Preparing Teachers for the Transition to an International Christian School

Submitted by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Education

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

This thesis is my own composition and is the result of my own research and work.

It contains no material that has been published elsewhere or taken in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree.

No other person’s work has been used without acknowledgment in the main text of this thesis.

All research procedures reported in this thesis have been given the approval of the Human Research Ethics for Education Panel (HREEP).

Signed: Roslyn Barnes

Dated: May 20th, 2019
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In particular, I am grateful to the eleven participants in this research project who generously and graciously shared their stories of transition with me. Their willingness to take time to talk with me and to provide feedback on my developing conclusions has been appreciated.

The advice and assistance of Dr Nola Norris, who supervised this work, is also gratefully acknowledged. Since I live and work in Europe, our communication was limited to electronic means, which isn’t always the easiest way to discuss complex ideas. Thank you, Nola, for your patient feedback on the many drafts that this thesis went through.
ABSTRACT

This study sought to gain insight into the experience of transition into teaching in an international Christian school that could inform the development of a pre-field orientation program for Australian Christian teachers, by giving voice to the perspectives of those who have experienced such a transition. Pre-field orientation (PFO) programs designed to meet the specific needs of teachers exist in the United States, but no such program is currently known to exist in Australia.

The experience of transition to an international Christian school was investigated with a comparative case study using a phenomenological approach to research. The experiences of five American teachers who had participated in a pre-field orientation program (case 1) was compared with the experiences of six Australian teachers who did not have access to such a program before serving in an international Christian school (case 2). Each of the research participants had served in an international Christian school for at least one school year.

While each teacher’s experience was in some ways unique, several common elements were identified. These are 1) an underlying experience of stress, 2) managing expectations, 3) cultural sensitivity, 4) informants and mentors, 5) understanding transition, and 6) educational philosophy. It was noted that the research participants tended to direct the conversations towards the factors that caused them stress during transition, and the factors that helped, or could have helped, them to grow through that stress.

Based on the insights and perspectives shared by the research participants, this thesis presents some initial recommendations regarding the content and structure of a PFO program that
could be developed to meet the needs of Australian teachers making the transition to an international Christian school. The topics recommended for inclusion in a PFO program as a result of this study are 1) life in cross-cultural transition, 2) conversations to have ahead of time, 3) Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the classroom, 4) building culturally sensitive relationships, 5) curriculum, instruction and assessment in an international context, and 6) the humble and intentional teacher. These recommendations are relevant to mission organisations in Australia that are responsible for preparation of the staff they are deploying overseas, leaders in international Christian schools, and teachers who are considering serving in an international Christian school.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declaration of Authenticity</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1: Introduction 1

1.1 Background to the Research 1

1.2 Purpose of the Study 3

1.3 Research Question 4

1.4 Definition of Key Terms 4

1.5 Benefits of the Research 5

1.6 Outline of the Thesis 6

## Chapter 2: Issues Commonly Faced by Teachers in International Christian Schools – A Brief Review of the Literature 7

2.1 Introduction 7

2.2 Teachers and the Transition Process 7

2.3 Developing Intercultural Competence and Cultural Humility 9

2.4 The Distinctive Character of Christian Education 11

2.5 Integration of Faith and Learning 13

2.6 Meeting the Needs of Third Culture Kids 14

2.7 Responding to Suffering and Risk 16

2.8 Conclusion 17
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

3.2 Research Participants

3.3 Research Instruments

3.4 Research Procedure

   3.4.1 The Position of the Researcher

   3.4.2 Data Collection

   3.4.3 Data Analysis

3.5 Validity and Reliability

3.6 Research Ethics

3.7 Conclusion

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Overview of Results

4.2 Underlying Experience of Stress

4.3 Managing Expectations

   4.3.1 Workload

   4.3.2 School Procedures and Practices

   4.3.3 Relationships with Colleagues

   4.3.4 Expectations of Self

4.4 Cultural Sensitivity

   4.4.1 Teaching TCKs

   4.4.2 Multicultural Staff Teams

   4.4.3 Host Culture Relationships

   4.4.4 Spiritual Life
4.5 Informants and Mentors 46
   4.5.1 During PFO 46
   4.5.2 On location 47
   4.5.3 Intentional Conversations 48
4.6 Understanding Transition 50
4.7 Educational Philosophy 52
   4.7.1 Instructional and Assessment Practices 52
4.8 Conclusion 54

