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Perceiving Organizational Culture in International Schools: A Qualitative Study of Experienced, Newly Hired Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Background

Rapid growth of the international school market in Indonesia demand teachers that not only excellent in mastering and delivering materials but also make meaningful contributions while adapting to the diverse cultural backgrounds.

Purpose

This study aims to explore how experienced, newly hired teachers understand and interpret the organizational culture of international schools in North Jakarta.

Design/method/approach

This research employed a qualitative phenomenological design, with data collected through in-depth interview with five experienced, newly hired teachers from three different international schools in North Jakarta.

Results

Research has shown that the experienced, newly hired teachers went through three stages before finally accepted and made adjusted. The three stages are disorientation and emotional friction, identity strain and growing into the system.

Contribution/value

Findings of this research help teachers identify the challenges they may face in transitioning to an international school and also help, school management to know how to provide support system.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the international school market has grown rapidly. As of 2025, 4,578 new international schools have been established, bringing the total to 14,833 schools globally, with 138 located in Indonesia across seven different cities, including 71 in Jakarta alone (ISC Research, 2025). The common belief in a world-class education system, particularly due to its constructive teaching and learning approach, has been one of the most valued aspects for parents when choosing these schools (Muslim et al., 2020). The entire system aims to nurture students with global values and a deep sense of intercultural understanding that enables them to engage meaningfully with diverse cultural settings and global challenges (Ferguson, 2024). Central to this approach is the emphasis on respecting cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity within the educational environment (Bayne, 2022). In Indonesia, a country with diverse culture and ethnicity, schools aim to foster intercultural understanding and tolerance among students (National Education System, 2003). International schools, in particular, are often seen as key institutions for preparing students to make meaningful contributions in an increasingly interconnected world through rigorous academic standards, English immersion programs, and diverse learning environments (Muslim et al., 2020).

In multicultural classroom settings, the fusion of knowledge and values of respect and tolerance for diversity in every learning activity must be effectively crafted (Öztabak, 2022). In this regard, teachers' role is perceived as vital in fostering inclusivity, regardless of the students' backgrounds (Judijanto & Al-Amin, 2024). As individuals carry their cultural perspectives into institutions, understanding the diverse nature of international schools requires a deeper look at the concept of organizational culture and how it influences both individual and collective behaviours (Fuller, 2015). According to Colquitt et al. (2015), organizational culture refers to the shared values, norms, and practices that influence how members of the institution think, behave, interact, and solve problems. This shapes decision-making processes, staff relationships, leadership styles, and approaches to teaching and learning (Cardona, 2023). For teachers, especially those who are working in multicultural settings, organizational culture plays a key role in how they interpret expectations, overcome challenges, and engage with both students and colleagues. As Colquitt et al. (2015) suggest, shared social knowledge within an organization deeply affects how members interpret their roles and expectations. Therefore, understanding the organizational culture of the school where they work influences their ability to adapt to a new professional environment where they can confidently design a conducive learning environment and make positive contributions.

However, international school teachers often face the dual responsibility of delivering academic content while also fostering intercultural understanding. These environments can be both enriching and demanding. Hughes (2020) argues that international school teachers frequently adjust to diverse communication styles, varying educational expectations, and the need to build inclusive classrooms. While many find these experiences rewarding, they may also encounter cultural misunderstandings, unclear institutional expectations, and difficulties adapting to unfamiliar norms (Pearce, 2013).

