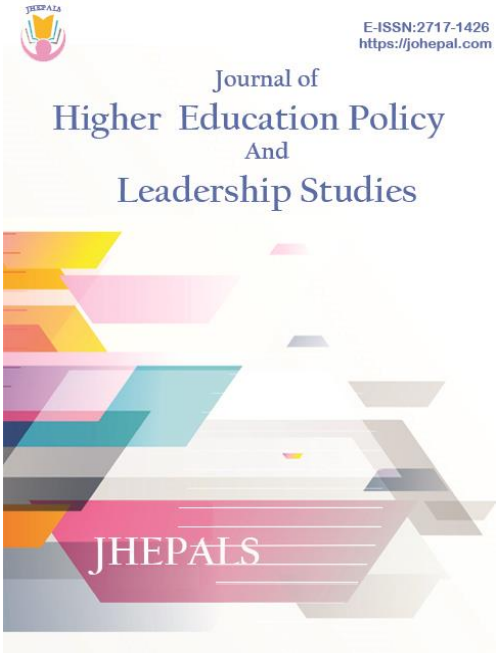
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# Towards an Acculturation Framework for K-12 Educators who Live and Work Abroad: The Role of Teacher Training Institutions

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**Rebecca Stroud Stasel** *

## Abstract

The demand for teachers overseas far outweighs the supply. International teachers become sojourners, or "between-society culture travelers" (Ward, et al., 2005, p. 6), but how do they manage to thrive once in their host country? Culture shock presents ubiquitous challenges for teachers. Policyscapes, metaphorical pools of diverse policies converging and sometimes clashing, are sure to add more challenges. This study explored factors affecting teacher thriving overseas. To date, research on expatriate teachers is scarce. Psychological acculturation theories have not covered teachers, which is significant because teachers guide students who are also acculturating. I developed a preliminary educator acculturation framework to inform my three-phase narrative qualitative study on educator acculturation, which explored the experiences of K-12 teachers and school leaders whose educator certification was completed at Anglo-Western institutions of higher education, and who were employed at international schools in Southeast and East Asia, and later sojourning school leaders. This article provides analyses of data from the study's first phase. Findings include evidence of acculturative stress, as well as personal and professional growth from sojourning. Propositions from the study include beginning a scholarly dialogue about educator acculturation, developing an educator acculturation framework, and translating acculturation understandings to praxes by means of reflection and professional development.

**Keywords:** Acculturation; Culture Shock; International Schools; K-12 Education; Leadership; Sojourners; Teacher Training

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## Introduction

The demand for teachers overseas has been outweighing the supply for over a decade and shows no sign of easing (Brummitt & Keeling, 2013; Bunnell, 2017, 2020; Ingersoll, Hirschkorn, Landine, & Sears, 2018). In 2016 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization declared a global shortage of almost 69 million teachers (UNESCO, 2016). This demand exists both in national schools around the globe, where student and teacher populations are largely comprised of local inhabitants, and international schools, where student and teacher populations are more diverse and often more economically privileged. This study was situated in the context of K-12 international schools, where teachers are expected to number 780,000 by 2026 (Gaskell, 2016). These schools seek educators from diverse contexts, but particularly favour educators whose teacher preparation and certification were undertaken at Anglo-Western universities, presumably because of a widespread endorsement of English as global lingua franca (Fail, 2011). As such, international schools may be policy actors that unintentionally facilitate Anglo-Western educators to constitute a transnational ruling class, ironically in tandem with promoting international mindedness (Brown & Lauder, 2011). The terms international education, international schools, and international teachers are all contested ones; thus, overlap is occasionally observed regarding national and international schools. For the purposes of this paper, *international school* refers to an English-medium school in a country where the primary language is other than English, and *international teacher* refers to certified teachers who move to another country to teach. My study included teachers in leadership positions, so I collectively refer to all participants as educators. My study followed the acculturative experiences of seventeen international educators who chose to live and work in Southeast and East Asia. All educators were sojourners, a term used to refer to a temporary acculturating group (Safdar & Berno, 2016). None of the participants identified as belonging to the host culture in which they were living.

My interest in the experiences of international teachers began twenty-five years ago, when I was an early-career teacher (ECT). I accepted a position at a Canadian-accredited international school in the Kuala Lumpur area, in Malaysia. This first overseas teaching position was transformational and fomented in me a global curiosity that has persisted throughout my entire teaching career.

This qualitative study explored the experiences of Anglo-Western-certified educators living and working overseas and aimed to better understand educator acculturation, with a particular interest in discovering keys to thriving while living overseas. Thriving is defined as an optimal state of being that includes feelings of confidence, resilience, well-being, flow, self-efficacy, and a sense that *'I'm doing really well, despite the obstacles that come my way.'* This represents the opportunity angle of the study. The other angle examined the challenges to thriving while living overseas, also known as acculturative stress (Berry, 2006). By exploring both challenges and opportunities, more realistic and nuanced understandings were expected to emerge.

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***Stroud Stasel, R.***

## Why Educator Acculturation Matters

*We can imagine them [international schools] as atolls in a coral sea. They have links, but different ways of life – different cultures"* (Allen, 2004, p. 131).

