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The Personal and Professional Benefits and Difficulties of Teaching Overseas

Linda KH Hoiseth

THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BENEFITS AND DIFFICULTIES OF TEACHING OVERSEAS

by

Linda K. H. Hoiseth

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Chairperson

Dean
School of Graduate Studies

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PROBLEM:

The purpose of this study was to determine why licensed teachers from the United States choose to teach in overseas English-language American or international schools. International school teachers were asked to respond to survey questions about the personal and professional benefits and difficulties of teaching overseas.

FINDINGS:

The personal benefits listed by the surveyed teachers include cultural experiences, travel, financial rewards, quality of life, friendships, adventure, personal growth, and learning. The professional benefits most often listed by the teachers include the quality of students, colleagues, parents, and schools, professional development opportunities, professional freedom and responsibility, small class size, lack of discipline problems, and job satisfaction. The personal difficulties listed by the survey respondents include distance from family and friends, language barriers, difficulty obtaining goods and services, culture shock/homesickness, saying goodbye to people, social difficulties, locational difficulties, medical care, and demands on time. The professional difficulties listed by the survey respondents include lack of professional development opportunities, difficulty acquiring resources, difficulties with local faculty and staff, professional isolation, lack of job protection, and differing philosophies with parents.

It is clear from the survey results that overseas teachers feel the personal and professional benefits of teaching overseas outweigh the difficulties unique to the lifestyle.

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Approved by Research Committee:

Stephen Hornstein
Stephen Hornstein Chairperson

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine why licensed teachers from the United States choose to teach in overseas English-language American or international schools. I have been teaching in international schools for six years, and when I meet teachers in the United States, I find I am called on to explain my career choice and justify my lifestyle. For me, the personal and professional advantages of teaching overseas far outweigh the difficulties, and I suspected my international colleagues would feel the same way. I chose this study to discover what other international educators see as the advantages and disadvantages of teaching overseas.

Significance of the Problem

The *International School Services 1998-1999 Handbook of Overseas Schools* indicates that approximately 10,000 American teachers are teaching in 455 American or international schools overseas where the primary language of instruction is English and the curriculum and school structure are based on the US system of education. An investigation of why these teachers choose to teach overseas helps to create a portrait of an increasingly popular, but under-reported, choice for teaching professionals. This

qualitative study focused on the personal and professional benefits and difficulties encountered by overseas teachers.

Research Questions

Why do teachers choose to teach in overseas English-language American or international schools? What do they perceive to be the benefits and difficulties of teaching overseas, both personally and professionally? What trends can be discovered in the personal benefits and difficulties in teaching overseas based on gender, age, years of overseas experience, and family status?

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, *overseas school* and *international school* are used interchangeably and are defined as a private school not in the United States where the main language of instruction is English, where the curriculum and school structure are based on the United States system of education, and which is either proprietary or non-profit. These terms do not include language schools--schools whose only purpose is to teach English as a second language.

Teacher is defined as someone teaching in a pre-kindergarten through grade twelve setting who has a teaching license or certificate from any state in the United States.

Overseas hire teacher is defined as a teacher who moved to the foreign country where he/she is employed specifically to teach--not to accompany a non-teaching spouse who was transferred overseas. In some overseas schools, one member of a teaching

couple is defined as an overseas hire, while his/her spouse is defined as a local hire for contract purposes; this distinction will not be used in this study.

A *local hire teacher* is defined as a citizen of the country where the school is located or someone who accompanied a non-teaching spouse who was transferred overseas.

Limitations

This study was limited by the willingness of United States citizen teachers teaching overseas to fill out a questionnaire on their reasons for choosing to teach overseas. It was also limited by the convenience sampling procedure used.

When sending surveys to specific teachers or schools (as opposed to posting them on public sites), I chose to send them to the biggest, oldest, and/or best known school in a city. I think well-established schools have different things to offer teachers than newer schools, and I think they attract a different kind of teacher. I wanted to point my study toward teachers who make international teaching a career choice, working in schools that have been around a while.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to licensed United States citizen overseas-hire teachers teaching in international schools.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is very little formal, published research done on international schools in general, and international school teachers, specifically. I found two bibliographies of research relating to international schools, but none of the research relevant to my study has been published.

Willis lamented, "As those of us in the field are only too aware, however, the attention of mainstream educators to international schools has been marginal at best . . . One of the reasons there is so little research on international schools is that until recently scholars have been content to picture them as extensions of national systems, as 'overseas schools.' In fact, they are something very different" (1991, p. 3).

Lockledge found that successful overseas teachers were "significantly and consistently more 'intelligent, venturesome, imaginative, and forthright'" (1985, p. 8). She also found that those who had positive cross-cultural motives and expectations adjusted to overseas teaching better than those who held negative expectations, that higher paying schools had better qualified teachers, and, "the more varied the previous experiences of the teachers, the better they adjusted to life overseas" (1985, pp. 8-9).

Evers' (1983) study of teachers in American schools focused on locus of control, normlessness, self-esteem, and short-term and long-term values. She surveyed teachers

in several schools, and wrote case studies of four of the surveyed teachers. Her focus was on the role of these teachers as "third-culture people" who serve as a connection between their home country and their host country. She concluded that adjusting to the new culture did not depend on knowing the host language, that teachers in Europe interact with host nationals more than teachers in South America, the female subjects had a more external locus of control, and men and women have different short-term and long-term values (1983, pp. 11-12).

Personal Difficulties

Wagner included a stern warning in his article:

> But do not even think about this option unless you are open-minded, possess a good sense of humor, and are able to adapt to new situations. Administrative positions in overseas schools are definitely not free of problems and stress, and while working overseas can be a very rewarding experience for both you and your family, it may not be the right choice if you can't bear to be away from your extended family for up to a year, or if your greatest joys are shopping at K-Mart and watching television. (1992, p. 36)

According to Wagner, some may fear for their personal safety overseas, but in many places teachers may be safer than they are in the United States (1992, p. 38). Two teachers in Evers' study who worked in Guatemala were concerned about personal safety; one of them had had his house bombed (1983, p. 9). Atkins noted that medical care and daily living conditions in many places do not meet U.S. Standards (1992, p. 45). She also concluded that overseas teachers need to have adaptability and flexibility, a sense of adventure, emotional stability, tolerance for different values, and self-confidence (1992, p. 45).

Bell and Purcell wrote about the heavy work load teachers overseas can expect, adapting to a new culture, and language difficulties (1986, p. 34). According to Bernardi, "Support systems disappear, a new environment increases physical stress (at least at first) and subtle challenges arise from the new environment" (1989, p. 2). He added that overseas teachers can suffer from the unpredictability of their experiences, frustration and irritation with cultural differences, low salaries, and culture shock (1989, p. 2). The teachers in Evers' study experienced a feeling of rootlessness and homesickness (1983, pp. 6-7). One of the teachers in Guatemala felt confined by the sub-culture he lived in (Evers, 1983, p. 8).

Personal Benefits

Two of the articles listed salary and benefits, (including free tuition for children and the tax-free status of some teachers) as a personal benefit (Wagner,1992, p. 37; Atkins, 1992, p. 44), but according to Bell and Purcell, overseas salaries vary (1986, p. 34). Despite the varying salaries, Bell and Purcell said that there is a "quality to life abroad which is rewarding and unique" (1986, p. 34).

Bernardi concluded that those who go overseas to teach often do it for the desire for travel and new experience, new friendships, new cultural experiences, and "new gastronomic pleasures," (1989, p. 1).

Professional Benefits

Wagner said that some of the benefits of overseas teaching include superior facilities, small class size, and no school boards (1992, p. 37). He wrote:

> The students will probably be more worldly than those at home. Many have already lived in several countries, have had opportunities to travel, and have experienced things that other children only dream about. It is stimulating to be around them, as they often have superior vocabularies and are usually enthusiastic about education. (1992, p. 37)

Bell and Purcell also talked about the worldly students of international schools:

> Students at our school, like those at any international school, are citizens of the world, used to jet lag, able to uproot and re-establish from Nebraska to Delhi if the company or the state wills it, often sophisticated in their outlooks, to an exceptional degree. They have seen the Parthenon, have visited Stratford-upon-Avon, have been on safari in Africa, and have lived in cities around the world. This makes many of them unusually accepting of, and knowledgeable about, differences in people and cultures. (1986, p. 33)

Another benefit according to Bell and Purcell is, "Because international school teachers are often without close family and friends nearby, becoming involved in the familial role of the school happens naturally" (1986, p. 33).

