



Exploring commitment and turnover intentions among teachers: What we can learn from Hong Kong teachers



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Teachers from religious schools higher on affective commitment to organization.
- Teachers from non-religious schools higher on normative commitment to profession.
- Teachers from EMI and band 1 schools higher on affective and normative commitments.
- Teachers from CMI and band 2 schools higher on turnover intentions.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:

Received 9 February 2015

Received in revised form
10 June 2015

Accepted 4 August 2015

Available online 14 August 2015

Keywords:

Teacher commitment

Turnover intentions

Teachers

Religious schools

Medium of instruction

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the relationship between affective, normative, and continuance commitment of teachers to their profession and their organization, and turnover intentions. Hong Kong teachers (N = 1060) from religious and non-religious, English medium and Chinese medium of instruction, and band 1 and band 2 schools participated. Teachers from religious schools were higher in affective commitment to organization while teachers from non-religious schools were higher in normative commitment to profession. Teachers from EMI and band 1 schools were higher in affective and normative commitments while teachers from CMI and band 2 schools were higher in turnover intentions.

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Teacher attrition is a perennial problem. For example, in the United States, about 30 percent of new teachers leave the teaching profession after five years, and this figure can be as high as 50 percent for schools in high-poverty areas (Chan, 2006; Hong, 2010; Ingersoll, 2001). This is a cause for serious concern because studies have shown that attrition can harm student learning and achievement (Buchanan et al., 2013; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011). A proximal precursor of attrition is turnover intention which refers to an individual's intention to leave, which can refer to the intention to leave the organization one is working for or to quit

one's profession and move to a different career pathway (Tett & Meyer, 1993). A crucial factor that might decrease turnover intention, and therefore overall attrition, is commitment (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). In this paper, we examine the role of teacher commitment in turnover intentions and attrition.

There has been considerable research on organizational commitment (Meyer et al., 2002) in which organizational commitment is defined as identification with the goals and values of the organization, a desire to belong to the organization and a willingness to display effort on behalf of the organization. While organizational commitment is often construed as a unitary construct, the Meyer & Allen framework and measures (see Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993; and Meyer et al., 2002) construe organizational commitment as multidimensional and

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having three components: *Affective*, defined as the employee's positive emotional attachment to the organization; *Continuance*, defined as the employee's attachment to the organization because of the perceived high costs of leaving the organization (such as high salary, retirement benefits, leave benefits), and *Normative*, defined as an employee's attachment to the organization because of feelings of obligation, loyalty and duty. In a meta-analytic study of affective, continuance and normative commitment to the organization Meyer et al. (2002) examined the validity of the three dimensions, the relations between the dimensions, and the relations between the three forms of commitment and variables they identified as antecedents, correlates, and consequences. They found the three components related, yet distinguishable, and also distinguishable from other aspects of work such as satisfaction and job involvement. All three forms of commitment related negatively to thoughts of leaving the job and turnover. Affective commitment had the strongest and most favorable correlations with organization-relevant (attendance, performance, and organizational citizenship behavior) and employee-relevant (stress and work-family conflict) outcomes. Normative commitment was associated with positive outcomes, but not so strongly. Continuance commitment was unrelated or negatively related to these outcomes. Interestingly, this model was found to be generalisable to Asian countries (e.g. Snape, Lo, & Redman, 2008).

Although research is typically limited to employees' commitment to their *organizations* (schools in the present case), research also established that employees' commitments in the workplace might involve multiple additional foci (Meyer et al., 1993). Among these various additional foci of commitment, employees' *occupations* are by far the most clearly established, and occupational commitment has been found to follow a similar three-component structure (Meyer et al., 1993). For this reason, Meyer et al. (1993) added a second dimension, affective, continuance and normative commitment to the occupation, career or profession as a whole making the model a 3×2 model of commitment. They argued that organizational and occupational commitments are distinct constructs, with each contributing to the understanding of, and ability to predict work behavior. As Meyer et al. (1993, p 540) said adding occupational commitment "provides a more complete understanding of a person's tie to his or her occupation" which may pave the way to understanding differential commitment to organization (i.e., school) and occupation (i.e., teaching). As a consequence of commitment to organization and occupation, Meyer and Allen (1991) assumed that each of the three components develops as outcomes of varied experiences, which have implications for work performance and perhaps for turnover intentions.

