Teacher commitment trends: Cases of Hong Kong teachers from 1997 to 2007

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1. Introduction

The problem of a high turnover rate in the teaching profession has been attracting increased attention. In the USA, Ingersoll and Smith (2003) pointed out that 40–50% of all beginning teachers had left teaching within 5 years and suggested that an improvement in teachers' working conditions is urgently needed to curb the high rate of attrition. In the UK, many primary schools had to recruit overseas teachers to fill the posts in 2002, and 8% of teachers taking up posts did not have qualified teacher status. Extensive national-level curriculum and assessment reforms were deemed the major factors contributing to increasingly unattractive working conditions in the UK (Webb et al., 2004). Teacher commitment, appropriately defined as 'the degree of psychological attachment to the teaching profession', has gained increased research interest at a time when the problem of teacher retention concerns many countries in the world (Coladarci, 1992; Fresko, Kfir, & Nasser, 1997; OECD, 2005).

Since commitment became an area of research in the education field in the 1980s, a rich knowledge of the antecedents and consequences of teacher commitment in the context of Western societies has been accumulated. However, little systematic study on teacher commitment trends in Chinese communities has been identified. Like their counterparts in the West, teachers in Hong Kong have experienced a spate of education reforms in the last decade since the political transition in 1997. In fact some primary schools were reported to be troubled by a lack of qualified teachers to fill vacancies since 2005, after over 1000 experienced teachers departed the profession in 2003 and 2004 (Choi & Tang 2005). The present study employed the life history method to investigate 23 Hong Kong teachers' self-appraisal of their commitment levels in their career course and factors contributing to such trends. It seeks to add new understanding to the global concern of the commitment crisis, and offers insights into teacher retention strategies.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Studying teacher commitment

The concept of commitment has been widely used in organizational research to analyze both individual and organizational behavior from the late 1950s. Researchers in the educational field have only begun to study teacher commitment since the 1980s (McPherson, Crowson, & Pitner, 1986). Commitment studies in the 80s fall into three different perspectives, which present findings with different foci (Reyes, 1990). Since commitment became an area of research in the education field in the 1980s, a rich knowledge of the antecedents and consequences of teacher commitment in the context of Western societies has been accumulated. However, little systematic study on teacher commitment trends in Chinese communities has been identified. Like their counterparts in the West, teachers in Hong Kong have experienced a spate of education reforms in the last decade since the political transition in 1997. In fact some primary schools were reported to be troubled by a lack of qualified teachers to fill vacancies since 2005, after over 1000 experienced teachers departed the profession in 2003 and 2004 (Choi & Tang 2005). The present study employed the life history method to investigate 23 Hong Kong teachers' self-appraisal of their commitment levels in their career course and factors contributing to such trends. It seeks to add new understanding to the global concern of the commitment crisis, and offers insights into teacher retention strategies.
expectations voluntarily, exerts considerable effort for the good of the commitment object, and has a strong desire to remain affiliated with the commitment object (Firestone & Pennell, 1993).

However, the psychological approach pays little attention to the social influences on the person’s internal processes. The sociological approach addresses such a limitation by attending to the articulation between the personality system and the social system. Many of these studies investigated the relations between teacher self-efficacy and organizational culture (Reyes, 1990; Cheng, 1990; Yu, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2002).

Since the 1980s, researchers in the West have increasingly recognized the complexities of teachers’ work and lives. Teacher commitment began to be studied from a new perspective of the teacher’s career. This perspective acknowledges the interactive dynamics of complex forces in teachers’ personal, institutional, and systemic contexts, which are mediated by the broader social historical landscape (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Gu & Day, 2006; Huberman, Thompson, & Weiland, 1997; Kelchtermans, 2005; Smethem, 2007; Ware & Kitsantas, 2007). Studies following this conceptual framework give evidence that teachers vary in their objects and intensity of commitment in different life and career phases. Certain objects of commitment appear to be more central than others in certain career situations and intensity changes over time due to various forces in teachers’ lived experiences.

2.2. Objects and intensity of teacher commitment

School organization is a widely-studied category of commitment object because of its direct relationship with teacher retention. Teachers committed to the school organization were willing to exert effort for the organization and showed a strong desire to remain part of the organization (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Reyes, 1990). It is important to note that teachers who intend to quit a school may still have a positive, affective attachment to the teaching profession. Researchers have further broken down this commitment to the teaching profession into three classes: teaching as a profession, a vocation and a career. These show teachers’ varied orientations toward teaching respectively as a dedication to improving one’s knowledge and skills for social utility, a calling in a missionary sense to promoting children’s welfare, and an investment in a life-long occupation (Coladacci, 1992; Little & Bartlett, 2002; Nias, 1989).

Commitment to students has been found to be a core category of teacher commitment, which is further differentiated into a few sub-categories (Louis, 1998). Teachers who are committed to student learning show a willingness to devote effort into ensuring such learning, and have high expectations that students will learn (Dannetta, 2002). Commitment to subject discipline is another distinguished sub-category and is regarded as a context for teacher–student interaction (Little & Bartlett, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

A few widely circulated studies have investigated the ups and downs of the commitment level of teachers in Western countries. (Huberman’s, 1989) study of 160 Swiss secondary teachers’ professional life cycles showed that teachers follow a number of trajectories in their career. Huberman et al. (1997) concluded that teacher commitment could gradually be built up only in those who follow a positive route. Day and Gu (2007) extended Huberman’s study by using mixed methods to investigate the professional lives of 300 primary and secondary schools in the UK. With a specific focus on teacher commitment to professional learning, they suggested that teachers who displayed a high level of commitment throughout six professional phases were those who were able to develop a positive professional identity. Few systematic studies on teacher commitment trends in Chinese communities have been undertaken.

