Teacher Commitment and Engagement: the dimensions of ideology and practice associated with teacher commitment and engagement within an Australian perspective.

Abstract:

Teacher commitment and engagement has been identified as one of the most critical factors in the success and future of education (Huberman, 1997, Nais, 1981). It contributes to teachers' work performance, absenteeism, burnout and turnover, as well as having an important influence on students' achievement in, and attitudes toward school (Firestone, 1996; Graham, 1996; Louis, 1998; Tsui & Cheng, 1999). This paper will investigate the traditional view of teacher commitment as it refers to external referents and propose that the personal value systems of the teachers is more significant than currently recognised by the literature.

This paper will report on an investigation into teacher commitment and engagement in Australia. The analysis indicates that commitment is best conceived in terms of two dimensions- an ideological dimension and a practice dimension. The significant point about these two dimensions is that while the particular characteristics of the ideological dimension are modified across the career span (in response to person and professional experiences) levels of commitment to particular practices vary (cf. Fraser, Draper & Taylor, 1998; Huberman, 1993). It appears that one of the critical contextual factors that influence this commitment to practice is the extent to which leadership (both at the school and system level) is perceived to understand the teachers' ideological commitment and to express change directions in terms of these. The findings have particular significance for leadership in terms of future change directions.

Introduction:

'Commitment' is a term that teachers frequently use in describing themselves and each other (Nias, 1981). It is a word they use to distinguish those who are 'caring', 'dedicated' and who 'take the job seriously' from those who 'put their own interests first'. Some teachers see their commitment as part of their professional identity, it defines them and their work and they 'get a lot of enjoyment from this' (teacher cited in Elliott & Crosswell, 2001). Other teachers feel the demands of teaching to be significant, requiring great personal investment and view it as a job that can 'take over your life' (teacher cited in Nias, 1981). These teachers often limit their commitment and their engagement with the school, as a means of survival. In some cases, these teachers choose to leave the profession altogether. For these reasons, teacher commitment has been found to be a critical predictor of teachers' work performance, absenteeism, burnout and turnover, as well as having an important influence on students' achievement in, and attitudes toward school (Firestone, 1996; Graham, 1996; Louis, 1998; Tsui & Cheng, 1999).

Teachers' commitment is thought to decrease progressively over the course of their teaching career (Fraser, Draper & Taylor, 1998; Huberman, 1993). At the beginning of a teachers' career, there is an early stage of commitment to teaching associated with the choice of professional identity, followed by a stage of experimentation and search for new challenges, teachers often experience a stage of conservatism and which can lead to eventual disengagement (Huberman, 1993). This transition from an enthusiastic engagement with the profession to a more distanced and limited involvement, reduces a teacher's willingness to reform classroom practice, engagement in whole school initiatives and levels of participation

in extra-curricula activities. A decrease in commitment levels during the course of the teaching career is also problematic in relation to the retention of experienced teachers in the classroom. However, some Australian research suggests that this pattern may not necessarily hold true for teachers in rural schools. Boylan and McSwan (1998) found that teachers who had served in rural schools for more than six years reported a high level of commitment to teaching which appeared to increase as teaching experience increased.

Teacher commitment may be enhanced or diminished by factors such as student behaviour, collegial and administrative support, parental demands, and national education policies (Day, 2000; Louis, 1998; Riehl & Sipple, 1996; Tsui & Cheng, 1999). Evidence presented at the UNESCO International Conference on Education in 1996 suggests that reform policies in many countries in recent years have led to deterioration in the working conditions of teachers, in turn producing demoralization, abandonment of the profession, absenteeism, and a negative impact on the quality of education offered to students (Tedesco, 1997).

Despite these trends, however, research in Australia suggests that there remain a significant number of teachers who display deep commitment to their profession, dedication to their students and innovative and cooperative teaching practices (Crowley, et al., 1998; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2001). The level of teachers' commitment is seen as a key factor in the success of current educational reform agenda.