There have been a number of studies concerned with teacher commitment (see, for example, Abd Razak, Darmawan, & Keeves, 2010; Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, & Hogan, 2008; Choi & Tang, 2009; Dee, Henkin, & Singleton, 2006; Henkin & Holliman, 2009; Sezgin, 2009a, b; Shin & Reyes, 1991). However, in most of the studies commitment was studied as a generalized identification with either the school or the teaching profession and not as a multidimensional construct as envisaged in the Meyer et al. (1993, 2002) model. In one exception Joolideh and Yeshodhara (2009) studied Indian and Iranian high school teachers and found Indian teachers had better organizational commitment in the affective and normative components and Iranian teachers had better organizational commitment in the continuance component. Teacher age and subject had no influence on organizational commitment. We located no studies that examined the multidimensional nature of commitment in the context of teacher motivation, attributes, job satisfaction, and job retention. This relationship is potentially quite complex and Hong Kong, because of its Confucian/Asian cultural contexts and current volatile employment situation for teachers

provides an excellent opportunity for testing both the three-component model and the relations that may exist between these components and potentially important covariates.

In earlier studies with teachers (McInerney, Ganotice, King, Morin, & Marsh, 2014; Morin, Meyer, McInerney, Marsh, & Ganotice, 2015), we found validity evidence for the three-component model of both commitment to organization and occupation. Occupational commitment may be particularly important for teachers, especially if one's objectives are to predict teacher's intent to remain within the teaching profession. Indeed, research (e.g. Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007, 2009) has clearly shown that attitudes such as commitment more strongly relate to behaviors when they refer to similar foci. Within the Hong Kong context employee's affective commitment to social foci (colleagues, supervisors, students) and personal foci (careerism, work ethics, tasks) are potentially important determinants of organizational and occupational commitments. We are particularly interested in this paper to examine the relationships of the 3 × 2 commitment model to turnover intentions and attrition.

Turnover intention is defined as a conscious will to look for a job outside the current organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993) and is believed to have a detrimental effect on the organization (Chen, Ployhart, Thomas, Anderson, & Bliese, 2011). A range of factors such as job dissatisfaction, salary, school organization, autonomy, resources, and participation, burnout and other issues (e.g., adjustment to teaching demands, management of social relationships, understanding the school cultural contexts) may lead to employee turnover intentions (Buchanan et al., 2013; Choi & Tang, 2009). Job satisfaction directly and negatively relates to employees' intention to quit their jobs, which in turn positively relates to actual turnover and system-wide attrition (Chen et al., 2011). The Meyer et al. (2002) meta analysis, as well as other reviews on retention and turnover, show that commitment is one of the main predictors of turnover.

While it might be argued that professional careers systems are increasingly multidirectional rather than linear, at least in some Western societies such as the United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia, in which transfer between professions is regarded as 'normal', it is highly likely that stability in such professions as medicine, and law, and to some extent teaching, is still highly desirable. Certainly in the Hong Kong context stability in the teaching profession is the norm (see, for example, Baruch, 2004).

1. The Hong Kong context

It might be helpful to present certain facts about the Hong Kong context to set the stage for the current study and to argue for the wider importance of studying teacher commitment and its relationship to turnover intentions and overall attrition rates in Hong Kong.

In terms of scope, there are 571 primary schools in Hong Kong with a total student enrolment of 329,300. The average class size is 27.0, and there are 23,558 primary school teachers. There are 509 secondary schools in HK with a total student enrolment of 373,131. There are 29,439 schoolteachers and the average class size of 30 (Education Bureau, 2015). In terms of the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese schools, Hong Kong's schools are totally independent from Mainland China schools due to the autonomous status of HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region). The Hong Kong school system is managed by the Education Bureau (EDB). The Education Bureau regulates the salaries teachers are paid which reflects level of training, years of experience, and level of teaching (<http://www.edb.gov.hk/tc/sch-admin/admin/about-sch-staff/salary-assessment/guides.html>).

It is commonly thought that the Hong Kong teaching profession

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