

# CULTIVATING TEACHER RESILIENCE THROUGH INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION AND COLLABORATION

Özge Hacifazlıođlu, Bilge Kalkavan, Chunyan Yang,  
Gökçe Ünlü and Serra Gürün

## ABSTRACT

*This collaborative effort aims to reduce international teacher attrition. Findings from the data are meant to be shared with principals to reduce the number of international teachers leaving teaching. The study revolves around three important research questions: What challenges do international teachers encounter and how do they meet them? What individual strengths help international teachers develop resilience in the transition process? and What support mechanisms help international teachers develop resilience in the adaptation process? The chapter ends with recommendations and implications for school leaders as they create conditions that will help retain new teachers.*

**Keywords:** International teacher attrition; intercultural interaction; collaboration; resilience; adaptation process; support mechanisms

## CULTIVATING TEACHER RESILIENCE THROUGH INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION AND COLLABORATION

This chapter draws on analyses of semi-structured face-to-face interview data collected from 15 teachers in different stages of their careers in a range of international schools in Türkiye and the United States. The story of each teacher is unique and is shaped by their personal experiences and by the particular

---

Teaching and Teacher Education in International Contexts

Advances in Research on Teaching, Volume 42, 307–325

Copyright © 2023 Özge Hacifazlıođlu, Bilge Kalkavan, Chunyan Yang, Gökçe Ünlü and Serra Gürün

Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited

ISSN: 1479-3687/doi:10.1108/S1479-368720230000042028

sociocultural context of each host school. The data were analyzed with a view to identifying aspects of resilience that are necessary for making a balanced transition through the stages of adapting to a new school and regional culture. We conclude with recommendations and implications for school leaders as they create conditions that will help them retain new teachers.

With the increasing number of international schools worldwide over the last few years, the issue of recruiting and retaining international teachers has become increasingly important. Internationalization of education has opened pathways for qualified teachers to travel to distant places and discover new lands and cultures while working as teachers. This has created a new market for education stakeholders who deal with teacher recruitment. However, the conditions provided for international teachers in schools where there are limited resources for supporting teachers' well-being are insufficient for teacher retention. In such a competitive arena, to retain international teachers, international schools should prioritize full disclosure recruitment processes and put in place retention strategies, which may include support mechanisms for teachers' families as well as benefits. No matter how generous these benefits may be, teachers and their dependents pass through phases of adjustment to a new social context. [Ward and Kennedy \(1996\)](#) and [Ward et al. \(1998\)](#) assert that starting a new life in a new culture brings lots of stress and anxiety. [Roskell \(2013\)](#) describes the adjustment phase as "sojourners learning the culture-specific skills necessary to interact successfully and integrate with the host environment" (p. 157). Nevertheless, helping the visiting scholar off to a good start as an honored guest is crucial to all that follows.

The purpose of the study is to share accounts of international teachers as they adjust to working in a new country. They share the ways they balance their academic and private lives and how this leads to developing resilience, enabling them to adjust. The study also looks at the notion of being an international teacher through the lens of intercultural communication. Documenting the experiences of international teachers provides rich examples and unique insights that can help inform teacher retention strategies. We sought to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What challenges do international teachers encounter and how do they meet them?
- (2) What individual strengths help international teachers develop resilience in the transition process?
- (3) What support mechanisms help international teachers develop resilience in the adaptation process?

[Lysgaard's \(1955\)](#) study on culture shock relates to risk and resilience factors, in which an individual's feelings of satisfaction and wellbeing progress through three stages. This was later refined by [Oberg \(1960\)](#), who documented four stages of adaptation, which are: the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment stages. The excitement of being in a new culture can shift into a crisis phase in which the

teacher feels homesick that can lead to regret and depression. Roskell (2013) highlights the conceptual confusion over the definition of adjustment and proposes two critical domains in the cross-cultural adjustment process, psychological and socio-cultural, which aligns with Ward and Kennedy (1999), who describe sociocultural adjustment as the ability to “fit in,” communicating effectively with the host environment. Scholarship on international teachers highlights the ways in which they compensate while adjusting to a new school context and culture. However, the voices of teachers relating how they maintain balance when dealing with multiple spheres of adjustment have rarely been addressed in teacher education literature, and teachers’ stories of challenge, resilience, and the ways in which they are supported has rarely been investigated. From a distance, it may appear that visiting teachers enjoy a wealth of advantages when working in privileged private schools. However, our experiences as teachers and scholars visiting such schools shows that each setting is unique in the challenges it presents.