2.3. Factors affecting teacher commitment

Depending on the perspective and foci of the studies, various factors have been found to enhance or diminish teacher commitment. Researchers interested in organizational commitment pointed out the importance of workplace factors. Leadership, teacher autonomy, collaboration, feedback, learning opportunities, resources and participation in decision making were some crucial factors in sustaining high levels of teacher commitment (e.g. Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). Recent research has indicated that whether principals could minimize teacher stress arising from excessive state initiatives and community expectations, is a good predictor of teacher commitment (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007).

Studies interested in the impact of teachers’ personal contexts found that life situations and events such as births, deaths, divorce and illnesses challenged the sustaining of commitment (Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 1985; Rosenholtz, 1989; Huberman, 1993). Teachers with sustained commitment to professional learning are those who demonstrated good self-adjustment amidst positive and negative “scenarios” and maintain the inner motivation to serve (Day & Gu, 2007). Huge efforts have been devoted to studying the relationship between teacher commitment and changes in teachers’ work conditions, which are mediated by the wider social historical contexts. Much evidence presented at the UNESCO International Conference on Education in 1996 that recent reform policies in many countries have led to teacher’s attrition (Tedesco, 1997). Goodson, Moore, and Hargreaves (2006) investigated social and political nostalgia and argued that mandatory new initiatives since the last quarter of the 20th century in the UK triggered loss of commitment, energy and enthusiasm among mid- and late-career teachers. Research on Australian teachers pointed out that government intervention in school governance and curricula has made teaching increasingly performance-oriented, accountability- and audit-driven and intensified. Short-term employment contracts lead to instability in the teaching force when teachers move in and out of the profession frequently. However, the literature also shows that a significant number of teachers displayed deep commitment despite the working contexts (Day et al., 2005; Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden, & Mitchell, 2001).

While the literature is inconclusive with respect to teacher commitment in similar work contexts, this study explores into features of the commitment of Hong Kong teachers, who have been working under reform-intensive conditions in the last decade. Previous research has indicated that teacher commitment involves the interplay of personal, school organizational and education systemic factors, which are mediated by the wider social historical contexts. Yet we understand very little about the ways the interactive dynamics play in teachers who experience sustained or decreased commitment. This study aims at filling in some of these gaps, from the teacher career perspective.

3. Method

This study draws on empirical data collected by the life history method with a belief that teacher commitment is a complex construct. It cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of the wider social historical context, and the organizational as well as the teachers’ personal characteristics. The life history method gives full recognition to teacher subjectivity and acknowledges that each teacher is a unique individual who may perceive his or her life and
Late-career cohort 1997–2007 (2–9 years)  
- Ann F B Ed  
- Eva F B A  
- Lawrence M PGDE  
- George M B Ed  
- Benson M T Cert; B Ed  
- Ian M T Cert; B Ed  

Mid-career cohort 80s–1996  
- Karen F PGDE  
- Charles M T Cert; B Ed, PGDE  
- Alice F PGDE  
- Joe M PGCE  
- Cecilia F T Cert  
- Leo M PGCE; M.Sc  
- Fred M T Cert; MA; M Ed  
- Janice F PGDE; M. Stat.  
- Martha F T Cert; B Ed  

Late-career cohort mid-60s–70s (29–40 years)  
- Pamela F B Ed; MA  
- Wendy F T Cert; MA  
- Tony M T Cert  
- Ophelia F T Cert; BA  
- Rebecca F T Cert  
- Lily F T Cert  
- Kim F T Cert  
- Stewart M T Cert  

Informants’ demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Academic/professional qualifications</th>
<th>School sector/type of school</th>
<th>Major teaching subjects</th>
<th>Grade of students</th>
<th>Career development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early-career cohort</td>
<td>Ann F B Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided)</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997–2007 (2–9 years)</td>
<td>Eva F B A</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>S1–S5</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lawrence M PGDE</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided; DSS)</td>
<td>Chin, Art</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>George M B Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided)</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benson M T Cert; B Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>PE</td>
<td>S1–S7</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ian M T Cert; B Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>GS, Chin</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-career cohort</td>
<td>Karen F PGDE</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT-MM-SM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80s–1996 (11–22 years)</td>
<td>Charles M T Cert; B Ed, PGDE</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided)</td>
<td>Chin, GS</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT-MM-SM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alice F PGDE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joe M PGCE</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>S1–S7</td>
<td>CT-MM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cecilia F T Cert</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>S1–S3</td>
<td>CT-Resigned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leo M PGCE; M.Sc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>S1–S7</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fred M T Cert; MA; M Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>S1–S7</td>
<td>CT-MM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Janice F PGDE; M. Stat.</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>S1–S7</td>
<td>CT-MM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martha F T Cert; B Ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided)</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT-MM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late-career cohort</td>
<td>Pamela F B Ed; MA</td>
<td></td>
<td>P, S (Aided)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>P1–S7</td>
<td>CT-PT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid-60s–70s (29–40 years)</td>
<td>Wendy F T Cert; MA</td>
<td></td>
<td>S, Sp, S (Aided)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>S1–S7</td>
<td>CT-MM-SM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tony M T Cert</td>
<td></td>
<td>P, S (Aided)</td>
<td>D &amp; T</td>
<td>S1–S3</td>
<td>CT-ER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ophelia F T Cert; BA</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Aided)</td>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT-MM-ER</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rebecca F T Cert</td>
<td></td>
<td>S (Aided)</td>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT-ER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lily F T Cert</td>
<td></td>
<td>P, S (Aided)</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>S1–S3</td>
<td>CT-MM-ER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kim F T Cert</td>
<td></td>
<td>P (Private; Aided)</td>
<td>PE, Chin</td>
<td>P1–P6</td>
<td>CT-MM-SM- NR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stewart M T Cert</td>
<td></td>
<td>P, S, P (Aided)</td>
<td>Chin, Maths</td>
<td>P1–S3</td>
<td>CT-MM-ER-CT- NR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Academic/professional qualifications: T Cert (Teacher Certificate) is required of primary teachers and teachers for junior secondary classes (S1–S3); PGDE (Postgraduate Diploma in Education) or PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) is required of secondary teachers and university graduates who teach in primary schools.  
* P: primary; S: secondary; Sp: special education. Aided schools are government-funded schools; Private schools are not aided by the government; Schools under the DSS (Direct Subsidy Scheme) are aided by the government but the pay of the teachers is delinked from the salary pay scale for government-funded schools.  
* Chin: Chinese; PE: Physical Education; GS: General Studies; D & T: Design and Technology.  
* CT: class teacher; MM: middle management; SM: senior management; PT: part-time teaching; ER: early retirement; NR: normal retirement.