### Sojourners and Acculturation

A person who moves to another country to work is often referred to as expatriate, a moniker that frequently carries a statement of privilege. Expatriates are generally well-paid, especially in comparison with the wages of their local colleagues, and with that comes a lifestyle of easy access. The expatriate identity limiting since it fails to acknowledge the importance of personal and professional growth, particularly in cultural competencies. When educators move overseas to work, they become sojourners, or "between-society culture travelers" (Ward, et al., 2005, p. 6). They bring with them their own cultural identities, which are formed at many intersections, including their own family lineage and cultural understandings aligned with their upbringing. At the same time, they begin to live in a cultural environment that may be quite different from any experienced before. Like third culture kids (TCKs; Useem & Downie, 1976), they begin to acquaint themselves with interstitial cultures that blend understandings from both home and host cultures but may not feel like they fully belong to either one. Thus, all international teachers must navigate a process of acculturation (Berry, 2005) as part of their lived experiences as sojourners. This experience is not unique to teachers; expatriates in all professions experience interstitial cultural realities, but teachers shoulder a duty of care, which encompasses legal and moral responsibility for the education, safety, and guidance of their students, many of whom are also acculturating, and so their professional success is at least in part a product of successful personal acculturation.

As someone who has sojourned overseas as an international teacher and researcher, I began to ask myself how sojourners manage to thrive once in their host country. Culture shock (Oberg, 1960) presents ubiquitous challenges for teachers (Roskell, 2013). Research on Oberg's deficit-oriented theory has led to decade-long careers studying acculturation (e.g., Berry, 1970, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2006, 2011; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 2008; Ward & Geeraert, 2016; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), and yet, the body of research on teacher experiences overseas is scarce (Bunnell, 2017; Halicioglu, 2015; Ingersoll, 2014). Psychological acculturation theories (e.g., Berry, 2005; Ward et al., 2005) have covered many sojourner groups, but not teachers, which is shocking, given that teachers provide quotidian support for students who are also acculturating.

This study explored factors that affect teacher well-being overseas in the context of acculturation, by closely examining the lived experiences of sojourning educators—teachers, school counselors, department heads, and principals—of varied ages and at various stages in their careers. The study was carried out over three phases. This paper examines interview data collected in the first phase from seventeen educators employed at eleven schools in Malaysia, Macau, mainland China, Singapore, and Thailand, in an effort to capture elements of their embodied, lived experiences with acculturation while living abroad. Data collection began in situ prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and continued virtually throughout the first year of the pandemic.

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***Educator Acculturation Framework: Teacher Training***

### Policyscapes

While the professional landscape looks promising for ambitious teachers willing to go overseas to launch careers, the critical question of how to thrive once in their host country needs to be addressed. In addition to the obvious expectation of experiences of culture shock (Oberg, 1960), is the likelihood of encountering policyscapes, (Mettler, 2016), which are metaphorical pools of diverse policies and pedagogies, replete with cultures and geopolitics that may be foreign to international educators. An example of a policyscape would be the contrasting approaches of providing special education for exceptional learners between an Ontario-accredited international school based on Ontario policies that is situated in a host country where exceptional needs may not be recognized, creating an inequitable system (Bradley, 2000) in which teachers are not capable of fulfilling their duties. Policyscapes can be stressful for all stakeholders, especially when the safety of children is involved and where the reassurance of tenure may be threatened if not properly navigated. Policyscapes complicate matters greatly and threaten to exacerbate culture shock, thus increasing a sojourner's acculturative challenges.

### Teacher Migration and Midnight Running

Teacher turnover in the international context is high. This might be expected; most international teaching contracts are two years long. Often, teachers will renew their contracts, but staying on indefinitely is the exception rather than the rule. Premature teacher migration is a significant concern for international school leaders. When teachers leave, it is costly to schools, interrupts programming, and is stressful for the students (Garton, 2000). The colloquialisms *runner, midnight run, and midnight running* refer to when a teacher abruptly breaks one's contract without warning and flees the host country. According to von Kirchenheim and Richardson (2005), up 70% of expatriates terminate their employment before contract completion. I posit that midnight runs are linked with policyscape and acculturation difficulties, and that successful acculturation influences teachers' thriving, the development of self-efficacy, and ultimately their retention or attrition. For these reasons, research on the acculturation of sojourning educators makes a valuable contribution to scholarship, benefitting teachers, school leaders, and students in international schools. As it happens, three of the seventeen educators in this study terminated working and living in their host country during the period of data collection. One returned to Canada after having finished her contract; one terminated his contract early but consulted with his employer and received a mutual release; one was a midnight runner.

I created a cursory acculturation framework based on extant literature, but sought to explore this further by delving deeply into the lived experiences of seventeen sojourning educators.

## Theoretical Framework

The literature on international schools identifies dramatic changes since the founding of UNESCO and the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO, now called IB). It also reveals many tensions that become everyday challenges for educators. These can be broken down into four general categories: social; cultural; ideological; and political.