Bernardi sees overseas teaching as a "chance to try out new professional ideas and to revitalize teaching styles" (1989, p. 1). He wrote:

> Immersion in a new culture, and often in a new language, brings the nature of teaching into perspective, perhaps giving the individual teacher a long-awaited chance to experiment with a new curriculum, or simply refine and hone professional skills that may be suffering from at least a touch of atrophy in surroundings that may have ceased to offer much in the way of pedagogical stimulation. (1989, p. 1)

Professional Difficulties

High faculty turnover was a common difficulty. Wagner attributed it to the adventurous nature of overseas teachers (1992, p. 38). Bell and Purcell, both teachers at the International School of Brussels, noted , "Perpetual turnover of both faculty and students is one of the greatest difficulties of working in an international school" (1986, p.

32). They also wrote about professional isolation, difficulty obtaining teaching materials, professional, development, and frequent student absences due to their extra-curricular participation in other countries (1986, pp. 33-34).

Chapter III

PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to determine why licensed teachers from the United States choose to teach in overseas English-language American or international schools. To do this, I solicited survey responses from overseas teachers via email or on paper (see Appendix) until I received 100 responses. I sent surveys to my acquaintances in 17 countries. They completed the survey and/or passed it on to colleagues and friends who are also overseas teachers. I sent surveys to 25 schools chosen at random from the *International Schools Services Handbook of Overseas Schools* and distributed surveys at two conferences I attended. I also joined an international educators' list serve and sent my survey out through that.

Once 100 surveys were returned, I entered them into a database, copying and pasting so as not to change their wording. I printed one page for each survey that contained identifying information and both professional and personal benefits, and a second page for each survey that contained identifying information and both professional and personal difficulties. I read through each section of the data several times until I had a list of the most common responses. After generating my preliminary list, I went through the data looking for one topic at a time, highlighting and tallying it. When I finished identifying responses that fit each topic, I entered a code for it on the database

and then wrote about the findings. After I had highlighted all of the major topics, I found some less frequent, yet important topics to include. Every topic that appeared in the data five or more times was included in the results.

Once I had all of the data coded on the database, I used sort and find features of the database to look for trends in the personal benefits and difficulties based on age, gender, family status, and number of years of overseas experience.

I received several surveys from people who did not meet all of my qualifications. Some were not United States citizens, some did not have teaching certification from the United States, and some were not overseas hires. I discarded those surveys. I received two surveys from people who have recently returned to the United States after several years overseas. Because they met all of my other requirements, I included them in my sample.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

Survey Respondents

The 100 people who responded to the survey hold teaching licenses from 36 states. They are currently living and working in 30 countries in Europe, South America, Asia, Central America, and Africa. They range in age from 26 to 64, with the ages distributed according to Table 1.

Table 1

Survey Respondents Grouped by Age

Age Range	Number of Respondents
20 to 29	11
30 to 39	31
40 to 49	35
50 to 59	19
60-69	3

Fifty men and 50 women responded to the survey. Sixty of them are married (48 with teaching spouse) and 40 are single. Forty-seven of them were accompanied overseas by their children. Some are in their first year overseas, while the rest have from 2 to 32

years of experience teaching overseas. The breakdown of overseas experience is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Survey Respondents Grouped by Years of Overseas Teaching

Years of Overseas Teaching	Number of Respondents
First year	8
2 to 5	23
6-10	40
11-20	16
21 or more	13

Not all teachers answered the question about how long they would continue to teach overseas. Of those who did, 34 said they plan to teach overseas until they retire or leave teaching. Twenty-seven said they are not sure or plan to teach overseas indefinitely. Six have plans to return to the United States for a few years and then go back overseas. The breakdown of how long the teachers plan to remain overseas is represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Number of Years Surveyed Teachers Plan to Teach Overseas

How Many More Years Teachers Plan to Teach Overseas	Number of Respondents
0	4
1 to 3	1
4 to 7	6
8 to 9	2
10 to 20	11
20 to 30	4
Not Sure/Indefinite	27
Rest of Career	34
Quit and Return	6

Personal Benefits

The personal benefits listed by the surveyed teachers include cultural experiences, travel, financial rewards, quality of life, friendships, adventure, personal growth, and learning. Figure 1 shows these benefits according to the number of survey respondents who included them.

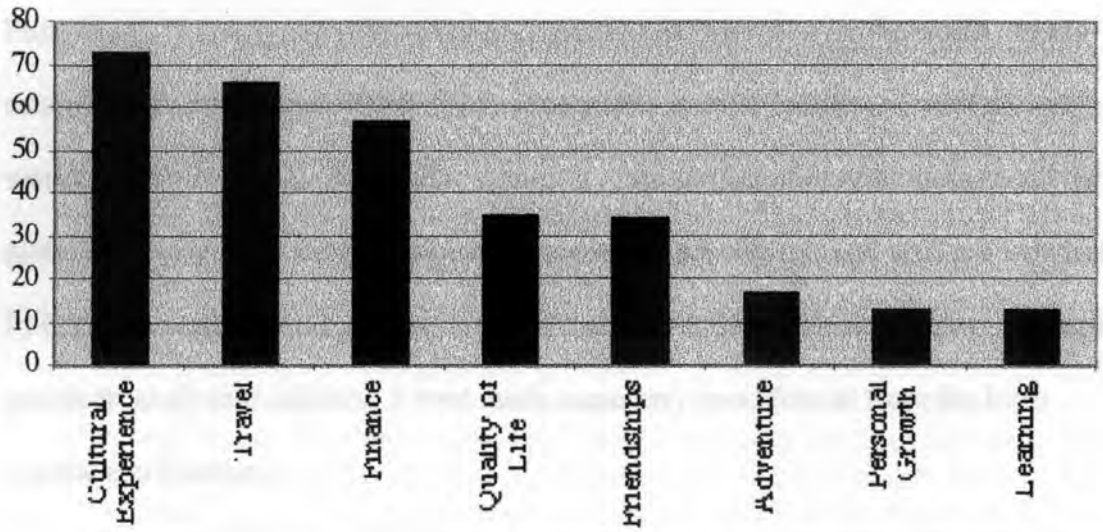

Figure 1

Personal Benefits

Of the 100 survey respondents, 73 indicated that they value the cultural exchange and learning they experience living and teaching overseas. They included meeting, working with, teaching with, and living with people of other cultures and the chance to experience the food, language, customs, arts, and atmosphere of new places. The personal contact with people of other cultures, be they students, colleagues, or neighbors is considered a benefit by many. According to a teacher in Poland, "My Polish neighbors are fast becoming my best friends here. There is nothing more important to me than learning something new every day and here I get to learn from my students, my coworkers and my neighbors, tripling the effect." Several teachers mentioned the number of students they see from different nationalities; an elementary teacher talked

about having 11 different nationalities in her class of 15 students. Wrote a teacher in the Philippines, "I also get to meet and work with people from all over the world. In my school we have kids from 40-60 different countries and the faculty and staff are very worldly too!" A teacher in Ecuador wrote, " . . . the wealth of experiences around the globe that are brought to the work environment by both students and staff are wonderful. I LOVE the multicultural aspects!" Added a teacher in Uzbekistan, "I enjoy . . . meeting people from diverse cultures. I have made some very good friends from the local populace in Tashkent."

Some feel this cultural exchange helps them see and understand the world better. A teacher in Korea who has been overseas for six years wrote that one benefit of teaching overseas is " . . . an awareness that there is never one way of doing things—cultural awareness in the truest form." A woman in Ecuador added, "My world has expanded and my vision is much more global. I am more tolerant of others and understand there is no right and wrong, just different." A teacher in Malaysia expressed a similar opinion:

> I am able to interact with a stimulating variety of people whose backgrounds and experiences differ greatly from my own, which in a strange way is what we all have in common. We relish the differences. I also have found I have become more tolerant and less opinionated as I teach overseas.

A teacher in Kuwait said, "I feel more centered as a global member of the planet Earth. I love bridging cultures." A woman in Beijing with 18 years of overseas experience wrote, "It is the global perspective that has profoundly influenced my life, and ultimately the lives of my children, grandchildren, family, and friends. I like to think

of this global perspective as my legacy for peace and understanding for those with whom I come in contact. Blessed are the peacemakers."