Although the way of demarcating chronological age or years of teaching experiences into different generations varies markedly in the literature (Day & Gu, 2007; Mayer, 2006; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006), the major characteristics of the sampled teachers led us to conceptualize them into three cohorts. Informed by Sweeting’s (2004) work on the historical periods of educational change, 23 informants were classified into “early-career”, “mid-career” and “late-career” cohorts according to the year of entry into teaching.

The early-career cohort consists of six teachers who entered teaching after 1997. They were in their early 20s and had teaching experience ranging from 2 to 9 years each during the period from 1997 to 2007. Teachers who have been teaching before 1997 are categorized into two subgroups. The mid-career cohort, a total number of nine teachers, started teaching from the 1980s to 1996 and had 11–22 years of teaching experience by the year 2007. The late-career cohort is the most experienced group of teachers who entered teaching in the 1960s and 1970s. These eight teachers have been teaching for about 30–40 years by 2007.

Data were collected from 2006 to 2007. A full life history interview, which lasted for 2–3 hours, was conducted with each informant (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Teachers were invited to tell their personal lived experiences, career histories, critical career events and professional development experiences. The full life history interview was then followed by a 60–90 min thematic life history interview on teacher commitment. Teachers were asked to indicate their commitment level across their professional lives, with 0 representing the lowest and 10 the highest teacher commitment intensity. This was used as a probing strategy to facilitate informants’ illustrations of what they meant by teacher commitment and why their commitment level was indicated as such. It is necessary to point out that the subjective figures reported by the informants were not used for comparison of commitment intensity between teachers. Rather, they were subjective indicators individual teachers used to report their changes of commitment level in the course of their career. A 1 h interview was conducted with the informants’ significant others such as a colleague, friend or spouse to seek information which provided an additional perspective to inform the understanding of their personal and professional lives. Personal and career-related documents were collected. These included, for example, personal correspondence, school magazines, information on school websites, educational statistics, government policies and reports and newspaper articles.
which captured the larger political tone that accompanied educational reforms and teacher policies.

Data collected in the full-life history interview were transcribed and preliminarily analyzed to inform the thematic life history interviews. A computer package (N-Vivo) was used to assist the storage and retrieval of data. Informants’ indications of commitment level in their career courses were represented by commitment indexes. Codes related to commitment objects, and factors contributing to commitment intensity in each one’s life and career course were generated by a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Disciplined subjectivity was exercised as interpretations of data were grounded on what informants said or did while allowing our conceptual frameworks, knowledge of the literature, and assumptions based on our experiences as teacher educators, to help us constantly reconstruct and test our emergent understandings. By making constant comparisons across different cases or within the same case at different phases of the study, properties and dimensions were identified and represented by the emerging codes. Coding data in these ways allowed us to produce both narrative and explanatory representations of our interpretations to address two research questions:

- What characterized teacher commitment in the period of 1997–2007?
- What were the factors contributing to teacher commitment trends in the period 1997–2007?

4. Results

4.1. The work context for Hong Kong teachers from 1997 to 2007

Documentary analysis allowed the tracking of Hong Kong’s wider social historical development since the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and its effect on the work context for teachers in 1997–2007. The unprecedented economic, political and social conditions in Hong Kong since the 1980s added pressure to education reforms. First, the economy in the Chinese Mainland experienced rapid growth from the 1980s and an increasing volume of Mainland products was shipped out directly from Mainland ports instead of through Hong Kong, posing challenges to Hong Kong’s economic performance. Moreover, the threat of brain drain also called for great attention when the rate of migration rose before the handover (Sweeting, 1995). Under the changing economic and political conditions at national and global levels, the Hong Kong SAR government was anxious about whether the “education system can produce young people with the right professional, technical or vocational qualifications and skills to sustain the development of Hong Kong into the next century” (The 1997–98 Budget Speech, 1997 para. 50). Schools were urgently expected to produce “talented individuals who are biliterate and trilingual” (The 2004–05 Budget speech, 2004, para. 21), as well as proficient in critical thinking, creativity and communication (Education Commission, 2000). Professionalization of teaching was called for in teacher policy which stipulated that language teachers should attain a subject degree together with a postgraduate professional education major in that language subject within certain period (Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, 2003; Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004).

Choi (2005) observed that education reforms gathered speed and intensified managerialism and performativity in education, which have expressed through initiatives such as school self-evaluation and external school review. The school evaluation mechanism created an excessive workload for teachers. Privatization of school education, introduced through the Direct Subsidy Scheme has disrupted the job security of teaching. Many teachers were also put under pressure to bid for the Quality Education Fund because successful application was perceived as a sign of active involvement in school improvement (Tse, 2002).

