

Expatriate Teachers' Experiences with Organizational Factors in International Schools: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to examine the personal and professional experiences of expatriate international teachers at international schools to develop a deeper, more heuristic understanding of the international teaching experience, particularly how the experiences might affect their decision to remain at a school past their initial contract period. International teachers are more likely to renew contracts when there is a reciprocity of trust and respect between faculty and administration, authentic appreciation, strong community and access to quality professional development. Participants value strong, student-centered leadership and philosophical approaches rooted in diversity, equity, and inclusion. More research surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion in international schools is required, specifically surrounding administrators and the lack of diversity within international school leadership.

Keywords: international teachers, international schools, international teaching, organizational culture, leadership, DEI

1. Introduction

Along with the academic benefits for students and a healthier organizational culture associated with good teacher retention, it is financially advantageous for international schools to retain teachers for longer periods of time because they can reduce the costs associated with recruiting new hires (Dos Santos, 2019; Dos Santos, 2020; Fong, 2018; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Hollett et al., 2021). Dos Santos (2020) explained that international schools endure costs associated with relocation costs, visa fees, compensation, housing allowances, resettling allowances, flight reimbursements, children's tuition fees, health insurance, and travel allowances for the expatriate teachers they hire. Thus, retaining teachers for longer contractual periods can mitigate some of these costs. Moreover, schools can save on the costs associated with recruiting such as recruitment membership fees, travel costs incurred with travelling to job fairs and the time spent interviewing and rehiring.

2. Literature Review

The seminal research surrounding teacher retention in international schools, conducted by Hardman (2001), Mancuso et al. (2010) and Odland and Ruzicka (2009), all concluded that leadership factors play a key role in teachers' decisions to remain at a school past their initial contract period. One of the most comprehensive studies conducted about international teacher retention, by Odland and Ruzicka (2009), surveyed 281 international teachers and discovered that the most cited reason for not renewing a contract surrounded the organizational leadership style at their school. Participants in the study expressed dissatisfaction with the way administrators communicated with them, the lack of teacher input in decision making and discrepancies between what was originally pitched during recruitment and the reality of working at the school.

Dos Santos (2020) reached similar conclusions in a study comprised of 51 international teachers who expressed their desire to have better acknowledgement and appreciation from school administrators. Teachers expressed their desire for more professional autonomy ranging from the flexibility of designing their own materials and structuring their classroom in ways that best support their students. Teachers recommended that schools invest in facilities and online learning platforms because these factors play a role in their desire to remain at an international school. Dos Santos's (2020) study highlights the role that administrators play in retaining staff. A limitation of the study is that it only focused on teachers in two Chinese cities; input from other locations could provide a more robust perspective.

Fong (2018) studied factors leading to retention of Gen Y and non-Gen Y teachers and noted that communication was the most important variable for Gen Y teachers, but specifically communication that goes both ways. Collaboration, information sharing and feeling like their presence is acknowledged are forms of communication that Gen Y teachers cited as being the most important for contract renewal (Fong, 2018). Non-Gen Y teachers were shown to remain in schools whose mission and vision most aligned with their core belief systems. When they felt that their work was meaningful and that they were contributing to 'a greater good' teachers were more likely to feel a sense of belonging (Fong, 2018).

Teacher wellbeing and sense of belonging is an emerging topic in academic research, but Wigford and Higgins (2019) posited that when teachers are in an environment that supports and nurtures their wellbeing, it could contribute to their decision to renew contracts. The research suggested that if administrators actively promote a sense of belonging within a typically transient environment, the results could lead to lower turnover and higher student achievement (Wigford & Higgins, 2018). Examples of this include acknowledgement of staff and their contributions, fostering professional autonomy, coaching, and mentoring, encouraging work/life balance and boundaries, and an overall more personalized approach by leadership teams (Fong, 2018; Wigford & Higgins, 2018). Similarly, Toropova et al. (2021) highlighted the important connection between job satisfaction and teacher retention. Job satisfaction contributes to higher degrees of teacher and student well-being. The factors that contribute to job satisfaction include teachers' workloads, teacher cooperation and collaboration, and the ways in which student discipline is handled by administrators.

