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The Future of Work in Education: Teachers' Professional Commitment in a Changing World

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Abstract

In the midst of a changing global societal workplace and landscape, it is natural to hunt for stability. In the educational realm, however, finding stability is about what we can simplify and clarify in order to keep driving a high level of professional commitment by teachers with the goal of producing high teacher-quality outcomes. This article aims to identify the factors that drive teachers' career-long commitment to their profession. We studied thirty-five primary school teachers across six career stages, from beginning teachers to those close to retirement, to uncover essential conditions, such as a supportive school leadership that helps teachers maintain a career-long commitment to their profession amid a rapidly evolving local and global educational landscape.

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Recent research on the future of work talks about global changes brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution.[1] Against the backdrop of war, human suffering, the ongoing pandemic, and the resulting economic recession, children today are growing up in very turbulent times. As the pandemic slowly transitions into an endemic situation with a gradual resumption of pre-COVID activities, reports of the "Great Resignation" have permeated the developed world.[2] This phrase refers to an effect of the global lock-down, which, in the past two years, has caused many people to re-evaluate their work-life balance and other priorities in their lives. Many workers, particularly those at the beginning of their career, have resigned from their jobs. The education domain has experienced major disruptions as a result of the pandemic, including unprecedented school closures and a tremendous increase in the workload placed on teachers, who have been charged with continuing to teach while also assessing student performance on virtual and blended platforms and ensuring that the school is safe place for all where the proper safety social distancing protocols are strictly enforced.

The pandemic has disrupted education for everyone and has impacted the professional and personal lives of teachers.[3] While education systems have stepped up to ensure that learning continues, through, for example, the implementation of home-based and blended learning platforms and flexible work arrangements, teachers have helped to minimize the disruptions to teaching and learning by being professionally committed. When the pandemic struck, teachers around the globe committed themselves to delivering remote lessons from home, implemented safe-distancing measures during in-school learning, and paid greater attention to the socioemotional well-being of their students; some even packed home packages for students who did not have access to technology.[4]

In this article, we argue that ensuring continuity in providing a high-quality education is an exemplar of a teacher's professional commitment in action. It is of paramount importance to examine more deeply what sustains teachers' professional commitment, especially in the context of a post-COVID world where the future of work is uncertain, impermanent, complex, and evolving and where workers must catch up with the latest technological affordances and with both remote and in-person working modalities.[5] Examining teachers' professional commitment is essential because their commitment to the profession affects both teacher quality and teacher attrition rates. Teacher attrition (or turnover) occurs because of personal life factors such as changing aspirations or changing life stages, a desire for growth or a desire to seek new challenges, and natural reasons such as reaching the retirement age.[6] Attrition can also be exacerbated by other circumstantial and systemic factors such as compensation, workload, school leadership, and teaching conditions, as well as a lack of adequate teacher preparation and the absence of support structures.[7] Teacher attrition brings with it a high cost to the individual teacher, the education system, and students. In the United States, with an 8 percent attrition rate even before the pandemic[8] and indications of higher attrition rates to come,[9] schools will have to cope with teacher shortages that are likely to have a negative impact on effective educational outcomes. It is estimated that USD20,000 must be spent to replace every teacher who leaves the US classroom.[10]

Teachers' professional commitment is also essential for ensuring high-quality teaching. The related effects of low levels of professional commitment by teachers leading to higher teacher turnover include increased class size and reduced class offerings and can result in the hiring of inexperienced or untrained teachers who may negatively impact the quality of student learning.[11] Conversely, strong professional commitment by teachers has been shown to lead to higher-quality instruction and more effective student outcomes.[12] For example, in a survey of more than nine hundred teachers in Israel, Somech and Bogler found that teachers with a higher sense of professional commitment tended to go beyond their expected roles and responsibilities.[13]

In Singapore, teacher attrition is less of a concern because the reported attrition rate has been about 3 percent for the past decade or so.[14] More recently, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has taken additional steps to support teachers' mental well-being by alleviating the stress teachers have encountered during the pandemic.[15] The system has a comprehensive and unified professional development framework that offers diverse career pathways for its teachers. The framework caters to teachers' career aspirations and developmental needs and provides generous caregiving leave that allows parents to take long-term no-pay leave to care for their young children. Singapore's aging population, its delayed retirement age,[16] and the recent pandemic, however, are likely to affect teachers' professional commitment levels and is worthy of further investigation.

This study seeks to understand what has influenced teachers' professional commitment levels and how they have maintained a career-long commitment to their profession. Employing a grounded theory approach, we interviewed thirty-five in-service teachers in Singapore schools across different career stages and we coded for emerging factors that influenced their professional commitment levels.[17] Our study aims to build an evidence base to contribute to the international body of evidence on teachers' professional commitment in an educational jurisdiction (i.e., Singapore) that has a more centralized education system than those of most other developed countries.