The deterioration of employment and work conditions for teachers after 1997 was further complicated by other social historical factors. Right after its reunification with the Mainland, Hong Kong’s open economic system was hit hard by the Asian financial turmoil. In 2003, its financial situation experienced another dip after the outbreak of SARS. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Hong Kong jumped over 50% from a low of 2.2% in the third quarter of 1997 to 5.8% in 1998 (The Government of Hong Kong SAR, 1999–2000 Budget Speech, 1999) and further soared to 8.5% in mid-2003. Deflation persisted for nearly 6 years (The Government of Hong Kong SAR, 2005–06 Budget Speech, 2005).

Concurrently there was a decline in birth rates from 7.8% in 1996 to 6.4% in 1997 (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). The loss of over 100 Primary One classes in the academic year 2002–03, due to the lack of sufficient 6 year old student population in Hong Kong, had an impact at both school and individual teacher levels. The decrease in the birth rate, as reported elsewhere, induced keen competition among schools to attract student enrolment (Choi & Tang, 2005). School downsizing and closure had impact on the entire ecology of the teaching force, but gave the greatest blow to early and late-career primary teachers. The increased unemployment rate in society, coupled with the shrinking number of primary students, made competition for teaching in primary schools from 1998 to 2004 very keen.

The “class shrinking and school killing” policy was enacted to handle the situation of the decreased birth rate. It was rated in a survey as the most ineffective, improper and objected-to education policy among the 30 new educational measures administered from 1997 to 2007 (Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union (HKPTU), 2007). As a result of the policy, surplus teachers became redundant. The Education Bureau (EDB, then the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB)) launched an early retirement scheme for primary and secondary teachers in 2004 and 2005 respectively, with an intention to encourage experienced teachers who had not acquired the upgraded mandatory teacher qualifications to step down from their posts. From 2003 to 2005, over 1000 experienced primary teachers, some of whom had only been teaching for 10 years, chose early retirement (Choi & Tang, 2005).

4.2. Trends of teacher commitment

Under the common context of penetrating education reforms, and unstable and intensified work conditions, our findings affirmed previous studies that teachers differ in following more positive or negative career trajectories (Huberman, 1997; Gu & Day, 2007). Though teachers in Hong Kong differed in the objects and trends of commitments in the period of 1997 to 2007, the ways the three cohorts of teachers defined teacher commitment were very much similar. The image of a committed teacher was one who

- gives extra time, thought and effort for students, school, and teaching;

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3 Biliterate refers to proficiency in written English and Chinese, whereas trilingual refers to competence in spoken Putonghua, Cantonese and English.

4 The Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) is a form of privatization of school education in Hong Kong. The pay of the teachers serving in this type of school is delinked from the salary pay scale for government-aided schools.
• is willing to seek improvement, to do things to an excellent standard;
• is engaged whole-heartedly, more than merely to fulfill responsibility;
• has a vision and strives to do something right for the students.

Teachers described their commitment in their career course by using figures. The number 0 refers to the lowest level and 10 the highest level. Point 5 was generally considered as the cut-off point between a positive and negative state of teacher commitment. It is important to note that teachers might have multiple objects of teacher commitment at different points of their career, but the figure represents their overall level of teacher commitment.

Analysis of the features of teacher commitment in the period 1997–2007 showed that there were teachers who reported increased and decreased commitment trends in all three cohorts, which affirmed previous studies that teachers may fall into positive or negative trajectories during their career cycle (Huberman, 1989). However, in the current sample, more teachers in the mid-career cohort demonstrated a sustained or upward commitment trend, whereas the greatest proportion of teachers with a downward trend was found in the early-career cohort (Table 2).

The early-career cohort consists of the largest proportion of teachers with decreased commitment. Only two teachers indicated that their commitment was on an increasing trend, up by 1 and 3 points respectively. On the other hand, four out of six teachers in this group reported a declining commitment since their career entry, with dips ranging from 1.5 down to the biggest dip of 5 points.

The mid-career cohort had the highest percentage of committed teachers in comparison with the other two groups. Five out of the nine teachers either maintained a high level of commitment (level 9) or increased their commitment by 1 or 2 points, although there were still four teachers in this group who reported decreased commitment.

As for the late-career cohort, four out of the eight sampled teachers indicated that their commitment was either maintained or increased to a high level (ending at 8.5–10 points by the end of the study period). The other half of this group reported decreased commitment. Of the six teachers who retired during this period, half had a higher level of commitment and the other half a lower level at the point of their retirement. Of those teachers who were still teaching in 2007, one showed a drastic drop of 3.5 points lower than before 1997 but there was also one who sustained a high level of teacher commitment.

The results that the early-career cohort comprises the greatest proportion of teachers with a downward trend reflect previous findings of a retention problem among teachers in their early career phase (Ingersoll, 2003). Nevertheless, the fact that there were teachers who reported increased and decreased commitment trends in all three cohorts led us to further investigate the factors contributing to these different trends.

4.3. Factors contributing to the decreased commitment trend

Teacher commitment involves a nest of personal, workplace and education systemic factors. However, the data showed that these factors interplay and affect teachers with decreased commitment in a way different from that of the groups displaying a positive trend (Table 3).

4.3.1. Education systemic factors

Compared with teachers with sustained/increased commitment, education systemic factors were widely cited by all three cohorts to have impact on teachers’ decreased commitment. The most salient factor that affected the commitment of the youngest cohort was the adverse effect of unstable work conditions at the workplace level, which subsequently impeded collegial support at the system level, when teachers came and left the school frequently.

