

# **Committed Teachers, Passionate Teachers: the dimension of passion associated with teacher commitment and engagement.**

Leanne Crosswell and A/Prof Bob Elliott

## **Abstract**

Teacher commitment has been identified as one of the most critical factors for the future success of education and schools (Huberman, 1993). Teacher commitment is closely connected to teachers' work performance and their ability to innovate and to integrate new ideas into their own practice, absenteeism, staff turnover, as well as having an important influence on students' achievement in, and attitudes toward school (Firestone, 1996; Graham, 1996; Louis, 1998; Nias, 1981; Tsui & Cheng, 1999). The traditional view of teacher commitment considers it to refer to external referents. However, there is a growing body of literature that draws a strong connection between teacher commitment and the very intimate element of passion for the work of teaching (Day, 2004; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Fried, 1995). This paper first discusses the traditional view of teacher commitment and then uses the findings from an Australian study to investigate the idea that an individuals' personal passion for teaching is central to their on-going commitment to, and engagement with the profession.

The level of teachers' commitment is considered to be as a key factor in the success of current educational reform agenda as it heavily influences teachers' willingness to engage in cooperative, reflective and critical practice. Thus, the findings of this paper are particularly significant for school leaders as they engage teachers in school initiatives and educational reform, and teachers themselves as they struggle to find a balance between the personal and the professional.

## **Introduction:**

Teaching is a complex and demanding profession. To sustain their energy and enthusiasm for the work, teachers need to maintain their personal commitment to the job (Day, 2000). This concept of 'commitment', as investment of personal resources, has long been associated with the professional characteristics of a teacher. It is widely recognised that the role of the teacher has intensified, and teachers are needing to adapt to 'bureaucratically driven escalation of pressures, expectations and controls concerning what teachers do and how much they should be doing within the teaching day' (Hargreaves, 1994:108). At a time when education is in constant flux, teachers are expected to incorporate reforms on a number of levels into their daily practice. The reform agenda has created an environment where those who wish to survive and thrive must

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become involved in an 'increased rate of personal adaptation and professional development' (Day, 2000:125). Teachers must be willing to experience steep learning curves and invest personal time and energy to translate the on-going reforms successfully into effective practice. Professional commitment appears to be highly influential for not only a teacher's success during times of change but also for systems in seeking to bring about change.

The expectation on teachers to respond to current reform initiatives influences their professional lives in a number of ways. At the same time, Dinham (1997) reports that this increase in workload, for many teachers, has spilled over into their personal lives. To make the required personal investments to adapt to these increased expectations, teachers' need to divert scarce personal resources away from areas of life, such as family to professional priorities. Dinham (1997) reports that around 40% of teachers' partners felt that teaching-related issues impact on the personal lives of their families. These issues include the general over work, the unrealistic demands of school and disruptions to personal lives by work expectations (Dinham, 1997). It is apparent, therefore, that many teachers are currently walking a fine line in the way that they are attempting to manage the balance between personal commitments at home and their commitment to teaching.

### **Teacher Commitment**

The teacher commitment literature can be distilled for generalizations and assumptions about the ways that teachers define, describe and characterise commitment. The current accepted conceptualizations of teacher commitment can be directly linked back to the research done in the 1970's into organizational commitment by Kanter (1974) and Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979). Teachers are thought to have commitments to the social context in which they work, or to what Kanter (1974) describes as the 'social system'. However, the overarching assumption is that teacher commitment is not one dimensional, but has many layers and dimensions (Day, 2000, 2004; Nias 1981, 1996; Tyree, 1996).

Individual teacher's commitment, it is presumed, can be analysed to identify centers of commitment in their professional practice. These centers of commitment are currently considered to be external to the teacher, and include commitment to;

- the school or organisation (Graham, 1996; Huber, 1999; Louis, 1998; Tsui & Cheng, 1999).

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- students (Bilken, 1995; Nias, 1981; Tyree, 1996; Yong, 1999).
- career continuance (Nias, 1981; Tyree, 1996; Wood, 1981; Yong, 1999).
- professional knowledge base (Nias, 1981; Tyree, 1996; Wood, 1981).
- the teaching profession (Day, 2000, 2004; Tyree, 1996).

Accepted ideas about teacher commitment assume that it is multidimensional. These dimensions are thought to be external to the teacher but interconnected and have some influence on each other (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Understanding the orientation of an individual's commitment is crucial, as a teacher may behave differently according to those aspects of the profession and organisation to which they are committed (Nias, 1981, 1996; Tyree, 1996).