**Chapter 5: Discussion** 55
5.1 Overview of the Discussion 55
5.2 Some Significant Causes of Stress During Transition. 57
   5.2.1 Encountering All Things New and Unfamiliar 58
   5.2.2 Unmet Expectations 59
   5.2.3 Cultural Differences 60
      5.2.3.1 In the school 60
      5.2.3.2 In the host community 61
   5.2.4 Student Diversity 62
5.3 Some Possible Ways Teachers Can Grow Through the Experience 62
   5.3.1 Understand the Nature of Cross-Cultural Transition 63
   5.3.2 Connect with Informants and Mentors 64
   5.3.3 Discover the Characteristics and Needs of TCKs 65
   5.3.4 Learn Language to Express Cultural Differences 65
   5.3.5 Develop a Humble Intentionality 66
5.4 Conclusion 68
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

6.2 Suggestions of topics to include in a PFO program that arise from the experiences of the participants

6.2.1 Life in cross-cultural transition

6.2.2 Conversations to have ahead of time

6.2.3 TCKs in the classroom

6.2.4 Building Culturally Sensitive Relationships

6.2.5 Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment in an International Context

6.2.6 The Humble and Intentional Teacher

6.3 Limitations of the study

6.4 Recommendations from the Study

6.5 Conclusion

List of References

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule (Case 1 – American teachers who participated in PFO)

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule (Case 2 – Australian teachers who did not participate in PFO)
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Participants in Case 1 – American teachers who attended PFO  22
Table 3.2: Participants in Case 2 – Australian teachers who did not attend PFO  23
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Representation of the unique and shared nature of the transition experience.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Representation of the development of common, overlapping themes.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Web-like connections between the major themes and sub-themes.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Causes of stress and related factors for growth.</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research

International Christian schools are an increasingly available option for missionary and other expatriate parents seeking to access quality education for their children in English while engaged in overseas assignment. The testimony of parents as to the impact that teachers in these schools have on their family and ministry is recorded in video form on the websites of many schools (see for example, the International Christian School of Budapest, n.d.). Teachers not only provide academic support, but also act as caring listeners and role models for the young people they serve. However, effective provision of educational services requires the commitment of qualified and equipped Christian teachers. These teachers must overcome significant barriers, such as acquiring financial sponsorship or facing opposition from family members, and develop unique skills and dispositions to thrive long-term in their new work-life context.

Teachers in international Christian schools need to adjust not only to the environment and culture of the host country, but also to the international culture of the school itself. They need to be able to respond appropriately to the needs of students from a variety of cultural and educational backgrounds, and to work effectively with similarly multicultural staff teams. The curriculum design, educational philosophy, behavioural norms and leadership structure of the school may be quite different to that which is common in the teacher’s home culture. Adapting successfully to these differences is important if a teacher is to be effective in an international Christian school.
In my experience, teachers who commit to serving in this way and facing these challenges do so in faith, trusting that God will meet their every personal and professional need. However, wisdom would suggest that good preparation prior to departure is also desirable. Many significant life changes, such as a serious medical diagnosis or the loss of a job, occur suddenly and unexpectedly. The experience of transition to an international Christian school is not like that. It is an experience that is entered into by choice, with the availability of time to prepare to grow through it. This study is founded on the belief that effective preparation could alleviate some of the stress commonly associated with the transition to an international Christian school, help teachers become effective in their new role more quickly, and continue to serve for longer. Pre-field orientation programs exist to meet this need for preparation in the United States, but the researcher is not aware of any currently existing program in Australia that addresses the specific needs of teachers preparing to serve in international Christian schools.

I have personally experienced the stress of a transition to an international Christian school without such preparation, and observed other teachers journey through similar experiences. Many of these teachers only remained in international Christian schools for one or two years. I have also had many informal conversations with American colleagues about how valuable they found the pre-field orientation programs that they had participated in. This study is therefore motivated both by personal experience with the topic and a desire to see an effective preparation program established for Australian teachers.

The present study is an initial exploration of the issues that teachers face when transitioning to an international Christian school. The voices of teachers who have experienced the transition to life and teaching in international Christian schools could provide valuable insight
into what the most critical needs of teachers are during this time and how a pre-field orientation program might address those needs. Their experiences and perspectives could be used to inform the development of a pre-field orientation program that effectively addresses the real needs of Australian teachers.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to explore the transitional experiences of teachers serving in international Christian schools to provide insight into what would be valuable content and structure for a pre-field orientation program for Australian teachers preparing to serve in international Christian schools. Participants in the study had the opportunity to contribute to the future development of staff for the international Christian schools similar to those they are serving in, knowing that their experience will contribute to the benefit of others.