Although many studies have examined international education and multicultural classrooms, limited research has focused on how new teachers perceive and respond to the organizational cultures of the schools in which they work, especially in Indonesia. Most studies focus on curriculum (Lestari et al., 2023), student diversity (Judijanto & Al-Amin, 2024), teacher intercultural competence (Azhari et al., 2024), quality of education (Mahfud et al., 2024; Anggraeni, 2021), and school organization (Norman et al., 2022). Therefore, this study seeks to address the gap by focusing on the voices of experienced teachers who are newly hired into multicultural international school settings. The selection of experienced teachers is due to the unfamiliar norms, expectations, and workplace culture they must face despite the prior teaching expertise they have. Failure to understand organizational culture can result in role ambiguity, where employees are uncertain about how they should behave in the workplace, what is expected from them, and how they are evaluated. This uncertainty can lead to increased emotional exhaustion and stress and result in difficulty adapting (Colquitt et al., 2015; Ridjal, 2023). Given the rapid growth of international schools in Indonesia, understanding how these teachers manage cultural transitions is not only essential for teachers who are aspired to elevate their career in their teaching endeavours to international school, but also for school leaders for improving their institutional support systems in strengthening induction programs, fostering team processes, and sustaining the inclusive school cultures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is widely perceived as the key to an organization's success. Schein (2017) defines organizational culture as the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions of a group within an organization that influence their interactions with one another and the way they perceive and solve problems. These beliefs, values, and assumptions are deeply embedded in an organization's norms and practices, shaping member's perspectives and behaviours. In the context of workplace behaviour, Colquitt et al. (2015) describe organizational culture as a system of control over employees' attitudes and behaviours due to the shared knowledge regarding the rules, norms, and values within an organization. This system influences how employees interact with each other, make decisions, and carry out their roles. Hofstede (2010) adds that organizational culture reflects the collective ways of thinking that distinguishes the members of one organization from another, emphasizing shared perceptions and habitual practices over individual personality. This influences members to use the common accepted ways in working together towards the organization's goals, such as communication styles, habits, and work ethics.

Organizational Culture in International Schools

The nature of organizational culture can vary considerably depending on the organizational settings. In the school context in Indonesia, both local and international schools are multicultural, but in different ways. Teachers and students in local schools mostly come from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the country's own rich diversity. On the other hand, international schools bring together teachers and students

from all over the world, encompassing broader variety of ethnicities and cultures. These characteristics influence communication styles, leadership approaches, teaching practices, and the overall school culture.

Understanding multiculturalism in international schools goes beyond merely recognizing differences; rather it promotes acceptance of dynamic cultural norms, where local and global influences blend (Palmer, 2024). Beside its dynamic cultural environment, teachers in international schools are also challenged with high performance expectations, frequent turnover, competing demands, and conflicting personal values (Cravens, 2018).

Adaptation

Influenced by its concept in the focus of biology, adaptation, later mostly used as social adaptation in the context of sociocultural, is defined as behavioural adjustments in the individual as a process to integrate and acquire the feeling of belonging to a group (Rachmad, 2022). He further explains that the adjustments are closely integrated with thinking and emotions modifications which require flexibility and self-awareness. According to Kim (2001) individuals who move to a new culture often face difficulties in dealing with unfamiliar norms and communication styles, as behaviours and assumptions that were previously effective in their home culture may no longer be relevant. This makes the adaptation process more challenging and can hinder the smooth functioning of their social and professional lives.

Dailey-Strand et al. (2021) state that the adaptation process is gradual and varies from person to person, and the same sequence of stages is often re-experienced when one returns to their original culture. Based on Lysgaard's U-Curve Theory of Adaptation Process, individuals typically go through four general stages of adaptation: (1) Honeymoon Stage: In this stage, individuals feel excitement and a sense of adventure about the new culture. Everything seems enjoyable and aligns with their expectations; (2) Crisis Stage: Challenges and frustration begin to emerge as cultural differences become more apparent while trying to adjust; (3) Recovery Stage: Individuals begin to accept and understand the new culture, and the process of learning and adaptation starts to take place; and (4) Adjustment Stage: Individuals start to feel more comfortable with the new culture and are able to integrate it into their daily lives.