Teacher Commitment

Commitment is part of a teacher's affective or emotional reaction to their experience in a school setting (Ebmeier & Nicklaus, 1999). It can be seen to be part of a learned behaviour or attitude associated with the professional behaviour of teachers. From these affective reactions to the school setting, teachers make decisions (both consciously and subconsciously) about their level of willingness to personally invest to that particular setting, or particular group of students.

The current teacher commitment literature can be distilled for generalizations and assumptions about the ways that teachers define, describe and characterize commitment. The current 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). However, the profession of teaching is unique in a number of ways. Its very nature involves a complex and rich combination of working relationships with not only the organisation (schools and education systems) but with a number of other stakeholders, including the parents, students and colleagues. To consider the idea of teacher commitment only in these terms adopted by Kanter (1974) and Mowday et al. (1979) ignores many of the factors that are integral to teaching itself. Thus, an extended view of teacher commitment is necessary.

A number of researchers have attempted to distinguish between the meanings that teachers have ascribed to the word commitment (Becker, 1960; Lortie, 1975; Lacey, 1977; Woods, 1979; Nias, 1981; Tyree, 1996). Becker (1960) and Lacey (1997) define commitment as the investment in a particular career, in this case teaching. Whereas, Lortie (1975) regards commitment as the willingness an individual enacts in investing personal resources to the teaching task. Teacher commitment, like organisational commitment, is conceptualised as being multi-dimensional (Nias, 1981). The different dimensions of commitment are thought to be external to the teacher and are outlined below.

Dimensions of Commitment	Teacher behaviour and attitudes	Key Sources
School or organisation	Teachers are committed to a particular organisation's philosophy, clientele, goals, values or even its reputation.	Graham, 1996; Louis, 1998; Huber, 1999; Tsui & Cheng, 1999.
Students	Teachers who act outside the role of 'teacher' and support students in mentoring and coaching roles.	Nias, 1981; Bilken, 1995; Tyree, 1996; Yong, 1999.
Career continuance	Teachers who remain in the profession, although it is demanding, stressful and complex.	Nias, 1981; Wood, 1981; Tyree, 1996; Yong, 1999.
Professional knowledge base	Teachers who continue to extend their own knowledge and expertise.	Nias, 1981; Wood, 1981; Tyree, 1996.
Teaching profession	Teachers who are loyal to the moral values and norms of the profession, even though this commitment may entail significant personal cost.	Tyree, 1996; Day, 2000.

As indicated, the literature identifies a number of external dimensions associated with teacher commitment. A teacher's behaviour will be influenced by what they are committed to in their professional life. However, a teachers' commitment does not fall neatly into one dimension or another. In fact, they may have various levels of identification with different dimensions. However, it is this identification with particular 'commitment centres' that is the key factor in the level of commitment a teacher exhibits (Nias, 1981; Tyree, 1996). This identification with particular commitment centres is highly influential, as it dictates how scarce and limited personal resources such as time and energy will be allocated. For this reason, it is important to investigate further teacher commitment to try and understand how it may influence teachers' professional behaviour.

We turn now to the findings of the study.

An Australian Study:

The study reported in this paper addresses the issue of teacher commitment within Queensland schools. Specifically, this study is framed by the following research questions.

- o *How do teachers characterize commitment?*
- o *Do commitment levels change throughout a teacher's career?*
- o *What specific factors sustain and diminish teachers' levels of commitment?*

This research can be shown to be conceptually and pragmatically significant. Conceptually, it enables a conceptualized model of teacher commitment to be constructed that takes into account the current educational context and the associated issues that affect teachers. Pragmatically, its findings can be used in discussion and planning by education leaders and systems on ways to support, stimulate and enhance teachers' commitment levels.

Twelve primary school teachers were interviewed in their own school settings. These educators had teaching experience ranging from twelve to twenty-five years. 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 (Appendix A).

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 position statements, were founded on actual phrases the teachers had used in the interviews. These statements 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).