In the literature, teacher retention has been connected to successful leadership. In schools where trust and sincerity are evident, teacher motivation appears high, promoting long term retention of teachers. Even in challenging contexts, retention can be maintained through teacher resilience (Burghes et al., 2009; Castro et al., 2010; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Gu & Day, 2013). The value of trust and sincerity is even more important where teachers must adjust to a new school in an unfamiliar culture, since the initial stages involve feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and risk (Bakioglu et al., 2010). The study we report here is based on the theory of resilience, which recognizes the importance of individual circumstances and changing environments, and posits that resilience is a dynamic state that is dependent on an individual’s “adjustment domains in time” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 551). The nature and extent of resilience in a person’s work and life span needs to be interpreted within a social system of interrelationships (Benard, 1995; Gu & Day, 2013; Luthar et al., 2000). Moving to a new school in a new culture presents many complications on a wide spectrum from settling in a new home and new office as well as adjusting to a new sociocultural context of school life. The decision to accept an offer in another country is risky, involving many interrelated challenges. Although the intensity of these barriers and constraints can be felt differently depending on a teacher’s individual personal dynamics, everyone encounters significant challenges on the path to adjustment. In this study, we use Gu and Day’s (2013) conceptualization of teacher resilience:

...teacher resilience [is not defined as] the capacity to ‘bounce back’ or recover from highly traumatic experiences and events but, rather, the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers teach. (p. 26)

### *Challenges in the Adjustment Process*

Given the influences of globalization, intercultural competence has become an essential survival skill. With the constant demand for teachers around the world, teachers have become more mobile and are required to rapidly adjust to a new

culture so they can support learners in the classroom. However, cross-cultural transition is widely accepted as a challenging, life-changing event (Roskell, 2013). Many international teachers struggle with this, despite the benefits they are offered, and need to develop the capacity to survive and thrive through the stages of cultural adjustment. The adjustment stage, the final stage of a successful cross-cultural transition, comes after the honeymoon, crisis, and recovery stages (Oberg, 1960). International teachers' adjustment entails managing two critical dynamics, sociocultural, and psychological.

### *Sociocultural Factors in Cultural Adjustment*

A study by Roskell (2013) describes and assesses the experiences of 12 teachers who relocated to Southeast Asia to teach in an international school. This longitudinal, ethnographic study revealed how international teachers are required to adjust to a new host culture and an unfamiliar work culture simultaneously, creating a double-culture shock. The findings show that dimensions of host-culture characteristics such as food, weather, transport, local people, and environment have real positive effects as teachers enjoy the experience of life abroad. The dimension of relationships with co-nationals, leadership, support staff, and children was positive upon arrival but became increasingly negative around the fourth month, becoming more positive after the seventh month. The third dimension, work characteristics, revealed difficulties with timetable, environment, roles, expectations, and assessment as the teachers began to worry about a perceived lack of professional knowledge and skills. The study found that participants adjusted to the unfamiliar host nation culture more easily than they adjusted to the unfamiliar work culture and that they found socio-cultural adjustment easier than psychological adjustment (Roskell, 2013).

Research focusing on the personal experiences, benefits, and challenges faced by a group of 22 visiting faculty in the United States revealed that they faced challenges related to language barriers, interaction with native speakers, classroom management, lack of support from school administrators, and separation from family (Ospina & Medina, 2020). Data collated through questionnaire, written narrative, and semi-structured interview revealed three main categories: intercultural issues, professional issues, and personal issues. Sociocultural challenges with socializing, language barriers, and professional issues such as classroom management, parent conferences, lack of support from schools, and ineffective mentoring all affected the ability of teachers to adapt to the community and the school system, greatly impacting their professional lives (Ospina & Medina, 2020), for instance, their ability to apply strategies for managing their classrooms.

Other research has focused on the relationship between job satisfaction and other job related factors and international teachers' adjustment. A study by Richardson et al. (2006), conducted with 196 international teachers from North America, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean revealed that these factors are clearly related to the ability to adjust given that they are concrete motivational tools (Richardson et al., 2006).

### *Psychological Factors in Cultural Adjustment*

Roskell (2013) demonstrated a close connection between sociocultural factors and psychological factors. Difficulties that present as sociocultural factors such as workplace or culture adjustments may lead to stress or worry for international teachers. This can become highly stressful when cross-cultural transition is perceived from the perspective of loss.

Ospina and Medina (2020) state that when teaching internationally, teachers also face challenges with personal issues. Being away from family, for instance, can be one of the biggest difficulties for teachers and settling down in a new environment is another source of psychological challenge. Teachers reported that establishing new living arrangements is one of the biggest challenges when arriving in a new country, making their adaptation to American life very stressful. Also, some teachers also stated that they felt abandoned by school administrators and worried about a lack of trust from administrators, colleagues, and parents (Ospina & Medina, 2020). Richardson et al. (2006) state that high self-esteem correlates with better adjustment. They also found a positive correlation between self-esteem and pay satisfaction. Moreover, with strong self-esteem, international teachers' transition is less stressful. While positive self-esteem may help people feel good about themselves, it does not solve all problems involved in adapting to a new culture smoothly and successfully.

### *Teacher Resilience*

Gu and Day (2013) suggest that "to teach, and to teach at one's best over time, has always required resilience" (p. 22). Their research aimed to provide empirical evidence about the significance of resilience in teacher's work. They analyzed twice yearly semi-structured face-to-face interview data from 300 teachers in different phases of their careers in primary and secondary schools in England over a three-year period. The teachers agreed that resilience was a necessity for teachers to be successful. Their resilience capacity was affected by their personal biographies and the strength of their educational values. Sociocultural factors and policies embedded in their teaching contexts and personal, relational, and organizational situations in which they worked and lived also made a difference. For teachers, resilience is much more than the capacity to survive and thrive under adversity and is not a mere option but is a necessity. Gu and Day's study (2013) illustrates that resilience in teachers is the capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching. Teacher resilience is driven by teachers' educational purposes and moral values, which are influenced by their biographies and the situations in which they work and live.