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## Social Tensions

Social tensions include the practices of inclusive global education, which remain a challenge (Bradley, 2000; Tarc, 2013) despite direction provided by the Salamanca Report (UNESCO, 1994), which called for education to become more inclusive, provide differentiation, and start global conversations about special needs, followed by praxes. Professional development is a challenge when working in relative isolation (Powell, 2000), as international schools' ability to support teachers varies greatly (Snowball, 2007). Thus, international teachers must be highly flexible and self-efficacious (Von Kirchenheim & Richardson, 2005) and draw upon their own self-leadership capacity (Snowball, 2007). The qualities of flexibility and self-leadership sum up the essence of the *fit* proposition (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Budrow & Tarc, 2018; Von Kirchenheim & Richardson, 2005), to which many recruiters ascribe when recruiting international teachers (C. Gauthier, personal communication, October 12, 2016), and which is more complex in reality due to numerous mitigating factors, which may or may not be evident.

## Cultural Tensions

Educators find themselves at intersections of numerous cultures, including organizational ones, and need to sort out how their identity fits in to these intersections. Identity intersects social-cognitive and emotional processes of meaning-making (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) found that identity is an important factor in teacher development, and further, that teachers undergo identity shifts throughout their careers. Bates (2011) reinforced the proposition of plural teacher identities, informed by cultural as well as organizational affiliations. Bukor (2011) found teachers' professional and personal identities to be conjoined. It follows that teachers who go overseas will experience identity shifts on both professional and personal fronts, demanding encouragement and patience. Powell (2007) introduced *holonomy* to describe "the balance between individual autonomy (self-direction and self-fulfillment) and the integration of the individual into the purpose, vision and work of a community" (p. 353). Delaney (2015) used the construct of *borderlands of practice* to represent "contested spaces of teacher practice" (p. 374), which extend beyond the classroom and may result in feelings of dissonance for the teacher. These constructs are important when thinking about teacher identity because the borderlands are chaotic, potentially leading to imbalance and additional stress.

## Ideological Tensions

The international education movement was ideological from its inception (Hill, 2015). It includes longstanding and ongoing debates on the praxes of international education, which continue to reflect a Western bias (Poonoosamy, 2018; Razak, 2012; Sunder, 2013), and a salient yet idealistic, if not precarious concept of international mindedness (Tarc, 2018). According to Savva and Stanfield (2018), while the international mindedness movement was intended to promote openness, it was nonetheless a model whose target audience was privileged youth around the world. On the one hand, considering that one of the requirements of international teachers is to provide culturally responsive instruction (Gay, 2000), sojourning teachers stand to gain cultural competencies by virtue of their intersectional experiences, and these are competencies that they will bring to their next professional experience. On the other hand, how do teachers reconcile disquieting

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inequities ranging from "teaching rich kids in poor countries" to "desires and attempts to forge non-coercive, if momentary, relations with locals who seemed placed toward the bottom end of a more rigid hierarchical social-class order" (Tarc, 2013, p. xxi), which may arise during their sojourning experiences? In the scant literature available, it seems that teachers become acutely aware of their privilege while sojourning overseas, encountering a consciousness that behooves action.

## Political Tensions

Political tensions involve both transparent and hidden agendas of the host institution, nestled within the larger regional and national frameworks. Thus, political tensions may be obvious to teachers immediately; they may also lurk invisibly as unspoken conditions. Sojourning educators need to be agentic, which Bandura (2001, p. 22) described as developing "ways of adapting flexibly to remarkably diverse geographic, climatic and social environments." Policyscapes are a product of political intersections between the host country and the governing authority of the school, which is often western. Policyscapes can be a counterforce to teacher agency. Because international schools are not bastions of transparency (Caffyn, 2011), teachers need confidence to become agentic. Ironically, agency may be even more critical to sojourning teachers who need high levels of resiliency to thrive. Another tension would involve the political implications arising from the choice of curriculum, standardization and performativity (Tarc, 2013; Zsebik, 2000). These critiques highlight political and policy tensions and illustrate the fertile ground in which policyscapes can create issues for international school leaders. Most of the impacts will be felt by teachers and students.

Why do all of these tensions matter? Teachers' pre-service training is not capable of fully preparing their teacher candidates amidst these tensions. This is concerning for the healthy development of teacher identity and professional capacity. Since international teachers are overseeing the acculturation of their students in a policyscaped environment, it is critical that they be supported in order to do so.

## Acculturation Theories

Numerous acculturation theories have been developed since Oberg's seminal work on culture shock (1960), which was framed as an occupational malady involving the four phases of euphoria, rejection, adjustment, and recovery. Berry (2005, 2006) reframed the orientation to a more balanced theory involving both opportunities and challenges. He coined the term *acculturative stress*, an effect of having to rapidly navigate many executive decisions with limited information while settling into a new place. Potential sojourners may feel optimistic when learning about Berry's acculturation framework because he proposed various attitudes and behaviours which may favourably position one to reduce the stress and successfully integrate. The optimism here is in the implicit proposition that such attitudes and behaviours can be developed. One might be able to strategize one's acculturative journey somewhat in advance, and prepare, and know how to find help when needed. Other acculturation theories provide nuanced deviations from Oberg's work, such as culture fatigue (Guthrie, 1966), culture confusion (Hottola, 2004), and refutations or extensions of Berry's work, such as sojourner adjustment (Ward, 2008; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000), and intercultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990).

