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Preparing International Teachers for their New Employment

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After arrival at an international school there are teachers who struggle to negotiate the social, cultural, curricular, pedagogical, linguistic, and administrative differences that characterize the work context (Bates, 2011). Such negotiation takes time away from teaching practice and school involvement, and may affect job productivity and retention through feelings of isolation, stress, and demotivation. Successful navigation of differences in the overseas workplace depends, in large part, on the orientation that international workers experience prior to departure (Deveney, 2007). An orientation is a form of professional development that supports a smooth and positive adjustment for new employees to their place of employment. An orientation can contain information that relates to, but not limited to, work procedures and organization, culture and language differences, evaluations, strategic plans, and resource allocation. Pointedly, what teachers learn prior to departure through an orientation-type activity may be helpful in mitigating the aforementioned work differences. Although 'learning on the job' is a familiar and acceptable practice of any position, the teaching profession has a well-established culture of preparedness that may be useful to international schools through its comprehensive and intense certification programs. Pre-departure work becomes paramount for international schools since many new faculty members do not visit the school or meet colleagues prior to their arrival. The goal for pre-departure work is to help international teachers conceptualize their lives in the new school and community, learn necessary skills, expand knowledge bases, and begin developing school relationships. International schools may stand to benefit by way of minimizing teacher turnover, improving student and teacher learning, and building a cohesive school environment at the hiring stage. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of corresponding research on the relationship between international teachers and pre-departure orientations; what is presented below may give some clue into understanding this relationship.

What agency provides pre-departure training for international teachers? In Canada, my research on preparedness and teaching overseas suggests that only 26% of schools of education across the country actually prepare educators for teaching overseas during their undergraduate program, and only 7% provide post-degree professional development in this area. Study findings also suggest that 86% of the current 106 provincially affiliated schools overseas do not offer a pre-departure orientation, which is mainly due to the financial and human resource costs associated with offering an orientation. In a recent survey I coordinated that involved 57 international teachers, study participants identified their colleagues as being a primary method of preparing for their jobs, largely facilitated through email exchanges. On one hand, this informal learning can

have useful elements because colleagues tend to feel more comfortable asking questions of each other rather than of their leaders. On the other hand, this exchange is largely responsive (i.e., the employed teacher responds to questions that the incoming teacher guesses are important), and shifts professional development away from school leaders. New teachers need many initial opportunities to become “psychologically close” to their formal leaders in order to “seek feedback” (Erdogan & Baur, 2014). Pre-departure learning that consists of unstructured email exchanges may represent a missed opportunity for school leaders to build close relationships with incoming faculty.

Building relationships based on sharing texts might not produce the desired effects of feeling prepared to teach overseas. In a recent study of nine pre-departure manuals designed for international teachers, we identified three dominant themes in the data (Mizzi & O’Brien-Klewchuk, 2016). First, there was a heavy emphasis on information that describes how to set up life in the new country (e.g., how to obtain a visa), and little emphasis on culture shock, cultural diversity, or intercultural competence. Second, there was moderate consideration of “good” teaching practices, but the manuals were devoid of leadership approaches, or learning how to become a leader. Last, the manuals informed teachers “what not to do” and “what to do” in order to succeed, without consideration of personal or professional backgrounds. These three themes are significant as they cement an instrumentalist approach to pre-departure orientation manuals and do little to present teachers with opportunities to acquire intercultural competence, predict issues of disconnect and toughness, learn of different options and opportunities in the new school and community, or form negotiation strategies of the differences that nuance work in an international school.

In light of this research, I suggest a reconsideration of the value placed on pre-departure support, to consider the experience as an opportunity to strengthen the applicability and adaptability of teacher academic knowledge. The pre-departure orientation can be utilized as a pedagogical moment through which international teachers can learn about and come to appreciate human diversity. For example, I find that online learning virtually transports teachers to an international school through videos and interactive activities. This approach helps teachers conceptualize different aspects of teaching overseas, such as how to incorporate aspects of the local culture into teaching practice. The way in which school administrators decide to provide pre-departure support largely depends on work situations and available resources. Yet with the advancement of new communication and education technologies, it will be more beneficial to adopt a proactive role and reconsider the new forms of pre-departure orientations that can be made available to international teachers.

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