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The Qualitative Report

Volume 6 | Number 1

Article 3

3-1-2001

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Joffres, C., & Haughey, M. (2001). Elementary Teachers' Commitment Declines: Antecedents, Processes, and Outcomes. *The Qualitative Report*, *6*(1), 1-22. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol6/iss1/3

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Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate

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This article is available in The Qualitative Report: http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol6/iss1/3

Elementary Teachers' Commitment Declines: Antecedents, Processes, and Outcomes

by

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The Qualitative Report, Volume 6, Number 1 March, 2001
(http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR6-1/joffres.html)

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the organizational, social, and personal factors that may influence elementary teachers' declining commitments. Our findings suggest that when the teachers under study felt unsuccessful, that is, when they experienced low feelings of efficacy and low feelings of community, teachers' commitments' shifted or declined. However, the impact of negative teaching experiences on commitments is far from uniform. Rather the teachers' commitments declined as a function of the teachers' understandings of their perceived failures.

Teacher commitment is crucial to effective schools, teacher satisfaction and retention (Fresko, Kfir, & Nasser, 1997; Singh & Billinsgley, 1998). Research findings suggested that low levels of commitment may result in decreased student achievement tests, higher teacher absenteeism, and increased staff turnover (Kushman, 1992; Reyes & Fuller, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989). Nonetheless, these findings are far from consistent partly because of methodological issues and partly because of the limitations of the existing theoretical frameworks that guided most of the research on commitment. As a result, there are still many unanswered questions about the factors that influence from teachers' commitments.

Studies that looked at associations between teacher commitment with variables such as transformational leadership (Riehl & Sipple, 1996; Singh & Billingsley, 1998), leader consideration and leader initiating structure (Blase & Kirby, 1992; Menzies, 1995) exhibited weak or inconsistent results. For example, studies on transformational leadership (i.e., the degree to which leaders are able to articulate and model school goals and demonstrate instructional and administrative support) (Singh & Billingsley, 1996, 1998; Sheppard, 1996; Riehl & Sipple, 1996) have accounted for very different levels of variance in commitment. Similarly, result findings on leader consideration (i.e., the degree to which leaders exemplify behaviours indicative of warmth, friendliness, mutual respect, and trust), leader initiating structure (i.e., the extent to which leaders focus on production by establishing clearly defined patterns of organizations, channels of communication, and methods of procedure) (Menzies, 1995; Blase & Kirby, 1992; Niehoff, Enz, & Grover, 1990) and commitment are contradictory. Cheng's (1990) sample of teachers did not confirm that principal consideration was related to teacher commitment, and Tarter, Hoy, and Bliss (1989) reported that the significant correlations that they had been established with Pearson's correlations between supportive leadership (i.e., the degree to which principals motivated teachers through constructive criticism and the example of hard work), principal initiating structure, and commitment became non significant when they used multivariate analyses, a problem that Reyes (1990) also encountered in one of his studies on commitment.

Much the same can be said about studies that looked at associations between collaboration, continuous learning, feedback and commitment. For example, while researchers (Singh & Billingsley, 1998; Graham, 1996; Reyes & Fuller, 1995) found that collaboration (defined as two or more teachers working together on a task) was associated with higher levels of teacher commitment, Rosenholtz (1989) found no association between commitment and collaboration. Moreover, using the same set of data, but different definitions of collaboration, Reyes (1992) found a strong association between collaboration and commitment, while Rutter and Jacobson (1986) reported a weak association between the same variables. Similarly, while Lichenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, (1991) and Martinez-Ponz (1990) found that professional development enhanced commitment, Ingersoll, Alsalam, Queen, Bobbitt, (1997), Rutter and Jacobson (1989) found no direct relationship between staff development and teacher commitment.

Similar issues arose when researchers looked for potential associations between teachers' characteristics (e.g., age, education, gender, experience, organizational tenureship, career stages) and commitment. For example, Fresko, Kfir, and Nasser (1997) found that teaching experience was negatively associated with teacher commitment whereas Riehl and Sipple (1996) found that the same variables were not significantly associated. The only exception to the above is teaching efficacy. However, the impact of efficacy on commitment is far from clear and/or consistent. While Louis (1998) and Coladarci (1992) found that teaching efficacy was directly related to commitment, Fresko, Kfir, and Nasser (1997) found that the same variable was not directly related to commitment but was directly related to job satisfaction. Such discrepancies may partly result from different conceptualizations and operationalizations of efficacy. While Bandura (1997) suggested that teacher efficacy reflected a teacher's belief that he or she is personally capable of influencing student learning (self-efficacy or personal teaching efficacy), other researchers (Rotter, 1966; Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977) contended that teacher efficacy is grounded in two sets of beliefs: beliefs about one's own abilities to influence student learning (self efficacy) and beliefs about teachers' (as a group) abilities to influence student learning or general efficacy.

Findings on commitment outcomes, particularly turnover, absenteeism, tardiness, and work performance are also mixed, weak, or inconsistent (Leung, 1997; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Tett & Meyer, 1993). The only exception is organizational citizenship behavior (i.e., discretionary job-related behaviors that promote organizational effectiveness), which has shown a weak but consistent relationship with commitment (Becker, 1992; Niehoff, Enz, & Grover, 1993), although Morrison (1994) has since questioned the construct validity of this concept. Additionally, studies on commitment outcomes have primarily focused on the organizational, and in some cases, behavioural outcomes of commitment to the detriment of the social, normative, behavioural, and emotional consequences that declining commitments may have on individuals.