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that there is a crucial link between emotional attachment to the work of teaching and a teacher's personal level of commitment (Day, 2004; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Fried, 1995; Nias, 1996). This literature challenges the view that teacher commitment is focused exclusively on external dimensions and explores the relationship between teacher passions, values and beliefs, and teacher commitment in a way that characterises teacher commitment as a highly personal way of viewing the self and its relationship to education. This literature takes the position that while teachers do articulate a commitment to external factors (such as students) they also make significant links to personal passions which have clear articulations with ideology, values and beliefs.

We now turn to the findings of an Australian study undertaken to investigate how teachers characterise teacher commitment and lend support to the growing connection between passion and teacher commitment.

### **The Study:**

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This study into teacher commitment is on the research question; *How do teachers characterise commitment?* It assumes that individual teachers will conceptualise the phenomenon of teacher commitment in a variety of different ways (Nias, 1981; Graham, 1996; Tyree, 1996; Louis, 1998). This research question sought to uncover how individual teachers conceptualise commitment, and possible relationships between their commitment and the ways that they practice their commitment. These dimensions of commitment may be interconnected, with an individual possibly exhibiting different levels of identification simultaneously (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

As this study sought to map what is thought to be the ‘collective mind’ of a group of teachers, it was necessary to ensure that participants were representative of education settings, both educationally and geographically. The geographical areas for this study covered Brisbane (suburban), Rockhampton (regional) and Longreach (rural/remote). A range of schools were invited to participate, including: special schools, primary schools, high schools and schools of distance education. The governing body, Education Queensland gave permission for this research to be carried out in the following areas: Brisbane (7 individual school sites); Rockhampton (5 individual school sites); Longreach (5 individual school sites).

Thirty teachers from these sites, with extended teaching experience, were interviewed. Extended teaching experience was defined as having taught for around ten years or more. This study was interested in teachers with extended periods of teaching due to the concern about teacher commitment levels changing over the course of teachers’ careers (Fraser, Draper & Taylor, 1998; Huberman, 1993). Schools were informed via a prepared statement. Teachers were invited to volunteer for interviews based on this information. A selection of teachers from each school was made based on criteria of experience, gender and teaching areas following discussions with the school principal. The selection was made so that the overall sample was representative of these characteristics.

The thirty teachers, who were interviewed, had teaching experience ranging from nine to twenty-seven years. Their teaching experiences were mainly in Queensland state schools. There were representatives from preschool, primary, high and special education settings. A precise statement in regards to the characteristics of the selected sample of teachers is set out below;

**Table 1: Characteristics of Teacher sample**

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Characteristics of Sample				
<b>Gender</b>	Female 18		Male 12	
<b>School Location</b>	<i>Suburban</i> 7	<i>Regional</i> 5		<i>Rural</i> 5
<b>Teaching Context</b>	<i>Special Education</i> 5	<i>Preschool</i> 4	<i>Primary</i> 11	<i>High School</i> 10
<b>Experience</b>	<i>9-14 years</i> 6	<i>15-20 years</i> 4	<i>21-26 years</i> 13	<i>27 years plus</i> 7

Interviews lengths ranged from forty-five minutes to up to one hour each. A semi-structured interview format was used, using a standard set of questions.

It can be argued that the notion and rhetoric of teacher commitment is intimately connected to the very ideology of teaching. Therefore, it is only to be expected that the teachers interviewed would, initially at least, present a very ‘public face’ (Wood, 1992, p. 350). This ‘public face’ or ‘front’ as Goffman (1959) refers to it, is a contrived appearance constructed by the individual in an effort to manage the impressions that others form of them. Methodologically, this means the researcher needs to maintain an open mind and be prepared to sift through many layers of meaning, settling, not for the initial ‘public face’ that is presented by the respondent, but looking further into the layers of reality that are discussed.

The collected data was analysed in order to identify each teacher’s conception of commitment and any factors that impacted on their levels of commitment across the course of their career. The principles that are associated with grounded theory underpin this study (Glaser and Strauss, 1979). The methods of analysis were as follows:

1. Isolate comments and phrases which signify the meaning of commitment within the interviews
2. Cluster together phrases and comments signifying similar meanings
3. Label these clusters with a phrase that represents the core similarity

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The assumption embedded in these methods is that knowledge generated about the meaning of commitment to teaching can be derived through qualitative methods, thus seeking to identify the total set of meanings in play, rather than simply to focus on the extent to which such meanings are evident in the interviews.