Adaptation in International Schools

For teachers entering multicultural or international schools, this process involves personal, social, and professional transitions. Adaptation includes learning to navigate cultural norms, adjusting teaching practices, forming relationships with diverse colleagues and students, and understanding institutional expectations (Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

From a psychological perspective, adaptation can be categorized into sociocultural adaptation the ability to fit in and perform effectively in a new cultural context and psychological adaptation, which refers to emotional well-being and satisfaction (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Both are relevant to teachers who may face culture shock, role ambiguity, and adjustment fatigue when entering unfamiliar educational settings. Professional adaptation also requires a shift in instructional strategies and communication styles, particularly in environments where Western and local educational philosophies converge. Teachers must reconcile their own pedagogical beliefs with the school's organizational

culture and the cultural expectations of students and parents (Schweisfurth, 2013). This adaptation often challenges teachers to reflect critically on their assumptions, embrace culturally responsive pedagogy, and develop flexible approaches to classroom management and student engagement. Teachers who lack institutional guidance may experience stress, burnout, or diminished motivation (Duncan et al., 2021). Conversely, schools that support adaptation through orientation programs, mentoring, and inclusive culture are more likely to retain teachers and foster a healthy workplace (Hughes, 2020).

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how experienced, newly hired teachers understand and interpret the organizational culture of international schools in North Jakarta (Creswell, 2013). Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interview with five teachers from three international schools in North Jakarta. The selection of the informants was based on specific characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study. Therefore, five experienced teachers who had recently (within the past 1–2 years) joined three international schools in North Jakarta, Indonesia were selected. Multiple schools were selected to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives obtained from experience shared by the individuals is the focus, not the institutions. Besides, all selected informants had at least three years of teaching experience in local schools prior to transferring to their current schools. This selection was made to capture rich, descriptive narratives that describe the challenges, expectations, and strategies they experienced to adapt and blend in with the new multicultural teaching environment they are entering. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Results of interview were transcribed, then they were generally read by the researcher to understand the feelings. After reading all transcripts, the significant statements are identified and coded. Lastly, themes were identified and categorized based on initial impression, challenges, and strategies to adapt. Triangulation of data from multiple subjects enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings.

RESULTS

Prior to presenting the research findings, the researcher begins by providing a brief profile of each informant and the motivational backgrounds for moving.

Table 1 Overview of Informants' Backgrounds

Informants	Years of Teaching Experience	Motivation for Moving
AS	7 years	Explored something new and challenging
ZA	9 years	Aimed to experience teaching in a school with a global perspective and a diverse setting
RC	8 years	Pursued career advancement after completing graduate school

Informants	Years of Teaching Experience	Motivation for Moving
FN	15 years	Pursued a better career opportunity
FA	6 years	Family and aimed to grow professionally

Despite having different experiences, the five teachers shared common themes in their adaptation journey. While each teacher bringing their own professional background and personal teaching philosophy, all encountered institutional tension, emotional stress, cultural conflict, and personal despair. This situation required them to challenge their expectations and the school’s organizational culture. After reading all transcripts, to understand the general feeling, the significant statements are identified and coded. Then, the results are presented in five big themes as follows:

Running on a Treadmill – The Pressure to Keep Moving

Highlighting its well-established system, all five teachers described the organizational culture in their current schools as rigid, fast-paced, and unrelenting. Surprised by the daily rhythm of the school, all teachers often felt pressured to keep on moving and being productive.

“When I first joined, I was fascinated by how quickly they get themselves moving among tasks.” (ZA)

“Even during our free periods, we are always having things to do. We have to be ready whenever the HODs assign us to be a relief teacher.” (RC)

“As the form teacher, I’m expected to always keep an eye on my students and report every incident, even minor, to the coordinator immediately.” (FN)

“I was off guard by how tight and structured everything was. I thought that it is going to be like the Western culture I often see in the TV. Surprisingly, the culture is very rigid.” (AS)

“Although our official clock-in time is 7:15 a.m., most teachers, including myself, arrive at around 6:45 a.m. and immediately start working. I remember one specific instance when I was assigned as an invigilator for the Grade 6 final exams. I was supposed to collect the papers at 7:40 a.m., but my coordinator texted me at 7:20 a.m. asking why I hadn’t picked them up yet.” (FA)

This fast-paced, high-pressure environment where expectations feel relentless and time never quite enough makes the five informants feel like they are constantly “on the clock”. This led them to a sense of being overwhelmed by the force to always be productive. This culture is not only expected but also internalized, making sure every teacher is up to the expectation. Although all agreed that in the first semester they experienced physical and emotional exhaustion, informant AS realized that this was done to keep the school’s accountability.