The above weak or inconsistent research findings have been attributed to diverse factors. First, researchers have used different scales to measure commitment. Second, the instruments that measure commitment, including the longer version of the Organizational Commitment

Questionnaire, have shown poor reliability (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Bar-Hayim & Berman, 1992; Randall, 1990). Third, researchers have also used different definitions and instruments to assess the independent variables, and/or have looked at different aspects of the dependent and independent variables. Fourth, data were not always analysed in the same way. In some studies, data were aggregated across organizations, while in others, they were averaged. Fifth, studies may have suffered from multicollinearity which tends to occur when statistical models include highly correlated or overlapping independent variables. Multicollinearity has been shown to lead to misinterpretation of coefficients, misleading significance levels, and opposite directions of associations. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, Larkey and Morill (1995) and Randall (1990) have suggested that the researchers' tendency to define commitment from reviews of the literature or hybridizations of previous definitions and/or to determine the a priori significance of variables to be studied in relation to commitment while ignoring individuals' own experiences further increased the confusion surrounding commitment.

Furthermore, although it is now widely accepted that the antecedents and outcomes of teacher commitment may be mediated by key social, personal, and/or organizational processes, most of the studies on commitment have neglected to explore the role of key mediators in the predictor-commitment and outcome-commitment relationships. As a result, little is currently known of the impact, or indeed, the existence of such mediating variables or processes.

The purposes of this study were to further explore the antecedents and outcomes of teachers' declining commitments, as well as the different processes teachers engaged in as their commitments shift and fall. Furthermore, since researchers suggested that previously discrepant findings may have been caused by a lack of respondent-generated input (Larkey & Morill, 1995, Randall, 1990), concept redundancy and/or multicollinearity, this research was based on a naturalistic approach.

Methodology

Our interest in commitment grew out of the stories we heard from teachers in graduate school. We began informally to discuss the stories told in classes when commitment was one of the concepts for discussion. Despite the extensive size of the commitment literature we found that it did not match the stories and so we decided that it might be best to go back and theorize from data deliberately gathered in the field.

The study design was guided by the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). Grounded theory seemed appropriate since we wanted to explore the processes that influenced commitment declines from the perspectives of those who had lived such experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Furthermore, although there had been much research done on commitment prior to this study, findings remained inconsistent and we felt that fresh/new insights into this phenomenon could better be gained by listening to and speaking with selected teachers who had experienced fluctuations (i.e., increases and declines) in their commitments.

Fourteen full-time elementary teachers (11 females and 3 males) were selected through theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The basic criterion of theoretical sampling is theoretical relevance. Storytellers' experiences have to be relevant to the phenomenon under study, and, at the same time, they have to present enough similarities and differences to allow researchers to generate multiple, information rich categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since the purpose of the study was to examine the different organisational and individual processes and characteristics that might influence commitment, we looked for volunteers who had experienced changes in their professional commitments. Change was what made storytellers' experiences similar. However, we also looked for teachers whose feelings of commitment had increased or decreased, or both, over the years. Moreover, the differences among the respondents with respect to their age, work experiences, and the number and types of schools where they had worked partly ensured that the data would be rich and varied.

Selected informants were full-time teachers and had experienced shifts and declines in their commitments. Informants' professional experience ranged from 4 to 22 years. Among them, participants had taught at all the elementary grades from Kindergarten to Grade 6 in urban and rural schools the size of which varied from 300 to 600 students. Three of the informants were French immersion teachers and two had taught Special Education programs.

Information was collected through semi-structured interviews. Questions focused on the storytellers' experiences of low commitment, the key players involved in these experiences, and the circumstances in which these experiences were embedded. Participants were interviewed three to five times for periods of 60 to 90 minutes over 6 months. Each interview yielded 60 to 90 pages of transcriptions.

Information was analysed through diverse analytical methods, including pattern identification, clustering of conceptual groupings, the identification of relationships between variables, matrices displaying storytellers' key experiences, constant comparisons, and theoretical memos (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). A case study was written for each informant and reviewed by the appropriate informant for verification and feedback. Case reports were followed by cross-case analyses.

As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1981), the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings were ensured through regular member checking (interpretation of findings from the individual case reports and the cross-case analyses, as well as emerging hypotheses, were regularly discussed with the informants throughout the analyses), peer debriefing with three colleagues, inter- and intra-informants' triangulation of information, thick descriptions, and audit trails.

Results

The teachers experienced multiple commitments that ebbed and flowed with their work experiences. The primary foci of teacher commitments were students and teaching. 50% of the informants ranked their colleagues as the second focus of their commitments, followed by the children's parents, while the remaining 50% placed the children's parents as the second focus of their commitments, followed by their colleagues. Principals were either not mentioned by the participants or ranked in last position. Teachers' commitment to school was peripheral to their other commitments.

The teachers' commitments shifted and/or decreased when they felt unsuccessful, that is, when they experienced low feelings of efficacy and little or no feelings of community. Low feelings of efficacy were fostered by the teachers' inability to influence the students' learning and/or the other community members, to live up to their sense of mission and/or internal professional standards, to continue to learn and grow, and/or to achieve valued goals (e.g., a permanent contract). Low feelings of community, that is, the teachers' inability to build warm and nurturing relationships in their work communities, were facilitated by value incongruence, intra-organizational conflicts, role overload, disorderly classrooms, and specific community members' characteristics.

Factors influencing the teachers' feelings of efficacy

When the teachers under study could not influence the children's learning, they felt profoundly unsuccessful, some to the point of uselessness. Failure to influence students' learning was attributed to a combination of factors, such as inadequate training and/or experience, role conflict and role overload, disorderly class environments, normlessness regarding the school behavioural policies or little support from the school staff (particularly the principal) to enforce existing discipline policies, the principals' failure to develop cultural norms facilitating teachers' learning (e.g., collaboration, mentorship, professional development), minorities' relentless and angry interferences (e.g., parents opposing the implementation of a program), and/or personal characteristics such as a poor self-concept or too high expectations for self.