It is generally the responsibility of mission organisations to provide orientation for the staff they intend to deploy in overseas service. The results of the study could help mission organisations design orientation programs that more effectively meet the needs of teachers. New teachers who arrive well prepared will likely adjust more quickly and stay for longer, increasing stability and reducing the burden of helping new recruits usually placed on long-term staff.
1.3 Research Question

The study will seek to answer the question “How could the perspectives of international Christian school teachers inform the development of a pre-field orientation program for Australian Christian teachers intending to serve in international Christian schools?”

1.4 Definition of Key Terms

*International Christian Schools* refers to schools that seek to provide education from a biblical worldview, and whose student enrolment is predominantly *Third Culture Kids*. The *Association of Christian Schools International* (ACSI) includes such schools in 77 different countries (Association of Christian Schools International, n.d.). Instruction is usually in English, and the curriculum offered is generally different to that of national schools in the same region.

International Christian schools differ from other types of international schools in several ways. Although many open their enrolment to other students, the education of missionary children remains the primary mission of the international Christian school. They tend to be smaller and less resourced than international schools that cater predominantly for the business and diplomatic communities. Teachers serving in international Christian schools are not usually paid a salary by the school, but are required to be supported by a mission organisation and churches in their home country.
Third Culture Kids (TCKs) refers to children who live in a country other than their country of citizenship for a significant time during their developmental years (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

Transition will be used to label the process of leaving one culture to relocate to another with the intention of remaining in the new location for a significant time. The focus will be on transition from the home culture to a new host culture, not the reverse transition upon return to the home culture.

Pre-field Orientation Program (PFO) refers to a training program designed to prepare teachers for their role in an international Christian school, occurring in their home culture prior to departure for service, such as the eight-day program run by ACSI (Association of Christian Schools International, n.d.). These programs are not pre-service teacher training programs. Since the teachers involved hold qualifications in education and have at least some experience, a PFO program focuses on the additional skills and dispositions needed to thrive in an international Christian school, such as understanding the needs of TCKs and living cross-culturally. Some topics overlap with those covered in general orientation programs offered by mission organisations, but a PFO offered specifically for teachers enables them to be addressed in the unique context of international Christian schools.

1.5 Benefits of the Research

The research is intended to benefit the teachers who choose to serve in international Christian schools, particularly those from Australia, by providing insights into their preparation needs. A prospective teacher may benefit from these insights even if they are unable to attend a PFO.
program. The research is also of benefit to the mission organisations that sponsor teachers who serve in international Christian schools and are responsible for their preparation. The insights gained through this research will help them to do this more effectively. The research is also useful to leaders of international Christian schools who are responsible for recruiting and on-location training of their staff. Prospective and current international school teachers, mission organisation personnel and international school leaders are therefore the intended audience of this thesis.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 2 of the thesis outlines some of the issues commonly faced by international school teachers as recorded in the literature. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in the study. The major themes and sub-themes identified in the data are presented in chapter 4, and insights gained from these themes are discussed in chapter 5. Recommendations for content to be included in a PFO program in Australia as a result of the insights gained in this study are presented in chapter 6.
Chapter 2: Issues Commonly Faced by Teachers in International Christian Schools – A Brief Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

As the purpose of the research is to hear the voice of teachers with experience in international Christian schools, taking note of the issues they deem to be significant, it is not possible to determine ahead of time what those issues will be. However, some possible issues that may be raised can be suggested, such as understanding the transition process, developing intercultural competence and cultural humility, understanding the distinctive character of Christian education and the integration of faith and learning, meeting the needs of TCKs, and responding to suffering and risk.

2.2 Teachers and the Transition Process

“Of course, everyone goes through transitions in life, but missionaries have major specific transitions added to the general ones that everyone experiences” (Koteskey, 2015). If those missionaries are teachers serving in international Christian schools, they also live in a community where others are constantly in transition. Transition, with all its practical and emotional implications, is always occurring, even for those who are not moving anywhere themselves at the time. It is perhaps the most constant, defining reality of life in such schools. In this context, teachers not only experience transition themselves, but also play a role in guiding and supporting the young people in their care through their own experience of this same reality. This makes the topic of transition always relevant for teachers in
international Christian schools, and especially for those who are about to encounter the lifestyle for the first time.