Walking a Tightrope – Balancing Roles and Expectations

Different from public schools in Indonesia, being a teacher in an international school means always wearing multiple hats as it holds parents' high expectation to the rigorous standards (Muslim et al., 2020). Teachers' responsibilities are not merely delivering materials, they can be the caregiver, counsellor, event manager, nurse, even sometimes detective while trying not to fall behind. Informants ZA, AS, and RC described their dynamic roles expectations the principal gave them as follows:

"I felt the role of a teacher here extended far beyond academics. I was expected to also care about my students' emotional and behavioural growth as many of them were neglected at home." (ZA)

"What surprised me was most parents during the parents-teacher meeting would always want me to explain their children's improvement in many areas. They would always ask how their children were interacting with teachers and friends, how their children were organizing their stuff, or what kind of extracurricular they could provide." (AS)

"Being encouraged to always learn something new, I learned that teachers here are expected to go above and beyond, proving our commitment to growth. Just this semester I joined a master class to use Canva." (RC)

The informants' statements above expressed that their roles extended far beyond academic instruction, something that they found new and unfamiliar from the culture in their previous school. They were expected to manage students' emotional, behavioural, and social well-being while simultaneously upholding the high academic standards. Teachers described the need-to-know things related to the kids beyond their academic progress reflecting a high level of surveillance and accountability. While some acknowledged the holistic vision behind these expectations, others felt strained by the pressure to meet diverse and, at times, conflicting responsibilities as they already had a lot in their hands. Informant FN described this challenge as follows:

"If I could, I wish to have 25 hours a day to finish my job. Teaching, planning, marking, and, ugh, don't mention about the sudden meeting or required documents to fill out. While thinking of them, you have a kid crying because his lunch hasn't arrived yet during lunch." (FN)

Lost in Differences - Navigating Cultural Currents

A multicultural environment offers an eye-opening, yet complicated experience for the teachers. Cross-cultural misunderstandings and communication gaps surfaced as sources of confusion. Some of the informants found that communication styles vary dramatically, making the beginning of their journey was a bumpy road.

"I found it difficult to adapt to more direct communication styles. Coming from different countries, my teaching partner and I have different ways to see and respond to things. Many times, we were in arguments and disagreements. Maybe that was also because of my limited English ability. I couldn't explain my intention that well. I felt underestimated." (AS)

Aside from different communication styles, facing different teaching approaches as the culture of the school was also a challenge. Informants FA and RC described their struggle as follows:

“We argued a lot over the teaching methods. They used to implement direct teaching while I was more into giving students opportunities to do exploration. The comment they gave me was my plan was wasting a lot of their teaching time. I felt all over the places at that time. I hoped that they would tell me about that in a different way.” (FA)

“My constant struggle with the long-distance collaboration system across campuses really stressed me out, even right now. Personal assumption upon reading text messages led us to many misunderstandings.” (RC)

The journey of adapting to a multicultural teaching environment revealed complex emotional and professional challenges for the informants. The different communication styles posed immediate difficulties. This issue was amplified by the different English proficiency levels. This created a feeling of being underestimated despite their best intentions. Beyond linguistic barriers, the clash of pedagogical philosophies triggered tension. Teachers came from diverse educational backgrounds with distinct classroom practices. The contrast between the two practices created friction, especially when feedback was given without cultural sensitivity. This deepened the feelings of disconnection and professional insecurity.

Wearing Someone Else’s Shoes – Losing and Finding Professional Security

The rigid, tasks-driven curriculum and uniformity, highly structured school procedures created professional restriction for the experienced, newly hired teachers. This culture led to feelings of disempowerment, as teachers felt they could no longer “be themselves” in their practice.