Respondents often felt unprepared to teach upon completion of their degree, which fostered low feelings of efficacy. Depending on their circumstances, the teachers felt inadequately trained to deal with the many different curricula, classroom behaviour management, large classes, age specific children, children's diverse learning styles, and/or the preparation and presentation of lessons:

I did not feel trained well enough to teach when I got out [of university].... I didn't even know that you had to give a certain amount of minutes of mathematics or science. I thought I could make my own schedule. I felt totally unprepared, I really felt like I knew nothing.

Feelings of inadequacy due to a felt lack of training or experience were not limited to the participants' first teaching experience. Respondents felt unprepared and inadequate whenever they were thrown into a situation for which they had had no prior training/experience, and/or were not given additional professional resources.

The administrators' failure to provide teachers with "constructive, regular, and specific" performance feedback, to promote cultural norms such as collaboration, mentorship, and professional development fostering information exchange and teachers' learning, and/or to implement and enforce school wide behavioural policies fostering orderly class environments, a prerequisite for student learning, acerbated the participants' feelings of inadequacy.

I was very frustrated at the kids because they weren't progressing and they weren't doing what I wanted them to do… and nobody came in and said: 'try this or try that, do this, I'll help you with this or that.' There was a silent rule there that said: 'don't ask for help, you should know those things." I was left completely by myself and I just felt I was not capable. I was devastated.

In turn, the principals' failure to develop cultural norms enabling the informants to improve their performance and/or maintain orderly environments was attributed to their invisibility ("The principal attends lots of meetings, and with him gone for long periods, there is nobody to take care of the discipline and we have no back-up, and it's very frustrating."), their lack of experience in specific areas (e.g., special needs children, French immersion programs), and specific leadership styles (e.g., overly critical principals) and practices (e.g., favouritism) which fostered intra-organizational conflicts, competitiveness, and/or discouraged teachers from exchanging information or working together:

We have extreme sub-groups on this staff. These sub-groups have been chosen by the principal whether he intended or not. They [the chosen ones] are the kind of personalities that want to please him, and he has asked them to do special leadership things. As a result, the staff is quite divided and people don't share their teaching strategies or it happens behind closed door with another individual and nobody else is included.

Intra-organizational conflicts were not necessarily limited to the school staff, be they other teachers or principals. They also happened between teachers and parents and could be just as debilitating for the teachers' feelings of efficacy. Parental interferences, particularly organised ones, often impacted the teachers' job autonomy, which angered teachers and left them feeling powerless. These interferences were often facilitated by the parents' long history of involvement in the school activities, their closeness with other parents, the principals' invisibility or unwillingness to address the issue(s) at stake, and the weak and often silent support of other parents who did not want to antagonize the few angry parents:

The respondents' feelings of powerlessness and their feelings of alienation further increased when the informants' colleagues were divided on the contentious issue(s).

It [a sex education program opposed by specific parents] became a very touchy issue in school because there were teachers who belonged to the same church as these parents and who did not agree either with the new program, and there were times where the situation got to be a mess, and I did feel fragmented. You could only go to certain people and not to others. The staff was quite divided, and that was a big morale downer, and there was not much you could do about it.

Felt unreasonable workloads also precipitated the informants' feelings of failure. Role overload was fostered by teachers' already low feelings of adequacy (informants with low feelings of efficacy often worked endless hours, yet never felt that they had done enough for their classes), too high expectations for self, classes with students at very different levels or disorderly classes, felt helplessness ("Some of my colleagues were very young and they weren't equipped to help me, and the more senior ones, they sympathized, but not so much that they actually offered to help me."), and/or school administrators' unreasonable demands or expectations. Demands were deemed "unrealistic" when teachers did not have enough time/resources/training to adequately facilitate student learning and/or via comparisons with previous assignments and/or actual assignments of comparable others.

When the new principal came in, my class went from 12 to 16 kids. At the same time, I hardly had any teacher time.... There was no way I could do a good job in those circumstances.... These kids weren't learning anything, and I felt defeated because I couldn't help them. This is why I left Special Education. I couldn't remain committed to Special Education after that.

Not only did role overload influence the informants' sense of powerlessness, but it also often led to role conflict, anger and guilt:

I spent 90% of my time and energy on this kid [a special needs kid], and he was not getting quality time, he was getting a lot of time, but he wasn't getting quality time. As for the other kids, I could not spend a lot of time with them because I had to be within 3 feet of that kid. So, I didn't really help that kid very much and I was neglecting the rest of the kids, and that's where I really felt bad. I tried even better, harder, whatever I could think to buffer the effects of that child, but the whole thing was a detriment to the other kids, and I just felt so bad because of that. At the time, I really went through roller coaster periods of just terrible frustration, anger, and guilt.

Felt lack of time, tiredness (caused by the extra hours that teachers put in to try and keep up with their workload and their sense of inefficacy), the guilt that resulted from the teachers' felt inability to address the students' needs, and the informants' concerns for their professional reputation caused many teachers to decrease their contacts with their peers and the children's parents, two potential sources of social rewards. As well, several informants reported that they temporarily sacrificed their leisure time and familial activities to their work, which increased their anger and feelings of guilt toward their family. However, teachers reported that, in spite of these sacrifices, they were often unable to catch up with their work and developed feelings of panic, anxiety, and/or symptoms of ill health:

I have the feelings that I'll never be able to catch up on what I want to do because I just don't have the time, and there is a sense of panic, particularly in the evenings when I think I need to do this and I need to do that. It's like my mind can never rest, and at night, I've difficulty sleeping, or if I wake up in the middle of the night, I just can't go back to sleep. I am really exhausted and there has been many times this year when I felt on the verge of a nervous breakdown, I can see all the signs, you do something and suddenly, for no reason whatsoever, tears come to your eyes, and that has happened to me lots of times. I'll be walking in a department store and I'll suddenly realize that I'm about to cry, and I've no idea why. I guess it's a kind of depression.