Using an interview-based case study approach to investigate the experiences of teachers transitioning into a Christian school within Australia, Harvey and Dowson (2003) discovered a lack of formal transition processes to support new teachers - either graduate teachers entering the profession for the first time or more experienced teachers transitioning from another school. Although the supportive environments of these schools compensated for this lack somewhat, Harvey and Dowson (2003) concluded that more structured transition processes would be of high value. It seems reasonable to suggest that this need for formal transitional processes would be even greater for teachers who are not only adjusting to a new school but a completely new social and cultural environment, as is the case for teachers transitioning to an international Christian school. PFO programs may be able to fill a part of this need.

Pollock and Van Reken (2009) developed a five-stage model to describe the process of transition from living in one culture to living in another. With the decision to take on an overseas assignment, an individual or family moves from a state of involvement in their current location to a state of leaving. They begin to disengage somewhat from roles and relationships as they prepare to move. The central transition phase occurs as final goodbyes are said, the plane is boarded and then disembarked in the new location. Soon after arriving, each individual begins to establish identity and relationships in the new place - the entry stage. In time, this leads to reinvolvement in the new community. The process begins again from this point with the next move, be that a return to the original location or to another different location. An understanding of this cycle and its attendant emotions could help
smooth the process for those in transition, and help those around them to be more sensitive to their needs at each stage.

2.3 Developing Intercultural Competence and Cultural Humility

Even teachers who are highly qualified and experienced in their own educational setting may lack some of the skills and dispositions needed to thrive in an international Christian school setting. Building on the seven important categories of knowledge developed by quality teacher training identified by Shulman (1987), Shaklee, Mattix-Foster and Lebrón (2015) suggest further elements required for international school teachers such as developing intercultural competence. While Shaklee et al. (2015) do not offer a definition of this term, Cushner (2015) describes a person with intercultural competence as “being able and willing to modify their behavior in ways that enable them to interact and communicate effectively with those different from themselves” (p. 12).

Intercultural competence is a characteristic not likely to be a major component of general teacher education programs, though some skills for working in culturally diverse classrooms may be included. While cross-cultural adaptation and communication is likely to be covered in general orientation programs facilitated by mission organisations that many teachers transitioning to international Christian schools participate in, such training may be inadequate for those preparing to serve in the unique context of international Christian schools. Since they are places where staff and students from such a large diversity of cultural backgrounds are seeking to build a learning community together, international schools are “among the most culturally diverse and interculturally complex organizations anywhere on the planet” (Cushner, 2015, p. 8). In order to minister effectively, teachers in international Christian
schools may therefore require a higher level of intercultural competence than those serving in other mission contexts, making it a potential topic for inclusion in a PFO program designed specifically for teachers.

Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) argued that acquiring intercultural competence is a developmental process involving the individual moving from an ethnocentric worldview, where interactions are viewed from the perspective of the person’s own cultural values and norms, to an ethnorelative worldview, where a person is able to view interactions through the cultural lens of the other and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Based on this model, Hammer et al. developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as a tool for measuring an individual’s current level of intercultural competence. Cushner (2015) comments on the “intercultural conundrum” (p. 15) that students often have more highly developed intercultural competence than their teachers as measured by the IDI. This view is also expressed by Taylor (2013, 2014). Helping teachers become aware of their own level of intercultural development and plan steps for further growth could be a challenging and useful feature of a preparation program for prospective international Christian educators.

An alternative approach to developing cross-cultural relationships is that of cultural humility. The idea overlaps considerably with that of intercultural competence, yet presents a change in nuance that is significant. Developed in the health sciences, this concept is a reaction to the notion of “competence”, which implies the possibility of arriving at a mastery level of skill where no further development is required (Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin, 2015; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). On the contrary, understanding and meeting the needs of clients from different cultural backgrounds is best served by an attitude that there is always more to learn and greater sensitivity to be developed. This requires an on-going posture of humility. It is
not difficult to see how this idea could apply to the teacher-student relationship as much as to the health care provider-patient relationship. Since humility is a virtue constantly commended in scripture, and modelled ultimately by Jesus himself (Philippians 2:5-8, New International Version), this is an approach to cross-cultural relationships that Christian teachers can embrace whole-heartedly and could be explored in a PFO program.