Literature Review

In the research literature, the professional commitment of teachers has been conceptualized from different perspectives, including organizational, occupational/professional, and goal commitment.[18] Rusbult and Farrell's definition of professional commitment is the "likelihood that a person will stay with a job and feel psychologically attached to it."[19] To Mowday and colleagues, organizational commitment entails three dimensions: identification with organizational goals and values, amount of effort exerted, and desire to remain in the profession.[20] Meyer and colleagues further categorize organizational commitment into three components: (1) affective (emotional attachment, identification, and involvement), (2) continuance (costs of leaving and benefits of staying), and (3) normative (obligation), each with different antecedents, correlates, and outcomes.[21] Antecedents of affective commitment include personal characteristics and work experiences. The affective commitment strongly correlates with occupational commitment, overall job satisfaction, and job involvement. Significantly, affective and normative commitment strongly predict on-the-job performance and employee well-being. All three types of commitment are negatively associated with turnover and turnover intentions. Teacher burnout is another antecedent closely associated with teacher turnover rate. Grant describes how teachers are vulnerable to giver burnout because of the temporal experience unique to the education environment in which they are left wondering whether their work has mattered.[22] The lack of affirmation and the often intangible outcomes of their constant giving makes sustaining their work challenging and exhausting. Sammons and colleagues delineate teachers' career stages in relatively predictable patterns or cycles (see Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' Professional Commitment across Career Stages

Career stage	Years of service	Profiles of teachers' professional commitment within career stages
1	0–4	**Commitment: support and challenge** • Teachers with developing sense of efficacy • Reduced sense of efficacy

2	5–7	**Identity and efficacy in the classroom** • Sustaining a strong sense of identity, self-efficacy, and effectiveness • Sustaining identity, efficacy, and effectiveness • Identity, efficacy, and effectiveness at risk
3	8–15	**Managing changes in role and identity: growing tensions and transitions** • Sustained engagement • Detachment/loss of motivation
4	16–23	**Work-life tensions: challenges to motivation and commitment** • Further career advancement and good pupil results have led to increased motivation/commitment • Sustained motivation, commitment, and effectiveness • Workload/managing competing tensions/career stagnation have led to decreased motivation, commitment, and effectiveness
5	24–30	**Challenges to sustaining motivation** • Sustained a strong sense of motivation and commitment • Holding on but losing motivation
6	31 and above	**Sustaining/declining motivation, ability to cope with change, looking to retire** • Maintaining commitment • Tired and trapped

Source: Pam Sammons, Christopher Day, Alison Kington, Qing Gu, Gordon Stobart, and Rebecca Smees, "Exploring Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Their Effects on Pupils: Key Findings and Implications from a Longitudinal Mixed-Method Study," *British Educational Research Journal* 33, no. 5 (2007): 681–701.

Much of the application of these representations focuses on challenges associated with early-career retention[23] and mid-career plateauing.[24] There is an implied assumption that once those patterns are understood, then those who manage teachers' careers will be better placed to anticipate the stage-related needs of teachers. The study by Sammons and colleagues outlines a relatively more significant decline in commitment among teachers in Career Stages 5 and 6.[25] Teachers in Career Stages 1 and 2, however, are no more or less committed than teachers in Career Stages 3–6 in relative terms. The findings also show that commitment may be enhanced, maintained, or diminished in accordance with teachers' experiences in their personal life and work settings and their management of these circumstances. These findings align with Akkermans, Seibert, and Mol's contemporary career-development perspective that considers the interplay between teacher agency and individual's experiences in career development and teachers' professional commitment.[26] The researchers introduce the concept of an individual's experience (career shocks) that are correlated to chance events and sudden turnover, highlighting how adverse shock events (e.g., strained working relationships, losing a valued mentor, or the death of a close relative) may threaten teachers' professional commitment and their retention intentions. This finding suggests that teachers at various career stages may respond differently to the same experience (adverse shock events) because of different contexts shaped by their work experience and personal attributes. While predictable career paths and lifelong employment may no longer be sustainable because of global hyper-competitiveness, they remain relevant in Singapore's teaching landscape. Teaching is considered an attractive profession in Singapore, as observed by many international reports.[27]

Contemporary career development theories complement established career development models[28] by incorporating the individual's experiences, termed differently by various scholars: (1) shocks,[29] (2) happenstance,[30] and (3) complexity and chaos.[31] The traditional views often understood career development to be an individual's adjustment to organizational requirements.[32] Vonk and Schras, for example, view success as tantamount to progressing up the hierarchical promotion and pay ladder (both objective criteria).[33] In contrast, contemporary career paradigms[34] are expressed through labels such as borderless careers (careers that involve opportunities that go beyond a single employer), protean careers (self-determined careers that are driven by personal values and life purpose), and chaos theory of employment (individual's experiences in terms of shocks, happenstance, complexity, and chaos that unexpectedly alter career development or decisions). Success is about one's inner feeling of career fit at a particular point in a life journey (a subjective measure) from contemporary career paradigms. This view takes into account professional identity,[35] cultural context,[36] gender,[37] and understanding of professionalism.[38]

Research on teachers' professional commitment has also linked it to thriving work experiences[39] and self-efficacy.[40] What is noteworthy is that teachers' professional commitment affects teachers' retention intentions or decisions and are influenced by motivational and school contextual factors (e.g., teaching-related stress, teaching level, subject domain) that vary with their career stages.[41] For example, Torres found that some teachers who entered teaching intended to stay for the long term but left early.[42] These findings suggest that teachers' professional commitment may change with context, individual experiences, and career stages. By and large, the career-stages framework, as presented by Sammons and colleagues, provides our study with an established model that helps frame our current research purposes.[43]