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### Self-Leadership

*"The first step is not action; the first step is understanding. The first question is how to think about leadership." (Gardner, 1990, p. xiv)*

This study utilized a leadership lens for two reasons. The first is that both new teacher thriving, and teacher retention can be traced to school leaders (Kutsyuruba, Godden, Covell, Matheson, & Walker, 2016). The second is that the literature makes evident that strong self-leadership capacity leads to thriving. Burns (1978) defined leadership as "the reciprocal process of mobilizing by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers" (p. 425).

This framing of leadership is compelling to me because it values the individual and collective goals of both the leader and the follower. One might presume that the leader would be the principal and that the follower would be the teacher, and this presumption would apply to many instances of acculturation. Teachers have been positioned as leaders (Frost, 2012; Harris, 2005). This is compelling for a variety of reasons. First, they are tasked with leading multiple classes of students daily. Second, they often provide critical specialized leadership in areas of their capacities within a distributed leadership approach that many schools use. Finally, teachers engage in self-leadership regularly. Neck and Houghton (2006) defined self-leadership as "a self-influence process through which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform (p. 271). Because acculturation is so complex and the experiences unique, this study included an examination of how teachers engaged in self-leadership processes by incorporating reflective practices.

## Towards an Educator Acculturation Framework

Most acculturation theories are nested within the field of psychology. Absent, however, is a single theory that pertains to educators. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies that have been conducted upon the experiences of international teachers. This is surprising given the influence that teachers have upon student learning. My study drew upon Berry's work on *acculturative stress* (2006). Berry's body of work has become influential to academics. This is not surprising given that his work has spanned four decades and includes both asset and deficit perspectives, as opposed to Oberg's purely deficit orientation.

It should be noted that while findings on acculturation are informative, there exist to date many inconclusive findings, unanswered questions, and gaps in understanding. The diversity of effects in the literature and inconclusive findings reinforce the complexities and nuanced processes involved. Indeed, a concrete framework may be impossible to establish due to the phenomenon's broad defiance of generalizability. And yet, it is still an area worthy of further scrutiny, given that the stakes are high and that discovering trends may illuminate a broad, yet flexible framework through which to approach educator acculturation.

From the review of literature on international schooling and acculturation, I developed a theoretical framework that drove my study design (see Figure 1 below). This framework is educator-specific and draws from theoretical perspectives that include theorising from the fields of psychology as well as educational leadership and policy.

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***Educator Acculturation Framework: Teacher Training***




**Figure 1.** Educator Acculturation Framework (Developed by the author)

The framework features three themes: teacher identity, leadership/self-leadership, and well-being. It is the embodied complexity that an examination of lived experiences of acculturating teachers is hoped to illuminate. I use Allen's (2004) metaphor of the international school as an atoll to situate each teacher, who is like one solo person living on an isolated atoll, hoping to thrive. This framework is ecological, demonstrating how the various elements (the atoll, the educator's identity, the leadership/self-leadership actions, and the qualities of thriving) interact with one another, flowing within and beyond the atoll, to produce different growth patterns and to illustrate the paradox of the atoll as both isolated from and connected with the external educational systems. The protocol for the initial interview is based upon this framework.

## Methodology

Given what we know about acculturating challenges, and the ubiquitous stresses that are imminent for those who choose to move to another country to work, and noting that the body of scholarship on acculturation has been largely conducted from a deficit perspective, there are missing pieces to the acculturation narratives currently in the literature. Beyond the stress, what growth opportunities exist, balancing the tensions that we know about acculturation? The following sub-questions emerged from the development of the above framework, such as:

- How do educators who work overseas understand, experience and manage acculturation?
- How do educators link their identities with their acculturative experiences?
- How does acculturation affect their working life, their personal life, their sense of well-being?

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- What is the role of leadership in mitigating acculturative challenges and promoting well-being?
- What self-leadership processes do sojourning educators engage in so as to achieve the direction and motivation necessary to thrive?

I collected stories from the educators in my study, to capture the embodied, nuanced lived experiences that provoke further inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) proposed that we understand through stories since we live storied lives. My research design involved three data collection phases. In this paper, I share findings from the study's first phase.

In the first phase, I travelled to Southeast Asia to meet most of the participants in my study (Table 1). There, I, toured schools, conducted the first round of interviews, provided instructions and materials to the participants for the second phase, which was reflective in nature, and during which time participants were invited to engage in reflective journaling, photovoice, and memory box. I was overseas for one month, during which time, I also engaged in utilizing the same instruments as my participants. In addition, I kept a commonplace book (Shuman, Shabtay, McDonnell, Bourassa, & Muhammady, 2018) to take field notes, and to log my own experiences.