Another of the research questions focused on the factors that impact on commitment levels. These factors were identified by Elliott and Crosswell (2001) who drew them from the raw data of the study. The factors can be seen to either sustain or diminish levels of commitment. Three such factors were used in the analysis:

- Personal
- School related
- System related

To discuss the relevance of the study's findings, the two major sub-headings of the research structure will be used.

Characterising teacher commitment: Dimensions of practice

All of the teachers in the study initially started discussing commitment in terms of practice and professional behaviour. They mentioned an aspect of caring for, responding to and meeting students needs as part of their opening responses. This, by far, was the most common element among the twelve interviews. Both Nias (1981) and Tyree (1996) suggest that many teachers see students' welfare and development as a core part of their commitment and their professional practice. This group shares the notion of 'commitment to students' as a common element in their definition of a committed teacher, even though their images of education are across a much broader range.

The second most common element was professional practice. One of the respondents defined a committed teacher as 'someone who is striving to improve on their practice and looking at pedagogies and looking at research. Trying to see what could be better'. Another makes the comment that commitment is enacted by the way a teacher will ' talk and listen to the children and act on this information'. Other aspects of practice that were seen to be behaviours of a committed teacher included: working as a member of a team, working as a

partner withparents, being appropriately prepared for class, being a reflective practitioner and being accountable.

The third most common element, with about half of the teachers identifying it, was the notion of commitment as relating to the use of time. Generally it was expressed in relation to investment of time outside of school contact hours, with one respondent seeing a committed teacher as one who doesn't 'turn up at nine o'clock and turn off at three o'clock'. Another added 'they give a bit more of their own time. Not just nine to five.' Certainly, this notion of investment of personal time appears to be a common measure of a teachers' commitment levels by the teachers themselves. However, one of the respondents pointed out that this investment of time can be misleading or in fact invisible to others because 'some of us leave at two minutes past three and are sitting up to 12 o'clock' at home, planning and marking.

Another view point shared by many of the teachers is that teaching is not 'just a job' (Day, 2000). This can be seen to have intimate links with the notion of commitment as an investment of time. However, it appears that teachers who identify with this not 'just a job' school of thought are demonstrating commitment to teaching as a profession. These teachers, Tyree (1996) suggests, are more willing to take on board a set of common 'teacher' attitudes and roles. Data from the fieldwork indicates that many of these teachers see teaching as an all-encompassing profession, that 'requires all of you' on a daily basis. Some of these teachers have made links between commitment and teaching as a lifestyle. Many of this group define a committed teacher as being someone who often contemplates their class programs and students while engaged in a range of personal activities, for example, shopping, watching television or even in the shower. The concept that teaching is never far from a committed teacher's conscious mind is a re-occurring theme through out the data.

Characterising teacher commitment: Dimensions of ideology

Many teachers initially began to discuss commitment in relation to factors such as caring for, responding to and meeting students' needs; a desire to improve professional practice; management and investment of time as a resource, and; the inability to leave the 'job at the gate'.

However, as each interview progressed, the teachers moved past comments based on practice and behaviour and began revealing more personal views about personal values and philosophies about education. One teacher positioned herself with the following statement: "education is the keystone to how our society operates and how we bring children up to be citizens of the world and society". Another linked her ideology to the "responsibility and the duty of care" she felt as a teacher, and yet another connected a teacher's personal internal values to the general values of education, saying that their "internal values... tend to match".

As these conceptualisations show, each teacher interviewed appeared to hold central beliefs about teaching that could be used to describe their context. These statements give an insight to the personal and professional values of the respondents and appeared to influence an individual's conception of commitment to teaching (Elliott & Crosswell, 2001). Teachers' personal and professional beliefs are clearly related to their commitment. Such beliefs are 'messy' (Pajares, 1992) but are central to commitment. They are formed at an early life stage (Lortie, 1975, Rokeach, 1968), are structured as networks of assumptions (Kitchener, 1986), act as filters to new ideas and knowledge (Posner, Strike, Hewson and Gertzog, 1982, Schommer, 1990), and are extremely difficult to modify or change (Lewis, 1990, Lortie, 1975, Wilson, 1990).