Volet (1999) underlines the complex and dynamic contexts in which individuals are expected to adapt, act, and live. In this context, resilience lies at the "interface of person and contexts, where individuals use strategies to enable them to overcome challenges and sustain their commitment and sense of wellbeing." Context is one of the main elements in developing resilience. Beltman and Mansfield (2011), Bobek (2002), and Gu and Day (2013) consider the importance of personal capacities and agency but highlight the risk factors individual

teachers face that could affect their ability to adjust to challenging contexts and their competence in dealing with challenging circumstances. [Gu and Day \(2007\)](#) assert that “. . . resilience can develop over time and manifests itself as a result of a dynamic process within a given context” (p. 1305).

Following the perspectives of adjustment and resilience, our study focuses on international teachers’ experiences of adjustment into new cultural contexts while developing resilience in response to initial challenges.

## METHOD

This study utilizes a phenomenological research design in which adjusting to a new culture as an international teacher in a new sociocultural context is the focus and phenomenon of interest. High school teachers working in international schools were asked to tell their stories of adjustment as they made their way in a new school culture and sociocultural context through relating what they considered critical incidents. Through open-ended questions, they were invited to share their experiences of adjustment and resilience in a visualizable and memorable way ([Seidman, 1998](#)). This in-depth study of the stories of 15 international teachers allowed us to develop a deeper and more contextualized understanding of their ideas and experiences.

### *Data Collection*

The interview process began with an invitation letter asking for voluntary participation. The interview questions were prepared based on [Chunyan Yang’s \(2021\)](#) project on “Pre-service and first-year teachers’ experiences with school violence and subjective well-being?” The letter informed prospective participants of our expectations of volunteers and the safeguards in place and asked that those who chose to take part confirm their informed consent. The interviews were conducted by the researchers, who used a reflective listening approach and took care not to lead the participants in any way. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, which lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Follow up online meetings were also held with some of the participants. After each interview, a contact summary form was used to highlight main themes that emerged during the conversations and researchers worked together to identify emergent themes related to adjustment and resilience.

### *Participants*

The sample for this study involved teachers from two countries working at international schools. A convenience sampling procedure was used and the participants were chosen from two large cities, Reno, Nevada in the United States and Istanbul, Türkiye both were home to diverse populations of different cultures and ethnicities. Both cities have international schools hosting teachers from many parts of the world. Seven participants from Istanbul and eight participants from Reno took part in the study. Half had experience working in a

different country before working in Istanbul and Reno, while the other half indicated that it was their first experience as an international teacher in another country. The majority of the participants were female teachers ( $n = 13$ ). Almost all the teachers ( $n = 14$ ) were married and had children ranging from 3 to 15 years old. They all confirmed that their relocation decisions had been made as a family. Participants were reassured that their identities would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used on all documents and data related to this research.

### *Data Analysis*

We divided the analysis procedure into the five phases, as suggested by [Marshall and Rossman \(1999\)](#): (1) organizing data; (2) identifying themes, patterns, and categories; (3) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; (4) searching for alternative explanations of the data; and (5) writing the report. One of the researchers who holds a PhD. The senior student researcher conducted the interviews in Istanbul while a doctoral student researcher conducted the interviews in Nevada. All the recordings were transcribed and coded by the research team members. As a first step, the research team reviewed three transcripts to develop a codebook. Then as a follow-up step, two graduate students and two researchers separately coded the same transcript and met to resolve inconsistencies to maintain inter-rater reliability. Researchers coded the remaining transcripts separately, paying specific attention to select excerpts from the transcripts and placing them into broad categories to identify thematic connections within and among the transcripts ([Seidman, 1998](#)). This chapter features interview data that captures the challenges encountered by international teachers during their transition to a new culture. We incorporated short narrative summaries to capture a few pertinent highlights from the teacher's perspective ([Maxwell, 1996](#)).

## **EMERGENT THEMES AND SUBTHEMES**

The phenomenological design of the study and the semi structured interviews with 15 international teachers provided important insights about teachers' experiences in different cultures. The interviews were transcribed, and codes were used to identify the main theme and the subthemes. The data exploration yielded *Challenges Encountered in the Adjustment Process* and *Developing Resilience through Intercultural Interaction* as the two main themes. Subthemes that emerged from the data, listed in [Table 1](#), will be elaborated in the following section.