Teachers who are seeking to develop higher levels of cultural sensitivity would likely find it helpful to have a framework and vocabulary to think about and articulate cultural differences. The “Dimensions of National Cultures” developed by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) for the international business community could provide this. The dimensions are a series of six continuums that each describe an important area on which cultures vary, such as attitudes towards authority or uncertainty. The further apart that two cultures are on any continuum, the more likely it is that misunderstanding or miscommunication will occur in interactions between people of those cultures. A similar eight-scale model was developed by Meyer (2014), also for use by people in international business. Teachers preparing to serve in international Christian schools could use either of these models as a framework for understanding the differences between their own culture and their intended host culture, or the culture(s) of their soon-to-be colleagues and students.

2.4 The Distinctive Character of Christian Education

Roy (2008) drew attention to the need for Christian educators to know what makes a Christian school distinctive from other types of schools, to be able to articulate that distinction clearly, and to act consistently in line with it. If Christian educators cannot do this then Christian schools, including international ones, have a hard time justifying their
existence. Roy (2008) outlined a number of principles he considers fundamental to Christian education, such as ‘Thinking Christianly’ and ‘Thinking Holistically’ (p. 39), and described several implications of these principles for Christian schools.

Hull (2003) argued that such thinking goes against the way our culture thinks about education, but is essential if Christian teachers are going to shape Christian schools that offer education that is faithful to the word of God. Greene (2003), reflecting on the apostle Paul’s injunction to Christians to “not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2), calls for Christian education to be shaped by “an alternative consciousness” (p. 27). Therefore, a PFO program for teachers transitioning to international Christian schools would need to reflect the distinctive character of Christian education and what it means to be a faithful Christian teacher.

Another approach to identifying how Christian faith impacts the philosophy and practice of education is that of Graham (2003), who outlined a series of areas, such as the purpose of education, the role of the teacher and the nature of the learning process, in which an understanding of the grace and truth of God leads a Christian teacher to view education differently. A similar framework of topics was used by Kaufmann (2008) and MacCullough (2013). Kaufmann (2008) wrote especially for Christian teachers in Europe who, like many in Australia, undertook their teacher training in a secular university. Kaufman’s clear and concise treatment of these topics could form a springboard for exploring the distinctive character of Christian education during a PFO program. Also coming from the European perspective, the six keywords proposed by de Muynck, Vermeulen and Kunz (2018) to describe the essence of Christian teaching, “awe, encounter, involvement, responsibility, sustainability, variety” (p. 48) could similarly be used to initiate meaningful discussion.
Another area where Christian education may be distinctive is the nature of the community in which it takes place. Drexler (2007, 2011) pointed out how prominent the theme of community is in scripture and in the practice of education throughout Judeo-Christian history. The Bible uses vivid imagery to describe Christian community, such as branches connected to a vine (John 15:1-8) or different parts making up a body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

Hekman (2007) contended that “the context of schooling is an important part of the content of schooling” (Christian Community, para. 1, emphasis original), and outlined a series of traits that characterise a school “that is striving to become a Christian community of grace” (Communities of Grace, para. 5). It could be argued that the transient nature of the international Christian school population, and the isolation many may feel due to the distance from family and friends in the home culture, makes the establishing of a strong sense of community even more important. The nature of biblical community and how it can be promoted in the school context could be another useful topic to explore during a PFO program. Hekman’s (2007) discussion of the differences between a nomad and a pilgrim may resonate well with teachers who are about to relocate to a new and unfamiliar place, and even encourage them to choose to be pilgrims.

2.5 Integration of Faith and Learning

Beckwith and Moreland (2009) argued that sound integration of faith and academic learning is necessary for genuine discipleship and spiritual growth of students. MacCullough (2016) advocated an “integrating core” approach to this task, viewing scripture as the source of ultimate truth that holds all other learning together as a whole. Lessons therefore involve activities that are designed to help students identify where the content they are interacting
with (be it in a text book, a work of literature, media or anything else) connects with, and
where it is distinguished from, a biblical worldview. This is a challenge for many teachers. In
a literature search and survey of teachers regarding professional development practices,
Swaner and Reel (2016) identified “biblical worldview” (p. 28) as a topic that teachers
desired to have more professional development focussed on.

Australian teachers may feel an even greater need for training in this area of integrating faith
and learning if they are expected to be comfortable and competent with it on arrival at an
international Christian school. Pre-service teacher training in Australia occurs largely in
public universities, where the integration of faith and learning is not likely to be included in
the curriculum. Even teachers who have been working in Christian schools in Australia may
therefore have had only a limited amount of training in this area through school-based
professional development. Sound integration of faith and learning in all aspects of teaching
practice may be a helpful topic to include in a pre-field orientation program for Australian
teachers.