A young teacher whose work conditions changed drastically when the school switched into the mode of the Direct Subsidy Scheme remarked:

The impact of the Direct Subsidy Scheme is far-reaching. It leads to the change of school administration and leaders. In these few

| Table 2 | Teacher commitment trends of teachers from 1997 to 2007. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cohorts & (years of teaching as at 2007) | Name | Objects of commitment | Commitment level during the period 1997–2007 | Commitment trend |
| Early-career cohort 1997–2007 (2–9 years) | Ann | S | 8.5–9.5 | ↑ +1 |
| | Eva | S | 7.5–5.5 | ↓ –2 |
| | Lawrence | S | 9–6 | ↓ –3 |
| | George | S Subj | 7.5–6 | ↓ –1.5 |
| | Benson | S | 8.5–9.5–3.5 | ↓ –5 |
| | Ian | S Sch | 4.5–7.5–4.5–7.5 | ↑ +3 |
| Mid-career cohort 80s–1996 (11–22 years) | Karen | S Sch | 6.5–8 | ↑ +1.5 |
| | Charles | S Sch Col T Ed | 9–9 | – |
| | Alice | S Subj Sch | 7–8–9 | ↑ +2 |
| | Joe | S Subj | 8–8 | ↓ –2 |
| | Cecilia | S | 9–7 | – |
| | Leo | S | 9–9 | – |
| | Fred | S Sch | 7–6.5 | ↓ –1.5 |
| | Janice | S Col T | 8–7 | ↓ –1 |
| | Martha | S Subj | 7.5–8.5 | ↑ +1 |
| Late-career cohort mid-60s–70s (29–40 years) | Pamela | S Subj | 9–5.5 | ↓ –3.5 |
| | Wendy | S | 9–9 | – |
| | Tony | S Subj | 9.8–9.5 | ↓ –0.3 |
| | Ophelia | S Subj | 10–8.5 | ↓ –1.5 |
| | Rebecca | S Col | 9–9 | – |
| | Lily | S Subj Col | 8–8.5 | ↑ +0.5 |
| | Kim | S Sch | 10–10 | – |
| | Steward | S | 8–5 | ↓ –3 |

*a* Objects of commitment S: students; Subj: subject; Sch: school; Col: colleagues; T: teaching profession; Ed: education; W: work; P: parents.

*b* Commitment level ↑: increased trend; ↓: sustained trend; ↓: decreased trend.
Late-career cohort regarded as the most damaging factor to teacher commitment. which "threatened the job security of the younger generation", was employment conditions at the systemic factors. School downsizing, their decreased commitment to the policies that induced unstable employment, school downsizing & closure policies

Mid-career cohort (11–22 years)

Early-career cohort (2–9 years)

Late-career cohort (29–40 years)

Table 3
Factors contributing to commitment trends from 1997 to 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohorts (years of teaching as at 2007)</th>
<th>Category of factors</th>
<th>Increased commitment</th>
<th>Sustained commitment</th>
<th>Declined commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early-career cohort (2–9 years)</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>love for students</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>other life commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>try out what was learnt</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>health condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>personal aspiration</td>
<td></td>
<td>protect private time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>less intensification</td>
<td></td>
<td>no time for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>psychic reward</td>
<td></td>
<td>student problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>collegial support</td>
<td></td>
<td>leadership problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education systemic</td>
<td>achievement recognized</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>unstable employment, school downsizing &amp; closure policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-career cohort (11–22 years)</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>love for students</td>
<td>devotion to students</td>
<td>other life commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>try out what was learnt</td>
<td>avoidance of further career advancement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>increased responsibilities</td>
<td>increased responsibilities</td>
<td>work intensification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>good leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td>student problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education systemic</td>
<td>perceptual change</td>
<td>new learning</td>
<td>lack recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late-career cohort (29–40 years)</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>love for students</td>
<td>love for students</td>
<td>other life commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>love for school</td>
<td></td>
<td>health condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>fulfill aspiration</td>
<td></td>
<td>age effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>goal achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td>more quality life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education systemic</td>
<td>collegial support</td>
<td></td>
<td>high job demands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

years, more and more colleagues have left. I feel isolated as there are fewer and fewer people in the school I can turn to for support... It is hardly possible for me to complete all the tasks. Honestly I won’t help students complete their assignments after school now. I simply don’t have the time! I have heaps of work to do after school hours and I have to further study as well. All these have dampened my commitment to the school and teaching. [Lawrence (early-career cohort): Full life history interview & school website; Education Commission (2000)]

Another teacher of the early-career cohort deliberated that changing occupation could probably be the only option.

Teachers worry because of this crisis of "school killing": The policy is so pressing... I am thinking about changing occupation because I can imagine all schools are the same. My friends in other schools said that no school is immune from these education reforms... Is workload in other schools as heavy? Will I be able to cope with so many initiatives? [Benson (early-career cohort): Full life history interview; EMB, (2004); HKPTU, (2007)]

Teachers in the mid- and late-career cohorts alike attributed their decreased commitment to the policies that induced unstable employment conditions at the systemic factors. School downsizing, which "threatened the job security of the younger generation", was regarded as the most damaging factor to teacher commitment. These experienced teachers felt sorry for the anxious young entrants and were uncomfortable with the restless school atmosphere.

The next frequently mentioned factor that defeated teacher commitment was "performativity". A frustrated teacher complained that the government’s drive for school performance has distorted the fundamental purpose of education.