A man who has taught in the Philippines, Kuwait, and Brazil called the travel and cultural exchange aspects of teaching overseas "the no-brainer part" and thinks it is important for all teachers. He wrote:

> Especially as a social studies teacher, I very often feel like I'm a character in the middle of a movie. Now, what I'm about to say is not meant as a slam against teachers back home, but in many respects this international exposure has put me in a position where I honestly think I have forgotten more about the world than many of my teaching colleagues back in the U.S. will ever know. Other than some kind of tourist-type, cosmetic tour of London or Paris, most of them do not have a realistic pulse (or in some cases, no pulse at all) as to what's going on outside the borders of the U.S. No matter how much formal education or credentials they have, . . . they are largely unaware. With every passing year, I see tangible examples of (my and them) not being able to relate to each other. I want to talk about the grinding poverty in the Philippines and they seem more interested in talking about the interest rate on new car loans at the local teachers' credit union.

The cultural experiences listed by overseas teachers not only provide an awareness of global issues, but also increase understanding of day-to-day life in other places. A man who has taught in Poland and Brazil wrote: "Life is never static, as even the most mundane daily activities prove to be a snapshot of life in a different culture." Another teacher added, "Also included is the patience learned coping with the differences of a new culture: the bank lines, bus tickets, and dealing with the post office all make one appreciate and know your own culture. You need to experience what a culture is not in order to know what it is."

A 14-year overseas veteran currently in Kuwait practically wrote an advertisement for the cultural benefits of teaching overseas:

> Teaching overseas is more than a job, it is an adventure. Forget what the army says, ours is the real adventure. With which other career can you jump from Japan to Kuwait to Malaysia to Poland at YOUR discretion and make good money along the way? Equally important is the chance to absorb the intricacies of other cultures. No one society has all the answers to life, liberty, family, medicine, death, etc. I believe one becomes an all around better person by listening and learning from the various cultures in which an international teacher finds himself.

The sense of adventure he mentioned was also listed as a benefit by 17 other teachers (11 men and 6 women) around the world who talked about "the high of moving to a new place," as well as the excitement of living overseas. Wrote one teacher: "There's a BIG FAT world out there and I'm seeing it! It's SO exciting to live and work overseas and avoid the sheer, raw, naked BOREDOM of a middle-aged, single person living in the northern climates of the U.S." Another enthusiastic teacher who is now in Ecuador wrote, "Living overseas is the single best thing I have ever done. It was a dream of mine for many years, and when it became reality, it was the most fulfilling experience to date. I love the adventure, the lifestyle, the cultural aspects, the travel, the education in general."

For 66 of the respondents travel, or in some cases, exotic travel, is one of the major benefits of teaching overseas. Included were teachers who listed travel as "at the top of the list," "the biggest personal benefit," "number one," or "first and foremost." Of the 66 who included travel on their lists, there were almost an equal number of men and women, and of married people and singles. Twenty-nine of them are accompanied by their children overseas. Wrote a teacher currently working in China: "The fact that I can travel and see so much of the world is something I do not want to lose by returning to the States." A teacher in South Korea described travel as the opportunity to " . . . encounter

'the other' and to be 'the other'." A 9-year overseas veteran wrote: "There is no replacement for actually seeing and discovering countries, hearing different languages, sampling different foods . . . It also makes me appreciate my home country and how easy life can be there." Some teachers added that through sports trips and conferences there are many opportunities to travel through the school.

Fifty-seven of the 100 respondents listed standard of living, salary, tax benefits, or other financial benefits as among the advantages of teaching overseas. Of these, 34 are men and 23 women, and 32 of them have children. A significant number, 33, are married to another teacher at their school.

While overseas schools are independent and pay scales vary greatly depending on size and type of school and location, this survey suggests that money is one motivation for teaching overseas. Overseas teachers mentioned high salaries, the ability to save money, housing and utilities allowances, travel allowances, tax-free status in the United States, and re-signing bonuses as some of the financial perks they receive. A 55-year-old teacher in the Philippines wrote: "For the first time in my life, I have been able to save real money, painlessly." A teacher in Poland said, "Personally, living overseas has given me a higher standard of living," and a teacher in Malaysia added, "Salary allows me to do one job. In the US I had to have 3-4 side jobs to keep up with my lifestyle, which meant I had no time to enjoy the lifestyle."

The financial benefits also serve to make some teachers feel more appreciated and respected as professionals. A teacher who has been overseas for two years wrote: "I feel like I am treated like a professional. The higher standard of living that I can afford

and that the school helps provide makes me feel valuable. " A teacher in Beijing who has also worked in Kuwait noted, "Financially, it is beneficial and teachers are paid more in line with level of education and perceived value to society." Several teachers responded that teaching overseas enables them to make house payments, send their children to college, travel, and hire domestic help. Some teachers wrote about the financial stress they felt while teaching in the United States. Said one, "We can enjoy a lifestyle that lets us enjoy ourselves without feeling trapped by having a low paying job, like we did in California."

Lifestyle or quality of life are considered benefits of overseas teaching and living by 35 of the teachers who responded to the survey, 23 of whom were accompanied by their children overseas. For some, living overseas is a way to avoid some of the social problems in the U.S., as in the case of the teacher in Poland who wrote he was, "sick of all the crap in the USA," or the teacher in the Philippines who wrote, "not living in the U.S.," as the first on his list of advantages. Others felt they are safer overseas ("no guns," wrote one teacher) or have a greater sense of community. Still others mentioned that domestic help, including housekeepers, nannies, gardeners, and drivers is more affordable and available overseas. Four teachers mentioned that their children are receiving a quality education.

The quality of life issues that teachers who are parents often mentioned include the amount of family time they have, safety, the kinds of entertainment available, domestic help, and child care. "One personal benefit is more time for my family to spend together. Even during the most hectic weeks of the school calendar we are very

involved in each others' lives," wrote a teacher in Kuwait. A parent of 10- and 12-year-old children wrote that teaching overseas, "gives my kids unbelievably cool personal and exploration experiences during their childhood." A woman in China listed, "No shopping, cooking, cleaning the kitchen after every meal; no malls; not being bombarded with advertising; less pressure for sex and consumerism on our teenage daughter; a slower pace in general," among the personal benefits she sees. A mother in Korea wrote, "We live on campus so it is a safe environment for my children. Seoul is a relatively safe and accessible city so my teenager can get around and be with friends. There is lots to do for her and for us too."

Almost an equal number of respondents, 34, wrote that the friendships they develop among colleagues and other people they meet while overseas are a personal benefit. An equal number of married and single teachers included friendship, and age made no difference. Overseas teachers like that their colleagues and friends are well-traveled and have interesting backgrounds and experiences. A 24-year overseas veteran wrote that he considers "interacting with people whose professional aspirations and interests take them beyond the mundane, people with a world view" a benefit. Wrote a woman in Indonesia: "I love the fact that I have developed friendships with so many individuals through work that I never would've run across at home—and if I had, we probably would've remained acquaintances on a professional level only." Several teachers wrote that overseas communities are closer than what they've experienced in the U.S., "a surrogate extended family." Many agreed with the teacher in Poland who wrote,

"You end up with a network of friends all over the world, and feel comfortable in most places."

Thirteen of the survey participants, including ten women, wrote about how living and teaching overseas has helped them to change and grow personally. Some mentioned having changed priorities and perceptions about themselves, and one talked about how teaching overseas has strengthened her marriage. "Teaching overseas has been a rewarding personal growth experience as I find myself facing challenges that I had never encountered previously," wrote a teacher in Indonesia. A teacher in her first year overseas wrote, "I think I have learned a lot about myself and have really grown in ways I didn't expect. I have realized how American I truly am!" A teacher in Korea wrote that the benefits of teaching overseas include "being among more people with a "can do" attitude, becoming a person who can solve a myriad of problems never faced before, an opportunity to develop sound values," while a teacher in Ecuador wrote simply, "I am a better person because of my overseas living."

Learning in general was listed as a benefit by thirteen of the survey respondents, with eight people specifically listing language learning. Some wrote that life overseas is made easier by learning the local language. Wrote a teacher in China, "Personal language development wouldn't happen if we were living in a place where English was readily spoken."

