



Committed, inspiring, and healthy teachers: How do school environment and motivational factors facilitate optimal functioning at career start?[☆]



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Beginning teachers reported that their primary motives for teaching are more autonomous than controlled.
- Teachers' motivation can explain the pathways through which certain school environment factors act on their functioning.
- Job experience moderates several relationships between environment factors, work motivation, and teachers' functioning.

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A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to deepen the understanding of the role of work motivation in teachers at career start. Participants were 589 beginning French-Canadian teachers working in public elementary and high schools. In addition to situating the forms of motivation (autonomous versus controlled) that drive teachers in the three first years of their career, the results provide support for a model explaining the motivational pathways by which school environment factors (work overload, control, recognition, and sense of community) relate to teachers' psychological health (emotional exhaustion), attitude toward the job (occupational commitment), and behaviors in the classroom (climate that fosters student attentiveness).

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A significant proportion of teachers must cope with daunting challenges at the start of their career, which can manifest as symptoms of burnout, among others (Fernet, Lavigne, Vallerand, & Austin, 2014), as well as job dissatisfaction (Perie & Baker, 1997). Moreover, many teachers quit the profession in the first few years. Although researchers disagree on the actual percentage of teachers who quit early in their career—ranging from 5% to 50% (Clandinin et al., 2015)—attrition nevertheless appears to be an international

problem in general. For example, in Belgium, 24% of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first five years of their career (OECD, 2005). Meanwhile, from 30% to 50% of beginning teachers quit their career in the United States and the United Kingdom (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Skyes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003). Canada and Québec (the Canadian province where the present study was conducted) are also affected by this worrisome phenomenon, with an estimated 20% dropout rate in beginning teachers (Chouinard, 2005; Martel, 2009). Although some countries (e.g., Italy, France, and Hong Kong) report lower attrition rates (less than 10%; Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; OECD, 2005), teacher attrition remains a cause for concern, and research is needed to better understand the school environment and individual factors that can promote optimal functioning in teachers (e.g., commitment, high levels of energy) at

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career start.

A number of psychosocial determinants have been associated with adaptive problems and low retention rates in beginning teachers. These determinants are generally grouped into two categories: school environment factors (e.g., administrative and collegial support, work overload, lack of autonomy and professional development) and teachers' individual factors (e.g., demographic features and family characteristics; Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012). However, of the individual factors that have been assessed, the role of work motivation—or the reasons that drive teachers to engage in (or disengage from) their work—has not been clearly determined to date. Although we recognize the considerable contribution of the many studies, both historical and current, that have sought to understand teachers' motivation (see Watt & Richardson, 2012; Watt et al., 2012), most of them have been based on theories of motivation that focus primarily on intensity, without much concern for form. As such, few studies have examined the differentiated forms of motivation (autonomous vs. controlled) in teachers, and even fewer have investigated whether these forms of motivation can explain the relationships between school environment factors and job functioning at career start.

Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), the present study had two objectives. First, the descriptive objective was to explore the motivation reported by beginning teachers in the three first years of their career, and to examine whether these motivation forms differ according to certain demographic characteristics (age, gender, school level taught, job status). Two forms of motivation were examined: autonomous (i.e., teachers accomplish their work primarily out of a sense of pleasure and satisfaction and/or because they personally endorse the importance or value of their work) and controlled (i.e., teachers accomplish their work mainly because of internal or external pressure). Second, the predictive objective was to propose and test a model that would account for teachers' motivation (autonomous and controlled) in order to explain how certain school environment factors can simultaneously affect their psychological health (emotional exhaustion), attitude toward the job (occupational commitment), and behaviors in the classroom (ability to create a climate that fosters student attentiveness).

1. Optimal functioning in teachers

In this study, we focused on psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral indicators of job functioning that represent significant concerns for teachers and school administrators. These complementary indicators were: emotional exhaustion, occupational commitment, and the ability to create a classroom climate that fosters student attentiveness, respectively. Emotional exhaustion is a key dimension of burnout (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007), and teachers are particularly vulnerable to this psychological state (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). It refers to feelings of strain, and particularly the chronic fatigue that results from overtaxing work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006), in a study of teachers in Finland (mean job tenure was 13.5 years), showed that burnout (operationalized as emotional exhaustion and cynicism) was positively associated with job demands (e.g., workload, students' misbehavior) and negatively with job resources (e.g., job control, supervisory support) at the workplace. As for occupational commitment, it reflects employees' degree of emotional attachment, involvement, and identification with the occupation (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). In addition to a negative association with job stress in teachers (e.g., Jepson & Forrest, 2006), this attitude has been positively associated with staff turnover (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000; for a meta-analytic review). Student attentiveness, for its part, tends to reflect their

teacher's ability to create a climate that encourages learning (Friedman, 1995). A longitudinal study by Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, and Guay (2008) in French-Canadian teachers showed that teachers' passion, which characterized a strong psychological investment in the job, positively predicted student attentiveness in class.

It appears particularly relevant to consider these psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics in order to fully grasp how teachers can attain optimal functioning at career start, for two main reasons. First, it would allow identifying certain school environment and motivational factors that could prevent negative aspects (emotional exhaustion) and at the same time foster adaptive aspects (commitment, student attentiveness) of teachers' functioning. Evidently, manifestations of poor job functioning are generally associated with various organizational costs (e.g., absenteeism, turnover, lower performance; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Lee et al., 2000). Second, the research reveals that job functioning is relatively stable over time. For example, in a study of school staff (60% teachers) with an average of 16 years of experience, Fernet, Gagné, and Austin (2010) obtained a 0.64 coefficient of temporal stability for emotional exhaustion over a 24-month period. Similarly, in a study of 494 experienced teachers (mean years of experience was 16 years), Carbonneau et al. (2008) obtained coefficients of 0.85 for burnout and 0.78 for student attentiveness over a three-month period. For occupational commitment, Fernet, Austin, and Vallerand (2012) obtained a coefficient of 0.73 over a 12-month period in 586 school principals (mean age was 45.2 years and mean years of experience in their position was 6.6 years). In light of this temporal stability, it becomes even more relevant to investigate school environmental and motivational determinants of early psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral functioning in beginning teachers, as it is liable to persist throughout an entire career. Although largely overlooked at career start (Fernet & Austin, 2014), the quality of job motivation is a cornerstone of optimal employee functioning (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

2. Self-determination theory

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) provides a multidimensional perspective on motivation. It proposes that employees engage in tasks for motives (i.e., motivations) that vary in their degree of self-determination, and that these motivations have considerable influence on their psychological functioning. SDT distinguishes between two main forms of motivation: autonomous and controlled. Autonomous motivation refers to accomplishing a task for the inherent pleasure and satisfaction (intrinsic motivation), or because it involves attaining objectives that align with one's personal values (identified regulation). In contrast, controlled motivation refers to accomplishing tasks under the influence of internal pressures (introjected regulation; e.g., to avoid anxiety or guilt, or to reinforce a sense of self-worth) or external pressures (external regulation; e.g., to avoid negative consequences, or to obtain material or social reward).

There is growing empirical evidence to support that these forms of motivation operate in diverse life spheres, including the workplace (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For instance, autonomous motivation has been positively associated with psychological health (Blais, Lachance, Vallerand, Brière, & Riddle, 1993), job satisfaction (Millette & Gagné, 2008), and organizational (Lam & Gurland, 2008) and occupational commitment (Fernet, Austin et al., 2012). In contrast, controlled motivation has been positively associated with negative consequences for workers, such as workaholism (Van den Broeck et al., 2011), emotional exhaustion (Fernet, Austin et al., 2012), and turnover intention (Richer, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2002).

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