I am disturbed, though at the same time I can understand why our school has to make such a move. When other schools are rising on the league table, there is great pressure for our school to seek outstanding performance. Then we throw money to short-sighted agendas, aiming at a quick fix for the senior classes to boost public examination results. Little resources are left for the junior classes! Shouldn’t we pool sufficient resources to build solid foundations if we really want to help our students learn well? [Pamela (late-career cohort): Thematic life history interview & school website]

4.3.2. Workplace factors

Various unfavorable workplace conditions were identified to have contributed to decreased teacher commitment in all cohorts. Work intensification was the common factor that all three cohorts found to have adverse effect on teacher commitment, though it played out differently for different teachers. Teachers in the early-career cohort attributed their declining
commitment to “long working hours on non-teaching duties that stop them from spending more time with students” and their commitment was hampered by “student behavioral problems”.

Some teachers, in the mid- and late-career cohorts, like the case of Pamela above, were frustrated by the priorities of resource allocation in schools, which created work that contradicted the espoused school vision and their own values. Other teachers (e.g. Fred of the mid-career cohort and Tony of the late-career cohort) reported decreased commitment as they received little recognition from the senior management and faced career stagnation. Fred, who is a Head of Department in a prestigious secondary school, attributed his declined commitment to his frustration with “students’ problematic values”.

I might be able to help the students if I could have more time to build up a good relationship with them. Now I find a big gap between us. Our values and ways of doing things are so different. In fact, I am tied up by too many administrative chores. There is little time for me to get along with the students … I have stopped putting in too much effort these years. There is little room to give full play to my potential. [Fred (mid-career cohort): Thematic life history interview & school website]

Work intensification due to increased administrative responsibilities drew Fred away from the students, the source of his psychic reward. Fred’s colleague added another reason for Fred’s disenchantment.

The school takes no notice of him. Fred does not lodge any applications for promotion these years. The management will invite you to send in a letter if they want you to fill the post. So why should he bother to apply again and again just to be turned down? [Fred (mid-career cohort): Colleague of Fred]

Other teachers related decreased commitment to the fact that they had fewer responsibilities in the school during the period under study than when compared with former phases. For example, George of the early-career cohort, who was attracted to a “substantive post” in a new school, explained that he felt less committed because he had had many more responsibilities in his previous school.

Some late-career teachers had strong feelings about the lack of school support, being unfairly treated or being rejected by the senior management. While some of them complained about work intensification with emphatic understanding of the ecological constraints, a few of them placed the blame on the leadership of the school management for the “meaningless paperwork”. The novelty of the new initiatives challenged the support system of the school too. Two of the early retirees left teaching due to these reasons.

Something unexpected happened when I prepared the first School Annual Report. I had tried my very best to do that. But I didn’t know how to calculate the teacher–pupil ratio of our school because it was related to school administration. I sought help from the Head of Mathematics Department and he told me the way to work it out. Then the first draft of the report was sent to the Principal for endorsement. He said that was fine. Then when the reports were printed out, he spotted the mistake! I had to quickly fix it. But the publishing company could only print a few amended copies for me to send to the EMB. For the rest that we were going to send to other schools and the parents, I had to mask the wrong information one by one with a label. Only a couple of janitorial staff were there to help me do the tedious masking task. [Ophelia (late-career cohort): Full life history interview & school magazine]

I have applied for early retirement basically because I felt the pressure. Every time when I talked with the Principal, he said that I should understand my own situation. He has been saying all these in recent years and there’s no reason I cannot get his intention. He has observed my lessons frequently and given negative comments on my work. [Tony (late-career cohort): Full life history interview]

4.3.3. Personal factors

All teachers displaying a negative commitment trend also related personal reasons to their decreased commitment in teaching. “Other life commitments” was a common factor across all three cohorts, though life commitments refer to quite different things in different cohorts. For the youngest cohort of teachers, there were struggles to protect time for personal use. Lawrence, for example, wanted to spare time for his girlfriend. Another beginner remarked that she also felt like “sitting and doing nothing,” when she was disturbed by her students who “idled around and wasted her time”. A mid-career female teacher needed to spend more time on her family, and later resigned from teaching. As for the late-career cohort, reasons such as leading a “quality life” or doing “something more meaningful” were highlighted. They recognized their freedom to choose as they were in a reasonably good financial situation after working for over 20 years.

Consideration of personal health was also a factor contributing to the fall in teacher commitment. Lawrence, a teacher in the early-career cohort, explained that he had to slow down because of the warning of his deteriorating health after just 3 years of teaching. An early retiree of the late-career cohort, Ophelia, said that she could not cope with the overcrowded, intellectually and physically demanding challenges in her early 50s. She decided to retire at the age of 52 before her health would have been further jeopardized.

The interplay of personal, workplace and education systemic factors worked among the decreased commitment group in a different way. Education systemic and workplace factors exercised much more force on teachers of this group than on their more positive counterparts. Education systemic and workplace conditions, which were negatively perceived, together with other competing personal life commitment, health consideration or availability of a ‘better’ choice of life style, lead to a drop in teacher commitment.

4.4. Factors contributing to the sustained/increased commitment trend

4.4.1. Education systemic factors

While all teachers with a decreased commitment trend talked about the impact of negative education systemic factors on their commitment, only the mid-career cohort of the sustained/increased commitment group mentioned the influence of this category of factors on them, which were positively perceived. For example, Martha considered that the education reforms “have changed her ways of thinking”.

The education policies did have an impact on me. We are already in this profession … we can only make some sort of adjustment and follow the trend if we want to go on … Some may question the meaningfulness and importance of all these reforms. Many of us don’t want to go with these. They may seek early retirement or a new job. As for me, I have no alternatives. If the EDB is to try these things, I have to try to see if they work. My attitude is to take them as experiments … I see things from a different perspective when I am engaged in a higher position. I enjoy seeing how creative our students are. It’s marvelous! When we teach Maths to them in one way, they can generate so many
different approaches to the same problem! [Martha (mid-career cohort): Full life history interview; Education Commission, (2000); EMB, (2004)]

Neither the early- or late-career cohorts related their level of commitment to education systemic factors.