### *Theme 1. Challenges Encountered During the Adjustment Process*

Starting a new life brings many interrelated challenges, no matter how rewarding the benefits provided by the school. Teachers' stories showed that the first experiences of starting a new life is the most challenging. Our participating stories recalled many wonderful and tragic-comic stories. This adjustment process involves the process of transition to a new school culture and also into a new

**Table 1.** Emergent Themes and Subthemes.

---

Theme 1: Challenges Encountered during the Adjustment Process
1.1. Unknown school culture
1.2. Unfamiliar social environment
1.3. Maintaining balance in an unfamiliar setting
Theme 2: Developing Resilience through Intercultural Interaction
2.1. Reflection and mindfulness in cultivating resilience
2.2. Professional/interaction rituals in cultivating resilience

---

sociocultural context. Their personal stories revealed that they all overcame the challenges they encountered in the process of adjustment into a new culture, which led them to take on new adventures in different parts of the world. One of the teachers, Tom, referred to this journey as follows: “I had the opportunity to pursue my graduate studies. Instead, I followed a career trajectory which involved changing a country every 3–4 years. I am lucky that my fiancée has the same perspective on life, who is eager to discover new experiences in different parts of the world.” Motivation to encounter enriching experiences in a new culture appears to be the primary source of support in the adjustment process. However, the teachers’ stories involved inevitable roadblocks on their journey, illustrating how the professionalism of the school context made a huge difference in helping them navigate during times of uncertainty.

### *Unknown School Culture*

All the voices of the international teachers described their initial days using words and phrases contrasting “unknown culture” and “unfamiliar culture,” as illustrated by Zeynep in the following excerpt:

Being unfamiliar with students’ background was the biggest challenge for me. Understanding what is right or wrong to do or say in the classroom took some time, and I realized that no matter how much research you do about the culture, you can only learn about it by actually living there.

These stories mostly focused on coping with uncertainty and the process of adjusting to a new administrative order. Jack related an interculturally interesting experience. He found the number and duration of meetings quite intensive, particularly as they were initially conducted in Turkish and then repeated in English. He suggested having shorter meetings either in Turkish or English, making them half as long. He also found it surprising to have meetings in Turkish since in every other school he had worked at meetings were conducted in English. Alice shared how she found the lines between work and home life became blurred when teaching online, which made it challenging to maintain a balance between school and home life. She said that arriving in a new country during the pandemic was tough and it was difficult to find housing and adjust to the new work environment once the school term started. She also noted that it was more difficult than in pre-pandemic times to establish relationships with colleagues and students

online as opposed to face to face. The difficulty of making sense of the school context during the pandemic is echoed in most of the voices: “It is difficult to establish a complete picture of how a school works online... both students, teachers and the wider school community were very welcoming.” Teaching in a different time zone (connected to visa issues exacerbated by the pandemic) was also challenging for her. Victoria talked about the extra responsibilities that teachers have besides teaching. She shared her experience in a different cultural setting with these words:

There is the time that goes into planning a lesson, making sure that the curriculum is being followed and implemented, marking homework assignments and essays, providing feedback, etc. Not all of this can be covered during the school day as teachers must teach the lessons, do duties throughout the day, attend meetings, etc. I think it is important to manage your time and set achievable goals. Amongst these goals, setting time to relax and step away from work is crucial in order to recover and continue to enjoy the work.

She suggested that as an international teacher, she needed additional time for considering different cultural backgrounds and teaching approaches, for example, “How would students react or interact with certain lesson plans, how should she change certain aspects of the course to make ideas more accessible to students whose first language is not English?” It was also difficult for her to live in a foreign country “with no familiarity with the area, customs, and language can add further stress and complications.”

The interviews with the teachers show that each school provided orientation to teachers when they arrived. They all noted that the orientation process was carried out effectively, being introduced to a group of experienced teachers in the orientation team, which provided them with choices as to whom to approach and how to navigate school policies and procedures as well as teaching practices. However, the possibility for the orientation to raise potential bias was articulated by Zeynep:

Usually, the orientation teams consist of experienced teachers. I think there could be another team consisting of students only as we mostly interact with students rather than teachers. I felt this need when I discovered some mismatch between the way teachers describe the learner profile and the actual profile in the classroom. I realized that teachers may have some prejudices because of their own cultural background.

The experience of teaching during Covid-19 was slightly different for Stephanie, who spent a few months teaching online in Mexico when the pandemic first started. A new challenge for all teachers worldwide, she and others in her school worked hard to ensure that education continued seamlessly. However, teachers were encouraged to step away from the computer once the online lessons finished and to physically rest. In Uzbekistan, however, unlike most other countries, teaching continued in person. She felt very fortunate to be able to be in the classroom with her students, albeit wearing masks and with social distancing regulations in place. She believes that this definitely helped her to maintain a better work-life balance as the two aspects of her life were physically separated. She added that she feels it is vital to work in and be a part of a community that values teachers’ social and emotional needs. She

thinks it is of utmost importance to work at a school where the administration understands how teachers work and what they need to recharge their energy, as it is a very different beast, compared to a 9-to-5 job. She also feels that teachers need more flexibility and trust in order to do their jobs well.

It was initially hard for Stephanie to create a routine around the school day, and she found herself working long into the evening and not taking enough breaks. She was dealing – as we all were – with an overload of new platforms and applications that we had to learn in order to adapt to online teaching and this became her sole focus for the first few months. She explained that once an initial panic stage subsided and she began to get used to online teaching, she found it relaxing to be able to sleep a little longer in the morning, have time for a good breakfast, take walks outside (when appropriate) between lessons, and make her own lunch. She also began to develop a healthy routine of dieting and exercising. She made herself switch off her laptop at 5 p.m., when school finished, and tried not to work at night. Similarly, Jack was also not working beyond 5 p.m. and was walking for exercise every day.