Table 1.
Participant information (N=17)

| Pseudonym | Host Region | Previous Sojourning as Teacher | Teaching Experience | Educative Role | Contract Status* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Bria* | Singapore | No | 10-20 years | Teacher/Leader** | EC |
| *Charlotte* | Malaysia | Pre-Service | 2-5 years | Teacher | HC |
| *Claire* | Malaysia | Yes | 20+ years | Teacher | EC |
| *Frédéric* | Mainland China | Yes | 20+ years | Teacher | LE |
| *Harry* | Malaysia | Yes | 10-20 years | Leader | EC |
| *Hayley* | Malaysia | Yes | 5-10 years | Teacher | EC |
| *Jake* | Malaysia | No | 10-20 years | Teacher | EC |
| *Jayna* | Thailand | Yes | 10-20 years | Leader/Teacher | HC |
| *Joon-Ho* | Malaysia | No | 5-10 years | Leader | EC |
| *Lily* | Macau | Yes | 5-10 years | Teacher | HC |
| *Mandy* | Mainland China | Yes | 2-5 years | Teacher | EC |
| *May* | Malaysia | Yes | 10-20 years | Leader | EC |
| *Pat* | Malaysia | No | 5-10 years | Teacher/Leader | EC |
| *Ron* | Malaysia | Yes | 20+ years | Teacher | EC |
| *Rowan* | Malaysia | Yes | 10-20 years | Teacher/Leader | LE |
| *Sean* | Mainland China | No | 5-10 years | Teacher | HC |
| *Victoria* | Malaysia | No | 10-20 years | Teacher/Leader | EC |

Notes: **Honoured Contract – HC; Extended Contract – EC; Left Early – LE. Of the two who left early, one negotiated an early departure and left on favourable terms, to teach at another international school in another country; the other became a midnight runner.*

***Where two roles are listed, the primary duties are listed first. A teacher whose primary duties are school leadership is labelled Leader/Teacher; a teacher whose primary duties are teaching, with added leadership roles (e.g., lead teacher, division head, guidance, etc.), is labelled Teacher/Leader.*

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### *Educator Acculturation Framework: Teacher Training*

Upon returning home from the first research trip, I transcribed all interviews, ascribed pseudonyms to participants, and undertook the first round of thematic analysis (Guest, 2012), which was exploratory. While the framework informed the design of the first interview instrument, in the first round of analysis, I avoided using predetermined codes. I identify the themes that emerged from this analysis cycle. I then revisit the framework to ponder what revisions might add to the framework.

The research design was emergent, to allow for changes beyond my control. As such, while most of the interviews were conducted in situ, there were participants who joined after my first research trip had been finalized, and they were interviewed virtually. This emergent design proved helpful as the COVID pandemic broke out during the second phase of data collection. I had to cancel my second research trip to China, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, revise my plan and instruments, and the final interviews were all conducted virtually. In the first phase, I used semi-structured teacher interviews to ask participants eight questions; the first seven consisted of conceptions about acculturation, themes of identity, leadership, and well-being, and the final question was open-ended.

Prior to leaving Canada, I had confirmed study sites with two schools in SE Asia from which to seek participants. Recruitment went very well with one site, but not so well with the second site, which had experienced an unexpected change of school leader, and my arrival coincided with organizational regrouping. One participant did emerge from that school, but I then reached out for more participants, adding a third school site and more participants while I was overseas, and adding more participants from other schools afterwards, for which school visits have been impossible due to the pandemic.

## Findings & Discussion

Collectively, the seventeen educators in this study represent teachers, guidance counselors, lead teachers, division heads, assistant principals, and principals. Their experience level ranged from none to many years of experience. Most of the participants had sojourned in another country before. Six had not sojourned as a teacher and two had not sojourned at all. All of the educators reported experiences with culture shock. Of those who had sojourned previously, most described their first experience as their most shocking one, which suggests that acculturation may involve learned skills. Three of the seventeen left their positions during the data collection period. Of these, one finished her contract as scheduled and returned to Canada, one sought international teaching work elsewhere and received an early release by mutual consent, and one was a midnight runner.

Following a triple field coding format provided by Saldaña (2013), the following three themes emerged prominently: 1) reflective practice; 2) self-leadership strategies; and 3) acculturative gifts amidst the shocks.

### Reflective Practice

Knowing oneself is an important professional practice, especially for those whose work involves leadership roles (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Many educators believed that self-reflection was a valiant ongoing goal, yet this goal lurked overhead like a cloud at times when educators had numerous professional demands made of them, all the while making multiple executive decisions that impact their students.

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Some participants linked professional goal-setting with acculturating success in their host country. Pat, a young teacher in Malaysia, whose work ethic led to a school leadership position, Charlotte, an ECT, also in Malaysia, and Sean, an ECT in China, all prioritized goal setting prior to leaving Canada, and goal monitoring as essential to one's journey. Pat recommended that teachers considering the international arena first make an inventory, and then drill down on their priorities, classifying them in terms of flexibility and necessity. He added, "you need to figure out why do you want to move away … I think if you know that before you arrive, you may stay longer or you may know your plan for living here … we've had some teachers who come in, within two or three months, they decide that they're going to quit and that they're going to go back to Canada and it happens." Pat went on to explain that the ones who left rapidly had arrived without plans and did not purposefully make decisions for comfort or belonging upon arriving.

According to Charlotte, goal-setting served to mitigate alienation that sojourners necessarily face. Conducting preliminary research on an area can also serve to educate and inform sojourning educators, which may reduce or even prevent some shocks. On the other hand, one cannot prepare for absolutely everything. Frédéric, a seasoned teacher in China with many previous international sojourns, challenged sojourning teachers to "know yourself" but also noted that, "until you've worked in a foreign country, you don't know yourself" and furthermore, much of what one will experience cannot be predicted in advance.