Teacher commitment, therefore, appeared to refer not only to practice but also to the core set of values or beliefs about education that each teacher held. The interviewed teachers revealed identity positions. One teacher made the observation that demonstrating her commitment to teaching is "not something that you just do at work, it is something that is in you". Another took this further by suggesting that it "might just be my personality type. I just want to do a good job". Yet another saw that "commitment is part of you. This is my work, my responsibility and I get a lot of enjoyment from this" (teachers cited in Elliott & Crosswell, 2001, p. 5-6). Such observations suggest internal factors, such as identity, values and beliefs need to be in the forefront of future discussions about teacher commitment.

An analysis of the data suggests that various teachers viewed commitment as;

- caring about children and caring about the philosophy of education.
- building family type relationships around each child and seeing teaching as a central part of the teacher's life.
- providing programs that meet the learning needs of children where the teacher is a flexible and reflective practitioner.
- investment of emotional energy, where the teacher shows care for the students beyond the required duties and thinks about teaching during their personal time.

Teacher commitment, therefore, appears to be viewed by the respondents in relation not only to professional practice but also to a core set of values or beliefs. Teachers interviewed appeared to be attaching both their professional and personal identity to these teacher commitment components. One of the more interesting findings emerging from the analysis was that the manner in which these teachers conceptualised their commitment illustrates a step away from the way current literature describes teacher commitment. It appears that instead of merely articulating a commitment to centres external from themselves, these teachers justified these commitments through their personally held ideologies. Therefore, instead of just discussing the way they show their commitment in their practice, they drew on their beliefs about education and their value systems. These internal factors are considered to be intimately connected to teachers' commitment and Elliott and Crosswell (2001) suggest that that the extent to which any particular practice becomes part of a set repertoire for a teacher may depend on whether it can be reconciled with the internal commitment that a teacher has made to a particular ideology.

Sustaining and diminishing factors

Although, as noted previously, some researchers have reported a progressive decrease in teachers' commitment during their career spans (Fraser, Draper & Taylor, 1998, Huberman, 1993), some of the teachers in the study reported that their levels of commitment remained at a more constant level. Indeed, many felt that their levels of commitment to their ideological position actually increased with time in the profession. One teacher suggested that she is 'probably more committed' at this point of time then she was at the beginning of her career. Another argued that because teaching has become such a demanding and stressful job she couldn't see 'how you could do it unless you were really committed'.

It could be argued that the reason teachers are reporting maintained, or even increased, levels of commitment to their ideological beliefs is because these values and beliefs about education are a central component not only of their professional identity but also their personal identity. An intimate connection could be said to exist between the personal component and the professional component of an individual's life. Therefore many of the life events that occur outside of the professional sphere, such as births, deaths, marriage and divorce, could be seen to impact upon the affective reaction to the work environment.

The teachers reported a range of factors impacted on their levels of commitment. Some of these factors, such as supportive colleagues, reinforced and sustained their commitment levels, whereas other factors, such as lack of acknowledgement from school leaders, diminished their commitment.

Elliott and Crosswell (2001) have analysed the data from the study and categorised the number of factors that sustain and diminish commitment. Some of these factors will be investigated and discussed in the following sections.

Context of Factors	Identified factors that sustain commitment	Identified factors that diminish commitment
Personal Context	**18** Factors revolved around reinforcing personal and professional identity and the importance of being involved in education.	**7** Factors revolved around personal crisis or a consequence of a particular life-stage.
School Context	**24** Factors revolved around positive working relationships and the perception of control and ownership felt by the teacher.	**8** Factors spread between class sizes, resources, negative work relationships, lack of professional support from peers and school leaders.
System Context	**4** Factors such as positive reforms, having control and influence over the reform process and being supported in requests for transfers.	**17** The current reform agenda. Specifically, the amount and pace of change and the lack of support for teachers to adapt to these changes.
Professional	**6** Factors revolved around the teacher being proactive about and responsible for their own professional development.	**0**