Among the challenges of adjustment, Stephanie pointed to student behavior. “I think our school deals with a lot of behavioral issues and very little effective consequences and rules. This needs to be changed through consistent and effective management.” While all teachers need to deal with classroom management problems, it appears to be one of the crucial problems for international teachers. This is especially the case when school leaders fail to maintain healthy relationships between teachers and parents. At times, the teachers complained about the ways in which they were questioned by parents who try to use their community status. At some schools, this is managed professionally, but there are incidents in which teachers start to develop feelings of loneliness, which may lead them to resign.

Other teachers also mentioned problems with classroom management. Sophia said, “It is very difficult to control my classes and I have a hard time to cover my content,” while Jennifer said, “I have some classroom management problems in my classes and in one of those days, the vice principal came into my class.” These experiences point to a particular problem some schools might experience in embracing internationalization. The pressure to accommodate parents’ demands and the problem of problematic students seem to affect the well-being of some teachers, as well as conflicting with their values as teachers. The adjustment process ends with stories of success while a few cases reflect the extent to which this process could be traumatic when there is a lack of effective school leadership. As Victoria stated:

School should be a safe, fun, and welcoming place to be. I think that schools improve when they have better organization, a sense of school spirit, and focus on mental wellbeing. Too often, hours and classes are added on in the belief that it will result in better grades or accomplishments. However, it tends to result in tired students who do not want to learn and tired teachers who have no time to improve their lessons or rest.

As Victoria suggests, the wellbeing of teachers and students is crucial. For many, the hours of duty become exhausting. As Sophia says, they must come to

school early and leave late to help to maintain control. Without breaks, they feel exhausted.

### *Unfamiliar Social Environments*

Teaching and living in an unfamiliar social environment can be experienced as being continually out of one's comfort zone. Although this unfamiliarity might be discomforting for many who relocate to a new country, for international teachers the effect is much deeper as each and every classroom they enter constitutes a representation of that unfamiliar society. Teachers must transform their beliefs, expectations, and values. And they must come to understand a new world very rapidly, so that they can adapt to the new culture quickly and support their learners in the classroom. For instance, a teacher may act in a way that is considered very sympathetic in their own culture but that is unacceptable in the host society. This can have an impact, as clearly reflected by Sara:

When I first taught in high school in the US, I made a cake with walnuts in it, and I served this to my students without hesitation. I later found out that some of my students had severe allergies to nuts, but this is not a problem in my culture [at least I was unaware of this] so I learned the hard way that I should never serve any food to my students . . . In my culture offering food is sign of hospitality and it is never considered unsafe for a teacher or school to offer homemade baked goods but here in the US, this is a major problem and there is a regulation regarding this. I was very surprised by this when I first had this experience in the US. (Interview with Sara)

Observing all these distinct approaches in a society, international teachers inevitably develop resilience either consciously or subconsciously.

I don't take anything personally and whatever they do or say, I have empathy towards them – I try to think that it is something cultural and I try to look from their own cultural perspective. I think this is something that I do to protect myself. (Interview with Lidya)

I had to develop resilience, as nothing was the same! I believe you need to develop resilience even if you are only changing your institution – however this is not that! All your classroom environment, colleague environment, culture, approach, methods, techniques need to be changed, even transformed! Because although you were considered to be very successful in your own profession as your comfort zone, you do not even know what comfort means in a new country. The role of a teacher and the meaning of a teacher may even change from culture to culture. This is not a job you can conduct on a computer screen; you are directly in collaboration with humans in a classroom. (Interview with Lidya)

### *Maintaining Balance in an Unfamiliar Setting*

The majority of the participants in this study were mothers who struggled to establish balance between their family lives in a new city and culture along with all the responsibilities they had to shoulder at their new school context. Their stories revealed that their perceptions of balance and the ways in which they reach a harmonious balance between their home and work lives differed from one teacher to another. Teachers appreciated the support provided by the school of their children's education along with accommodation opportunities close to

school campus, which made their lives easier. All the participants mentioned the initial two months as the most challenging time, feeling lost in multiple roles and adjustment processes. After the first six months, almost all felt that the situation was under control. They could now allocate time for their personal and family priorities whilst performing effectively in their roles as teachers.

It is exhausting. If you have children, you need to create a lot of opportunities for your kids to talk about what they go through. I think I achieved this by giving priority to my own family. (Interview with Zeynep)

All participants emphasized the support they have received from their family members.