Professional Benefits

The professional benefits most often listed by the teachers who responded to the survey include the quality of students, colleagues, parents, and schools, professional

development opportunities, professional freedom and responsibility, small class size, lack of discipline problems, and job satisfaction. Figure 2 shows these benefits according to the number of survey respondents who included them.

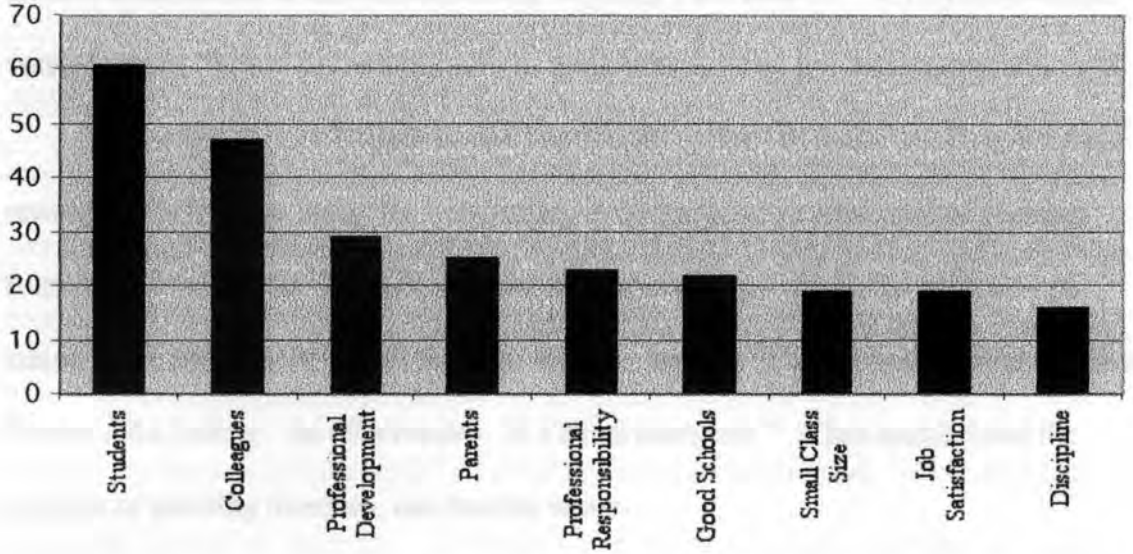

Figure 2

Professional Benefits

The student population in international schools is a benefit for 61 of the surveyed teachers. Teachers frequently used words like "motivated," "diverse," "highly capable," "great," "eager," and, "above average," to describe the students in international schools overseas. A teacher in Poland called her students, "a special breed." A teacher in Beijing wrote:

> The students are excellent in that they are part of the educational process, not in opposition to it. Multiculturalism is an integral part of each class by virtue of the students being from 52 different countries. There is a feeling of hope for the

> future because we get to work with really good, kind, students who might make a positive difference in the world.

Her colleague wrote, "I get to work with kids that are more motivated and accepting than those back home. You can teach more," while another Beijing teacher added, "The student commitment is also unmatched by anything I am used to." A 12-year overseas veteran wrote, "The kids are a pleasure to teach because they try, and want to succeed."

A teacher in the Philippines said that one thing that has made teaching overseas rewarding for him has been "the opportunity to be teaching a cornucopia of students from around the world. To have so many kids from so many countries and cultures sitting in the same classroom at the same time . . . well . . . it's like being inside a glass of fizzing Alka Seltzer. So effervescent. It's a real energizer." When asked about the benefits of teaching overseas, one teacher wrote:

> First and way above the rest are the quality of students with varied cultural and educational backgrounds. Because of the rich storehouse of experiences they have accumulated, in general, they appear to be much more tolerant and accepting, even embracing of, individual differences. They appear to quickly form a sub community of support systems and deep and lasting friendships develop.

Several teachers mentioned that their students don't bring the kinds of personal and social issues to school with them compared to students in the United States. "I feel that I do much more teaching overseas than I did in the States. There I felt that I was a policeman, babysitter, counselor, drug rehab person, etc. and only did teaching on the side," wrote a middle school teacher in Saudi Arabia. A special education teacher in her first year overseas wrote:

> Last year at this time my caseload consisted of (among others) child molesters, a teen that was the product of incest, a dying teen, a girl with no language and no

> movement—wheelchair bound (diaper changing needed), recent prison releases, transient homeless sleep-in-the-car types, pregnant teens, gang members who weren't supposed to bring weapons to school (but used a shotgun near my house), a lawsuit-happy family looking to make something happen, and some very nice teens with IQs around 40-50. A great portion of the day went toward coordination with social workers, group homes, or parole officers. During the year we had five deaths in a not so large school.

The student population in overseas schools might be connected to discipline. Sixteen teachers listed safety or lack of discipline problems at school as a benefit overseas. An 8-year overseas veteran who returned overseas after one year of teaching in the United States wrote, "Kids don't call you a fucker," when asked about professional benefits. A teacher in China wrote "no guns" on her benefits list. A teacher who has been in Poland, Bulgaria, and Kuwait wrote, "Since discipline problems are rare the actual time spent teaching is high." A teacher in Kuwait added that, "More time is spent 'teaching' instead of 'policing.'" A teacher in Korea wrote that in overseas schools, "Discipline is nil."

Many of the teachers who listed good students among the professional benefits they see also mentioned the parent community. Words like "caring," "concerned," "supportive," "involved," "cooperative," "educated," were used by 25 international teachers to describe the parents of their students. "Most mothers are not working and are willing to volunteer or share their time with the class," wrote a teacher in Poland. Another teacher in Poland wrote, "The first thing that comes to mind is that our clientele is made of parents who are educated. They think education is important, and pass that same feeling on to the children." A teacher in Kuwait wrote, "Tuitions are high and parents demand high accountability. Most parents are highly educated themselves and

come from embassies, international corporations, and NGOs." A teacher in Japan wrote that she appreciated working with students "whose parents place a high value on education and who appreciate the school." A teacher in Uzbekistan wrote that one benefit is "more respect shown from the parents (they seem to realize how important you are in their child's life.)"

For 47 of the surveyed teachers, the quality of their teaching colleagues and administrators is a professional benefit. Overseas teachers think that overseas teachers are more professional and held to higher standards, like the teacher in Malaysia who wrote, "I feel that the caliber of teachers in overseas schools is higher than that in the States." A teacher in Peru wrote that overseas teachers, "are of higher quality in terms of imagination, innovation, and creativity." A teacher in Poland wrote that, "Professionally, the staff seems more cohesive and caring."

Overseas teachers also like that their colleagues are well traveled and bring with them diverse training, experiences, and backgrounds. They like their mobility, and that the faculties are changing and dynamic. A teacher in Argentina likes to "work with professionals who want to be there rather than making tenure," and a teacher in Poland likes that overseas teachers "are not burned out." Some benefits listed by a teacher in the Czech Republic are: "Being exposed to teaching methods that come from all over the world; working with professionals who have a wide, varied, repetoir of teaching strategies; working with people who are curious about the world." A 55-year-old teacher in her first overseas post wrote, "I am encouraged by being surrounded by so many people who exhibit and live a positive attitude and seek both new experiences and a joy

of living. In Minnesota there are so many teachers who are perennial gripers and it gets depressing to be surrounded by them day in and day out."

Twenty-nine of the surveyed teachers think that the professional development opportunities provided by international schools are a benefit. They listed such things as sabbaticals, professional conferences, and flexible professional development money. A recently retired teacher who spent 24 years overseas wrote, "I have met and personally gotten to know the leaders of our profession (such as Madeline Hunter, Gordon Cawelti or Gerald Bracy), opportunities I would never have had in the US." A teacher in Korea wrote, "SFS provides professional development funds each year for teacher use and offers a one year masters sabbatical that can be awarded after one has taught at least five years. Access to conferences is encouraged, something that I had never done in the public school setting." In her list, a teacher in Poland included, "Flexible professional development money in comparison to the rigid requirements of the U.S. public educational system. International schools let you explore the areas most beneficial to your professional growth." A teacher in Kuwait concluded, "Even staff development is taken more seriously overseas."