Dos Santos (2020) conducted a study in which 28 international teachers teaching at international schools in Hong Kong for more than 20 years were interviewed. Dos Santos (2020) learned that teachers value professional development opportunities, a safe environment and having the freedom to transfer their skills and knowledge to local and international students. Once again, Dos Santos (2020) highlighted the importance of effective managerial styles in improving staff morale and retention. Manusco et al. (2011) drew similar conclusions when participants listed poor leadership support as their reasons for not renewing contracts. Research highlights the need for transformational leadership that emphasizes shared decision making, individualized and differentiated support for teachers, and effective communication which are all factors that administrators could improve upon, thus improving teacher retention (Dieterle, 2018; Mancuso et al. 2011; Odland & Ruzicka, 2009). In other words, there are significant variables that can be addressed by administrators and senior leadership teams.

Ceballos (2020) echoed this thinking when studying the impacts of mentoring and role modeling to inform supervisory practices of administrators. International teachers are a distinct group of professionals and have unique needs which could be better addressed by administrators to improve retention. Ceballos (2020) completed a comprehensive literature review to learn the extent to which international teachers are affected by mentoring, role modeling and acculturation support. Research suggested that there is little to no induction for international teachers before they arrive in their new host country (Ceballos, 2020). This is problematic because it hinders the rapid acculturation that takes place at the beginning of a contract. Narratives from international teachers expressed a need and desire to understand the host culture and the associated education system. The research surrounding expatriate management indicated that coaching or mentoring could improve work outcomes for international teachers thereby enhancing the overall schools' outcomes (Ceballos, 2020; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Ceballos (2020) cited positive collegiate relationships as important avenues for international teachers to understand the academic landscape, student behavior and culture; these relationships can improve a teacher's sense of connectedness and sense of belonging which in turn improves self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Fong, 2018). Moreover, mentoring through positive collegiate relationships and effective leadership can improve cultural intelligence and help international teachers cope with changes in academic expectations, pedagogical practices and reduce overall acculturative stress all of which will improve outcomes for international teachers (Ceballos, 2020; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

Cox (2012) and Ingersoll et al. (2018) were interested in how recruiters should approach teacher candidates. Cox's (2012) study found that teachers who have more than five years of experience teaching in international settings valued effective school leadership, compensation, and autonomy. Whereas teachers with less than five years of experience valued the meaning of the work they do, opportunities associated with wanderlust, personal safety, and job conditions. Inexperienced teachers tended to prioritize personal factors over the career focused criteria of the experienced teachers (Cox, 2012). Ingersoll et al. (2018) concluded that hiring the right type of teacher will result in improved retention. Along with qualities like self-efficacy and professional capabilities, recruiters should be hiring new teachers from teacher education programs that highlight the importance of global and intercultural competencies.

Nguyen et al. (2019) systematically synthesized 120 studies and created a meta-analysis of the longitudinal data available on teacher attrition and retention. While this study does not specifically examine international teachers in international schools, the results closely mirror those previously highlighted that suggests a school's organizational characteristics can affect retention; along with things like merit pay, disciplinary issues and policies, administrative support, meaningful teacher collaboration and professional development opportunities all strongly impact teacher retention (Dos Santos, 2020; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2019).

3. Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative research inquiry utilized descriptive research, using case study design. This study centered around the methodological principles put forward by Merriam (1998). According to Merriam (1998), case studies are designed to provide a holistic picture of a particular phenomenon, yielding descriptive and heuristic understandings of the participants' lived experience with the phenomena. Based on Merriam's (1998) contention that purposeful sampling occurs before data collection, 20 participants were selected purposefully, based on the number of international teaching contracts and the number of countries they have taught in. Expatriate teachers who have undergone at least one contract renewal period, in two or more countries, at international schools were interviewed about their experiences. Data from the initial questionnaires was examined, mined for data, and triangulated with the interview transcripts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2002). First, participants answered an electronic questionnaire to establish they meet the criteria, then ten of the participants agreed to being interviewed online and recorded, using semi-structured, field-tested questions, which were designed to illicit each participant's unique experience and draw more details from the answers in the questionnaires (Merriam, 1998).

After member checking the data from the questionnaire and the interviews was triangulated to analyze for common themes or patterns (Merriam, 1998; Ospina & Medina, 2020;

Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2002). Once the data was member-checked, it was analyzed using thematic analysis. This study utilized thematic analysis by following Braun and Clark's (2006) steps. By examining the holistic, interconnected, and rich experiences of expatriate teachers, and identifying the patterns or themes that have emerged from the data, international school administrators could find ways to mitigate challenges and improve retention.

Research Question

What organizational factors do teachers perceive to play a role in their retention in international schools?

