaching experience, indicated a drop to very low commitment at a point of time in their mid-career phase (3.5 to 4.5). The most drastic case was Benson. Although he showed an increase in the beginning two years of teaching, it was then followed by a persistent decrease in commitment level.

Attributes of Teacher Commitment

Analysis of the commitment levels showed that teachers include various attributes in their concept of teacher commitment. Some informants defined teacher commitment with reference to the amount of time they devoted to their commitment objects. In explaining why his commitment level raised from 8.5 to 9.5, Benson remarked:

> It was the first time in the school history that our students got a championship! The event was reported in the press. I was very happy that the students have become more self-confident… At that time I wanted to do even better and help them achieve more. (Benson, Performance-oriented Period)

Like Benson, Rebecca's concept of teacher commitment was also based on time investment for the welfare of the students.

> Most of the parents had little education. They had great trust in teachers. We felt like giving extra attention to their children. ... I stayed in the school for three years and lived with several colleagues in a rented cottage… We had plenty of time marking and planning the lessons together. (Rebecca, Number-oriented Period)

Time was a critical factor in teacher commitment. Often high levels of commitment were accompanied by high invasion of personal time. A colleague informant had the following observation about Joe:

> He was very competent academically. But when he went into the administrative work, it was entirely new to him. He was a bit down…He had the same amount of time and there was no change with his routine teaching duties and his family commitment. Therefore he could only sacrifice his lunch time and private time. (Joe, Quality-oriented Period)

As the opposite side of the same coin, some teachers judged that their commitment level decreased when they wanted to keep some time for themselves. Lawrence, for example, reported a decreased commitment level (from 9 to 6) towards his fourth year of teaching.

> My health condition keeps warning me. I need to give myself a break…I am unhappy with the parents and middle managers. The parents come to challenge you rather than respect you. I no longer reprimand students…Frankly speaking I found many problems in my students but I felt like washing my hands off them. (Lawrence, Performance-oriented Period)

It was a desire of psychological distance to certain objects, rather than the time investment in work that led to Lawrence's judgment of decreased commitment. At the time of the study he still had a prolonged work schedule which had "affected his health" and "time available to spend with her girlfriend". Psychological attachment to commitment objects tends to outweigh the quantity of work hours as an attribute of teacher commitment. Rebecca's case illuminated such observation. She reported an increased level of teacher commitment throughout her early and mid-career even after her marriage (from 7 to7.5). Rebecca experienced a psychological bond with her students and even their parents, even though she had to leave school earlier than previous years to take up parenting role after marriage.

> My focus was mainly on the students but as a mother I also understood more about the expectation of their parents…I was proud of myself as my colleagues called me the "Model of Grade One Teachers". Those young parents are just like my

> children and they need support to raise their kids…My mother-in-law and I took turns to take care of my own children when they were young. (Rebecca, Number-oriented Period)

In sum, psychological attachment to commitment objects was a crucial criterion in teachers' assessment of their commitment level. Teachers' subjective sense of psychological distance to certain aspects of teaching can affect their rating of teacher commitment, regardless of the time they have to spend on those activities. Some teachers considered themselves to have sustained a high level of commitment although they had made an adjustment of time for work to accommodate other life roles.

Teacher Emotions and Committment

Satisfied commitment

Teacher commitment was found to be strongly related to emotions, regardless of being judged as increased or decreased. Some teachers reported increased commitment in all three periods and they experienced positive feelings such as satisfaction, enthusiasm or a sense of achievement. Some typical affective expressions were:

> The Principal asked me to teach junior classes from Grade 1 to 3, then Grade 4, 5 and 6. You could see the kids grow! It is so satisfying to see them learning in the lessons! This is a challenging job, but also gives you a sense of achievement. (Ophelia, Number-oriented Period)

> It was the first time in the school history that our students got a championship! The event was reported in the press. I was very happy that the students have become more self-confident… At that time I wanted to do even better and help them achieve more. (Benson, Performance-oriented Period)

Satisfied commitment is characterized by feelings of happiness, a sense of achievement, and a willingness to devote more time to the students. More teachers with satisfied commitment were found among the

Number-oriented Period entrants. This could be partly related to the structure of a teaching career of that period. Many teachers of this cohort, such as Lily, Rebecca and Ophelia, taught in private schools before they received teacher education. They found themselves rather "ignorant about teaching" when they first entered the classroom but had higher teacher commitment after their professional training. Rebecca's accounts highlighted a common feeling:

> Most of the parents had little education. They had great trust in teachers. We felt like giving extra attention to their children. ... I stayed in the school for three years and lived with several colleagues in a rented cottage. A janitor staff of our school cooked for us. We had plenty of time marking and planning the lessons together. After we finished our work, we had our free time. Sometimes we went sailing. Those were very, very happy days. (Rebecca, Number-oriented Period)

Satisfied commitment was also found among those teachers who had a successful time adjustment to achieve their work and overall life satisfaction. They were mainly female teachers in their early- and mid-career in the Number-oriented and Quality-oriented Period. Though these teachers considered the dual demands "tough", they were "delighted", "satisfied and proud of" the family-work balance they could maintain.