Informants also experienced a great deal of dissatisfaction when they became emotionally and intellectually unable to experience teaching as challenging, that is, when they experienced a growing sense of boredom. Boredom and the resulting sense of meaninglessness it facilitated among the informants was often bolstered by a combination of factors, such as little or no professional growth (often acerbated by the schools' lack of emphasis on collaboration and innovation, and felt inadequate professional development), a sense of task routinization, a lack of upward and lateral mobility, and/or a growing disinterest in students ("When you deal with children constantly, you can become sort of burnt out from it."):

I was getting tired of the same routine, and I felt I needed a change... I was experiencing some boredom...I wanted to try something different... [but] when you have worked with the same age level a long time, you are considered maybe an expert at that, or that's your area of expertise, and it sometimes hard to find a different age group. I could slightly change, I could get a grade above or below the one I am currently teaching, that would be easy, but basically that's the same kind of work. I mean it's not a major change, and that's a definite problem with teaching. There is not a lot of opportunities to change within the profession, to change your role, or to change your focus.

Teachers also felt very unsuccessful when they realized that valued goals (e.g., a permanent contract, a principalship) would probably never be met, or would not be met within the time limits that they had initially hoped for. They felt "trapped" in jobs that were no longer relevant to their future plans, which further increased their feelings of role alienation.

I had accumulated quite varied experiences and was angling around for possible chances to enter an administrative position but nothing was opening up and I was becoming restless and frustrated... I was feeling held back, unappreciated, no opportunities to move on, and I was kind of angry at being in the job, and I was not sure I could make a long-term commitment to teaching.

Felt normlessness regarding the allocation of permanent contracts and/or principalships, the administrators' failure to support the informants' valued goals, and perceived non-equitable hiring practices further aggravated the teachers' sense of victimization and dissatisfaction at their work and/or superordinates.

On the other hand, respondents emphasized that their sense of efficacy may have also been affected by specific personal characteristics and/or the interface of personal and organizational characteristics. Teachers noted that shyness, social fear, a high concern for one's professional image, and personal beliefs about teachers' roles (e.g., some respondents believed that asking for help would damage their professional reputation) often prevented them from asking for help or additional training:

When you go into a school, and you're brand new, and you're a fist year teacher, you are very reluctant to draw attention to yourself. So, you just don't go around and ask questions or ask for help.

Shyness and social fear were boosted by the informants' felt lack of teaching experience, lack of familiarity with the community members, and/or already low feelings of efficacy, which, in turn, were fostered by previous poor teaching experiences or, as it was the case for one participant, an overall very poor concept of self.

The informants' locus of evaluation also affected their sense of efficacy. Respondents often felt discouraged and alienated when they combined a high need for recognition with an external locus of evaluation and worked in communities where neither recognition nor support was fostered. As one teacher suggested: "I'm not very confident, and if somebody, particularly somebody in authority, isn't seeing me as competent, I start to question whether I am competent." As well, when teachers had an internal locus of evaluation and low feelings of adequacy or set up for themselves expectations that they could not reached, they often felt overwhelmed by feelings of failure.

My unhappiness in teaching was caused by my own doubts about my abilities. I had lots of feedback telling me I was really good at teaching, but I never felt it or believed it and I would live these doubts day in and day out, and I was not sure I should be a teacher.

My administrator told me that the way to handle my workload was to cut back on the amount I taught per class and per subject because it was just impossible to cover each subject in the depth I wanted to. However, I found that very difficult to accept. It didn't suit my style. I tend to be a perfectionist and I wanted to do better than a good job. I wanted to be able to teach my subjects to the depth I wanted to, and I have always been like that. So, I was feeling very frustrated because of my own expectations. It was definitely my expectations but I couldn't let go of them.

Additionally, teachers noted that their endless attempts at reaching their internal standards led to a great deal of pain, "exhaustion," and discouragement:

There is that work ethic that I have. If I am hired to do something, I try to do it well. It's like a sense of fairness. So, I would work hours and hours. I constantly felt I had to do more and more, and at the same time, enough was never enough, and things were never good enough. I had set up standards I could never reach, no matter how many hours I worked, and I couldn't let go of them, and I was exhausted because of the hours I put in. The last few months [of the academic year] were just agony, I couldn't wait until the day was over, until I could leave. There was so much pain in that [process] that I had to stop teaching.

Tolerance for frustrations also influenced the teachers' satisfaction with their environment and/or roles, and subsequently impacted their feelings of success. The less sensitive to frustrations respondents were, the more frustrations they could endure before their commitments shifted. The teachers' ability to tolerate frustrations was partly influenced by their feelings of efficacy at the time in that the less efficacious teachers felt, the more likely they were to be sensitive to frustrations, which, in turn, was partly influenced by their previous working experiences. This sensitivity was also exacerbated by felt value incongruence and the existence of coalitions at work. Coalitions strengthened the teachers' beliefs that their working experiences were unsatisfactory since they primarily associated with like-minded colleagues, thereby gaining conviction in the strength of their beliefs and validating their unsatisfactory experiences.

Felt value incongruence and the extent to which participants held dear the values that were challenged in their work environment influenced both their feelings of efficacy and their feelings of community (lack of value congruency increased the participants' feelings of alienation):

That year I had a lot of difficulties. What I believed in, and what I tried to do wasn't supported by the administration, and I just couldn't say: 'That's alright, I'll do what you are doing.' When you have a true commitment, it's hard to give up on the values you believe in…and so, I became more and more frustrated and I started thinking: 'What the use of being there?' Thank goodness, it was April or May, so the end of the year wasn't too far.