Thus, the analysis focused on constructing position statements that characterized how individual teachers were conceptualizing commitment. Here it identified not only the diverse nature of individual's concepts about commitment, but also the many commonalities that existed between the various individuals. In order to ground the data, these metaphors of belief, or position statements, were founded on actual phrases the teachers had used in the interviews. These metaphors were then distilled for conceptualisations of teacher commitment. These conceptualisations emerged from the collected data and there was substantial correlation with the conceptualisations identified in the research of Tyree (1996) and Nias (1981).

From the data six conceptions of teacher commitment in Australian state schools have been identified and these are reported here as six distinct, yet related categories. These six categories represent different ways that teachers perceive, understand and conceptualise the phenomenon of teacher commitment. The six identified categories are:

1. **Teacher commitment as a 'passion'.** This conception sees teacher commitment as a passion or a positive emotional attachment to the work involved in teaching generally, or a specific aspect of teaching.
2. **Teacher commitment as an investment of time outside of contact hours with students.** This conception identified teacher commitment as an investment of 'extra' time outside of expected contact hours with students. This extra time is discussed as either visible time invested at the school site or, invisible time invested off the school site.
3. **Teacher commitment as a focus on the individual needs of the students.** This conception considers teacher commitment to be a sharp focus on the needs of the student. Student needs are discussed as either emotional and/ or academic.
4. **Teacher commitment as a responsibility to impart knowledge, attitudes, values and beliefs.** This conception considers teacher commitment as taking responsibility for imparting a body of knowledge and/or certain attitudes, values and beliefs.

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Teachers who hold this conception place great value on the role that they play in preparing students for the future and take responsibility for passing on a core set of skills, understandings and values.

5. **Teacher commitment as ‘maintaining professional knowledge’.** This conception views teacher commitment as the maintenance of professional knowledge and on-going professional learning. Within this conceptualisation is the notion that committed teachers are proactive in their professional development and in many cases are willing to share with and learn from their colleagues.
6. **Teacher commitment as engagement with the school community.** This conceptions considers teacher commitment to be the willingness to engage with the school and the school’s community. Within this conceptualisation is the belief that teachers have a professional responsibility that reaches out beyond the four walls of the classroom and perhaps even extends beyond the boundary of the school.

One significant finding of this study involves the way in which these teachers appear to be conceptualizing commitment. The mainstream current literature conceptualizes teacher commitment in relation to external centers, however, this study reveals that while teachers do articulate a commitment to external centers (such as students) they also make significant links to personal passions which include ideology, values and beliefs. It seems that the way teachers’ are conceptualizing teacher commitment moves beyond the dimensions of external referents and practice into a more complex and sophisticated notion of passion, ideology and values.

This study finds that teachers conceptualise teacher commitment as six different but inter-related categories. All of these categories are worthy of further investigation and are discussed at length in other work (see Crosswell, 2003). However, in this paper we are focusing our discussion on Category One of this study; *teacher commitment as a ‘passion’*, which identifies the strong connection between passion and teacher commitment. Amongst this sample of teachers there exists a wide-spread connection between the notion of ‘being passionate’ and the conceptualization of teacher commitment. Thus a conclusion could be drawn that there is a very intimate connection between a ‘passion’ for the work of teaching and teacher commitment.

Drawing on the results of the study, we now turn to a discussion about the close association between passion and teacher commitment.

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### **The conceptualisation of teacher commitment as a ‘passion’**

The description of teacher commitment as a passion, emotional involvement or a love of particular aspects of teaching was a significant theme throughout the interviews. Teacher commitment from this perspective is a phenomenon that requires a positive emotional attachment to the job. These teachers believe that a committed teacher is:

*...someone with a love for the job, I think you have to really enjoy the job to do it well.*

(Interview 7, Paragraph 6)

Teachers who hold this conception consider that there needs to be a certain level of emotional attachment to some aspect of teaching for teachers to be committed to the work. This notion that a committed teacher has a passion for teaching and gains great personal satisfaction from certain dimensions of their role was a widely held concept amongst the teachers interviewed.