> My commitment in teaching dropped a bit after I got married (from 6 to 5.5). I wanted to give more time to my family. I gave birth to my eldest daughter one year after married. The second one was born two years later in 1991 and then the third one was born in 1994. I found my children are marvelously creative…In fact I became more patient with students after my children were born (from 5.5 to 7.5). (Martha, Quality-oriented Period)

In the Number-oriented and early Quality-oriented period reduced time allocation to teaching-related work could be accommodated. Teachers like Martha and Rebecca could enjoy their family roles. Their childrearing experiences in turn were contributive to their teaching lives when they gained better understanding of children and their parents.

Another contextual factor contributing to teachers' satisfied

commitment was the relatively more stable employment condition before the 1990s in Hong Kong. Teachers in the profession basically could remain in their position as long as they wished to stay. Although entrants in the Number-oriented Period did not have as many promotion opportunities in their mid-career as the Quality-oriented Period entrants, they enjoyed a sense of satisfaction from their devotion to students and their teaching areas.

> I had a great time in that school. I could teach Design & Technology there. The colleagues were good and the students were smart. I was also assigned to teach Chinese Language but it was fine for me to take two classes… In fact I was quite happy with that because at that time there was no such culture as language benchmark. I could manage two classes of Chinese Language and could still develop my own subject. (Tony, Number-oriented Period)

Some teachers experienced positive emotions, with increased time investment for the goals they were psychologically identified with. Others were able to make adjusted time investment and achieved a global life satisfaction. These teachers enjoyed satisfied commitment, which was characterized by positive emotions associated with their psychological attachment to teaching in general.

Dissatisfied Commitment

All Number-oriented Period entrants reported increased commitment in their mid-career reported positive emotions, however many mid-career teachers in the Quality-oriented and Performance-oriented Periods with increased commitment level reported negative emotions. Karen expressed her sense of doubt:

> I spent more time thinking about where I would like the school to go. There were tough times when we had to go through certain changes….I was deeply involved in school promotion work. I asked myself if it was worth spending so much time preparing shows and entertaining the media. (Karen,

> Quality-oriented Period)

Negative emotions were induced by a sense that time could be better spent. Ian thought of "leaving teaching" as the school's aim was far from the educational goals he cherished.

> Teachers here make full use of every minute to coach the students - for various competitions. We use recess, after school - throughout the whole year, not only for immediate competition but to have good preparation for the coming year.…And there is also the drilling for examination strategies. Our headmistress feels unsafe when all other schools do the drilling. Therefore the Headmistress is stressful, the teachers are stressful, and the students are stressful. (Ian , Performance-oriented Period)

Self-rated decreased commitment was more frequently found among sampled teachers in the Performance-oriented Period, despite the intensive time involvement teachers actually exhibited. Some teachers reported decreased commitment because of the lack of identification with the organizational goals. These teachers were filled with a sense of disenchantment and a desire to leave the school, though they were still committed to students or colleagues.

> I have thought about changing school. I hoped there are some schools in this world that will care for student development, on top of the emphasis on academic achievement. (Benson, Performance-oriented Period)

> It's like you would ask yourself why the school was like that. Colleagues talked about unhappy experiences when they met each other. That affected the quality of my teaching. The morale was low.... (Pamela, Number-oriented Period)

The changing contexts of Hong Kong school education in 1990s were found to have contributed to dissatisfied commitment. For many teachers in the Quality-oriented and Performance-oriented Period, increased commitment involved long working hours for improving student attainments, school performance as well as securing one's job opportunity. Teachers recognized the need to work hard for the survival of the school in the threat of school

downsizing. Yet time investment, especially in tasks beyond that deviated from teachers consider as deviating from core activities of student learning, gave rise to dissatisfied commitment.

Unlike teachers in the Number-oriented and Quality-oriented Period who could make successful time adjustment of their work and family lives, Lawrence's strategy to take things "lightly" so as to avoid heath deterioration and cope with other life goals was accompanied with a feeling of being "selfish".

> …The tasks are endless. I see commitment as a lump of rock. I have to keep reminding myself to take it lightly. My health condition keeps warning me… (Lawrence, Performance-oriented Period)

Data show that teachers who reported dissatisfied commitment experienced negative emotions and were inclined to establish a psychological distance to their work, regardless of the amount of time they spent on their work. Some teachers with dissatisfied commitment experienced tension or a sense of guilt. Other teachers doubted the worth of their time investment in their duties and even the occupation.

Discussion and Implication

Discussion

This paper studies the phenomenon of teacher commitment and associated emotional experiences in the first ten years of teaching among different generations of teachers. The analysis of data allows us to understand the relationship between teachers' self-rated increased or decreased teacher commitment with their emotions. We found that some teachers experienced satisfied commitment while others were trapped in dissatisfied commitment.