Value incongruence increased the informants' feelings of isolation as it limited opportunities to develop warm relationships with the community members (and thus feelings of community) but it also undermined collaboration, a valuable source of efficacy for most teachers, since informants refused to work with colleagues who held different values. Informants also noted that value incongruence decreased their job autonomy because they were reluctant to continue behaving or teaching in ways that were frown upon in their work communities for fear of reprisals (e.g., a poor performance evaluation or further isolation), a process which angered them and induced feelings of self-betrayal (informants felt that they betrayed the teachers they wanted to be or ought to be).

Teacher-teacher or teacher-principal value incongruence was fostered by careless hiring practices (i.e., hiring practices with little or no emphasis on the job applicants' values and goals), the principals' failure to engage the school staff in discussions or decision making processes around the school goals and values and/or to role model these goals and values, large teacher turnovers, and/or the transfer of a principal to a school the staff of which strongly believed in values that differed from the new principal's. As mentioned earlier, value incongruence was not limited to in-school staff. It also happened between parents and teachers and was devastating for the informants, particularly when parents formed a well-organized and rather aggressive coalition and when school administrators were noticeably invisible.

Teachers who could not live up to their internal sense of mission or do what they deeply believed in felt that they had to impersonate individuals who were alien to them. This felt obligation to playact someone they were not and its subsequent feelings of self-betrayal, anger, and guilt often induced a deep sense of self-estrangement in the respondents, particularly when informants did not feel any support in the work communities:

All my energy went into trying to figure out what the principal wanted and in doing things I didn't believe in. I lost the sense of freedom and the high energy I had when I did do things I believed in… I also felt guilty for not being true to my convictions… but I didn't feel I could be honest. So I played a role, and my role was to follow the principal's directives, to do things I didn't believe in, and, in the process, you lose yourself because you try to be someone you are not.

Whenever possible, these teachers looked for like-minded colleagues and created coalitions, thereby further fragmenting the school culture and increasing their feelings of alienation.

Factors influencing the teachers' feelings of community

As indicated above, value incongruence increased the teachers' feelings of isolation and alienation as teachers would not collaborate with community members whose goals and values differed from their own. When it did not foster isolation, it fostered intra-organizational conflicts, particularly when community members strongly believed in the values and goals being challenged in their work environments and when were able to find like-minded colleagues.

Similarly, role overload and disorderly class environments prevented teachers from developing nurturing relationships with other community members. We described earlier how teachers who felt overwhelmed by their workload tended to cut down on their social and familial activities and increased the time that they spent on class-related work. This social withdrawal both angered and relieved the informants. It angered them when they had to cut on their familial activities, but it relieved them as far as their colleagues were concerned, primarily because they felt that many educators still considered a teacher's inability to meet his or her workload a personal as opposed to an organizational problem that revealed the individual' inability to adjust to his or her environment. Teachers with disorderly classes echoed a similar concern for their professional image, which also led them to distance themselves from specific community members.

I have distanced myself from the staff. My class is so noisy, there is so much screaming going on, that everybody sort of wonders what's going on, and that bothers me. I really wonder what people think about me… and so, right now, somehow, it feels safer for me to keep to myself and not to mix too often with the staff.

Low feelings of community were also fostered by the teachers' felt inability to influence the school decisions and goals. Lack of participative decision making processes, the teachers' inability to influence the principals' decisions regarding the school budget and school wide norms regarding educational matters, the principals' unresponsiveness to teachers' complaints, favouritism, and/or the principals' conflict resolution tactics and overall emphasis on structure and rules strengthened the informants' feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and meaninglessness:

It [the school] just kept being a negative place and three or four of us complained to the principal about it, but he was just really unresponsive… And that was when I started thinking: "What's the use of being there? The principal doesn't want me, he doesn't need me, really what's the use of being there?"

Generally, informants found it difficult to build nurturing relationships with community members who were invisible, unsupportive, overly critical or aggressive, who attempted to infringe on their professional autonomy through hostile influence tactics, or who tried to rally them against another community member whom they admired or respected. They also expressed as strong dislike of educators who tended to put their personal or professional concerns ahead of the children's and/or did not show a strong commitment to the children's learning.

Again, the participants' tolerance for frustrations, the extent to which informants held dear the values that were challenged in their work environments, and their unwillingness or inability to ask for help when in difficulty further precipitated the participants' feelings of alienation and victimization.

The impact on low feelings of efficacy and community on teachers' commitments

The shifts and falls of teachers' commitments reflected the teachers' understanding of their negative experiences. Commitments decreased in function of the teachers' causal attributions for their perceived failures. When teachers attributed their inability to impact student learning and/or develop a sense of community to students and specific community members, their commitments to the children and these community members decreased:

My commitment to the students and some parents decreased as I felt betrayed by them. We had worked very hard building the concept of 'community school,' and this was undone by the actions of a few students and parents. This incident, combined with a few other things, gave me reason not to trust speaking or interacting with them other than strictly as a district employee and teacher whereas before I had considered them more like friends.

In contrast, when teachers did not attribute their lack of success to the children, their commitment to the children did not decrease, whereas their commitments to those whom they felt responsible for their failures declined:

At that time, I still felt committed to the children, they had nothing to do with the situation, but I was very angry at my principal and at the school district for not ensuring that all the money for Special Education did go to Special Education. My commitment to them was certainly gone.

When participants felt particularly hurt by a group of people, not only did their commitment to these people declined but so did their commitment to their school and their commitment to the other members of the group whom these people represented or worked with:

The pain was just too great, and so, not only did my commitment toward the persons that were responsible [for the felt pain] decreased, but my commitment to the larger community or group that these people were supported by also decreased, and I started looking for other schools.