4.4.2. Workplace factors

As far as workplace factors were concerned, teachers in the early- and mid-career cohorts made many more references to favorable workplace conditions in relation to their sustained or enhanced commitment. Interesting, none in the late-career cohort gave reasons in this category for their positive commitment trend. Conditions which enhanced the commitment of the early-career cohort included psychic rewards from students, achievements being recognized and support from colleagues. Another factor worthy of note is the importance of available time and space for close interaction with students. Ironically one beginner, Ann, who started teaching in 2005 could enjoy a lot of room for trying out measures to help students improve, because her school was in the countdown period before school closure. There was no pressure for the staff to implement initiatives that may otherwise tie them down in “endless paper work”. Another similar case was that of Ian, a teacher who did not have high initial commitment, but who gradually became “interested in teaching” (from level 4.5 to 7.5). He was able to achieve that because the school, which was downsizing in the early 2000s, was not involved intensively in education reforms.

Honestly speaking, I just wanted to try and see if teaching really suits me. Gradually I became more interested … I had plenty of time and didn’t know where to commit. I went on to courses. It’s hard to imagine I still had time left after all my part-time studies at that time. Then the only way was to commit it to the students. [Ian (early-career cohort): Full life history interview & personal correspondence]

As for teachers in the mid-career cohort, increased commitment was associated with increased responsibilities and good leadership in school. This was closely related to the fact that many of these teachers were assigned more professional responsibilities and some of them were in middle management. The accomplishment of their duties was facilitated by admirable principal leadership. These brought them a sense of job satisfaction from achieving personal goals.

The support of the senior management sustained my efforts. It is an external recognition and affirmation – which means you could keep trying, particularly in selected areas. This is not the same as trying in every area as before but to have more in-depth experiment with several areas … Also, the principal was like a mentor. He demonstrated excellent strategic leadership and helped us make good decisions. [Charles (mid-career cohort): Thematic life history interview]

Moreover, these teachers tended to perceive their increased responsibilities as professional and meaningful rather than merely administrative chores. Their new positions enabled them to look at student learning or school development from a broader perspective. This broader perspective probably added a new dimension to and enriched these teachers’ love for students.

I have had three distinctive posts. One is a remedial class teacher, the next is to develop English curriculum for all the SEN, and then the PSMCD (who looks after the curriculum development for the whole school) … Why do I have a greater sense of commitment as a PSMCD? When I was a class teacher, I see things from a teacher’s perspective. Now I will take the development of the whole school into consideration. When you have more exposure, you know more and can make better decisions for all the students … Surely there are difficult times. But I love children. It’s very happy to see them grow, and know what we have done can help them enjoy their school lives. All these bits and pieces reenergize me from weariness. [Karen (mid-career cohort): Thematic life history interview]

4.4.3. Personal factors

Teachers’ commitment was found to be reinforced by a personal sense of achievement, which played out differently among teachers in different life and career phases. Teachers of the early- and mid-career cohorts became more committed when they could “try out what was learnt” whereas the late-career cohort related increased/ sustained teacher commitment to “goals being achieved” and “aspirations being fulfilled”. Another set of personal factors, “concern/love for schools”, was only mentioned by the two more experienced cohorts, echoing previous findings that many teachers of the youngest generation nowadays have more problem in taking school as a commitment object (Mayer, 2006).

Note worthily, ‘love for students’ stood out as the single personal factor that was mentioned by all three cohorts of teachers who demonstrated sustained or increased commitment in the period under study. The affection in and moral purpose for the students had a prominent role in sustaining and increasing teacher commitment.

Students come from different backgrounds, which have a profound influence on the ways they behave. I just want to try my very best to help them. [Ann (early-career cohort): Full life history interview]

There is a lot of satisfaction! After trying out those programmes year after year, I began to realize that the students actually enjoy them very much. This drives me to do a little more for them. [Martha (mid-career cohort): Thematic life history interview & school website]

Our society has changed immensely. Children nowadays are brilliant. But from the news we know they will lead an awful life if they are not properly socialized. There is this strong urge in me to try my best to help them grow. If the parents trust us and work closely with the school, the children will grow more healthily and happily. [Rebecca (late-career cohort): Thematic life history interview]

Love for students, as displayed among various cohorts of teachers, was consistent with their conception of a committed teacher. With a love for their students, they made extra efforts to do something more so that the students could enjoy learning in schools. They had an urge to help children grow into a healthy and upright person who could thrive in the risk societies. Such drive directed them to extend their professional boundary to work with other stakeholders such as their colleagues and parents. Loving teachers sought to understand the uniqueness of students from different backgrounds and reach them with their hearts and additional efforts.

5. Discussion and conclusion

We recognize multiple factors influencing the trends of individuals’ teacher commitment. As promptly described by Huberman et al. (1997), the development of a teacher career is a co-creation of an adaptive teacher and the specific social environment. The analysis of both subjective and objective data in this study allows us to see how intensity of teacher commitment was influenced by the interplay of teachers’ personal, workplace and education systemic conditions. While we were cautious with the over-stating of any one category of factors to the exclusion of the others, we found different categories of factors yielding varied weightings to affect teacher commitment.
5.1. Varied interplay patterns of the three categories of factors

The interplay of the personal, workplace and education systemic factors works differently between the teachers who followed a positive and negative commitment trend. Education systemic and workplace factors were perceived negatively and were heavily referred to in connection with decreased commitment by teachers in the negative commitment group. All generations in this group of teachers shared disillusion because of the education systemic context in the last decade and unfavorable conditions in their immediate work environment. They attributed the decline of teacher commitment to the unstable employment and intensified work conditions. Some demoralized teachers of the late-career cohort who found insufficient support to meet the challenges chose to exit teaching or switched to part-time teaching mode. Other teachers in the mid-career cohort experienced career stagnation because of the mismatching of their expertise with changing role expectations. The youngest cohort had to keep upgrading their professional qualifications to secure their employment after their career entry.