4. Results

Theme 1: The Reciprocity of Trust and Authentic Appreciation Between Teachers and Administration. During the interviews and on the questionnaire responses, participants frequently used words like trust, respect, humanizing, value, appreciation, and autonomy when they discussed the leadership or organizational factors they value at an international school. Participants talked about the importance of having an administrator that values their own unique skill set or the experience they bring to a school. Bee explained,

Being seen and knowing my worth...that you have strengths, that you have value for the school. So, I think if I were to ever work at a school where that was not a thing, I think I would head straight out the door.

Forty percent of the participants explained that when their administrator saw them and valued their expertise, they were more likely to contribute more to their work environment. Harry said, "Where I felt like I was valued and appreciated, I have liked those jobs more, a lot more. The better the administration is, the better I feel about my work environment." Harry continued to explain that "Administration can have a big impact on your sense of belonging at school and it really does affect how well you enjoy your job." Ana took it one step further by explaining that being valued and appreciated leads to impactful relationships which makes her want to stay at a school.

So, when you have leadership and teachers saying how important you are to their professional life and you feel you've made a difference, then that kind of motivates me to stay so I think it's more relationship building to feel needed and to feel wanted and to feel appreciated.

Bee discussed the implications of reciprocal respect, or lack thereof, between her and her previous administrator.

He was so awful, so awful. That's why I left that job. He was so unbelievably toxic. I mean, that shows like having relationships with whoever the leader is or just having respect for them or having them treat you well can make or break that position for you.

Now, Bee remarked that, "I love that I have autonomy in my classroom, but mostly just like, I feel really respected. I feel like the people around me...my colleagues and administrators see me and respect me as an educator."

It was frequently suggested that administrators can value an educator's experience by trusting them to do their jobs without micromanaging or time wasting. Ivy said, "Politics, the micromanaging, the constant checking up on somebody, I don't want to be part of that lack of trust." Forty percent of the participants expressed a desire for administrators to get out of their way so they could do the jobs they were hired to do. Gia expressed frustration over lengthy faculty meetings on weeks when she would have preferred the extra time to prepare report cards, or professional development sessions scheduled on weeks where she had already stayed late for parent-teacher conferences. Ana succinctly stated, "Don't waste my time. Value my time." Ivy described a situation that changed for her, "You were hired because you know what you're doing, then let me do it. They just let me do what I was hired to do." Ivy went on

to explain that the directors of the school changed and then “They didn’t value my experience in the position” and she wanted “To be trusted as a professional.” Trusting a teacher as a professional includes offering them a new experience or opportunity. Gia discussed an example that was impactful.

I’ve had principals that have been willing to kind of like, take a chance on me. Like, I’ve said, hey, I’m interested in doing this, this is what I want to do, and they’ve been willing to work with me to do that. I think that that belief in me had made me even more willing to put in more work or more effort or more energy. When people have faith in you, then you want to aspire to better and do more.

Once again, the notion of trust as being an important reciprocal act was discussed by Ana.

One of the things at my current school that I’ve been sad about is I value trust a lot and I feel like a lot of the teachers don’t feel trusted, their opinion or what they are doing. And on the flipside, they don’t trust leadership.

Two participants spoke in their interviews about how they felt when their administrator supported their efforts to become better educators and wanted to help them achieve their goals or let them try new initiatives. Bee said,

I feel appreciated. I feel seen. And I do feel that people are working to help me reach my goals, even if that means trying out a whole new position or something like that. People know you and know what you’re capable of so maybe they’ll offer you those opportunities.

Cici echoed this when she explained what she looks for in an administrator, “I think I’m generally like, what’s the principal like, do I get along with them? Do they understand the curriculum? Will they be supportive? And will the help me get better?” Bee also talked about the importance of having her administrator want to help her get better. Bee said, “If I want to reach my potential, she’s going to advocate for me in whatever way.”

Every participant talked about valuing administrators who are empathetic, approachable, supportive, and good communicators. For example, when discussing the positive attributes of his administrators Harry said, “If there was a problem with a parent, their first reaction was to support you.” For Bee, being supportive was more like “Seeing you as an individual, not just a number and not just having this idea of like, well, if something pisses you off you can leave, and we’ll find somebody else.” Jen was passionate about having an administrator “Who actually cares about you as a person...are they humanizing you or are you just a number in their game? I would work for less money if I was treated properly like a human being.” Dee compared two administrators she had worked with; the first one “Was approachable. I could have a normal conversation with him. Whereas my second director, when I approached him, I got reprimanded. I didn’t like him as a human being.” Cici described the attributes that make a good administrator for her

Respect...there has to be mutual trust...open communication aligns with trust. It’s being kind of authentic and transparent with the way that things are working rather than hiding. I’ve had administrators that just hid what was happening and then we find out last minute and were like, you knew all along?