All the informants, but one, reported that some of their commitments (commitment to teaching and/or commitment to specific community members and/or their schools) had declined at least once during their careers. The difference between informants who lost their commitment to their schools (and specific work community members) and those who lost their commitment to teaching resided in their feelings of hope. Respondents who had had a majority of positive teaching experiences prior to their negative experiences tended to believe that they would find another environment in which they would thrive again. Inversely, informants who had had several negative experiences in a row or more negative than positive experiences lost any hopes to find teaching fulfilling again. These informants either left teaching, if only temporarily, or remained in the teaching profession (particularly when there were no other job opportunities in their area and/or the informants were not prepared or could not move), even though they recognized having no commitment to teaching at the time.

As noted earlier, felt lack of success was often combined with anger, feelings of powerless, shame, and feelings of role, social and cultural alienation. Additionally, participants launched into diverse processes that aggravated their feelings of dissatisfaction. They increasingly "obsessed on" their aversive experiences. This included actively searching for new reasons to complain ("You increasingly focus on the negative things, and, of course, you find them. In fact, you even search for these things, they justify you being angry."), and intensifying their predictions of further deteriorations ("We [unhappy teachers] would anticipate circles of disaster if things didn't change."). Some also re-activated latent beliefs about teaching ("I let myself think again that teaching the lower grades was not a man's job."), internalized new beliefs about self, community members, and teaching ("Lately, I have learned that teaching is very frustrating." "I just can't do a proper job in any of my class."). Ultimately, as participants noted:

Negativity breeds negativity, and you become more and more negative… Once you start this down spiral, it's just like a spinning ball, and the only way to stop it is to leave the school.

To decrease or soften the emotional impact of their growing frustrations, the teachers searched for like-minded colleagues and formed cliques, whenever possible. Cliques helped informants reduce their feelings of isolation, provided them with some welcome emotional reassurance, and helped them maintain some sort of connectedness. Nonetheless, the emotional relief that these coalitions provided was short-lived as coalitions also reinforced the teachers' feelings of cultural and social alienation via comparative, normative, and confirmative processes ("You need those friends [like-minded teachers], it's like a perception check: I'm okay, but, in the end the frustration is still overwhelming."). Comparative processes allowed informants to compare their situations and emotional wellness with those of other group members and/or previous experiences and increased their "negativity" against specific community members. Normative processes helped respondents establish mutually agreed-upon bases for appropriate and inappropriate behaviours and role-models. Validation and confirmation processes enhanced like-minded individuals identification with one another, but they also fostered the crystallization of opinions, group polarization, and they further cut down the respondents' chances at developing warm relationships with all the community members.

Like-minded individuals distanced themselves psychologically and physically from community members by "tuning them out at meetings," and avoiding common spaces (e.g., the staff room). Depending on the respondents' unique circumstances, avoidance strategies included principals, specific colleagues, and parents:

My relationships with these parents were kept to a minimum. In fact, they were nil, except for parent-teacher interviews. I stopped calling home for positive things and I didn't call either for negative things.

The nature of the informants' relationships with their students changed. Overloaded teachers who did not attribute the students' lack of learning/progress to the students complained that they could not develop the kind of relationships they had hoped for with their students, which angered them as warm relationships with students was one of the social rewards they most coveted. Teachers who attributed lack of learning/progress to the children suggested that they became "rather cool, demanding" toward these children, and respondents who had conflictual relationships with the children's parents became increasingly "uncomfortable" in the presence of their (the parents') children, which also affected their behaviour toward the students:

I became distant from these [aggressive] parents, and I became very careful with the children of these parents. I was very careful about what I said around these kids and about the information I sent home. I supposed I might have lowered my [academic] expectations toward these kids, perhaps giving them some 'back-off grades, but I was jut trying to avoid problems.

Informants developed increasingly negative attitudes toward the community members whom they felt responsible for their dissatisfaction and/or for those who failed to support them. Derogation, blaming, and critical postures solidified ("We called them [other teachers] the lackeys, meanwhile they were busy accusing us of being incompetent and blamed us for the school discipline problems."), and anger built up. The joy, energy, and enthusiasm that these teachers had experienced when teaching vanished.

The teachers' focus shifted from the children's learning and diverse school activities to self-preservation ("You are just thinking about ways to survive"). Partly out of anger and partly out of demoralization, several informants indicated that they "started to do what was just considered [their] job," which in turn, decreased the intrinsic satisfaction that they derived from their work and further undermined their chances at professional fulfillment. They decreased their involvement inside their classes and/or schools. They stopped volunteering for extra-curricular activities, refused to collaborate with and support the initiatives of felt unsupportive and/or aggressive community members, resigned from diverse leadership positions, and became increasingly busy at trying to find ways to rationalize their new attitudes and behaviours:

Of course, if you try and you're not getting any support, you start getting into that self-fulfilling prophecy that it's not worth trying and that's what happened to me… I felt like I had lost all my value, so what was the use of working?

Informants also shied away from risk-taking ("I stopped taking initiatives, developing new projects, trying new things, and I started to put things off."), cut down on the time that they used to spend on class preparation and/or correction, and required more time to complete specific routine school activities:

I do see difference in the way I taught last year and the way I teach this year. I've cut back on what I used to do for the kids, like very detailed lesson preparations, where you are preparing things specifically for children who are either above or below the norm. I am just too tired, I don't have the energy to do that anymore.

They redirected their energies toward other activities in the larger community:

There was a kind of low time in my career, I was feeling drained, perhaps a bit burnt out, and so I immersed myself in activities outside school, and I designed and built my own home. That gave me an outlet that I wasn't able to have in teaching.