2.6 Meeting the needs of Third Culture Kids

One of the distinguishing features of international Christian schools is the nature of the
student population. Most of the students in international Christian schools are “Third Culture
Kids” (TCKs). That is, they are growing up in a cultural world that is neither that indicated
by their passport nor that of their host country or countries, but rather a mixture of them all.
Pollock and Van Reken (2009) identified the defining realities of the TCK’s world as
crossing multiple cultural worlds and high mobility. Teachers who understand the
implications of these realities can play a significant role in helping TCKs maximise the
benefits of their growing up experience as well as successfully managing the difficulties. Zilber (2004) suggested that exploring the metaphors TCKs themselves use to describe their experience may provide insights that are valuable for teachers in international schools.

In an in-depth study of the lives of 11 former international school students, Fail, Thompson and Walker (2004) found that a TCK’s sense of identity is challenged with each move they make. They tend to find a sense of belonging with other TCKs, and to define themselves relationally rather than geographically or ethnically (also Pollock and van Van Reken, 2009). Meeting other TCKs normalises their experience of high mobility and crossing cultural worlds. Being the place where many TCKs meet each other and spend time together, international schools therefore become significant in their identity development. Grimshaw and Sears (2008) suggest that TCKs frequently question their own identity and seek ways of providing continuity to their life story through the changes. In exploring the identity development of female TCKs, Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) found that the disruptions associated with a highly mobile lifestyle had limited the energy that these young women had to engage in regular developmental tasks. However, a strong sense of spirituality provided some stability for those who possessed it. Developing an awareness of the issues surrounding the identity development of TCKs, including the interaction of these issues with spiritual formation, would be valuable for teachers preparing to serve in an international Christian school.

Although TCKs do connect well on some level with other TCKs, the repeated loss of friends associated with their highly mobile lifestyle can lead TCKs to exhibit a wariness towards forming deeper friendships (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009). To protect themselves from the constant cycle of grief that repeated transition involves, TCKs tend to avoid becoming
attached. Using an autobiographical approach involving visual and verbal responses from participants, Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014) found that the TCKs they interviewed formed strong relationships within their families, but had difficulty developing deep friendships at school and saw themselves as outsiders. Teachers of TCKs need to be aware of this dynamic and become skilled at building trust with and between students in their classroom.

In establishing the qualities that are most important for teachers to possess if they are to be effective in teaching TCKs, it is useful to hear the voice of TCKs themselves. Linton (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with a group of former international Christian school students living in the United States. In reflecting on their experiences, these students identified the teachers most valued by them as being highly competent professionally, able to build multiple meaningful relationships, and possessing a level of spiritual maturity that made them able to model an adult Christian life. It would be valuable to expand this understanding by giving voice to a greater number and diversity of TCKs, and to consider how a Christian teacher might go about developing these qualities.

2.7 Responding to suffering and risk

Many international Christian schools operate in regions of the world where significant security challenges exist. Security challenges have the potential to unsettle the emotional and spiritual lives of teachers who are not personally prepared. In addition, many teachers experience significant suffering and loss during their time of service, such as illness and separation from family. Christians who are convinced that God is present with them in their suffering are able to embrace that suffering rather than be unsettled by it (Emmert, 2015), and be a role model to their students who are also experiencing suffering. Jesus did not promise
safety, security and prosperity in this life to those who follow him, but warned of persecution and loss (for example, Luke 9:23, John 15:18-20). Determining a faithful response to God’s calling is difficult in the midst of a crisis situation. Developing a theology of risk, suffering and loss could therefore form a very valuable part of teacher preparation prior to departure.

Noting that “the vast majority of the Bible was written by people facing significant danger and chaos” (p. 129), Frost and Hirsch (2011) contended that comfort and stability are dangerous for God’s people. Indeed, God warned his ancient people Israel, who had endured the hardship of Egyptian slavery, that their new life of freedom and prosperity would be a challenge to their faithfulness (Deuteronomy 8:10-20). Frost and Hirsch (2011) therefore urged the church to be “propelled to the edge of chaos where it has to constantly adapt” (p. 132). It is the place where innovation and growth, rather than complacency, develop both individually and corporately. This is a reasonably accurate description of my experience of life and teaching in the three international Christian schools I have had the privilege of serving in. Teachers who are planning to serve in international Christian schools need to be ready to embrace, rather than fear, life on “the edge of chaos”. Overcoming a natural fear of such chaos, with its associated risk of suffering and loss, is motivated by love (Frost & Hirsch, 2011). Having experienced the love of Christ, who gave up his life for others, Christians are compelled to live out this love by also giving up their lives to serve others (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). Teachers preparing to serve in international Christian schools, especially in regions where political or religious instability exists, could benefit from time and encouragement to carefully think through the ways in which this theology of suffering and risk might be worked out in practice in their own lives.
2.8 Conclusion