Despite the importance of teachers' professional commitment, empirical research on this topic in Singapore remains sparse and previous research has generally focused on preservice or early-career teachers. In one local study by Bennett on preservice music teachers' identities, motivations, and career intentions, thirty-four out of thirty-five participants reported that they intended to teach during their bond with MOE, while only eighteen of them planned to teach beyond the teaching bond, which varies from three to five years.[44] In another local study, Tan suggests that the difficulties teachers experienced during the early career transition may affect their self-efficacy as a teacher and subsequent commitment to teaching and, eventually, their retention intentions.[45] It is equally important, however, to examine teachers' professional commitment throughout their careers. Moreover, it is important to highlight that physical retention does not equate to quality retention.[46] What genuinely matters is the retention of hearts (emotional engagement), minds (challenges and intellectual stimulation), enthusiasm (commitment and passion), and morale (ethics obligations and feelings of being respected, appreciated, and valued).[47]

This exploratory study seeks to determine what conditions keep teachers committed to their calling throughout their careers in Singapore and whether these conditions vary for teachers in different career stages.

Methodology

Participants

The study focused on primary school teachers who taught English, math, or science in the past five years. Thirty-five teacher participants were interviewed. Purposeful cross-sectional sampling was used to identify interview participants at different career stages: Career Stage 1 (0–4 years), Career Stage 2 (5–7 years), Career Stage 3 (8–15 years), Career Stage 4 (16–23

years), Career Stage 5 (24–30 years), and Career Stage 6 (31 and above years) in teaching. The interview was performed in 2019, before the pandemic outbreak.

Recruitment was done by e-mail invitations to thirty-five randomly selected primary schools. Twenty-nine female-teacher and six male-teacher participants across career stages (see Table 2) agreed to participate in the survey voluntarily in accordance with the Nanyang Technological University's institutional review board (IRB). The approved IRB number for this study is IRB-2019-03-007.

Table 2. Breakdown of Participants by Career Stages

Career stage	Years of service	Number of participants
1	0–4	4
2	5–7	6
3	8–15	4
4	16–23	7
5	24–30	8
6	31 and above	6

Research Design

This exploratory research uses a qualitative grounded theory approach, employing primarily semi-structured, face-to-face individual interviews with the teacher participants to distill themes and common factors contributing to their positive teacher commitment.

Interviews

Adopting Josselson and Lieblich's intensive narrative interview approach to study the phenomena of development and transition in people's lives, we invited participants to examine their teaching experience and describe the impact it has had, through critical professional and personal events over the years, on their career-long development and growth.[48] The selection of this approach was marked by how it aptly raised the significance of transition as teachers develop and move through various stages.

The interviews were conducted at the participants' school in a quiet meeting room. For every face-to-face interview session, at least two researchers were present so that the influences of the participants' experiences could be explored from different perspectives and any interestingly related probing questions that were neglected by one researcher would be caught up by the other. The sessions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by various transcribers. Individual sessions lasted between forty and eighty minutes.

To put it in context, this study is a subset of a larger study aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' school experiences and the impact of those experiences on the development of their professional identities and competencies, as well as on their professional commitment. Thus, the full-interview protocol also covered questions about their professional identities and competencies. For the purpose of this article, however, we focus on responses to and analyses of questions related to teachers' professional commitment.

The questions were designed to help participants reflect and express their thoughts objectively in order to explore what keeps teachers committed to the profession and to probe into what the system and school can do to keep teachers motivated and committed from a hypothetical approach. For example, rather than asking, "What has your school leader done to keep you committed to the profession?," the question was worded in a hypothetical setting

inviting the participants to take on a certain element of creativity to freely express their idealized form of a school leader, and often the participants drew on their experiences of inspiring leadership to describe leadership that promotes commitment. The hypothetical phrasing of the question, "If you were a school leader, what would you do to keep teachers committed to the profession?" made it possible for participants to step into the shoes of a school leader to reflect critically in a nonthreatening manner to provide the research team with greater insights into the factors contributing to professional commitment. This constructive approach allows the participants to express themselves in a manner that does not compromise their professional status.[49] Motowidlo advocates the use of this approach because participants are provided with a safe environment where they "are immune to the detrimental effects" of their responses.[50] Bosshardt; Campion, Campion, and Hudson; and Motowidlo and Burnett have compared the validity of past and hypothetical future questions and found the latter to be more valid.[51]

Data Analysis

After the interview data were transcribed and checked by the research team, it was thematically coded. The data was systematically analyzed by career stages to identify prominent patterns, with grounded theory as the guiding approach.[52] The transcripts were segmented by the guiding research questions. For each question, the set of transcripts from a common career stage were read and codes were assigned to any meaningful units of narrative (e.g., spent time knowing your teachers, affirmation of effort), and similar codes were grouped into larger categories by at least two researchers in the team. From the analysis, six categories of codes emerged:

- Positive Work Relationships: teachers attributing their professional commitment to the school leadership's or MOE efforts to build a conducive environment for social interactions during work. The codes include fostering good work relationships among the teachers, leaders spending time getting to know the teachers, and maintaining regular communications with the teachers.
- Professional Dignity: teachers attributing their professional commitment to the school leadership's or MOE efforts to promote teacher autonomy and respect for teachers as individuals and professionals (i.e., professional dignity). The codes include empowering and entrusting teachers in their pedagogical choices in the classrooms and decision making about professional matters, encouraging teachers to innovate, leaders' upholding and modeling professional values and standards, instilling in teachers a sense of the importance of the teaching profession, recognizing and affirming the efforts put in by the teachers, addressing their professional and personal concerns, and promoting teacher well-being.
- Opportunities for Growth: teachers attributing their professional commitment to the school leadership's or MOE efforts in developing and mastering their professional competencies,. The codes include striving to promote teacher learning, allowing subject specialization, and prioritizing professional development to support career growth.
- Workload: teachers attributing their professional commitment to the school leadership's or MOE efforts to ensure a reasonable workload. The codes include having a good work-life balance, prioritizing national or school-level initiatives so that teachers know what to focus on, and alleviating workload in the administrative aspects.
- Sense of Safety: teachers attributing their professional commitment to the school leadership's or MOE efforts to enhance the psychological work safety and financial health of the teachers. The responses in this category tend to be more negatively nuanced and describe strategies that school leadership and MOE can do to make the teachers feel "safe." The codes include having antiharassment policies, enhancing the level of trust

between MOE and school leaders and teachers, reducing the competition among teachers caused by the annual performance ranking, and enhancing teachers' compensation package.

After the interview data had been coded and the themes identified, we compared the responses of teachers from the six career stages based on the emergent themes.

Findings

Five themes emerged from the findings of what affects teachers' commitment: (1) positive work relationships, (2) professional dignity, (3) opportunities for growth, (4) workload, and (5) a sense of safety. In the sections that follow, we describe the nuanced divergences that we found among the different career stages in each of these factors.

Positive Work Relationships

Generally, positive work relationships keep teachers committed. These relationships include students, colleagues, and school leaders. As teachers progress in their career, they take on a more nurturing role to younger colleagues and are, in turn, energized by them.

Across all career stages, teachers made the point that having a positive relationship with their students kept them committed. Teachers who teach vulnerable or students who "need them more" also felt more committed.

> I come to school because of my students. These past two weeks, I haven't fully recovered from my illness but I'm always thinking about what they've been doing in school. I'm thinking that if it's just cough, let's just go to school. If I feel very unwell, I'll just head home to rest but at least my students would have learnt something. My students motivate me. Generally, my students do not come from a well-to-do background. Given the school's location, even in my high-progress class, there are pockets of those who do not come from well-to-do backgrounds. Sometimes, they only have me to turn to. Most of my students are like that so if they are coming to school to learn and I am not there, then I feel I have short-changed them —Career Stage 1, Participant 22

Having positive social interactions with colleagues, especially with the more experienced teachers, also helped Career Stage 1 teachers remain professionally committed. This commitment was usually made possible in various ways, including setting up a "buddy system" where the newer teachers are partnered with more experienced colleagues, implementing a school-based mentoring program for beginning teachers and at a more interpersonal level, having warm, helpful, and encouraging colleagues and school leaders.

> My colleagues are all very helpful. I know I can always count on the senior teachers, who are all very approachable. When I started out, they willingly shared their teaching strategies and tips although they were quite busy with their own work. They helped me grow into a better teacher. To this day, I'm very thankful for the help. —Career Stage 1, Participant 23

Career Stage 2 teachers also felt more committed to the profession if they perceived that school leaders take on active roles to foster good working relationships among teachers. Career Stage 2 teachers reported that being involved in staff welfare to promote teacher well-being gave them a sense of fulfilment, particularly when they were able to foster a positive work environment for other teachers. Because they were typically given more responsibilities at this point of their career, Career Stages 3 and 4 teachers expressed greater commitment when they were supported by less experienced and more senior teachers who were able and willing to

contribute and support departmental work effectively. Teachers in Career Stages 5 and 6 expressed nuanced differences in the way younger teachers had kept them committed to the profession. As they took on mentoring roles, Career Stages 5 teachers cited how mentoring had motivated and kept their commitment to the profession to develop not just their students but their mentees. Career Stage 6 teachers, that is teachers who were close to retirement, felt energized by younger teachers, because the latter provided new insights to the teaching practice and tended to be more technologically sophisticated. This finding was in contrast to that of the study by Sammons and colleagues that reported a decline in teacher commitment in Career Stages 5 and 6.[53]

Unsurprisingly, school leadership played an important role in the development of teacher commitment within a school setting. Career Stages 1 and 2 teachers would feel more professionally committed when they were affirmed and recognized by their school leaders. Though they did not expect constant affirmation, they would like consistent, informal feedback on their performance to help them improve. Thus, it is important that school leaders avail themselves of opportunities to guide younger teachers toward career and personal development.

> I remembered an experience once when I was teaching in another school, I was struggling. To be honest, I could have resigned back then. OK, not because of teaching incompetencies but because of relations with the staff. It was extremely critical at that time when my principal assigned a head of department to be my buddy, not even a mentor but to be a buddy, to talk about things that are not entirely related to teaching. I think his mentorship and his guidance prevented me from submitting the resignation letter. I already crafted the letter deciding to resign. But when my buddy came to talk to me and said: "Let's talk it out, let's share what's going on," that helped me through that difficult season. Having this kind of delicate touch, I think is crucial. —Career Stage 4, Participant 5

Teachers in Career Stages 3 and 4 worked closely with the school leaders and were motivated by leaders who cared for their welfare, aspirations and struggles. Naturally, if these teachers were to progress eventually to the leadership roles, school leaders would serve as their role models of leadership. A majority of teachers in Career Stage 5 had academic leadership roles (e.g., heads of departments) and to remain committed, they perceived a need to feel supported and recognized by school leaders for their initiatives. Career Stage 6 teachers who remained committed to the profession had nurturing leaders who were committed to helping them grow, even though they were in the late stage of their career. Figure 1 summarizes the positive professional work relationships that kept teachers committed in their career across the different career stages.