However, one informant who had been warmly supported by her Anglophone colleagues during a lengthy conflict with Francophone parents also redirected her energies toward extra-curricular school activities developed by her Anglophone colleagues.

As informants' commitments declined, and further adding to their sense of alienation, respondents felt obligated to present themselves to other community members as if they were committed:

Of course, when you lose your commitment, you still want to appear committed, to portray an image of being committed... I would talk and act as a committed teacher, go through the motions one could say, but I would not have a real gut or heart felt sincere commitment, and that would cause feelings of frustration, guilt and self-betrayal, a sense of not being sincere.

This acting and the informants' constant comparisons with perceived committed teachers often resulted in increased feelings of fear, guilt, shame, and self-estrangement:

What I felt the most was shame, shame that I was not being true to myself, shame for pretending to be effective, and I started thinking: 'If I cannot teach, if I cannot be a good teacher, what am I?' And you go back to being 12 year old and you have lost your identity because if you cannot be a good teacher, then who or what are you?

The informants' feelings of failure, their subsequent guilt, fear, acting, and their growing feelings of alienation resulted in informants developing a sense of pointlessness that resounded throughout the retelling of their negative experiences. Ultimately the participants' feelings of meaninglessness boosted their sense of worthlessness and permeated their personal lives. As one participant pointed out: "You are depressed, you feel valueless, you feel worthless. You loose your self-esteem, your confidence in yourself and, in the end, you loose yourself." Feelings of meaninglessness also affected the respondents' physical and emotional health. Illnesses went from serious to milder disorders such as hair loss, loss of appetite, digestive problems, sleep disorders, severe headaches, exhaustion, the development of nervous problems, and depressive feelings.

The last year, I was really not feeling good... I was desperately, desperately tired. I was so worn out. I could not sleep well, I didn't have the energy to react, to fix things up. I was losing my hair, my nails weren't growing. I had trouble getting up in the morning. I was more apt to cry, to be upset, more apt to be mad. I was really disturbed by what was going on, and physically, I just couldn't go on. I was back at survival level.

Teacher absenteeism increased, and while some teachers started to search for new schools or revisited their commitment to teaching, others considered leaving teaching:

There used to be a time when my world was around teaching. However, this is no longer the case. I am already putting 10 hours a day. There is a lot more I could do, but why should I? Before my payoff was how I felt about myself. In my other school, I believed I was competent. I was told I was good and these kids and my principal made me believe in myself. In this school, kids are wild and I need some support and I'm not getting it, and I really don't feel good about myself. So, where is my payoff? The excitement I used to feel in this profession is gone, and I am not sure I want to continue teaching.

Discussion

This study has several advantages. First, it presents a coherent and comprehensive model of selected elementary teachers' declining commitments, including predictors, processes, and outcomes. In this model, low feelings of efficacy and low feelings of community are the direct determinants of the informants' declining commitments. In turn, low feelings of efficacy and community are fostered by diverse organizational (e.g., lack of collaboration) and individual characteristics (e.g., the participants' beliefs in specific values and goals). Second, it enhances our understanding of the social processes that may accelerate commitment declines and of the individual, social, organizational consequences of declining commitments. Third, it also clarifies the ways in which the commitments of specific teachers may decline (not randomly but according to the teachers' understanding of their work experiences), an area so far unexplored. Finally, this paper may also contribute to our understanding of the concept of efficacy.

Informants' low feelings of efficacy were fostered by a combination of factors, which included the participants' felt inability to influence student learning, fulfill their internal sense of mission, meet their own professional standards, boredom, unfulfilled expectations, the informants' failure to influence specific school decisions, and specific leadership characteristics (e.g., overly critical principals, principals unable or unwilling to implement and/or enforce school wide behavioral policies, and/or principals with little or no experience regarding specific programs such as French immersion).

Failure to influence the children's learning was attributed to felt inadequate training or knowledge of specific curricula, age-specific children, specific types of children (e.g., special needs children), and classroom management techniques, role conflict and overload, disorderly environments, the schools' lack of emphasis on cultural norms that fostered collaboration, a leadership that discouraged respondents from asking for help, exchanging information, increased intra-organizational conflicts (facilitated by favoritism or value incongruence), and/or organized parental interferences.

Disorderly environments were facilitated by the principals' invisibility and/or frequent absences, and/or by the principals' unwillingness or inability to implement and enforce school wide behavioral policies, and parental interferences were facilitated by the parents' history of involvement in the school affairs, their closeness with other parents, the principals' invisibility, and intra-organizational conflicts around controversial issues.

Boredom and the participants' failure to achieve valued goals (i.e., a permanent contract or a principalship) were attributed to the schools' lack of emphasis on professional development and/or collaboration, and, in one case, in a growing disinterest in children, within- or between-school lack of lateral or upward mobility, normlessness with respect to the attribution of permanent contracts and principalship, and the principals' failure to support the informants' goals.

That teacher efficacy is related to teachers' commitment confirms previous research on the same issue (Louis, 1998; Coladarci, 1992; Reyes, 1992). However, whereas other studies found a relationship between efficacy and teacher commitment, this study also describes a sequence of events and intermediary variables that may lead to decreased efficacy. In other words, we were able to show that commitment was linked to the feelings of efficacy of the research informants, which in turn, were affected by diverse organizational and individual characteristics, which were also fostered by certain organizational and individual factors. For example, the feelings of efficacy of our respondents were influenced by parental interferences, particularly organized ones, which, in turn, were impacted by the parents' history of involvement in the schools' affairs, their closeness with other parents in the community, the principal's invisibility, and staff disagreement around the issues at stake. As well, whereas Reyes (1992) found that efficacy was related to teachers' organizational commitment and Coladarci (1992) that efficacy was related to commitment to teaching, we found that efficacy could either be related to teachers' organizational commitment or commitment to teaching depending on the teachers' understanding of his or her situation, which itself was influenced by his or her work history and the presence of coalitions at work. Additionally, we found that low feelings of efficacy can also affect teacher commitments to specific community members under specific conditions, which are described in the result section.