One of the participants shared his story of why he had to resign from his previous school due to the mismatch between his son and the school. The voices of the teachers echoed each other, confirming the importance of “fit with the school,” which may also require it to be a good fit for the kids who become students in that school setting:

As a teacher, I do not spend long hours at work anyway. We are a team as a family, and we support each other. My wife and my kids have been quite understanding. My professional life does not bring about any challenges that cannot be solved with a phone call or an e-mail message. (Interview with Mehmet)

I don't think I was good at maintaining the balance between my private and professional life in the transition process. Having close friends and sharing help a lot. (Interview with Irene)

I kept my private life separate from work and always kept boundaries so the two don't consume each other. I only worked part-time for the first 15 years so that I could be home with my young family, I only started teaching full time when I felt that I was ready to do so. Otherwise, it is very hard to maintain that balance. One reason is that there aren't any efficient ways to provide childcare in the US in most workplaces and this makes it very hard for moms to work outside the house for an extended period of time. (Interview with Sara)

All the participants noted that they had a smooth transition to the new way of life. None of them seem to be affected in a negative way. Instead, they used it as an opportunity to develop resilience for all members of the family. The excitement to discover new culture helped them to interpret all the experiences in a constructive manner, which led them to establish stronger connections with friends and other families. Each one of them tailored their own recipes for a seamless transition that leads to balanced life.

### *Theme 2. Developing Resilience through Intercultural Interaction*

The teachers' experiences were categorized under personal-focused, process-focused, and context-focused perspectives. The way in which each of these elements emerge and interact with the other elements changed from teacher to teacher. It is evident in all the stories that person-focused and context-focused elements serve as counterparts that complement one another in a constructive way. Intercultural interaction appears to be the main theme that embraces all these patterns and dynamics in the process of developing resilience. None of the teachers had a specific strategic plan to follow critical steps to build resilience. However, awareness of their wellbeing helped them to take important actions in dealing with challenges, enabling them to develop

resilience. It was clear in all the stories that they were courageous in embarking on new adventures and were therefore prepared to address risks and challenges they would face. This is reflected as follows:

I usually accept things as they are rather than expecting something. This has helped me a lot. This happens when you can disregard your expectations, give time to yourself to observe your environment and the people without responding.

No matter how experienced each of the participants was, they all gave themselves time to “take a breath” and “observe what is going on,” which enabled them to make sense of their school context as well as the new cultural context.

### *Reflection and Mindfulness in Cultivating Resilience*

All the teachers emphasized the power of reflection and mindfulness in cultivating resilience. They struggled to allocate sufficient time to sustain their wellbeing in their new contexts. They all saw new challenges as opportunities to support their wellbeing. For this reason, they prioritized activities supporting reflection and mindfulness. However, they also mentioned the difficulty they had in being mindful and reflective in the first days of adjustment since they had to deal with multiple and urgent life adjustments along with taking on their professional roles at the school. They were aware of the necessity to create opportunities to support their wellbeing, as reflected in here:

I think it's important to create a routine and to manage your time in such a way that work and home life remain separate as much as possible. Eating well, getting enough sleep and exercise is crucial. Keeping in touch with colleagues, family and friends is essential and asking for help when you need it. I found keeping a diary helped me empty my head and helped when feeling anxious and helpless.

Teachers also prioritized being organized and managing their time during the adjustment process. Their stories show that they developed these skills over time and the more experience they had as teachers, the easier it was. The teachers' voices reflected cycles of reflection: self-reflection, peer reflection, and group reflection (Schön, 1987). Their experiences implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the power of reflection and constructive interaction with their students and their colleagues.

I think I am approachable as a teacher and treat my students as equals. I believe this makes them feel comfortable around me and allows us to have a better relationship. That said, I have high expectations and I consider myself quite strict in the classroom. I think as a teacher you need to create a balance of respect and friendship, and students need to know their boundaries. These strengths are acquired with experience, being confident in what you are teaching and knowing your own strengths and weaknesses.

The teachers felt that there needed to be more professional development opportunities on how schools can better create “community” within the school environment. Their words and expressions seem to fall under the category of

reflection in which they “nurture each other’s souls” (Clark, 2001). The following excerpt reflects the ideas of most of the teachers:

Much of the time we are so focused on the academic side of teaching that we forget the humanistic side of it and creating an environment of respect/tolerance and well-being amongst students and staff... Awareness is vital in order for teachers to be better educated and informed in order for them to take that knowledge into the classroom.

One-third of the participants had previous international experiences. This seems to have a positive impact on their adjustment process. Also, initial adjustment to a new setting was helped by participation in an active community of practice supporting other international teachers who were new to the school. Victoria appreciates her upbringing in an international setting as follows:

I was able to gain these strengths as my upbringing [was] in an international setting. I myself attended an international school and was always surrounded by people from different backgrounds. Furthermore, I have always moved around and thus been comfortable with changing my settings. These experiences helped fortify my strengths.

#### *Professional Interaction Rituals in Cultivating Resilience*

Professional interactions established in this study seem to align with the features of interaction rituals, as described by Kadar and House (2021). International teachers seem to be engaged in building communities of interaction as well as developing professional interactional rituals that helped them to feel a part of the professional community. The international teachers shared their experiences focusing on intercultural interaction with colleagues, school staff, and students as means that helped them develop resilience. They focused most on collaboration with colleagues and the welcoming attitude of the host culture. Zeynep’s words echo most of the teachers’ experiences as to how students served as facilitators for them to understand the culture:

My students wanted to celebrate National Day in the classroom. They arranged everything. They brought traditional food, decorated the classroom, and prepared presentations. I was a genuine listener for them as I had no idea about their culture. This was a very important learning moment for me. I realized that the best source of learning for international teachers is the students.