WORK RELATIONSHIPS | Positive work relationships keep teachers committed. As they progress in their career, teachers take on a more nurturing role to younger colleagues and in turn are energized by them.

	0-4 YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	5-7 YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	8-15 YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	16-23 YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	24-30 YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	>30 YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE
	career stage one	career stage two	career stage three	career stage four	career stage five	career stage six
Work Relationships	Students					
	• Motivated by students					
	Colleagues					
	• Motivated by positive and supportive work environment shaped by colleagues				• Motivated by teacher mentees	• Energized by their younger colleagues
	School Leaders					
	• Affirmed and recognized by school leaders		• Motivated by leaders who care for their welfare, aspirations, and struggles		• Supported and recognized by school leaders for their initiatives	• Stayed on under nurturing leaders who cared to grow them

Figure 1. Summary of findings on the theme positive work relationships

Professional Dignity

Teachers need to be given autonomy as professionals and respect as individuals if they are to remain committed to the profession. Autonomy and respect can come in various forms as teachers progress in their careers. Teachers across all career stages felt that the autonomy afforded to them would help in their growth as professionals, thereby endearing them to the profession further. Career Stages 1 and 2 teachers perceived that they would engender greater professional commitment when they were trusted and given time to make pedagogical choices in their classrooms, allowed to innovate and experiment with new methods or resources, and possibly to "fail forward," even when they were still considered less experienced as teachers. Teachers from Career Stages 3–6 perceived their ability to make decisions and lead change as avenues for them to exercise autonomy and, most important, significantly impact the school environment. Teachers across the career stages perceived performance reviews as effective platforms from which to promote development opportunities and affirm good work.

In terms of respect, Career Stage 1 teachers perceived that when their school leaders spent time knowing them and their aspirations and put in place opportunities for regular conversations, these efforts made this group of teachers feel a greater affinity to the school fraternity and this, in turn, engendered greater professional commitment. Career Stage 1 teachers also reported that respectful communication, such as when colleagues respect the views of others regardless of their seniority, is an important expressions of respect in the workplace.

> I had a severe disagreement with a colleague in the same department. So, it was so severe to the point where the head of the department had to sit us down to resolve our conflict. It got to the point after I gave my viewpoint that the other colleague started shouting at me within the enclosed staff room for the rest of the meeting. That was very damaging, and it dealt my self-belief a great blow. It is embarrassing for the nonrelated people to hear about the dispute. —Career Stage 4, Participant 5 relating an account when he was in Career Stage 1

Teachers in Career Stages 2–5 perceived that they would be more professionally committed when school leaders upheld professional values and modeled professional standards, taking on a consultative approach that included setting high expectations for student outcomes and school programs, making efforts to recognize and affirm teachers' contributions in

academic and nonacademic aspects, showed care toward teachers, and actively addressed their concerns such as the need for flexibility in work arrangements.

Teachers in Career Stages 5 and 6 felt that they were respected within the profession as they gained seniority, and this respect contributed to their professional commitment. It was also observed that Career Stage 6 teachers prioritized other aspects of their life, such as hobbies, health, and volunteering. While these involvements were outside of work, they complemented their professional lives and might have allowed them to stay committed to the profession. Compared with their retired peers, Career Stage 6 teachers felt they had remained active contributors to society because they were gainfully employed and were working with younger colleagues and children. Figure 2 summarizes the importance of professional dignity that kept teachers committed across the different career stages.

Figure 2. Summary of findings on the theme professional dignity

Opportunities for Growth

When school leaders advocate more learning opportunities and provide opportunities for teachers to grow professionally, they signal that the organization is investing in the teachers' aspirations and future.

> Some outstanding teachers I know would like to take on more responsibilities such as leadership roles. However, such opportunities have not been presented to them because of the school structure. Opportunities to grow and progress should be available to all teachers. —Career Stage 1, Participant 23

Teachers across all career stages looked forward to new opportunities to grow. Teachers from Career Stages 1–3 expressed interest in developmental opportunities or formal appointments; teachers in Career Stages 5 and 6, despite their age, expressed interest in professional development programs.

> My husband in the private sector had to pay for the courses he wanted to take. All the courses we go through are borne by the government. Teaching today is so different from 40 years ago. We keep upgrading ourselves, and it is sponsored. —Career Stage 6, Participant 26

One significant industry disruption was the adoption of education technologies in schools. Teachers in Career Stages 3 and 4 had to pioneer the change, while teachers in Career Stages 5 and 6 had to swiftly adopt education technologies in their classroom practice. Though adopting new technologies was challenging, teachers concurred that it was essential if the profession is to progress in the twenty-first century. Teachers in Career Stages 5 and 6 also

perceived that their technical skills surpassed those of their peers in other industries because of the numerous professional development opportunities they were given to adopt education technologies in their classrooms. These opportunities and their perception that they stayed ahead of their non-teacher peers contributed to their remaining committed to the profession.