Serving in a transient community, providing education that is distinctively Christian and meets the needs of TCKs, developing effective cross-cultural relationships and embracing the risk of suffering and loss are all potential challenges that a teacher’s previous training and experience is unlikely to have prepared them well for. The current study was designed to investigate the impact of these issues, and hopefully raise others that have not been identified here, by listening to the voices of the teachers who have experienced the joys and challenges of making the transition to teaching in an international Christian school.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study utilised a phenomenological approach to research. Phenomenological research seeks to uncover the essence, the fundamental nature, of the phenomenon being studied by gathering information from those who have lived experience of it (Creswell, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher looks to discover the elements of the experience that are common to all or most cases in order to produce a composite account of the phenomenon as expressed by those who have experienced it (Groenwald, 2004, p. 5; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 32).

In this study, the objective was to gain rich insight into the experience of transition into teaching in an international Christian school that could inform the development of an effective pre-field orientation program. Creswell (2006) suggested that a phenomenological study is useful in establishing an understanding of “common experiences in order to develop practices or policies” (p. 60). This requires an approach like that of Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg and Pollio (2017) that “is both descriptive and hermeneutic” (p. 124).

Qualitative research generally assumes that meaning is socially constructed. The realities being studied do not exist objectively by themselves, but subjectively in the perceptions of the people who experience it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). The insight that humans are meaning makers, and that this process is carried out in socio-cultural contexts, is a useful one, but conflicts with a biblical worldview if adopted in an ultimate sense. God is the ultimate meaning-maker, with humans having this capacity in a derivative sense, being created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). God has revealed truth to us about His world and our lives in
his word. The view of human meaning-making adopted in this study is that described by MacCullough (2013) as “cognitively interactive” (A Brief Critique, para. 1). This view holds that human meaning-making involves both an objective reality that exists outside of the meaning-maker, as well as the internal processing of that reality as it is experienced.

The phenomenon of transition to an international Christian school was investigated in the current study using a case study approach. Yin (2014) identifies case study as a useful method when seeking an in-depth description of a phenomenon. Since a case study approach seeks “holistic description and explanation” (Berg, 2007, p. 284), it is possible for the researcher to uncover “nuances, patterns and more latent elements” (p. 284) than if more quantitative methods such as surveys were used (see also Punch, 2009). Working in the performance improvement industry, Turner and Danks (2014) suggested that the understanding of a particular work situation generated by a case study approach could be applied to other similar situations. Mason (2002) also argued that qualitative research methods are capable of “cross-contextual generalities” (p. 1). In this study, in-depth understanding of the transition experiences of a small number of teachers was sought in order to generate insight that could be used to help a much broader group of teachers who are about to experience a similar transition. However, any such generalisations made in this study are offered in a suggestive manner, acknowledging the limitations of working with the small sample size.

Rather than study only one individual case, this study used the approach referred to by Punch (2009) as a “collective case study” (p. 119). Two cases were compared. Firstly, insight was sought from American teachers who participated in a PFO program designed specifically to meet the needs of teachers before making the transition to an international Christian school.
Secondly, insight was sought from Australian teachers who have experienced the transition to serving in an international Christian school without participating in such a PFO program. The data, generated through semi-structured interviews, was then analysed through a process of coding and categories so that emerging themes from the two cases could be compared.

3.2 Research Participants

Sohn et. al. (2017) recommended carrying out enough interviews to reach a point of “saturation” (p. 131), where repetition of themes already identified in previous interviews is noticed. Van Manen (2016) defined sampling in phenomenological research as an “attempt to gain ‘examples’ of experientially rich descriptions” (p. 353). An appropriate number of such examples has been collected when the meaning of the phenomenon being studied is able to be explored. Van Manen (2016) claimed that saturation was not necessarily the goal, as phenomenological research is interested not only in what is common to most cases, but also in the insights that are unique to a particular case. The approach to sampling taken in the current research reflects this understanding of its function in the research process.