Reflective practice also facilitates culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), and is a pathway toward improved educational practices both individually and systemically (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Hayley, an ECT in Malaysia, shared that she wanted,

> to show my students that I understand some components of their culture and if I don't understand, I'm curious about it and I ask questions and I try to reflect on how their culture and mine might not always agree, but how we can come to some sort of compromise with what we're talking about in class.

She believed that this is not only helpful for acculturating, but it's an important pedagogy for teachers to model for their students. In order to propel herself in this direction, Hayley decided to augment her reading, and to read books from diverse authors. She smiled as she shared, "I absolutely crushed my goal and I readjusted to make it 80 [books]."

## Self-leadership Strategies

The participants in this study were very generous when asked to share insights and advice for potential sojourning educators, who are interested in thriving while acculturating. Many of these may be framed as self-leadership strategies, grouped under the following titles: seek supporting networks, cultivate optimism, and make yourself at home.

### *Seek Supportive Networks*

Sojourners willingly leave behind that which is known, comfortable, not to mention their support system. The educators in this study all believed supportive networks to be essential to acculturative well-being and expressed an understanding that their leaders can greatly influence their acculturative experiences. Some educators in the study felt well-supported; others did not. Expectations of support and active stances to seek supports ranged among

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the participants. Most participants actively sought supports in both formal and informal ways. Three participants took a more passive stance, accepting what was offered yet not seeking additional supports.

Some of the educators, such as Kate, an experienced teacher and guidance counselor in Malaysia, and Jake, an experienced teacher in another city in Malaysia, and Frédéric, in China, were motivated to develop friendships with local people in their host countries. Frédéric believed that embracing cultural learning opportunities enhanced a sojourner's well-being. Lily drew from online support from her former classmates, teachers, and colleagues. Both Lily and Kate found themselves working in schools that were still establishing themselves. Supports were limited and sometimes nonexistent. Both expressed experiences of isolation, which adversely affected their sense of well-being. Another gap in support appeared to be in the area of supports for school leaders. Jayna, an experienced teacher and school leader in Thailand, indicated that she received no support at her work. She had developed extensive self-leadership strategies that included taking leadership courses online, networking with other international school leaders, and maintaining touch with former colleagues who are now in positions of leadership internationally. Like several other participants, she noted that having a partner with her helped, as they could unpack their daily stresses and support one another through them.

### *Cultivate Optimism*

All seventeen educators displayed characteristics of being optimistic, brave, flexible, prosocial, resourceful, and resilient. These traits are evident in their self-perceptions as well as in the actions that they described in their lived experiences. All educators exhibited aspects of positive mindset (Dweck, 2008), which align with the concept of fit (Budrow & Tarc, 2018; Gauthier, 2016). Ron, a seasoned teacher who sojourned in many countries, advised other teachers to know one's strengths and to capitalize on them.

Oberg's four phases of culture shock include one that is idyllic. The second stage "euphorie," also known as the "honeymoon stage" (Oberg, 1960, p. 142), involves a heightened sense of delight. Charlotte reflected upon an aspect of the teacher induction program at her school, where she and other newly hired teachers were treated to a two-week stay in a luxury resort so that they could acclimatize to the weather, meet and bond with the other newly hired educators, and enjoy a bit of a holiday up front, while they were finding accommodations and settling in. She shared,

> It was like a honeymoon phase. I was like, 'Oh, this hot weather.' And you know, when you first get here, they put you in a hotel and it's a really nice hotel you have a pool and you're just like, 'wow, like this is the life!' I could get used to this kind of thing.

According to Charlotte, this experience prolonged her honeymoon period, and allowed her to establish herself from a perspective of optimism and confidence. She also felt this gave her added clarity with which to maintain her optimistic outlook.

### *Make Yourself at Home*

The educators in this study were generally happy with their current lifestyle and situations in their host countries. Most teachers were able to mitigate and buffer the myriad of

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challenges they discussed by creating a comfortable lifestyle for themselves. Expatriate teachers are a privileged group, and most participants acknowledged this. Pat, who enjoyed his sojourn so much that he renewed his contract a couple of times, believed that sojourners who treated themselves to certain comforts had an overall impact on their daily well-being and their perceptions of both personal and professional experiences.

The range of self-supportive strategies varied greatly from participant to participant. Some strategies may seem contradictory; however, upon closer look, they illustrate the educators' understanding of themselves and how to prioritize self-care. For example, educators articulated in some fashion the imperative to be prosocial, what Charlotte referred to as "saying yes" to as many social invitations as possible, because "if staying and enjoying ourselves here is having that social group… because [if we don't] have friends, we're not going to be happy either." In contrast, Sean told me that he liked to work alone, and under stress, he would retreat to a physically isolated space to do his work.

## Culture Shock, Acculturative Stress, and the Gifts of Growth

No two atolls are the same. Each international school is situated within its own local and regional culture, and has its own pedagogical and organizational stance, which may or may not reflect the local and regional culture (Allen, 2000). Participants were given an opportunity to define acculturation and culture shock in their own terms. None of them refuted culture shock; in fact, many of them generously regaled me with examples. Most of the participants reported that their most difficult experiences predated their current situations. The geographic location of the shocks appears to have less of an influence than their chronology, based upon the reports from these participants. Beyond the shocks is the more prevalent and ongoing experience of acculturative stress. The participants in this study found the term acculturative stress to resonate with their current sojourning experiences. Participants described acculturative stress as an ongoing intermittent phenomenon, an irritant that wasn't always at the forefront of their minds, but like little storms that came and went during their sojourn.