Half of the teachers who contributed to this study indicated that they changed schools just before the Covid-19 crisis. The initial days of adjustment made their struggle more difficult since their process of adjustment held additional risks, though all of them mentioned the support they received from their colleagues as well as from parents during times of remote teaching. Jack felt that one of the crucial factors that helped him develop resilience during Covid-19 was support from his wife and colleagues. He explained: “The colleagues that I taught classes with were also super helpful and supportive.” He also explained the support he had from his students’ families:

It was an exercise in empathy for everyone. Parents were more supportive and empathetic than I'd experienced before. Colleagues were also very willing to listen, share resources and help in any way they could. Students also developed more autonomy in communicating with setting up...online meetings, staying after class in a meeting [room] or taking initiative to send emails.

Alice suggested “ultimately, being an international teacher creates resilience – moving to a new country, creating new social networks, adapting to a new work environment and new colleagues – doing that during the pandemic was a little too much!” She also explained how her new school made their new staff feel welcome and found that international teachers at her school were fortunate to have such welcoming staff, students, and student families. She said that her school made a good job of making staff feel welcome and the administration reached out to staff to let them know they were looking forward to their arrival and provided lots of information. Regular communication from the administration team prior to arrival was very reassuring. She underscored the importance of good communication and shared her experience as follows:

... I do not see [different] racial/ethnic backgrounds, I see individuals with a passion for learning [embracing cultural richness] ... My experience of teaching in many different countries has been positive. Good communication and an understanding of the local culture is key.

This was echoed in most of the voices of the teachers who appreciated the unwritten interactional rituals created within the school setting. Routines such as tea talks, coffee gatherings, celebrations and authentic dialogues among teachers formed the basis of interactional rituals, enabling teachers to be recognized and appreciated in the host culture. Teachers noted that these professional interactional rituals helped them to feel no longer the guest but the host in the school setting.

Alice says that throughout her teaching career, she has been invited to courses on peer coaching and management. These courses have helped her to understand how to bring out the best in her students. Along with collaboration with colleagues, successful intercultural communication and peer coaching can be considered gateways to teacher resilience. Victoria said:

It is a joy as an international teacher to have the opportunity to be a part of a global community – teachers and students alike being able to learn and share. At times, the stress comes from clashing cultural customs or when people are unwilling to learn their socially engraved stigmas. However, it is the job of the teacher to keep an open mind and approach all students and conversations with sensitivity and respect.

She shared her experience as an international teacher:

I believe that I am a patient and adaptable person. I do not easily get ruffled and am able to listen to others with a collected and open mind. I am respectful to my students as I consider them individuals capable of making their own decisions and having their own valuable opinions. I try to see something good and unique in each student – I think that most of my students know that I listen to them, and, in turn, they listen to me. I was able to gain these strengths as my upbringing in an international setting. I myself attended an international school and was always surrounded by people from different backgrounds. Furthermore, I have always

moved around and thus been comfortable with changing my settings. These experiences helped fortify my strengths.

Victoria also shared the collective strengths that she and other international teachers have gained as a group. She suggests that most international teachers are accepting and open-minded. She has met colleagues who have lived and taught in a variety of different countries. They all have rich experiences and advice to share – they love their international background, and it has given them tolerance and appreciation. They develop these collective strengths because she says, “we bond over our profession – we believe that teaching is an important calling and seek to help our students in both their academics but also personal growth.”

Stephanie explained that the process enabled her to develop resilience by being immersed in uncertainty:

I was living on my own and had to adapt to a completely surreal experience in such a short time. I think as a school we managed to adapt very quickly and the support that was given to us by the school was unprecedented. I was also constantly thinking about my family in Italy when Italy was going through its worst days of the pandemic. It was often difficult to focus and forget and carry on [with my] teaching.

She emphasized the importance of cultivating intercultural communication skills in times of uncertainty and crisis by keeping in touch with friends and family. Creating a safe community among colleagues who can identify with similar issues and difficulties can be a support system for them. She related her experience in different countries:

I have taught in Japan, Zambia, India, and Türkiye. It is very important to be aware of cultural/religious/social norms. One needs to be sensitive to student’s personal/family backgrounds and... [disclosing] your own values and beliefs in the classroom [should wait] until you have established a close relationship with your students and understand the social dynamics that you are teaching in.

What Stephanie recommended also gives significant insights for intercultural communication and gaining resilience:

You gain a wealth of experience living in a different country with diverse cultures and traditions. A new language can be daunting and the inability to express oneself fluently can be stressful at times. I believe it is important to adapt as much as possible and to take every ‘uncomfortable’ situation with a sense of humor! Working with colleagues from different backgrounds should be seen as a learning experience and one should never impose their own beliefs and methods on others ...