Professional freedom and responsibility was a theme for 23 of the teachers who responded to the survey. Some teachers appreciate that they have less paperwork to do overseas than in United States public schools, such as the man who wrote, "There is also freedom to do "what's right for kids," not because a state or federal law mandates it. Similarly, there is less bureaucracy and paperwork." Several teachers wrote that they enjoyed flexibility in their curriculum and were involved in curriculum development as

well as in the overall planning of their schools. For many teachers, overseas schools have proved them with opportunities to teach outside their initial licensure area. "I've taught many more subjects to a more rigorous level than during all of my eight years as a public school teacher in California. I've also had more opportunities to help shape school improvement processes, e.g. accreditation or growth/strategic planning while at Karachi American School," wrote a teacher in the Philippines. A teacher in Poland wrote, "Because of the nature of the smaller school, I have had the opportunity to teach different subjects (without credential) and to begin and administer a small program." A teacher in Korea wrote, "Our school gives us greater responsibility for determining our own curriculum, materials, and scope and sequence than I was used to in the States." Teachers in Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal, Ukraine, Japan, and China echoed those comments.

Twenty-two of the teachers consider the schools overseas better than those they have worked in in the United States. They used phrases such as "more student oriented and progressive," "great school, great facilities," "well equipped classrooms," "well funded and well supported," "more resources than I've ever had access to before," "greater commitment to excellence," "great schools to teach in with high academic standards," and, "schools that are motivated to bring out the best in their students." A teacher in Ecuador wrote, "Two out of the three schools I have been in have more technology, and are more up to date with the latest in education than that which I experienced in a good public school in the States." Wrote a teacher in China: "International schools work diligently to be on the cutting edge of trends (including

technological advances) in education. Drawing from the conglomerate methodologies and brain power of educators from around the world has been inspiring, challenging, and intellectually broadening."

According to 19 teachers, they have smaller class sizes than in U.S. schools. "Small class sizes provide more one on one time," wrote a sixth grade teacher. A teacher in Poland agreed: "Smaller class size is an added bonus. You have more time to give individual attention and build relationships with your students." A teacher in China wrote, "My biggest class at this school has been 22. My smallest is 17."

A positive working environment and job satisfaction were also listed by 19 of the surveyed teachers. "I love coming to work. The environment is extremely positive," wrote a teacher in Poland. A teacher in Indonesia called her school a "very energetic and stimulating place, leading to high morale for everyone."

Personal Difficulties

The personal difficulties listed by the survey respondents include distance from family and friends, language barriers, difficulty obtaining goods and services, culture shock/homesickness, saying goodbye to people, social difficulties, locational difficulties, medical care, and demands on time. Some wrote that they had few or no difficulties. Figure 3 shows these difficulties according to the number of survey respondents who included them.

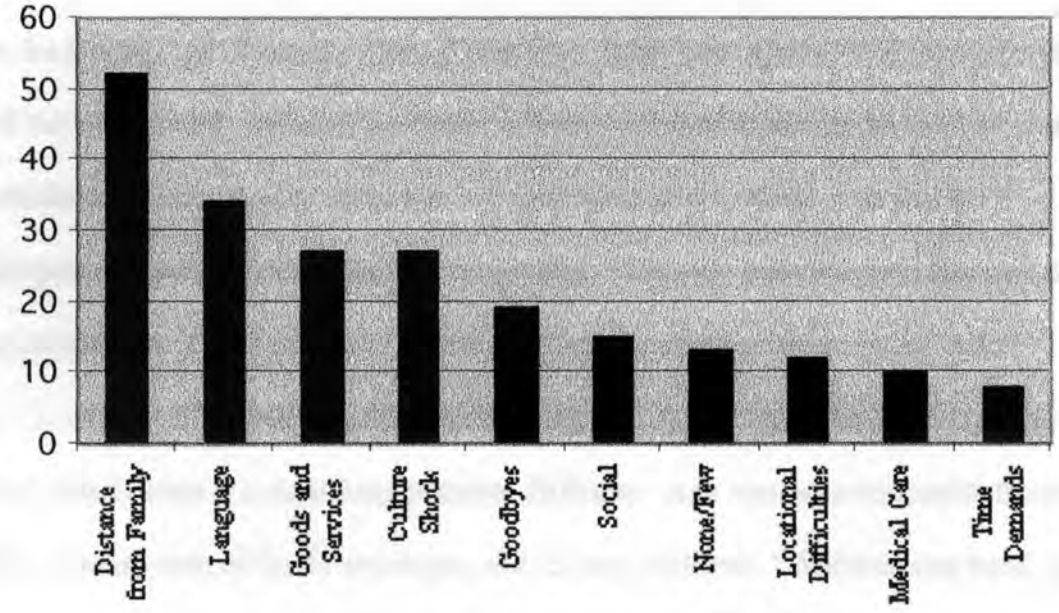

Figure 3

Personal Difficulties

Thirteen of the survey respondents, ranging from 3 to 32 years overseas experience, said they have experienced very few or no personal difficulties while living overseas. "Frankly, after doing it so long, I'm hard pressed to recall what I once considered difficulties!" wrote a retired teacher who spent 24 years overseas. A teacher who has been overseas for 32 years wrote, "I've not encountered many difficulties actually in all the years I've been living overseas. Being single, I've had only myself to take care of and personally haven't felt the need for American foods, restaurants, culture, etc." After listing a few difficulties, a teacher in Saudi Arabia concluded, "the rest are not personal difficulties but fascinating opportunities to live, learn, and grow." Other teachers wrote in the personal difficulties section of the survey: "nothing that can't be

resolved with time," "hardly any so far," and, "I really have to hunt for these." A teacher in the United Arab Emirates wrote, "Very few. It has been a very satisfying experience all the way around. I think it's a matter of being satisfied to live on the local level in whichever country you're serving in. If you expect it to be home, you will be disappointed daily!" A teacher in Korea added, "The only personal one I have is relating to people when I go back in the summers. I feel like our worlds are so different."

For 52 of the survey participants, being so far away from family and friends in the United States is a significant personal difficulty. Age was not a noticeable factor in this. Twenty-two of the 52 are single, and 25 have children. "While on one hand, the expatriot community becomes "family" in the overseas teaching situation, I also miss my own family at home," wrote a single teacher in Syria. Wrote a first-year overseas teacher in Poland:

> The hardest personal aspect of teaching overseas is the physical distance between me and my family. I can't imagine what it was like even 4-5 years ago, before the internet and PCs became a universal tool of communication. I am able to email my parents every day. We have a photo album on a website for them to visit. It is much easier to keep in touch. Still, I miss people from home.

Several teachers who are accompanied by their children overseas say the separation from family is especially difficult. A mother of a 3-year-old wrote, "My daughter is the only grandchild in a close family and we travel home every Christmas and summer vacation so she has that time to spend with her grandparents and uncle." Wrote a mother in China: "Our children don't have the family connections they'd have if we were in Minnesota, but they also don't know what they are missing and certainly

are surrounded by many aunties and uncles (other teachers) and cousins (our students) and they are truly cherished. But we see that they aren't with their grandparents."

"The dread of receiving 'THE phone call' imparting sad/bad news," is how one teacher described what several mentioned: being away from home when their families need them. Overseas teachers are frustrated that they are not able to support their families in times of need or crisis as they would like. "Also, as one gets older one's relatives in the States begin to need attention—people die, and one can't get home in time for funerals or to visit during serious illnesses," wrote a teacher in Morocco. The only personal difficulty one teacher in the Philippines wrote was, "Having my father die when I was away and unable to get home in time due to visa problems and the long flight." A teacher in Korea wrote that one difficulty is, "Keeping up on what is really going on in our families as opposed to what is told to us. They can be two different things at times."

Living in places where English is not spoken is a difficulty for 34 of the teachers who responded to the survey. Twenty-eight of these teachers have ten or fewer years experience overseas. Some indicated that learning the local language is difficulty because they work in an English-speaking community, because the local people they meet want to practice their English, or because the language is so difficult. "I am frustrated by not being able to communicate. But, I am starting intensive Polish classes next week!" wrote a teacher in Poland. A teacher in Ecuador wrote, "Some days you are just tired and don't want to have to challenge your brain to find the words." A teacher in the Philippines experiences "frustration at not being a language learner . . . grunt-'n-point

is my only other 'language'". For a teacher in Indonesia, not knowing the local language is also a professional frustration: "Sometimes a language barrier can force me to rely on a translator to make arrangements that inevitably turn out differently than I had hoped." A teacher who has lived in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia started her list of personal difficulties with: "LANGUAGE!!! I wish I had a greater ability for picking up a language quickly – here in Rabat I feel 'out of the loop' without French or Arabic – it makes you dependent upon others for daily logistics."