Furthermore, teachers in Career Stage 4 reported that they were given opportunities to participate in international conferences and overseas learning opportunities. These avenues provided them with an international perspectives that helped them understand the context Singapore's education operated in. And this understanding deepened their motivation to continue to expand their knowledge, skills, and determination to be better as teachers and teacher developers. Understanding the significance and importance of their roles as teachers and as teacher mentors and facilitators of professional development helped to cement their professional commitment. Figure 3 summarizes aspects of professional development growth opportunities that teachers in different career stages expressed to be important.
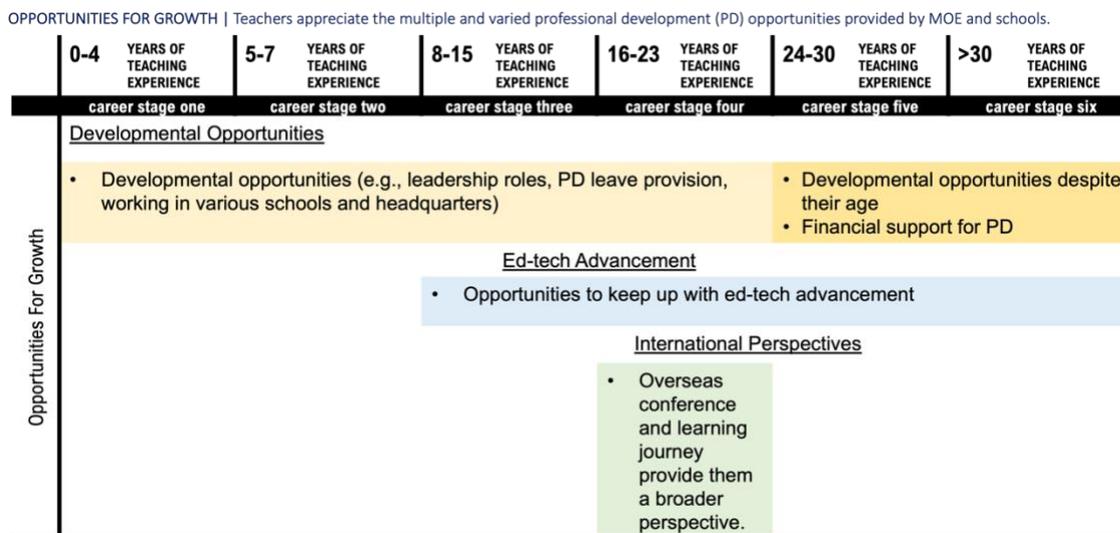

Figure 3. Summary of findings on the theme opportunities for growth

Workload

Workload, when well managed, can provide teachers with a sense of competence and fulfilment, which can lead to increasing professional commitment. Work can be made more efficient using technological affordances. Non-teaching-related work can also be streamlined. Across the career stages, teachers agreed that the non-teaching-related duties such as collecting forms or collating student information could be reduced or done more efficiently in an administrative office or through online platforms. Staff meetings could also be made more efficient. For example, the dissemination of information at these meetings took up a sizable portion of the time, and it could be communicated by email.

Teachers in Career Stages 1 and 2 acknowledged that their workloads in the first year were manageable. Still, the administrative work escalated once they were asked to be the form teachers or the main teachers in charge of a co-curricular activity (e.g., organizing outside-class learning and development programs, running sports teams and aesthetics clubs). They felt that when school leaders proactively sought to alleviate their administrative workload, work-life balance improved and they were able to focus on their teaching practice. School leaders could consider the heavy marking load of language teachers across career stages.

As teachers progressed and took on more leadership responsibilities from Career Stage 3, they perceived that their workload increased significantly before stabilizing in Career Stage 5. This period was often characterized by the need to meet multiple administrative deadlines, for

example, to complete performance appraisals, vet test and examination papers, and schedule teachers' timetables.