*I think the main thing, the biggest thing [about teacher commitment], is an enthusiasm, and an obvious love for the job and the kids.*

(Interview 20, Paragraph 25)

*I just enjoy it [teaching]. I get a lot of pleasure out of what I do.*

(Interview 2, Paragraph 70)

*Yes, I love it [teaching]. I mean that is one thing I have always prided myself on is that if there is an outside problem, whether that is personal problems, home or the Department I don't bring it into the classroom, and I don't.*

(Interview 10, Paragraph 49)

Many teachers, such as the teacher quoted above, conceptualise teacher commitment as a general passion for teaching. However, some of the other teachers were very specific about what their particular ‘passions’ were amongst the many diverse elements of teaching:

*The reason I am here is because I love the contact with children, I value that so much. I think that is the reason that I have stayed teaching.*

(Interview 7, Paragraph 21)

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*Your little teaching area is very, very important to you and sometimes it is really hard to understand that other people don't see it as important, it doesn't have the same importance to anyone.*

(Interview 7, Paragraph 47)

*I think that relationships underpin everything. For me it is all about the emotional side of teaching, it is about the relationships and the connection that I have with the little people that I work with every day.*

(Interview 26, Paragraph 19)

The teachers acknowledged that not all of them value the same things, or are willing to invest time and energy into the same areas. This diversity of passion and interest was celebrated by some of the group, as the following comment illustrates:

*... a lot of teachers who put in an enormous amount of time and effort, maybe not in the areas that I do, but that is because they see something else as important. I think it is important for kids to start to think, ...other people might put in time with reading ...other people put an enormous amount of time into sporting teams which I couldn't be bothered with. And that is a good thing I think, because as the kids move through the grades what they miss out on the hurdy-gurdy, they get on the roundabout.*

(Interview 7, Paragraph 60)

Accompanying this notion that a committed teacher has a passion for some aspect of teaching, is the idea that this passion or 'love' of the job is what sustains and motivates these teachers in what many of them consider to be a complex and difficult role. In most cases these teachers seem to transcend the everyday difficulties via the passion they feel for the work. In this regard, these teachers consider this emotional attachment or passion to be the core element of teacher commitment. Passion, rather than merely external rewards or recognition, is seen to be the essential element that sustains and maintains teachers' interest in the job and their willingness to remain in the profession. As one of the teachers suggests:

*You don't come into this job for the money. You don't do it to get rich. You do it for the love of it.*

(Interview 7, Paragraph 13)

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In summary, teachers who hold such a conception have a strong positive emotional connection with teaching in general or some specific aspect of their practice. It is important to note that although some teachers are passionate about teaching in general, others feel passionately about a very specific element of their role. This group of teachers who identify strongly with specific elements of their roles will not necessarily transfer this emotional attachment to all other aspects of their role. In one sense it may be argued that the specific external referents of children, school, subject etc. are not important because these so-called 'passions' appear to act as a sustaining and motivating force in these teachers' professional lives. Even though these teachers consider the job to be complex and demanding it is this involvement with the work at an emotional level that sustains their commitment and dedication to the profession.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The findings from this study support the growing body of literature that challenges the current literature in a highly significant way. As discussed previously, the current literature conceptualizes teacher commitment in a way that relates it to external issues. This study challenges the view that teacher commitment is focused exclusively on external dimensions and explores the relationship between teacher beliefs and teacher commitment in a way that characterises teacher commitment as a highly personal way of viewing the self and its relationship to education. The findings support the growing view that, while teachers do articulate a commitment to external factors (such as students), they also make significant links to personal passions which have clear articulations with ideology, values and beliefs (Day, 2004; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Fried, 1995; Nias, 1996). It appears that instead of just discussing the way they show their commitment that is their practice, teachers are investigating their beliefs about education and their value systems.

Teaching is complex and demanding work and there is a daily need for teachers to fully engage in that work with not only their heads, but also their hearts (Day, 2004; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Fried, 1995; Nias, 1996). It appears to be a professional necessity for teachers to be emotionally committed to their work, for without this emotional connection teachers face the constant danger of burn-out in an increasingly intensified work environment (Nias, 1996). As Day (2004: 11) states, a passion for teaching cannot be considered to be a 'luxury, a frill, or a quality possessed by just a few teachers, instead he argues, a sense of passion is 'essential to all good teaching'.

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Therefore, 'passion, uncomfortable as the word may sound, is at the heart of what teaching is or should be about' (Fried, 1995:6).

These findings have significant implications for both school leaders and systems of education. Ignoring the connection between teacher commitment and passion could be considered to be perilous. School leadership is considered to be highly significant in influencing teachers' levels of commitment to and engagement with new initiatives and reforms (Day, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Louis, 1998). School leaders are considered to be the interpreter and the connector between the school's and the system's goals and priorities and specific teacher practice. Given the core role that 'passion' appears to play in conceptions of teacher commitment it is reasonable to assume that any reforms deemed desirable by schools and systems are only likely to be successful if such reforms are interpreted for teachers in a way that relates to their passions. Thus, school leaders are of crucial importance in establishing and maintaining connections between the new educational ideas and teachers' existing passions and ideological frameworks.

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