On the other hand, education systemic factors appeared to have less weighting in affecting the teacher commitment level of the sustained/increased commitment group when compared with teachers following the negative trajectory. Instead, personal factors, in particular, teachers’ personal value of love for students, were associated with sustained/increased commitment trend among all the three cohorts. This echoes previous findings in the Western societies that a sense of purpose to shoulder more professional responsibilities in the school. Similarly, motivated by the great love for students, teachers like Martha were able to find room to maneuver in hope of efforts. Teachers like Martha who... (Sawyer et al., 2007). However, we argue that the seeds of love for students, which are part of the characteristics of most beginning teachers, need a facilitating environment to grow before love for students can become a long lasting motive for commitment.

In the cases of the early- and mid-career cohorts, we found that schools played an important mediating role in insulating the teachers from any adverse systemic impacts and providing room for nurturing and strengthening their moral purposes in teaching. The literature provides evidence that teachers in the early career phase who cannot survive students’ discipline problems may lose enthusiasm for teaching (Huberman et al., 1997; Fessler and Christensen, 1992). On the other hand, psychic rewards reinforce teachers’ devotion of time for students (Nias, 1989). Although by temperament most teachers are in favor of working with people rather than working in other industries, developing love for students is itself an experiential process which not every teacher has opportunities to undergo after their career entry. New entrants to teaching have little knowledge about who they are and what they can achieve as a teacher. Schools that can provide room and support for teachers in their early career phase, to explore and overcome challenges in pedagogy and student discipline, help early-career teachers to succeed in the teacher–pupil relationship. The experiences of Ann and Ian, for example, contributed towards affirming and further strengthening the teachers’ love for students. The primitive and fragile love for students in the early career phase becomes stronger when there is time and support to help them survive trials in teachers’ everyday practices.

The workplace is also important in mediating the wider systemic environment for the mid-career teachers. A positive immediate work context where leadership was sound and colleagues were supportive helped them carry out their increased and new responsibilities. Opportunities for career advancement and recognition of their contribution to schools enhanced their investment of efforts. Teachers like Martha who could relate increased duties outside of classroom teaching to the ultimate development and learning of students, were able to experience a deepening love for students. In our sample, we see how the heavy administrative workload of teachers, especially in the mid-career cohorts, as competed for the time they could spend on teaching and with the students. Abundant evidence points to the fact that teachers are dissatisfied with much of the paper work induced by performance-driven education reforms, which has no meaningful connection with their ultimate goal of caring for students (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Choi, 2005). Our study found that distancing from the students results partly because of insufficient opportunities for teachers to understand the changing student values and behavior. A previous study points out that leaders who can transcend transitory agendas of imposed change are able to provide better workplace conditions for teachers (Day, 2003). We would further suggest that supportive and just leaders facilitate the development of competent middle managers who can relate their broadened and increased professional responsibilities to their love and concern for students as well as schools.

5.2. The nurturing and strengthening of love for students

Love for students is an accumulated asset, which was able to carry teachers through the overwhelming work and systemic contexts and sustain their commitment. The case of Karen shows us that it is her love for students that reenergizes her from weariness and she finds a sense of purpose to shoulder more professional responsibilities in the school. Similarly, motivated by the great love for students, teachers like Martha were able to find room to maneuver...
and decreased commitment. This study shows that among the teachers from different cohorts who displayed a positive commitment trend, ‘love for students’ plays a crucial role in countering the adverse influence of external factors.

The evidence suggests that love for students, together with a sense of personal fulfillment in teaching, accumulated in earlier years, have become rich personal resources, which help to discount the turbulent factors and sustain teacher commitment. Students’ recognition provides psychic rewards and contributes to teacher retention (Pang & Cooke, 1993). This has implications for school administrators, who are able to make room and provide support for the seeds of ‘love for students’ to blossom and strengthen, especially among early- and mid-career teachers. Early-career teachers need support to survive students’ discipline problems. For the mid-career teachers, especially those who have taken administrative posts, it is critical whether their increased responsibilities can be meaningfully related with their professional responsibilities. Middle managers who are properly inducted to gain a deeper understanding of “love for students” through their management roles are likely to develop a transformed sense of “love for students”. Conversely, if the administrative position is tied up with students. It is suggested that teacher educators could model the development of the teacher–pupil relationship, which may in turn have an impact on teachers’ future experiential learning with their own students.

Yao (2006), in discussing the development of professional virtues in the Chinese Mainland, points out that school is not a utopia that can be immune from external diseases. Wider systemic contexts constitute the backdrop for fostering teachers’ moral purposes for teaching. This applies not only in Hong Kong but also elsewhere. While certain heroes/heroines may thrive and sustain high teacher commitment irrespective of unfavorable external conditions, the majority of ordinary people, or the middle ground as coined by Goodson (1995:93), needs facilitating workplace and systemic conditions to cultivate and consolidate teachers’ professional virtue. The more asset of love for students being accumulated, the better opportunities these teachers will be able to survive unpredictable challenges ahead with a positive outlook and sustained teacher commitment.

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