For some teachers who took on additional teacher-leadership roles (e.g., senior teachers, teacher mentors) in Career Stage 4, when school leaders devised a more balanced distribution of their workload that considered the time required to mentor and guide younger teachers, the teachers felt that the workload was more manageable and these teachers expressed greater professional commitment. Figure 4 summarizes the workload concerns of teachers in different career stages.
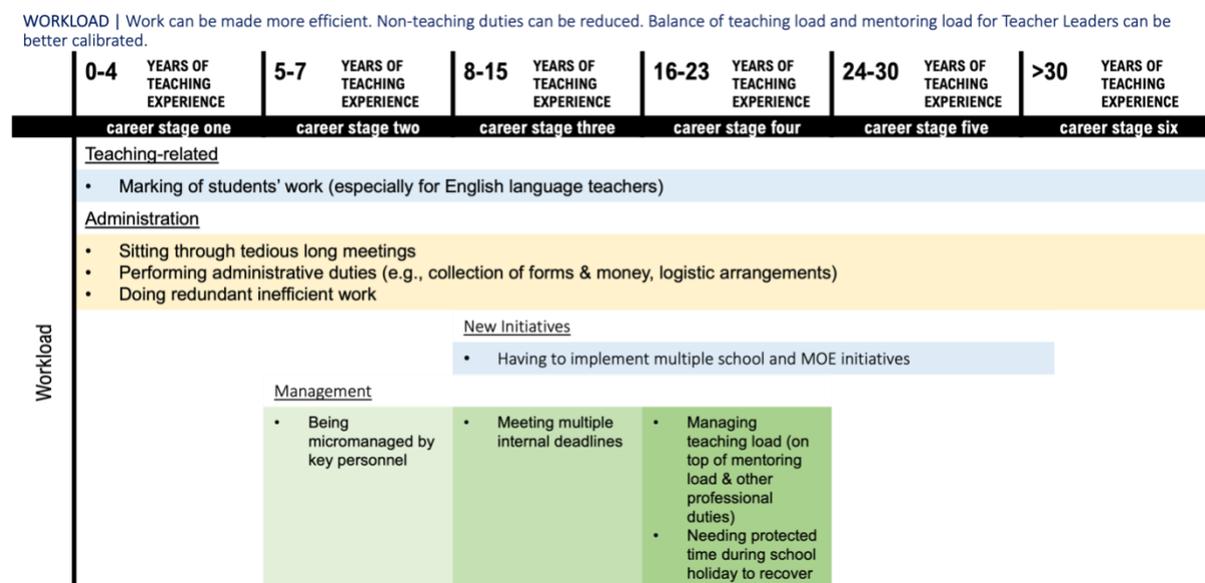

Figure 4. Summary of findings on the theme workload

Sense of Safety

A sense of safety in the work environment was cited as being fundamental to a teacher's professional commitment. While the preceding four themes focus on how school leaders and MOE can enhance conditions for teachers' professional commitment, addressing teachers' psychological work safety and financial health are perceived to be fundamental in anchoring teachers' professional commitment.

One major contributor that negatively affected professional commitment was the institutional practice of ranking teachers' performance. All teacher-respondents cited this practice. This annual ranking exercise conducted by school leaders in consultation with the school's middle managers is part of the annual appraisal exercise. Teachers' performance placement or ranking determines their performance bonus for the year and is also a key consideration for promotion. The teachers described this practice as being detrimental to their morale, seeing it as adversely affecting their professional commitment. Teachers in Career Stages 1 and 2 reported that the approach could be potentially unfair, that it can stir competition among teachers, and that it appeared to go against the promotion of organizational values of teamwork and collaboration.

The teachers also reported that some colleagues could abuse the practice by using it to make a power play. Teachers in Career Stage 3 also reported that the method inspired teachers to compete rather than collaborate. Teachers in Career Stage 4 said they felt demoralized when they were unable to meet the expectations of their reporting officers. They lamented that they were being overlooked for promotion when younger colleagues were making faster career progress. Teachers in Career Stage 5 talked about how the ranking exercises pressured them to perform, primarily when their teaching role did not provide them with the "high-profile"

portfolios of their peers who took on leadership appointments in school. They also realized that they had limited career opportunities. Teachers in Career Stage 6 found it stressful to be compared with younger colleagues, especially when they were formally their mentors. Ranking inevitably encouraged a negative culture in some schools and might have resulted in perceived unfairness in the treatment of some teachers.

Another dominant finding on this theme relates to the harassment by colleagues and parents. Teachers across the career stages cited examples, such as middle managers taking credit for work done by the teachers and the perceived unequal distribution of work responsibilities, particularly by the more senior colleagues under the pretext that junior colleagues should take on more duties for developmental purposes. Regarding harassment from parents, most teachers reported that there were no established avenues for recourse when they were victims of cyber or verbal abuse.

Other areas of perceived workplace injustice included the lack of fair developmental opportunities for all teachers, deployment to teach subjects that the teachers were not trained in but were expected to perform, and lack of understanding for teachers who had young children and needed flexibility in work arrangements. In Career Stage 5, the teachers also reported a perceived lack of support to attend professional development programs, which lessened their professional commitment levels. Figure 5 summarizes the sense of safety issues that affected teachers' professional commitment across the career stages.

Figure 5. Summary of findings on the theme sense of safety

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study investigated the conditions that facilitate teachers' career-long commitment to their profession. Five themes emerged from the analysis: positive work relationships, professional dignity, opportunities for growth, workload, and sense of safety. The study revealed that these themes permeate all career stages. Consistent views about a more manageable workload, professional development opportunities, supportive school leadership, establishing an antiharassment policy, and uplifting teachers' status and image were expressed.

Some policy implications arising from these findings can be elucidated for schools and school leaders, the central education authority, which in Singapore is MOE, and for teachers' professional development.

Schools and School Leaders

The study suggests that school leaders and middle managers are the lynchpins in keeping teachers committed across all career stages. This finding aligns with what Holmes, Parker, and Gibson found about urban school teachers in the United States.[54] School leaders and middle managers should spend time getting to know teachers, affirm their efforts, address their concerns, encourage and care for them, and maintain communication with them. They should also foster positive work relationships among teachers. Managing workloads and opportunities for growth contributed to professional commitment where teachers are challenged to grow while successfully coping with their work responsibilities. Having too few options or too heavy a workload worries teachers. Thus, careful calibration needs to be applied to individual teachers. Such calibration can happen only when the school leaders or the middle managers understand the teachers' aspirations and cultivate a nurturing environment to encourage the development of strong bonds, because only limited intervention can be done at the central education authority level.