When asked about organizational factors that contribute to participants renewing contracts, many teachers mentioned the importance of feedback from leadership. Ana said, “Having a leader that you can trust, that will listen to you and make the effort to come into your classroom and give you specific feedback rather than general feedback is something I value.” In large international schools, feedback can sometimes be lacking, as Harry described this in his current circumstances, “We’re in this giant school where administration is not present. It’s just too big...I would say they’re not visible and they just kind of make assumptions about your teaching.” Harry went on to explain why this is problematic, “When a principal is using hearsay to make judgements about a teacher, when principals aren’t evaluating their teachers...they generalize and form their own opinions...to me that’s a red flag.” On the flip side, Cici described how her administrator handled feedback in a way that fostered a positive reciprocal relationship that was rooted in respect

She would tell us, I will be popping in and out of your classrooms like, I’m not evaluating you, just checking in because I care, like I’m there and I just care about the kids. I care about you. It was more like, hey, I saw you did this, do you want to teach other teachers about that? Or I think that may be this teacher could help you with that. She was very strategic...I love that she cared.

All the participants agreed that during the course of their careers so far, they have had inspiring leaders and leaders who were lacking. As Harry put it, “You have good leaders. You have bad ones. Just like you’d have good teachers and bad teachers” but when you can strike a combination of reciprocity of trust and authentic appreciation teachers were more likely to enjoy their jobs and not want to leave.

Theme 2: The Meshing of a “Forced Family” and Collective Experience. Participants almost unanimously talked about the importance of their fellow colleagues as an organizational factor that affects their decision to renew a contract. Ivy said, “It’s a lot about the people there...it’s a matter of meshing with where you are and who you’re working with.” Dee concurred by saying, “My colleagues, my friend group was something that was consistent through all the schools.”

Dee explained that during one of her international teaching contracts “I was in the middle of a deep depression and not that fun to be around during those two years...but I’m shocked I still have friends from [there].” Eve was clear about community being a priority for her when seeking employment in international schools.

We really looked for schools that build community and that really put a priority on that because as people living outside of our home country, that was something we really needed. I wanted a school that was intentional about supporting community among staff and students and the more removed you are from your familiar culture, like the more you need that sense of community.

While community is important within the international school Ivy stressed that she needed some space from coworkers outside of school.

I was always not in one of those compound areas, I found that makes a difference too. Being able to have space and be able to run around and do whatever it is I need to do without running into somebody that I just spent the whole day working with.

This was an area where participants diverged; some teachers enjoyed having community with co-workers both inside and outside of school whereas others valued having local non-teacher friends outside of school more. This theme is explored in more detail later in the findings.

Fred described a situation in which colleagues came together to support new hires in a powerful way that demonstrates the notion of a “work family” that many of the participants described.

It takes usually...40 to 60 days to receive your first salary so a lot of teachers would help and chip in and give you kind of like a free loan so that you could survive that first month, then you would pay them back with your first salary...then I was one of those teachers that lent out money to new teachers.

Gia said that good relationships with coworkers was the thing she valued the most about her current school and explained that “I did not realize what a big deal that was until I had some coworkers who were absolutely horrible.” Participants talked about the sense of community at a school as being an important consideration when renewing a contract.

Theme 3: Professional Development and Access to Quality Resources. The participants valued professional development and it can be a draw for teachers to not only join a school but to renew contracts as well. In Gia’s case, “The school was like, we’re totally willing to pay for your training for you to come here and work...so they were paying for my training.” It was also a reason to stay at a school, as Dee explained, “They would send me to a math conference; those kinds of things made me like it more. Like I was having good professional development. The school hosted big conferences.” Eve also described how she was able to travel to international conferences which made her feel valued and supported in her learning.

Having access to good resources was prioritized and enjoyed by 30 percent of the participants like Jen who said, “We had an entire Mac department, so we had help and support with technology.” Participants valued working at schools with beautiful campuses and access to outdoor spaces or spaces that supported well-rounded learning. Cici explained, “The campus itself was just beautiful...I really valued that like we had a huge theatre, so we had a big drama club that I was really into.” Eve described a school that her and her husband both loved working at, “I think both of us would say those are some of the best teaching years. We had phenomenal resources. His class had access to the garden, to be outside and mixed age classrooms.” Professional development and resources were listed in the data and during interviews as being important retention factors.

Theme 4: Alignment with the School’s Ideology and “Students First” Practices.