“I genuinely felt disempowered, having to get approval for things I used to handle independently. I felt like I couldn’t be myself in the classroom anymore. I had to follow rules that didn’t really match how I teach.” (FN)

“I used to slow down to help students who struggled, but now I’m expected to keep going even if some are left behind. At first, I resisted. This was not the way I used to do. I slowly felt like I was losing part of my identity as a teacher.” (FA)

“It’s honestly stressful. Personally, I feel like I am weak. Professionally, I somehow feel disappointed with myself. I somehow feel like I can actually do better.” (RC)

Despite initial resistance and discomfort, the informants eventually shifted toward a mindset of adaptation. Rather than abandoning their beliefs entirely, they described a process of internal negotiation.

“However, as a new teacher, I don’t have a lot of options in my hands. I tried to learn the system and the whys.” (FA)

“If I can describe myself in these two years, it is going to be “stretching myself” rather than “forcing myself”. (ZA)

"I try to take a step back and understand others' perspectives rather than pushing my own. I think that mindset has helped me survive. I make a conscious effort to adapt and be empathetic, even when there are differences." (FN)

"I talk to my coordinator. She is working here longer than me. She must know them better and help me see our problem objectively." (AS)

The pressure to conform to the existing culture led the informants to feel a loss of identity. Nevertheless, they found ways to acquire gradual adaptation. They reframed their experiences in a new approach, integrated their beliefs and values, compromised with the new situation to let growth occur.

Leaning on Each Other – Surviving Through Support

Despite these challenges, the informants emphasized the critical role of informal and formal support in their journey. Mentorship from heads of department and coordinators was repeatedly cited as essential in understanding expectations and the school's systems. In addition, peer relationships also served as emotional anchors.

"If it's not my friends, I don't think I am going to be able to survive this long. My friends in Math departments keep on reminding me to see every conflict that I encounter as a matter of perspective, not personal attack. With that thinking, I try my best to get to know them better. I think that was what helped me adjust quickly." (FA)

"The presence of the HODs and the coordinators helped me survive here. Although it was hard to show our vulnerable side at first, I realized that they need to know my condition for them being able to help me." (ZA, AR)

"Let yourself explore new things was what kept me going. I know I am experienced but letting myself get directed by my coordinator helped me see things differently and learn. Through this entire process, I learned to accept things I couldn't control while trying to still have a control of things I could control within my capacity." (FN)

"I learned to be more flexible. Even though it took me work twice, I challenged myself to prepare the lessons independently in case the materials were late to be updated. Constant communication with my HODs was another way I took to tackle the challenges." (RC)

While the system can be rigid, the human connections within it provide warmth, understanding and much-needed relief. Trusted colleagues helped them acknowledge their struggles, reframe conflicts, and maintain a sense of community. This theme underscores the importance of relational support in mitigating the impact of cultural and institutional stressors.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the five experienced, newly hired teachers encountered similar patterns of challenge and journey of adaptation despite the different organizational cultures of their current schools. Across the five themes, it is evident that in the journey of transitioning to the new school teachers face a complex process to integrate

and acquire the feeling of belonging to a group (Rachmad, 2022). This required, even for the experienced teachers, thinking and emotions modifications were very needed.

The first two themes drew the dynamic feelings that the teachers experienced when the journey unfolded. It challenged the thinking and emotion modification for the teachers to understand the new culture. The third theme described role ambiguity and adjustment fatigue that the teachers experienced when they were trying to adjust themselves, showing a tension in the process. The last two themes emphasize how self-awareness helped the teachers to integrate their thinking and emotions to the organizational culture, enabling them to form relationships and understanding institutional expectations (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). As Schweisfurth (2013) suggests, reconciling own pedagogical beliefs with the school's organizational culture and the expectations will help teachers to adapt with the new settings.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that in adapting to the new organizational culture, particularly in multicultural international school settings, experienced, newly hired teachers went through three stages before finally accepted and made adjusted. The three stages are disorientation and emotional friction, identity strain and growing into the system. Based on these findings, school management should be able to provide support system that can help the experienced, newly hired teachers adapt, learn and reorient themselves to the organizational culture in order to have them effectively play their roles as valuable additions to the existing team.

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