To promote professional commitment, especially among teachers who are not committed professionally or are at risk of leaving teaching, school leaders can look out for teachers who do not have strong and positive relationships with their students and colleagues. It will be in the best interests of school leaders to understand these teachers' plans or make efforts to integrate them into the school community. One approach may be to establish a mentoring program at the school level. Mentors can provide a stable and dependable professional relationship with the less experienced teachers within the school environment. A positive relationship can benefit both the mentor and the mentee.[55]

Central Education Authority

The leading education authority MOE can think about ways to enhance teachers' professional dignity and management of workload. As MOE is able to put forth several national-level education initiatives, it is crucial that it helps and prioritizes schools and teachers prioritize so that they do not get overwhelmed. This effort may involve strengthening ministry-school coordination of the roll-out of the initiatives. Furthermore, rather than disseminating information down the typical channel by the school leaders, the central authority can initiate more direct MOE-to-teacher communication to ensure that policy intent and initiative implementation is timely and accurate.

MOE's centralized ministry job portal through which teachers may apply for teaching and leadership positions in other schools could be a promising approach to promoting autonomy in teachers' career development, thereby creating broader opportunities for teachers to develop professionally. These postings from one school to another can help teachers widen their teaching experience and deepen their expertise. This strategy is also one way to retain teachers who are thinking of resigning from the public school system. The education authority also needs to put in place supportive measures for the sandwich generation of parents with young children who are also caregivers to their aging parents. This generation is likely to leave the profession if they do not feel supported. Teachers who do not have strong and positive relationships with their students and colleagues appear to be more likely to leave.

Professional Development

For teachers who are early in their career (Career Stages 1 and 2), opportunities within and outside the school environment are essential for exposure and a high-quality learning experience. Implementing a structured mentoring program helps foster a trusting and reliable professional relationship for young teachers. Schools need to foster a nurturing environment

for positive relationships to flourish and emphasize soft skills development. Teachers in this group require close career guidance and planning for their professional development. Professional development becomes increasingly important for teachers in mid-career (Career Stages 3 and 4) who wish to gain recognition for the additional knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired. Professional development opportunities with certifications will help motivate this group to participate in life-long professional development. More intentional professional development programs customized to teachers at this career stage would be helpful. For example, this group of teachers have sufficient experience to be groomed as preservice teacher educators. To cater to the schedule of these teachers, professional development could be conducted in the schools where the teachers teach. For teachers in their late career (Career Stages 5 and 6), the information communication technology (ICT) skills demanded of teachers need to be introduced at a slower pace to cater to their learning needs. Curation skills, that is, selecting appropriate technologies for meaningful learning, are more functional than content creation skills. It may be good to have an assigned buddy/mentor in areas where these teachers develop new skills. Provision of professional development opportunities to help this group develop the ability to mentor others in soft skills to create a more positive working environment is important. Rich and long career experience makes teachers in this group suitable to conduct professional development courses for other teachers in situ in identified areas of need.

Extrinsic factors identified in school leadership practices and central education authority and professional development initiatives play significant roles in creating the "recurring positive affective episodes" cited by Morgan and colleagues.[56] These positive affective episodes are shaped by professional relationships and development and growth experiences and they contribute to the development of teachers' career-long commitment to their profession. The findings of this study also identify with Mowday's finding that the "amount of effort exerted," which we termed as "high workload" ($n = 21$, 60 percent), has a negative impact on well-being and diminishes one's desire to stay in the profession.[57]

We hope that our findings inform the policies on the management of the teaching force, especially factors related to teacher well-being and teacher motivation. Understanding these various contributing factors to teacher commitment will help provide an evidence base for policymakers in the areas of teacher retention and professional development. The authors acknowledge that the present study has its limitations. For one, it involves only a small sampling of primary school teachers because it is part of the initial phase of a more extended research study. Future research should be extended to preschool teachers and secondary and junior college teachers. Additionally, selecting a more purposive sampling of teachers across different career tracks and disciplinary areas can provide richer insights.

Career Progression Drives Teachers' Professional Commitment

As the global environment becomes increasingly challenging, teachers need to constantly find ways to stay relevant. In the present age of information overload, students may be saturated with (mis)information. Thus, developing the art of discernment and building a nimble and collaborative team that can respond swiftly is important in the new economy. The teaching fraternity may be viewed as a large-scale organization. With every organization come organizational norms and culture. The pressing concern is to build an organizational culture that genuinely values discernment, collaboration, excellence, adaptability, nimbleness, and loyalty. Professional commitment can be realized only when both workers and the organizational values are working in tandem. Our study sought to give a hearing to the often silent voices of teachers. Research literature and governmental reports often articulate what government, policy, leaders, businesses, and society requires of teachers. We hope our research

articulates teachers' aspirations so that they can remain committed to the profession and achieve productive longevity while in service.

Our findings lead us to conclude that passion leads teachers into the profession[58] and that purpose, such as contributing to their students' growth, keeps them committed. But it is the people who will keep them inspired or drive them to leave the profession.[59] Our study emphasizes the importance of positive relationships and continual professional growth and articulates possible mitigating conditions that can be put in place to keep teachers professionally committed throughout their career and willing to make the changes needed to take education forward in the postpandemic era.

Acknowledgments

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