Table adapted from Elliott and Crosswell, 2001

Personal Context

As already discussed, the personal and professional components of an individual's life are intricately connected. One of the teachers discussed the need to be 'good at blocking out the personal concerns' because teaching is 'all encompassing' and it requires 'all of your energy and emotion'. Less than a third of all the personal factors were seen to negatively impact commitment levels. However, of the factors reported there seemed to be a common theme

of personal crisis. One respondent reported that following her divorce she was 'just basically pulling myself into work every day and getting through the day' and 'for the next twelve months when things weren't going smoothly in my personal life I wasn't really excited about school. I was just going through the motions'. Another teacher felt that particular personal changes, such as deaths and births really 'make you take stock of your life' and impact significantly on commitment. One particular teacher defines what many of the others touch on, when she states 'if you're unhappy in your personal life then you don't have so much to give as a teacher'.

Many of the teachers reported personal factors that sustained their levels of commitment. Certainly balance and happiness in the personal sphere appear to provide an atmosphere conducive to sustaining levels of commitment. One teacher sees her own and her partner's shared values as a significant factor in sustaining her commitment because they have this culture in their home 'where you worked really hard and you always were thinking about doing your job better and better'. Other teachers suggest that living a balanced life outside of teaching and being 'well rounded' and 'social beings themselves' helps to sustain teachers' levels of commitment. Others see the feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction of a job well done as an ongoing factor that sustains their levels of commitment.

School Context

The school context is significant in that it provides the daily environment where teachers enact their commitment. Again the factors that are being reported to diminish commitment levels are significantly less than factors identified as sustaining commitment. Factors that are diminishing commitment tend to focus on lack of support from colleagues, parents and administration. As one of the teachers states, 'it is very difficult to be in a school where you would like to bring in excitement and change and you never really have support', and another sees that as 'teachers we only ever hear when things go wrong'. One of the teachers has identified the responsibility and stress associated with dealing with parent demands and complaints as one of the major detractors from her commitment.

The school context appears to be the place where the majority of factors that sustain teachers' commitment exist. A common view among the teachers interviewed is encapsulated by this statement, 'our rewards are from the kids, but they're also from the people we work with'. Another teacher states that she sees teaching as a very emotional role and she views the 'relationships and the connection(s)' with the students and the staff as very motivating. These teachers appear to draw much sustenance from their students as well as from the 'support' and 'acknowledgement' of their colleagues. One teacher, describing the staff at her school, says 'there is sort of feeling that it is not just you - people are working with you'. Similarly, Becker and Reil (1999) suggest that there is a particular group of teachers who see teaching as a collective endeavour; these teachers appear to view ongoing relationships with other educators as having positive spin-offs for both their class programs and the standard of theirs students' learning (Glazer,1999 cited in Becker & Reil, 1999).

System Context

Of all the contexts discussed, the system context was the only one that was overwhelmingly identified as having the most factors contributing to the diminishment of levels of commitment. Factors discussed include: the transfer system, and not being consulted on decisions that affect students, schools and teachers. One of the most commonly mentioned factors was the current pace of change. One of the teachers states, 'sometimes the changes are so fast and furious that you could throw your hands in the air and give in', not because she can't adapt to the changes but because ' there are too many things piling up'. Another

sees that she is 'putting in the time but I can't keep up' and that she needs to 'accept that I can't do that even if I think that it is important'. One of the other widely discussed factors was the poor funding and resourcing. One teacher talked about being 'very disheartened when there is a lack of funding for particular areas' and another made the comment that 'as teachers we are continually having to make do, or raise the funds ourselves'.