With respect to the conceptualization of efficacy, that is, whether efficacy primarily represents a teacher's beliefs about his or her ability to teach or is a combination of a teacher's belief about his or her personal teaching efficacy and the overall efficacy of teachers in general, our conversations with our participants led us to believe that they evaluated their ability to influence student learning on what they had been able to achieve in prior work experiences and against comparable others, that is, against teachers who had been or were in similar situations. However, the impact of comparisons with comparable others may not be significant since we also noted that informants tended to reject comparable others' experiences when they were not congruent with their own. Participants emphasized that efficacy was contingent to the class they got, the other community members, specific school characteristics, as well as specific individual characteristics, and the informants' awareness of the ecological 'fragility' of efficacy made it hard for them to think in terms of general teaching efficacy. As well, our data suggests that efficacy may not be the stable characteristic mentioned by Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998).

Other researchers (Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Fresko, Kfir, & Nasser, 1997; Kushman, 1992; Rosenholtz, 1989; Reyes, 1992) also found that value congruence, support, and collaboration tended to facilitate the teachers' commitments. However, again, our study outlines the sequence of events that ultimately led to the declining commitments of the teachers studied in this research. As well, we found that the respondents' feelings of community affected their feelings of commitment toward the community members, a finding which may not be surprising but that had not been addressed in the literature because previous research on commitment focused on commitment to teaching and organizational commitment to the detriment of other commitments.

Low feelings of community, that is, the informants' inability to build meaningful relationships in their work environments were fostered by felt value incongruence, rivalries or professional competitiveness, organized and aggressive interferences from specific community members, specific leadership styles (e.g., unresponsivness to teachers' complaints, emphasis on structure), role overload and role conflict, and disorderly environments.

Respondents noted that specific individual characteristics, such as feelings of shyness, high representational concerns for one's professional image, lack of familiarity with the community members also prevented them from asking for, and thus receiving, help. Additionally, a low tolerance for frustrations, too high expectations for self combined with an internal locus of evaluation, or already low feelings of adequacy and an external locus of evaluation in an environment where recognition and positive feedback were inexistent, and/or the extent to which informants held dear the values that were challenged in their work environments further accelerated the informants' feelings of failure. In turn, the extent to which informants tolerated frustrations and the participants' feelings of adequacy at the time of their negative experiences were influenced by their previous work experiences, intra- and inter participants' comparisons between previous and actual work communities and/or previous and actual work experiences, and by the presence of coalitions at work. However, most of these findings need to be confirmed since other research on teacher commitment focused on different individual characteristics (age, gender, organizational and professional tenureship, marital status, and education).

As indicated earlier, we also found that commitment declines were informed by the informants' understanding of their negative experiences since commitments decreased in function of the teachers' causal attributions for their perceived failures. Feelings of failure did not necessarily lead to a decrease of the participants' commitment to teaching, unless informants experienced hopelessness (which was fostered by an accumulation of negative experiences [at least two], and/or the participants' inability to move to a different school (e.g., particularly felt in rural areas). Instead, respondents indicated that unsatisfactory working conditions diversely affected their commitments, depending on their attributions of causes as to their felt lack of success. Nonetheless, this finding is still exploratory and needs further confirmation.

Unsuccessful respondents seemed more likely to develop unfavourable attitudes toward specific others, including administrators, their peers, parents, specific children or groups of children, and, in some cases, district superordinates, distance themselves physically and psychologically from specific community members and/or their work communities, decrease their behavioral involvement at school and/or in their classrooms, experience feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, normlessness, social and cultural alienation (facilitated by intra-organizational conflicts, competitiveness, and value incongruence), self-betrayal (induced by their playacting individuals foreign to them), and worthlessness). The teachers' feelings of alienation were often reinforced by different phenomena, such as the emergence of countercultures (facilitated by the formation of cliques), the teachers' increasing tendency to dwell on their negative experiences and their search for validation. Schools also appeared to be affected by the informants' declining commitments since absenteeism and turnover increased, and teachers stopped communicating and collaborating. We also have some evidence that declining commitments not only impacted the teachers' professional lives but their personal and social lives as well.

Respondents' consistently low ranking of principals in terms of commitment may be explained by the fact that, overall, participants reported having had more "negative" than positive experiences with principals. They also felt that principals had a lot of power in shaping school environments and thus over their every day lives.

While some behavioral and organizational outcomes of the participants' declining commitments support previous research by Rosenholtz (1989), the social and emotional outcomes need to be confirmed by further studies. So do the diverse processes (e.g., forming collations, playacting, focussing on one's negative experiences) which teachers engaged in as their commitments declined.

The respondents' determination to maintaining an appearance of commitment is also a novel finding that may explain why some of the previous research on commitment has produced conflicting results. The implications of this result may be important since principals may not be able to address some of the issues that teachers with declining commitments face if they cannot differentiate committed from uncommitted teachers. Further research in this area may include whether or not and how principals can distinguish committed from uncommitted teachers, as well as what they do to try and help teachers whose commitments may decline.

The above findings may not be generalizable since this research was based on fourteen storytellers and we have identified concepts and/or relationships between concepts and commitments that have not yet been confirmed by other studies. As well, since the informants' commitments were influenced by multiple factors such as the respondents' personal characteristics, their history, their hopes and ambitions, the situations in which they taught, and past socio-cultural influences, findings may not be appropriate and/or transferable to different teachers, not to mention individuals in different professions. Readers will have to determine the appropriateness of the study findings for their given circumstances.

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