"Difficulty doing the simple things," "loss of cliché American conveniences," "renewing your drivers license," "getting your phone installed," "taking longer to find what you want," and, "availability of stuff," were all listed by teachers as examples of the day-to-day challenges they face in their lives overseas. The difficulty encountered when trying to obtain goods and services was listed by 27 of the surveyed teachers, 12 who are accompanied by children, 15 who are men, and 23 with ten or fewer years experience teaching overseas. "Sometimes even the simplest of chores can be a nightmare in a third world country. Try getting a phone line for your house in Dhaka, Bangladesh," wrote a teacher in Kuwait. A teacher in Syria who has spent several years in the Middle East wrote, "Especially in the Third World, nothing is done easily. The whole notion of 'order' is different from that in Western society. 'Time' has completely different connotations in the West than it does in the East." Wrote a teacher in Poland, "I miss being able to get in my car and run 10 errands in an hour or two. Now, I have to plan everything and figure out where I need to go and who to talk to. I can probably only do one or two errands in the same amount of time." A teacher in Ecuador added,

"The amount of energy it may take to buy a pair of socks can be ENORMOUS!!" Wrote a teacher in China: "Everything is more difficult than living in Minnesota. Buying a loaf of bread is tougher." A teacher it Taiwan wrote, "I miss the conveniences of America from time to time but still complain when they build a McDonalds here."

Adjusting to a new culture and missing their home culture is an issue for 27 of the respondents. Age and gender did not play a role in this number, but numbers of years experience overseas did. Twenty-two of the 27 have been overseas for ten or fewer years. "Nothing is the same as at home and it usually takes some getting used to the situation. Traffic flows in the opposite direction, electricity is 220 instead of 110, the weekend is Thursday and Friday instead of Saturday and Sunday, what's going on here?" wrote a teacher in Kuwait.

Several teachers indicated that culture shock was mostly a problem when moving to a new place, like the teacher who called it "the unavoidable culture shock at each new posting." According to a teacher in Korea:

> Overcoming culture shock initially was the hardest hurdle to cross. Not being able to read any sings and not knowing where to go to get what was needed was frustrating. It has been a challenge for me to step back and learn to appreciate cultural differences instead of comparing them. After the second year, life in Korea was much more hospitable than it had been earlier.

Yet, an 18 overseas veteran in Colombia wrote, "Even after so many years, there are remnants of culture shock. The period of cultural alienation can be very difficult."

"The transient nature of this business can be difficult," wrote a teacher in the Philippines. Nineteen teachers included having to say goodbye to friends, faculty, and/or students as one of the difficulties of teaching overseas. Gender, marital status, nor years

of experience have an effect on this. "The expat population is often transient, and losing friends (when they move away) is difficult," wrote a teacher in Ecuador. Another teacher wrote, "People come and go in the international scene. It can be difficult when you make good friends and they move to another school or back to their home country. It is always a challenge making new friends with the new recruits each year, but I usually enjoy it." A teacher in Poland wrote, "High student turnover makes for all students having numerous gaps in learning and curriculum development difficult." Added a teacher in Malta, "Frequent staff turnover makes both professional and social relationships tenuous."

Besides the personal impact of frequent arrivals and departures, some teachers feel it affects the school as well. A teacher in Beijing included on her list: " . . . having kids come and go frequently; having staff turnover affect the continuity in the school." A teacher in Belarus wrote, "Turnover of staff and students presents a problem in the area of continuity and structure." Wrote a teacher in Colombia, "Every year a large number of my colleagues leaves. This is a challenge for the school and personally difficult as the support group leaves." A teacher in Luxembourg described it this way: "There is a lot of reinventing the wheel." A woman in Egypt who has also worked in Malaysia wrote, "Rapid turnover limits institutional memory." A teacher in the Czech Republic wrote, "Constant turnover of students and faculty and administration can create a definite lack of continuity or a feeling of recreating the wheel more often than one would like."

Fifteen of the teachers surveyed (9 singles, 12 women) found that their social life is hampered by being overseas. Five said that being a single person makes their social life overseas difficult. "The dating scene can be challenging, as there are obstacles in multicultural misunderstandings and gross stereotypes of foreign cultures [by people] who watch too many movies and make assumptions," wrote a teacher in Ecuador. A teacher in Malaysia wrote that it is, "difficult at times being single in a community that is mostly married with children." Seven of the 14 wrote that their community is limited to English speakers with a connection to their school. "Life is more likely to revolve around school and fellow staff members," wrote a teacher in Poland. A teacher in Indonesia who has worked in Poland and Kuwait wrote, "Often international schools seem to be all-consuming. I find that when my social life and professional life both involve the exact same group of people, it can be draining. Sometimes I feel like JIS is a way of life instead of a school!" A teacher in Peru said this leads to a feeling of, "living in a crystal ball as an expat – everyone knows everyone's business." Five of the 14 wrote that their recreation and entertainment options are limited.

Twelve teachers wrote about difficulties that are specific to certain locations. For example, one teacher wrote, "In some cities such as Karachi, the ongoing security concerns can make having a life outside of school extremely difficult or impossible, especially for my kids." Another teacher listed, "Possibilities of economic crisis, political unrest," while another included, "Sometimes we have to deal with instabilities of the government in the country where we are teaching." Three teachers wrote about pollution and its health risks, including the teacher in China who wrote, "Pollution is a

worry and we always worry about the health of our children and whether we are exposing them to chemicals or something that will sneak up on us later on. There is a fear of someday saying, 'Gee, if only we hadn't lived in . . .'" Other locational concerns were crime, traffic, slow mail service, and cockroaches.

Medical care is a factor for ten of the teachers surveyed, six of them parents. Some wrote that finding good medical care is difficult, while others concluded that the medical care overseas is sometimes not adequate, especially in emergency situations.

Eight teachers feel that the demands on their time made by international schools can be too much, like the teacher in Indonesia who wrote:

> I think that because international schools are often the hub of activity for students, teachers are called on to be supervising or directing or facilitating numerous activities/events outside the normal school day. Also, teaching in a large international school, I feel pulled in so many directions – department meetings, team meetings, PIC meetings, performance dress rehearsal supervision, community service project afternoon/night, etc. This may be what is expected at some stateside schools, but certainly there are many schools where teachers are responsible solely for what takes place in the confines of their classrooms.

A man in Korea wrote, "This teaching situation appears to attract professionals for whom the classroom is their only realm of enjoyment. I have had some struggles being who I am, especially as a new father now of two girls, balancing job demands and family needs. Wrote a teacher in Poland, "Sometimes the load feels really heavy – the expectations of a larger school are put on a small staff." A counselor in Peru included on her list, "Sometimes I find myself working TOO much because at times my job consumes my "other life" but then again, if I was doing this in the states that would probably happen there too."

Professional Difficulties

The professional difficulties listed by the survey respondents include lack of professional development opportunities, difficulty acquiring resources, difficulties with local faculty and staff, professional isolation, lack of job protection, and differing philosophies with parents. Some wrote that they had few or no difficulties. Figure 4 shows these difficulties according to the number of survey respondents who included them.