However, there were some factors identified that teachers saw as sustaining their commitment within the context of the system. These included having more power in school decision making and increased freedom in professional practice. As one of the teachers states, teaching today is ' a lot more professional, even though there is a lot more expected of us, there is more fulfillment'. Flexibility to negotiate part-time work to suit teachers' changing life-styles was also mentioned, as were initiatives that supported teachers' personal teaching philosophies.

Conclusions and Implications

One significant conclusion of this study involves the way in which these teachers appear to be conceptualizing commitment. The current literature conceptualizes teacher commitment in relation to external centers, however, the study reveals that while teachers do initially articulate a commitment to external centers (such as students or practice) they go on to discuss their commitment as a much more complex and sophisticated notion of ideology. It seems that, instead of just discussing the way they show their commitment that is their practice, they are investigating their beliefs about education and their value systems.

This notion that commitment to teaching consists of different components merits further discussion. Two apparent components of commitment can be identified as practice and ideology (Elliott and Crosswell, 2001). Initial responses were generally about commitment to practice and varying aspects of practice. However, respondents went on to outline their practice in terms of their beliefs and values about education. Therefore, commitment can be discussed in terms of an individual's ideological position and the teaching practices that act out and enforce that particular ideological position.

This personal component of identity is central to understanding how the teacher views his/her work. Therefore, it is also central to the processes of educational reform. Central to the success of such reform is a connection between the belief structures associated with teachers' commitment and the organisational goals. The establishment of a connection between the discourses of commitment that are central to teacher identity and the discourses of educational reform is at the heart of the success of any reform agendas. For example when a school system proclaims that it's challenge is "to build a state school system that serves the diverse needs of all sections of the 'public' and that forms a network supporting learning communities and a learning society. Schools need to sustain a curriculum that is general and vocational, virtual and face to face and global and local" (Education Queensland, 1999) steps have to be taken to ensue teachers are able to incorporate this position into the discourses of their identity.

School leaders are faced with the challenge of creating contexts in which teachers can make connections between such school, system and organizational priorities and their personal views of commitment. The processes necessary for such incorporation are difficult because values are formed at an early life stage (Lortie, 1975, Rokeach, 1968), are structured as networks of assumptions (Kitchener, 1986), act as filters to new ideas and knowledge (Posner, Strike, Hewson and Gertzog, 1982, Schommer, 1990), and are extremely difficult to modify or change (Lewis, 1990, Lortie, 1975, Wilson, 1990). Notwithstanding such difficulties Pajares (1992) outlines principles for change within a Piagetian learning framework drawing on concepts of assimilation and accommodation. Essentially the points of reference for

teacher commitment have to incorporate personal and system values in a coherent total. This means that processes of school planning and setting professional development goals have to be seamless.

A number of factors that influence and shape each teacher's concept of commitment have been identified. They can be discussed under the general categories of: personal life, school environment, and issues to do with the system. These findings are significant and have implications at an individual school level and particularly, because of the high level of negative factors at a systems level. The importance of the relationship that exists between a teacher's ideological position and their practice needs to be further understood. By understanding and utilizing this intimate relationship, school and system leaders may be able to effectively support teachers in interpreting and implementing change.

When connections between school and system goals are made with teachers' personal views of commitment, then it can be argued that teachers are "engaged" with the school and the system. These findings have implications for both schools and systems of education. Given the personal-ideological significance in conceptions of commitment it is reasonable to assume that changes deemed desirable by systems are only likely to be successful if they are sensitive to teachers within that personal-ideological framework.

Appendix A

Questions for Semi-structured Interview

1. *How would you characterise a teacher who is highly committed to their profession?*
2. *How would you characterise a teacher who appears to have little commitment to their profession?*
3. *What are you committed to in your work? Tell me about this (trace the source)*
4. *Do you feel that this commitment has changed throughout your career?*
5. *Do you think your views are shared by other teachers?*
6. *What sustains your level of commitment to your professional practice?(trace personal, school and systemic factors)*
7. *What diminishes your level of commitment to your professional practice?(trace personal, school and systemic factors)*
8. *Do you think Education Queensland is concerned about teacher commitment?*

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