

# Chapter 4

## Exploring the Relationship Between Teacher Empowerment and Retention in International Schools: A Cross-Regional Analysis and Insights From East Asia

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The problem is empowerment is not clearly defined and therefore perceived as vague. Turnover of high-quality teachers negatively impacts school culture and student achievement and is costly. A quantitative study to investigate the relationship between teacher retention and empowerment was conducted by the author in international schools in East Asia. A moderate correlation ( $r=.393$ ) between structural empowerment and teacher retention and a modest correlation ( $r=.323$ ) between psychological empowerment and retention was found. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between teacher empowerment and retention in other geographical regions, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and compare them to the original study. Another aim was to explain and provide insights into some of the findings of the original study. Similarities and differences between international schools in the investigated regions, a potential relationship between access to support and competence, and a difference between retention in Type A, B, and C schools were identified.*

*What did you notice? What needs to be done and what do you need to get it done? How can I best support you?*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8795-2.ch004

These were the words one of my previous supervisors used when I joined the school. How often do employees hear this in the workplace? Is it common practice or an exception to the rule? How often do employees get to decide what needs to be done, by when, and what supports they need to get the job done? I still remember the feeling of invigoration and huge responsibility when I heard these words. On that post, I went above and beyond what I thought was required and, in the end, it turned out to be the most successful post I have held.

On numerous other occasions, I have also been told *This is what needs to be done, I want it done by this time and check in with me so I can give you regular feedback on how exactly it needs to look*. More often than not, the regular feedback is either criticism, revisions that need to be made to be exactly how someone wants the project to look like, or in the worst-case scenario, you never hear back from your supervisor, but, in the end, you are made to feel as if you have failed.

Both situations describe the feeling of empowerment or lack thereof. The multiple personal experiences I have had and the many conversations with colleagues in international schools led me to research the term *empowerment*, especially as tied to the teaching profession. Teachers would often complain they did not feel empowered. When discussing it they would often say *Yes, but how do you measure empowerment? It is such a vague concept*. My response was *There must be a way*.

After having worked in almost all geographical regions in the world, Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East and having colleagues who work in international schools in numerous countries, I noticed that, in general, international schools struggle to retain high-quality teachers. That is how I became interested in the correlation between teacher empowerment and teacher retention.

The original research was conducted in international schools in East Asia for my doctoral dissertation. The findings were quite revealing. As a result, I wanted to replicate my research study in international schools in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Conducting research online, spread over such a vast geographical region is hard in any case, however, conducting research on teacher empowerment and retention in particular, has proven even harder. After collecting very few responses following the initial plan, plan B was to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews with selected participants who represented each region. This approach proved itself to be much more successful and informative. The findings, discussion points, and conclusion are presented here. I would like to first thank my research participants who gave their time and were vulnerable when discussing and sharing their experiences.

## INTRODUCTION

Educators around the world, in particular in the international school context, use the word empowerment frequently. A clear definition and measurement of the concept is needed. Another problem which is reported in international schools is the retention of high-quality staff. An international teacher turnover rate of 23%-60% has been reported in different geographical regions (Desroches, 2013; Mancuso, Roberts, White, Yoshida, & Weston, 2011).

The original study was conducted in 2020/2021 as a part of the author's doctoral research. For the purposes of this book chapter, the author conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants from the Middle East, Europe, and Africa region on a smaller scale and compared the findings. A study of this scope has not been conducted so far in international schools. The extension to the original study allowed for the comparability of the findings across different geographical regions to determine similarities and differences and provide appropriate recommendations based on the results.

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