She thinks the ability to listen and work as a team is essential. You cannot impose your own way of doing things but need to be accepting of others, taking on board their ideas and suggestions. For her, having worked with so many people from different countries, she learned to adapt to different thought processes and learned to mediate, even when in disagreement. She considers flexibility crucial to working well with others. Sophia also believes that collaboration with local teachers helped her develop resilience. The advice of experienced teachers in her new intercultural setting had a healing effect during the process of

adjustment. Intercultural communication with school administration, students, and their families helped as well. Jennifer shared her challenge within a story in which she had a hard time communicating during a teacher-parent conference. However, in collaboration with an L1 Turkish teacher, she had an amazing experience, and this gave her more confidence.

The teachers' experiences highlight the critical role school leaders play in creating a culture of collaboration and connection, serving as role models of respectful interactional dialogue. Rosa's words underline the importance of school leadership in playing an essential role in international teachers' adjustment process. The guidance and mentorship provided helped her to overcome initial challenges, giving her confidence and courage, which eventually helped her to develop agency. Rosa's words echoed in all the voices: "Teachers shouldn't feel lonely and insecure and therefore the first contact or communication with the school administration is very important. . . ."

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

Utopias and dystopias exist even in privileged school contexts. While working on this study, each of us continued our overarching project of creating more equitable pathways for teachers and leaders. This study gave us insights about how intercultural interaction can serve as means to support teachers' adjustment to new cultures. Also, stories of teachers implied and highlighted the importance of successful school leadership in this challenging process. Case studies focusing on experiences of successful schools can give in depth data which can inform practices at the schools. Action research projects can also be implemented at school sites to create research-informed, local improvement-oriented practices. Finally, stories can be collected in authentic settings in different countries to hear teachers' immediate experiences and the ways in which they can navigate in different cultural contexts. As Clark (2001) notes, "authentic dialogues can enable teachers to articulate their own experiences, implicit hopes and fears, in the intellectual and emotional company of others whom they trust" (p. 177). We hope that stories shared in this study will be heard by other ISATT members who can channel the voices of teachers and leaders in their own local contexts in future collaborative studies.

## **AUTHORS' NOTES**

The authors thank Christopher M. Clark, who read and commented on drafts of this chapter. The authors also thank the teachers who gave their valuable time to participate in this study.

## REFERENCES

- Bakioglu, A., Hacifazlıoğlu, Ö., & Özcan, K. (2010). Influence of trust in principals mentoring experiences at different career phases. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 16(2), 245–258.
- Beltman, S., Mansfield, C., & Price, A. (2011). Thriving not just surviving: A review of research on teacher resilience. *Educational Research Review*, 6, 185–207.
- Benard, B. (1995). *Fostering resilience in children*. ERIC/EECE Digest, EDO-PS-99.
- Bobek, B. L. (2002). Teacher resiliency: A key to career longevity. *The Clearing House*, 75(4), 202–205.
- Burghes, D., Howson, J., Marenbon, J., O’Leary, J., & Woodhead, C. (2009). *Teachers matter: Recruitment, employment, and retention at home and abroad*. Politeia.
- Castro, A. J., Kelly, J., & Shih, M. (2010). Resilience strategies for new teachers in high-needs areas. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(3), 622–629.
- Clark, C. M. (2001). *Talking shop*. Teachers College Press.
- Day, C., & Leithwood, K. (Eds.). (2007). *Successful principal leadership in times of change: An international perspective*. Springer.
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2007). Teacher’s resilience: A necessary condition for effectiveness. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23, 1302–1316.
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2013). Challenges to teacher resilience: Conditions count. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 22–44.
- Kadar, D. Z., & House, J. (2021). Interaction ritual and (im)politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 179, 54–60.
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience. A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71, 543–562.
- Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in a foreign country: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. *International Social Science Bulletin*, 7(1), 45–51.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. R. (1999). *Designing qualitative research*. Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative research design*. Sage.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7(3), 177–182.
- Ospina, N. S., & Medina, S. L. (2020). Living and teaching internationally: Teachers talk about personal experiences, benefits, and challenges. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 19(1), 38–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240920915013>
- Richardson, W., Kirchenheim, C. von, & Richardson, C. (2006). Teachers and their international relocation: The effect of self and pay satisfaction on adjustment and outcome variables. *International Education Journal*, 7(7), 883–894.
- Roskell, D. (2013). Cross-cultural transition: International teachers’ experience of ‘culture shock’. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 12(2), 155–172.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. Jossey-Bass.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Teachers College Press.
- Volet, S. (1999). Motivation within and across cultural-educational contexts: A multi-dimensional perspective. In T. Urdan (Ed.), *Advances in motivation and achievement* (pp. 185–231). JAI Press.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1996). Crossing cultures: The relationship between psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment. In J. Pandey, D. Sinha, & D. P. S. Bhawuk (Eds.), *Asian contributions to cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 289–306). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of socio-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23(4), 659–677.

- Ward, C., Okura, Y., Kennedy, A., & Kojima, T. (1998). The U-curve on trial: A longitudinal study of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transition. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 22(3), 277–291.
- Yang, C. (2021). *Pre-service and first-year teachers' experiences with school violence and subjective well-being project*. University of California Berkeley. Institutional Review Board (IRB#2020-08-13553).