The educators found language barriers to be significant to acculturative stress, yet most of the extreme situations described involved previous sojourning experiences, with the exception of Jayna, who had several teaching and leadership sojourns in English-speaking countries before accepting her position in Thailand. She has been slowly picking up Thai, but found that her translation apps were not sufficient, leading to many misunderstandings outside of her workplace. She also noted that her experiences of culture shock were most prominent in her current sojourn.

When an educator can communicate with the local people in their mother tongue, a significant amount of stress is alleviated. Sean and Mandy, two teachers who lived and worked in different cities in China, both noted language barriers and required language support strategies to navigate their personal lives. Lily, an experienced teacher in Macau, was fluent in Cantonese, which also facilitated her acculturative experiences. All the educators in Malaysia found English to be so prevalently used that no language barrier existed unless traveling to remote areas, although in all cases, communication differences were noted by participants.

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***Educator Acculturation Framework: Teacher Training***

The data indicate alienation as a common feature of both culture shock and acculturative stress. Harry, a school principal in Malaysia, with previous sojourning experiences as a teacher in another country, provided a poignant example of his experience with alienation. He enjoyed both his professional and personal life and called his current sojourn "a soft landing" because there were no language barriers, and navigating the initial steps was made easy by virtue of the cosmopolitan nature of his living arrangement, as well as by organizational support, which was purposefully set up to cushion culture shock(s). On the other hand, as a principal, he observed that leadership overseas was alienating. As a former sojourning teacher, he recalled that sojourners often make de facto families of their colleagues, such that informal after-school social time became a meaningful part of life, and that when he became a principal, he lost the informal synergy of his colleagues-friends. International schools are fairly siloed due to their diverse unique contexts (Allen, 2000). Harry embraced and enjoyed leadership. He enjoyed helping people and was a solid team player. His compassion for his staff was evident in the way he spoke of them, and in the way I observed him at the school. During my time in Malaysia, he went out of his way to serve as a support for me, understanding that I was on my own and that things had changed since my sojourn 25 years ago. However, regarding his experience as a school leader vis-à-vis teaching, he wistfully remarked, "it's lonely at the top."

In summary, all participants experienced culture shock and acculturative stress. None experienced these enough to leave international teaching. Unanimously, these participants enjoyed adventure. They expressed that their sojourning experiences provided unique opportunities for personal growth, professional growth, and travel that would not be possible without their sojourning experiences. The presence of a growth mindset among participants was palpable. While many of them shared stories that might be framed as professional or personal failures, there was an appreciation for these experiences, as if the shocks offered valuable lessons to the sojourners which has made them more resilient. This reminded me of a proposition that failure is never failure if one takes the learning from it (L. Cheng, personal communication, Oct. 2, 2019). All participants expressed an interest in future sojourning experiences as educators.

## The Role of Teacher Training Institutions

The experiences as reported by the participants give insights into some individual actions that may facilitate educator acculturation. They further provide implications for programmatic responses at teacher training institutions. These most clearly highlight areas for improving teacher training for candidates who envision themselves moving overseas to work, where both organisational and host cultural contrasts will be experienced. These findings also illuminate areas for improvement more broadly. As educational institutions augment their internationalisation efforts, one can expect intercultural contacts within the contexts of educational institutions to occur with increased frequency, and intercultural contact activates acculturation processes (Berry, 2019). It therefore behooves teacher training institutions to address contexts of acculturation so that new teachers may not only approach their own acculturative experiences with confidence, but that they may facilitate the well-being of their students while they navigate acculturative experiences. Finally, organizational acculturation occurs whenever a person takes a new position within an

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organization. The implications discussed here target primarily teacher training with sojourning in mind. These implications fall into the categories of identity work and reflective practices, self-leadership, and outreach between teacher training institutions and educational organizations.

## Identity Work and Reflective Practices

The extant literature highlights how educator identity is dynamic, embodied, complex, and intertwined with one's personal identity (Banks, 2001; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Bukor, 2011). Identity work involves subjective self-construals (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009); thus, educational spaces must be created to honour and to promote subjective self-knowledge (Ndura, 2004). The challenge raised by Frédéric about not knowing oneself until one moves away does not negate rich self-knowledge that one may have prior to sojourning, but it does serve as a cautionary tale that once abroad, an individual may learn new facets of their identity, and that understanding these facets may be critical to sojourning educators' well-being and capacity to acculturate. Embedding identity work and reflective practices into teaching and learning during teacher training can provide teacher candidates with baseline records of one's teacher identity and establishing ongoing reflective practices as essential to professional growth creates a standard of practice that can help teachers to continue this identity work after the teacher training program has been completed. Engagement with identity measurement instruments (Szabo et el., 2016) may also be introduced during teacher training programs.