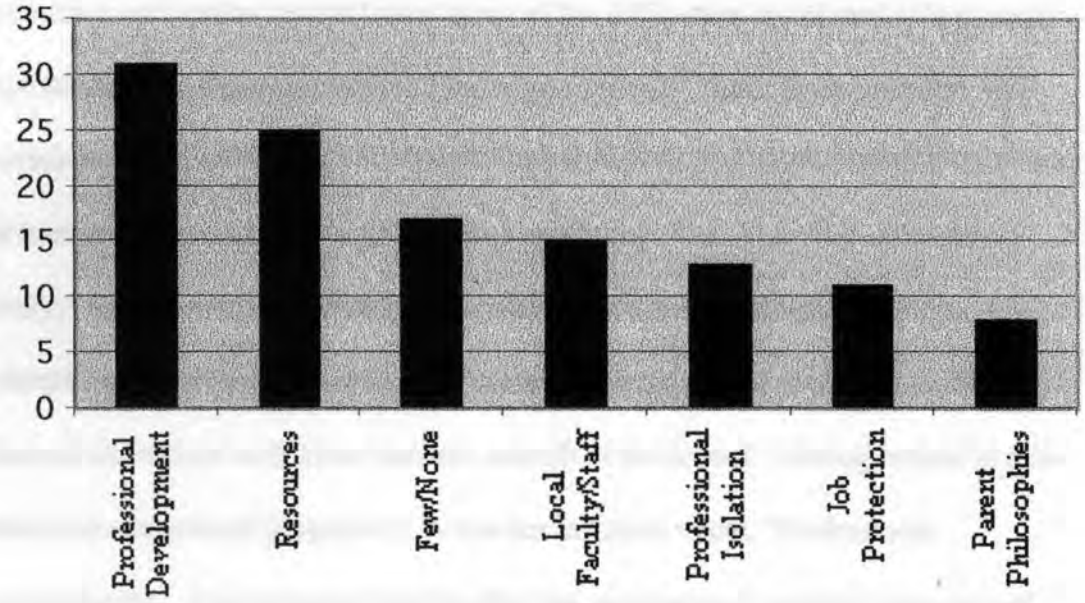

Figure 4

Professional Difficulties

When asked about the professional difficulties of teaching overseas, 17 people answered that there were very few or even none. "I am sure there are some, but I can't think of anything major. My experiences have been wonderful, which is why I am still

overseas," wrote a teacher in Japan. A teacher in Saudi Arabia who is in his third overseas post wrote, "I really can't think of difficulties as much as they are challenges of getting things done and learning both the internal and external ropes." A teacher in Indonesia wrote, "I've found it much more positive than teaching in the States—no comparison really."

For 31 of the respondents, professional development is an issue. Inability to attend classes due to distance or timing of summer vacations, difficulty in getting professional journals and current information, insufficient in-service opportunities, and credential/certification renewal were some of the difficulties mentioned. "It is nearly impossible to get a masters that isn't just a general one. You can take masters level courses abroad but anything in a specific area is hard to find. Resources are limited to the internet, what is available at the school and in my files. I miss an educational library," wrote a teacher in Poland. Another teacher in Poland had on her list: "Maintaining certification and keeping current with new trends and philosophies. Minimal interaction with other teachers outside of the school. Getting behind in new trends and educational programs." A teacher in China wrote, "Professional Development!!! It is extremely hard to find any professional courses in my area of teaching within the Asian area. It is also difficult to take some summer offerings due to the vacation schedule of the school here."

Twenty-five of the teachers who responded to the survey listed the availability of resources as a professional difficulty. Some wrote that they are not able to get materials at all, while others wrote that the shipping/delivery time it takes to get materials that

have been ordered can be frustrating. "Sometimes it can be difficult to obtain supplies that are readily available in the USA," wrote a teacher in Ecuador. A teacher in Poland wrote, "It is often difficult to acquire teaching resources and materials. I tend to get ideas late in the game and prefer being able to go out and get what I need last minute. Having to plan and order a year in advance for items you will want the next year is difficult."

Difficulties with local faculty and staff members due to cultural and language differences or different treatment by the school was mentioned by 15 of the surveyed teachers. "Sometimes working with the local staff can be challenging because of cultural differences in ways of communicating and basic business practices," was the only professional difficulty listed by a teacher in Malaysia. A teacher in Poland wrote, "It is difficult working in a system where the pay scale and benefits are not equal between staff members who are overseas, local, and Polish." According to a teacher in Colombia, "It can be daunting to work alongside of people with whom you cannot communicate, because of different languages spoken." A teacher in Peru simply listed, "Local hire staff resentment toward foreigners."

Professional isolation is a difficulty for 13 of the teachers surveyed. Counselors and specialist teachers are frustrated with the lack of support services in the community, and teachers in small schools miss having colleagues to share ideas with. "I am the only physics teacher in the school, so I feel kind of isolated," wrote a teacher in Korea. A middle school math teacher wrote, "I find it difficult to be the only one teaching a specific subject at a specific grade level. I miss the opportunity to share ideas with

teammates." A music teacher in Morocco wrote, "Sometimes the schools are too small and one ends up being the entire department. No one to bounce ideas off of, and no opportunities for team teaching." Another teacher added, "Yes, I always get my way, but ideas can grow old quickly."

Eleven of the teachers surveyed are concerned about the lack of protection from misguided administrators or school boards. "I have trouble with administrators having so much power and the individual teacher so little. There is no way to back up an ill treated teacher because my job will be on the line next if I do," wrote a teacher in Korea. A teacher in Kuwait wrote, "As an overseas teacher you have no rights. Generally the school board, if there is one, can do anything it wants with little regard for morality or legality." A teacher in Saudi Arabia only listed one professional difficulty: "The only thing I can think of is once or twice I wish that we had the backing of a union like teachers do in the States. If you are "wronged" here and the superintendent doesn't care and the board won't do anything, you have no real recourse (unless you want to bring it up in the local courts.)" A teacher in the Philippines seems passionate in his frustration with lack of protection:

> Lack of protection of a teachers' union and/or the ability of a teacher to bring (or to threaten to bring) court action against a psycho administrator who somehow thinks it's still the Middle Ages and the school he/she is in charge of is his/her fiefdom. That is, every once in a while, we in the overseas teaching network run into a whacked administrator who thinks they can run rough-shod over a teacher and unfortunately they get away with it from time to time. Fortunately, most of them are mentally healthy and it is the exception, not the rule. Needless to say, if they ever tried that back in the United States where there is a virtual guarantee of rule of law, that administrator's hide would be hanging from the courthouse lamp post (in figurative terms, of course). Also, in keeping with the above, the lack of job security. If you are not wanted, they can say bye-bye to you on short order.

Eight teachers wrote about having different philosophies than the parents of their students and the tension that creates. "Parents are more demanding, and it takes a while to adjust to customs and mannerisms that are very different from American," wrote a teacher in Poland. A teacher in Korea wrote, "I have difficulties with parents who have different value systems than I have when it comes to education. I have trouble pushing kids into studies they have no interest in or to apply to Ivy League colleges they could care less about and will just become a number in." A teacher in Manila wrote:

> Many of our students come from millionaire families, and there are elements of school culture that I find disturbing as a result (e.g. that imperious, "world-revolves-around-me" way of behaving that some rich folks exhibit, the inordinate influence some families have compared to others) . . . . Some members of the board of directors, both here and in Karachi, have a tendency to micromanage based on the goals they have for their kids (who sometimes do not share them), or if their kids are not succeeding. Finally, I become frustrated with the emphasis upon letter grades over and above helping students find a fulfilling path for their life, due to the "prep school" character of the institution.

Another teacher in the Philippines wrote:

> Often local families want the prestige of an American school but often don't want either all the (student) freedom or the responsibilities that go along with an American style education. They want an American school with mostly American teachers but they want it run like a local school. Both schools I have been at have had clashes between the board and administration, to some degree, because of this reason.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was prompted by a year of taking graduate level classes in the United States after several years of teaching abroad. As I met teachers who were working in the public school system in the United States, I felt like I was continually justifying my choice of personal and professional lifestyle. I have only taught full time in the United States for one year of my career, yet as a product of the U.S. educational system and a friend and relative of several State-side teachers, I can not imagine teaching anywhere but overseas. This study was meant to take a look at why expatriate teachers choose to do what they do and to present overseas teaching as an option for those who have never considered it.

It is clear to me that the personal and professional benefits of teaching overseas outweigh the difficulties unique to the lifestyle. The teachers who responded to my survey generally listed more positive than negative things, and there was more of a consensus on what the benefits are than the difficulties. A majority of teachers listed cultural exchange, travel, financial benefits, and quality of students as positive aspects of teaching overseas, which seems significant. On the other hand, being far from family and friends was the only difficulty, professional or personal, that a majority of the teachers who responded to the survey agreed on. Only one teacher thought there were no

professional benefits, while several teachers mentioned that the personal and/or professional difficulties were few or none.

Personal Benefits

The high percentage of respondents (73%) who listed cultural exchange and interaction as a benefit says something about the kind of people who choose to teach overseas. They consider it important to understand others and look at the world from new perspectives. In comparison, only a few (17) mentioned the thrill of adventure as a motivation. The teachers who responded to the survey are looking to learn about, understand, and appreciate other people and places and not necessarily to seek thrills. They appear to have a willingness to give up what is comfortable and known to explore and learn about the unknown, and to learn about themselves in the process.