The critical differences between satisfied and dissatisfied commitment lie in the nature of teachers' emotional experiences and their psychological state to teaching. Teachers with satisfied commitment were those who enjoyed emotions such as happiness, a sense of satisfaction or achievement, which are

coupled with a psychological attachment to teaching in general. Some of these teachers demonstrated high time investment to their commitment objects voluntarily (Buchanan, 1974) while others were able to make satisfying time adjustment to accommodate the work and life commitments they valued. This is in line with Firestone and Pennell's (1993) definition of commitment as a "psychological bond or identification of the individual with an object that takes on a special meaning and importance" (p.491). While the majority of teachers in the Number-oriented and Quality-oriented Period indicated increased commitment, more teachers in the Number-oriented Period reported positive emotions than those in the Quality-oriented Period. Contrarily, many teachers with increased teacher commitment in the Qualitative-oriented Period expressed negative work-related emotional experiences. The few teachers in the Performance-oriented Period who reported increased commitment also reported negative emotions to teaching, making the relationship between teacher commitment level, time investment in work and psychological attachment to teaching uncertain.

Analysis of data showed that some teachers in the field were involved in dissatisfied commitment. The core characteristic of teachers with dissatisfied commitment was that teachers were trapped by negative emotions such as weariness, doubt and stress, which are intertwined with psychological distance to certain aspects of school work, even though some may still affectively attached to students. They were caught by a sense of unworthiness when they perceived their time was spent on activities that were incongruent with their educational goals. Some found themselves being deprived of private lives or other domains of life satisfaction. While teachers with dissatisfied commitment were characterized with negative emotions about teaching, they exhibited various career directions. Some intended to change school and others wished to leave the occupation if economic conditions allowed. Some stayed in the field in a state of dissatisfied commitment.

Most teachers in all three periods of school education reported their commitment levels changed in the first ten years of teaching. Analysis of teacher commitments of three generations together with teacher emotional experiences leads us to understand teachers' satisfied and dissatisfied commitment in the changing social, educational and workplace contexts. The

differentiation between satisfied and dissatisfied commitment is deemed important in contemporary education milieu as it provides new lens for teachers, teacher educators, school leaders and policy makers to understand teacher emotions and re-appraise issues of teacher retention and teacher commitment.

Implications

Teacher educators need to help teachers unfold their romantic beliefs regarding teacher commitment (Day et al., 2005; Easthope & Easthope, 2007), which has to be challenged with the perspective of overall life satisfaction (Lent & Brown, 2008; Yilmaz, 2008). In the Number-oriented and early Quality-oriented Period, an adjustment of work/life commitments was seen to facilitate satisfied commitment both in teachers' personal and professional lives. However Easthope & Easthope (2007) found that teachers very often perceived a decrease of workload as a decrease of teaching quality. Our findings indicate that teachers who have increased time investment felt uneasy with their professionalism. This represents a dual threat to novices' physical and emotional well-being when they have to work long hours and at the same time be eroded by a sense of dissatisfaction with themselves and their work performance.

School leaders need to re-examine their concept of commitment and strive to promote satisfied teacher commitment. A high level of teacher commitment used to be considered positive and decreased commitment considered unfavorable, particularly by school administrators and the general public, as teacher commitment is suggested to be associated with job involvement (Billingsley & Cross, 1992). However, prolonged work schedules spill over to other aspects of teachers' lives, successful school leaders need to reduce teacher stress by regulating excessive state initiatives and community expectations (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007). How to juggle a balance between competing goals or commitment objects of teachers and the school is challenging. As reported elsewhere, school administrators' creative provision of opportunities for teachers in the early career phase to experience affirmative teacher-pupil relationships, share the struggles and wisdom of senior

colleagues' time management strategies, could promote satisfied teacher commitment and subsequently the welfare of the students (Choi & Tang, 2009).

Policy makers have to study the relations between teacher commitment and teacher retention in greater depth, particularly those in Hong Kong and other Asian countries where teacher attrition rate does not seem to be as problematic as their Western counterparts (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003, OECD, 2005). Commitment involves assuming one's responsibility for choice and acting intentionally in the world. There were opportunities for teachers in the Number-oriented Period and Quality-oriented Period to experiment and reconfirm their commitment when alternate schools or occupational choices were available. However, society increasingly encourages flexible employment policies. Job insecurity is wide ranging in the 21st century. When teachers are caught by a feeling that they must trade in their personal time for the continuation of employment, teachers as employees may approach the whole process of commitment negatively, fearfully or feeling discouraged (Drucker, 1969). In such cases, teachers' disaffection about teaching is mediated by a weak employment market outside teaching (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990). We have evidence that Hong Kong teachers staying in the field includes those with satisfied and dissatisfied commitment. To what extent the quality of student learning and the teaching profession will be affected if many of our teachers are trapped in dissatisfied commitment should be high in the agenda of policy research.

A sense of satisfied commitment provides a great source of strength and enjoyment to a teacher. Examining dissatisfied commitment with a new perspective helps people unpack their "ongoing emotional struggles" (Kelchtermans, 2005, p.1005) in more constructive ways. This is important to teachers themselves, as well as the teaching profession. Our study shows the need to differentiate the emotional aspect of teachers' increased and decreased commitment level, particularly against the contexts of changing times. More research efforts on how to redirect dissatisfied commitment towards satisfied commitment is urgently needed.

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