Further, identity work can facilitate the process of teaching in culturally diverse contexts. Teacher training institutions often address theoretical perspectives designed to prepare teachers for working in culturally diverse contexts. Candidates must learn about how to be culturally responsive teachers (Gay, 2000) and develop a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), and understand how the relevance is contextually and culturally situated.

## Self-Leadership

The findings indicate that self-leadership may be an educator's secret superpower for maintaining well-being while acculturating. Self-leadership includes a composite of strategies that one undertakes to maintain hope, confidence, motivation, and sustenance (Houghton et al., 2003) when external supports are lacking or inconsistent. While educators in this study developed unique formulas employing diverse strategies, the exploration of useful self-leadership strategies ought to be undertaken at teacher training institutions. That the participants were unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of self-leadership suggests that currently, this is an underdeveloped area in teacher training. The good news is that the participants drew upon self-leadership for sustenance, and that those who were more self-aware and purposeful about their self-leadership also reported more pleasant sojourns.

Intersecting with identity work, teacher training could include teacher candidates working solo and in group on the development of a self-leadership guide. Benefits of solo work include deeper and perhaps more authentic recording of one's self-leadership styles and needs. Benefits of working in groups include broadening one's toolkit by learning about and observing how strategies one doesn't currently use can be adopted and used. Some effective strategies highlighted in this study included goal setting, identity work, planning in

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advance to research both school and region prior to accepting a contract, engaging in reflective practices, knowing how to connect with others both personally and professionally, and both in a face-to-face and virtual contexts, how to comfort oneself with opportunities while sojourning, and engaging in purposeful learning outside of the school.

### Outreach Between Teacher Training Institutions and Educational Organizations

Some teacher training institutions have solid and diverse organizational connections external to the institution itself. There is always room for improvement. In terms of preparing teachers for teaching abroad, organizational outreach often leads to discovering what one doesn't know that one doesn't know. Teaching abroad courses and teacher training institutions that provide overseas placement services can engage external organizations in outreach, and this outreach can serve numerous practical functions, such as finding employment with a strong probable fit, but can also serve to inform teacher candidates in their own preliminary research on international schools, that can in turn inform what types of areas to explore when seeking employment and also what questions they might wish to ask in a teaching interview. Some examples of areas to probe that became evident in this study are the presence and quality of onboarding, induction, and ongoing supports for teachers. For international schools, onboarding, induction, and ongoing supports should extend beyond the usual professional requirements as delineated by government and organizational trends. They ought to include acculturation elements, and teacher candidates who are aware of these may be able to pre-empt environments that will not be likely to support educator acculturation.

## Conclusions

The initial interview data from these seventeen educators provide cursory snapshots that help to illustrate educator acculturation. No one story provides an archetype, and no results are presumed to be generalizable. After all, each atoll is different, and so will be the growth patterns of the educators living on these atolls. The data from the second and third phases of this study have been collected, and their analysis is enabling further charting of the experiences of each of these sojourning educators, creating an academic dialogue in an arena that Bunnell (2017) noted is neglected.

The framework for educator acculturation offers key elements that may impinge upon educators' abilities to thrive while acculturating. The data suggest that identity is an integral piece of the ecological equation of acculturation, yet the impacts are not clear in the data. In her studies on acculturation, Ward (2013) found cultural heritage to be a factor, but also found complexity and inconclusive findings. That acculturation is complex should come as no surprise. Identity intersections in the context of acculturation would be an area to probe in further studies.

The data clearly support links between one's experiences with their leaders and self-leadership capacities as directly influencing one's acculturative experiences. The more supportive the leadership provided, and the stronger the self-leadership capacities an educator is aware of possessing, the more evident thriving was. Interestingly, most of the participants didn't recognize the term self-leadership by this name, but when unpacked, many strategies and stances emerged from educators. Self-leadership would be another

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area for further research. I would also propose that professional development in the area of self-leadership would be a fruitful area for international schools to explore, especially since they are generally interested in optimizing teacher retention (Garton, 2000; Mancuso, Roberts, & White, 2010).

The acculturation framework developed from the literature review was informative for the study design, and yet the data suggest that such a framework would require significant development, since the experiences indicate complexity. The ecological construct is fitting. Consider gardening as a metaphor to illustrate the complexity of findings. One could plant a variety of young plants into one's garden and see some plants thrive, while others do not. This may depend upon variables in sunlight, soil quality and drainage, and even serendipitous events, such as some plants avoid a blight or bug infestation, and others don't. When I mapped these themes on to the acculturation framework with their initial labels, I noted that the categorization of these themes required fluidity, as these may map onto more than one of the categories in the framework and may set in motion an iteration or spiral. For instance, reflective practice maps on to an educator's identity, but it also is a useful self-leadership strategy.

The study was intended to expand understandings about teacher-specific acculturation as well as to initiate discussion in academic and leadership circles on the topic of teacher acculturation. This article reviewed the data from the first set of interviews, which was designed from an emergent acculturation framework. This framework grounded the study along various factors that affect acculturative well-being. The framework is undergoing further development. Educator acculturation is a complex experience that impacts individuals both personally and professional, and has impacts beyond the individuals, such as the students. Because of this, educator acculturation compels further research in focused areas, including extensions of the findings, but also in areas of onboarding teachers, ongoing supportive structures for sojourners, and evidence-based training and professional development for sojourning educators.

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