It is not surprising that travel ranked as high as it did. It was such an obvious choice for many teachers that they listed it first and did not feel the need to provide any more explanation. Teachers who choose to move themselves, and in some cases their families, overseas to teach have to be willing to get on a plane to do so. You do not have to travel far from the location of most overseas schools to find new and fascinating places to explore. It is important to note that teachers with children also listed travel as a benefit; it is not just single teachers who take advantage of the opportunity to travel. It would be interesting to study how many countries international teachers have visited in their years overseas.

Of the teachers who listed financial benefits to teaching overseas, most have children, and most are part of what is known in the overseas circuit as a teaching couple.

A teaching couple in public schools in the United States would probably not consider their salaries as one of the strengths of their career choice. Overseas teaching couples and families wrote that they can save money, travel, buy homes, and put their kids through school more easily than they could if they were teaching in the United States. An analysis of salaries, benefits, cost of living, and saving power of state-side and overseas teachers could prove interesting.

A majority of the teachers who included lifestyle or quality of life as a benefit also have children. Before my husband and I had children, people in the U.S. would say to us, "When you have kids certainly you will move home." That was never our intention, and like many overseas teachers, we find our overseas lifestyle advantageous for raising children. Childcare, domestic help, higher incomes, and increased safety make our lives overseas more comfortable then they are in the United States. For some locations, however, that is not the case. Some overseas schools are considered hardship posts by teachers because of housing, health, or safety concerns.

I had not expected the number of teachers who listed friendships as a benefit, yet this is certainly true for me. Because of the transient nature of this business (as was included as a difficulty by 19 teachers), overseas teachers get used to making friends quickly. Our love of travel and experiencing new cultures is a commonality for most of us.

I had anticipated that more teachers would write about personal growth in their surveys. I feel like I am not the same person that I was before I first went overseas ten years ago. While everyone grows and changes over time, I find that moving to a new

country and culture challenges me like I had never been challenged before. I know myself better now, I know my strengths, and I know my limitations.

Professional Benefits

I agree with the survey respondents that the greatest professional benefit of teaching overseas is the quality of students that we teach, followed closely by the parents who support them. While I firmly believe in public education and the right of everyone to have access to quality schools, I know that teaching students with a desire for learning, and whose parents are supportive, is much easier than teaching every student who lives in the area. It is exciting to work in a place where education is valued by the majority. Of course the students who attend overseas schools are not better or smarter than students in public schools; they do, however, have more advantages.

Overseas schools are private schools, and private schools, by nature, can refuse to accept or keep students whose behavior (and in some cases, academic performance) is not up to the standards of the school. Because of this, discipline is not as much of an issue as it is in United States public schools. It is obviously refreshing for some teachers to be able to focus on teaching and not maintaining discipline. A comparison of students and discipline with U.S. private schools would be an interesting study.

Overseas teachers believe that they are held to higher standards than teachers in the United States. One reason for this may be because most overseas schools do not have teacher unions or tenure rules, so teachers are expected to perform well in order to keep their jobs. Because overseas teachers change jobs more frequently than teachers in the United States, they have to prove themselves again every time they go recruiting for

new positions. The more frequent job changes also cause the makeup of the faculty to be more dynamic, which can be professionally stimulating. I wish I had asked how many schools the teachers have worked in during their time overseas and how many years they spent at each school on average.

Like 23 of the surveyed teachers, I appreciate the professional freedom teaching in overseas schools allows me. I am a licensed 7-12 English teacher, and in my 10-year career I have taught English, English as a second language, math, computers, social studies, and keyboarding. Overseas schools have the freedom to let their teachers grow and explore that U. S. schools, bound by strict licensure rules, do not have.

Personal Difficulties

It is not surprising that being away from family and friends was the personal difficulty most often mentioned by the surveyed teachers (52%). Missing out on big events and not being there when our loved ones need us is a worry. In the years I have been overseas, e-mail and personal web sites have made an incredible difference in helping me feel connected to my family and friends "back home." Interestingly, three teachers wrote that being so far from the demands of family is also a relief.

I did not expect to see knowing the local language as a difficulty. For me it is just part of my daily existence and is really not much of a problem. Communication is so much more than words, and I have learned to use gestures, mime, facial expressions, and drawing to get what I want. One of the first questions I am asked by State-side teachers is, "Do you know Polish/Arabic/Malaysian . . . .?" Because I'm teaching in English, in an American-style school, I don't need to learn the local language to do my

job, although it does make daily life easier. Another area for further study would be teachers' foreign language ability before and after their overseas experience.

I do agree that obtaining goods and services and culture shock can be challenges. There are not many foods I can not live without, but buying large enough clothes, obtaining a drivers license, and getting a phone line have been difficult almost every place I have lived. We have to depend on the school to help us accomplish some tasks that we would handle ourselves at home, and occasionally that feeling of dependence is frustrating.

I was surprised that no one included reverse culture shock (when returning to the United States) on their list. Maybe none of the teachers who responded to the survey have been in the United States long enough to have experienced that phenomenon. I also expected teachers to write about feeling displaced—like they do not belong anywhere. I know several overseas teachers who spend the summer travelling and staying with friends and relatives, while others, like me, return to the same place every year to provide a sense of home.

Professional Difficulties

Availability of resources appropriate for a U.S.-based curriculum is an obvious difficulty. Sometimes what you are looking for is unavailable locally, sometimes shipping resources in is too expensive, time-consuming, or difficult, and sometimes the local government can control or censor the materials teachers want available.

I expected a much higher number of respondents to write about lack of job protection from administrators and school boards, as well as from political, economic,

and environmental difficulties in the places they are teaching. My career has been affected by economic and environmental crises, and I know several teachers who have been evacuated from countries due to war. There is very little job protection in overseas schools, and I thought more teachers would list it as a concern.

Discrepancies

There were some contradictions within the results. Professional development was listed as a benefit by 29 of the teachers, but as a difficulty by 31. Obviously there is disparity in professional development among schools, probably dependent on school size, location, financial status, and quality of the school. Teachers seemed pleased with the professional conferences available to them, but were frustrated at the difficulties they encounter renewing licenses, earning advanced degrees and additional certifications, and learning about recent developments in their fields.

A second discrepancy was in the quality of overseas schools. While 22 teachers said something about the high quality of overseas schools, a few mentioned that there are some bad schools out there. I purposely chose to send surveys to well-established schools (usually the best known or oldest international school in the country), so it is not surprising that the overall feel for the quality of schools was positive. Also, it may be easier to create a better school with good funding and selected students.

Cultural interaction provided a third discrepancy. While a strong majority of teachers enjoy teaching overseas for the multicultural interaction it provides them, cultural differences with local-hire colleagues are the source of difficulty for a few of them. Most international schools have different pay scales for overseas and local hire

teachers, and that is a source of conflict at some schools. Sometimes just having different approaches to accomplishing a task can cause conflicts as well.

Conclusions

So why do teachers choose to teach overseas? It is impossible to make broad generalizations about overseas teaching due to the large variety in location, quality of schools, and personal expectations. Yet, despite some commonly agreed on difficulties, the teachers who responded to the survey had more good to say about the experience than bad. The vast majority have no plans to return to the U.S. to teach in the next few years, and a good number plan to teach overseas until they retire.

Clearly teachers who teach overseas feel that the cultural diversity, travel opportunities, financial rewards, and the quality of their students are some of the benefits of their professional and personal choice. Distance from family and friends is an issue for many, but it is not enough to make the majority choose to return to the United States to teach.

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APPENDIX

Teacher Questionnaire
For my master's thesis, I am doing a study on why American teachers choose to teach overseas. If you would, please answer the following questions and send your replies to me at: lhoiseth@asw.waw.pl.

As this is a qualitative study, I am looking for stories rather than statistics. Any time you take to share your story is greatly appreciated.

Linda Hoiseth, teacher
American School of Warsaw

Are you a US Citizen?
Do you have a teaching license or certificate from the United States?
Which state(s)?
Are you considered an overseas hire at your school?
Gender:
Age:
Are you married?
Does your spouse teach at the same school you do?
What are the ages of your children?
Did your children accompany you overseas?
How many years have you been teaching overseas?
Describe the personal benefits of teaching overseas:
Describe the professional benefits of teaching overseas:
Describe the personal difficulties you encounter teaching overseas:
Describe the professional difficulties you encounter teaching overseas:
How many years do you plan to teach overseas?
Would you be willing to answer some follow up questions at a later date?
If so, what is your email address?