The data revealed a tension between international teachers and the parents of the students they teach. Gia explains this tension

Leaders who really cater to parents has a double-edged sword because we have a clientele that we are working for, but when there are just things that are so blatantly obviously against [putting students first] ...the irony is you're saying that you're doing this to improve student belonging [but] you're doing the exact opposite.

Ivy echoes this notion by saying, “Again, to me, it’s always what's best for students. Making a policy because a parent thinks it’s the right thing to do, I'm just not interested in that, you know.”

Ivy went on to explain that this is so important to her that often the factor that leads to her leaving a school. “Most of the time I left because of political reasons within the school, you know, something like administration changed the philosophy.” Participants explained that policy most often changes when there is a change in administration. Dee explained her situation

The new director came in. I feel like when you're new you should sit back and observe for a while, get to know the culture, not only of the country you're in but of the school you're in. And he didn't, he came in and bam steamrolled. He had his agenda. He made a lot of changes without speaking to a teacher; without knowing the culture.

Dee described another experience with a different administrator, "He once said to me, you're a pain in the ass, but I know that every time you come to me, it's because you think it's better for students." Participants talked about times when they have openly supported what is best for students but did not receive support from their administrators. In Bee's case, the faculty continued to put student's needs first despite receiving resistance from parents and administration.

We have this façade to appease parents. At the end of the day, they're doing what they can to keep the institution running and what we really want to do, if we were teachers that care about kids, if we're leaders that want to do what's best for kids is we're still student centered, still doing it, even if it means lying to their parents.

Ana explained that at her current school "They try to tout the philosophy that kids first and I value that philosophy, but I also know that kids aren't going to be first if the teachers aren't happy." When Ana was asked about what would cause her to leave a school, she replied with "When I think leadership disregards their own values for the bottom line." This sentiment came up frequently with almost all participants; participants wanted a students-first philosophy to be practiced consistently, rather than switching to a parents-first philosophy to appease paying clients.

5. Discussion

The data gleaned from this study surrounding organizational factors matches the findings in both seminal literature and current research. Teachers want to be seen, valued, and appreciated. Joslin (2002) identified school organizational culture and international school culture as important influences for international teachers. Odland and Ruzicka (2009) concluded that the most cited reason for not renewing a contract surrounded poor leadership styles. Dos Santos (2020) similarly found that teachers want to be acknowledged and appreciated by their administrators. Fong (2018) found that the age of the teacher affected their expectations of administration. Non-Gen Y teachers made up the bulk of the participant pool, and Fong (2018) suggested that they tend to value schools whose mission and ideology aligns with their core beliefs. This was indeed the case with most participants who talked about their desire to have a school whose focus and ideology is rooted in being student-centered or where students come first beyond parental demands.

The data suggested that the meshing of teachers into a type of forced family within the collective experience of teaching internationally was an important factor at a school. Ceballos (2020) noted similar findings that positive collegiate relationships with faculty members improves a teacher's sense of belonging and connectedness which improves self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Along with strong leadership and a sense of belonging, participants in this study valued access to professional development which has been strongly linked to teacher retention (Dos Santos, 2020; Geiger & Pivovarov, 2018; Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2019).

6. Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Participants in this study expressed the ways in which they benefit from teaching internationally. They cited all the ways international schools are getting it right such as competitive salaries, paid flights home, relocation allowances, resigning bonuses, access to affordable paid help, tuition coverage for their children and medical benefits. Participants talked extensively about the challenges they face with poor leadership. International schools need to address the issue of leadership capabilities; offering ways for faculty to assess and provide constructive feedback to leadership teams without repercussions or repudiation may help highlight blind spots. Furthermore, using the feedback to offer additional professional development training for leadership best practices could translate into better retention rates. The changes brought on by addressing the recommendations could be marketed to new recruits (and existing faculty) to improve retention thus reducing high recruitment costs.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

An area that warrants more investigation concerns the diversity, equity and inclusive practices within international schools. Participants mentioned that their directors were mostly older white males that tended to rotate through international schools. This was echoed in Gardner-McTaggart's (2018) findings which noted that the "winning template" for an international school director is white, English, Christian and male (p.113). Given the increased globalization and internationalization of education, international schools should be representative spaces that offer all-encompassing diversity, not merely the English westernized white version that is offered under the guise of being 'international' (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018; Savva, 2017). A limitation of the study was that all participants were Caucasian, while some of them identified DEI as an area of weakness in international schools, opinions and experiences from non-Caucasians would be helpful. Additional research in this area is highly warranted.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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