Purposive sampling for the two case studies was used, as participants were selected because of their experience with the research topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96; Punch, 2009, p. 162). Each participant had taught in an international Christian school outside of their country of origin for at least one year. The participants in both cases were former and current colleagues of the researcher, and others referred to the researcher by those colleagues. Effort was made to recruit teachers of both genders, from a variety of international Christian schools and with varying lengths of experience in order to provide a variety of perspectives. However, recruiting male participants proved difficult, and the small sample size limited the variety in terms of location and length of service.
Eleven participants, seven female and four male, were interviewed. Six participants were Australians who had not participated in a PFO program specifically designed for teachers before making the transition to an international Christian school, and five were Americans who had participated in a PFO program. Each of the participants had served between one and six years in an international school in places ranging from West Africa, South-East Asia, Western Europe, Central Europe and South Asia. The research participants are introduced briefly in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 introduces the participants in Case 1 (American teachers who attended a PFO program prior to serving in an international Christian school). Table 2 introduces the participants who make up Case 2 (Australian teachers who did not attend a PFO program specifically designed for teachers). Pseudonyms have been adopted, and names of schools and countries of service have been omitted, for confidentiality.

**Table 3.1: Participants in Case 1 - American teachers who attended PFO**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Region and length of service</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Central Europe, 6 years</td>
<td>Middle school Social Studies teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>South-East Asia, 1.5 years</td>
<td>Development officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>West Africa, 2 years</td>
<td>Middle school teacher, Dorm parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>South-East Asia, 1.5 years</td>
<td>Middle school principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Central Europe, 5 years</td>
<td>High school Mathematics teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2: Participants in Case 2 – Australian teachers who did not attend PFO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Region and length of service</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Gary and Jill (married couple) | West Africa, 1 year          | Gary – Science teacher  
                               |                               | Jill – Primary teacher     |
| Mary                         | South Asia, 2 years          | Mathematics teacher                       |
| Tony                         | Western Europe, 4 years      | Administrator, Foreign language teacher   |
| Sarah                        | West Africa, 1 year          | Science teacher                           |
| Andrea                       | South Asia, 3.5 years        | Head Science teacher                      |

3.3 Research Instruments

An interview schedule was developed (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) using the approach suggested by Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) of thinking “topically” before crafting specific interview questions. For each of the two cases, a small number of broad areas of interest were identified, then three or four interview questions were developed to elicit participants’ experience and insight relating to that topic. The interview schedule was formatted with the broad topics in a column on the left of the page, with the related questions in a wider column to the right. This format kept the key topics in the researcher’s sight throughout the interview, and enabled the researcher to move easily between topics and questions as the interview progressed. It also provided a convenient format for the researcher to take notes during the interview.

The interview questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible, and to avoid suggesting topics for the interviewee to share about so that the interviewee would raise topics and share experiences that they felt were most significant (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 129, 132). Attention was given to designing questions that not only prompted the participant to share
about the topic of interest, but also led to a positive interaction between the participant and the researcher (Kvale, 2007).

3.4 Research Procedure

3.4.1 The Position of the Researcher

This study was carried out by an insider researcher. The researcher made the transition from Australia to an international Christian school, without attending a PFO program, more than a decade ago, and has now served in three such schools in three different countries. This gives the researcher a high level of familiarity with the research topic, and ability to empathise with the research participants.

Much of the literature referred to in chapter 2, especially that dealing with transition and TCKs, is widely read by teachers serving in international Christian schools. This has had the effect that these teachers, regardless of their country of origin or country of service, speak a common language on these topics. They are able to dialogue about them often and easily without the need to define terms. The researcher speaks this common language. Since the participants were aware of the researcher’s experience with the research topic and the common language, they were free to use it during the interview.

3.4.2 Data Collection

The primary data collection method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews involve a sense of equality and collaboration between the researcher and the interviewee (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p. 94). The objective is to open a “knowledge producing conversation” (p. 105) in which the participant provides data from their own experience that
helps answer the research question. As suggested by Mason (2002), the interviews were approached more as an exercise in “generating data than collecting data” (p. 52, emphasis in original).

The prepared interview questions were used as a guide during each interview, however the order varied as the researcher attempted to follow the direction the participant was taking the conversation. As well as using the prepared interview questions, the researcher also asked follow-up questions to clarify important ideas and probe for stories and anecdotes that painted pictures of the ideas the participant was expressing. Kvale (2007) suggested that such an approach provides “a more secure ground for the later analysis” (p. 60) and communicates to the participant that what they are sharing is valued by the researcher.

Ten interviews were conducted for this study between May 2018 and January 2019. One interview was with a married couple, the others were conducted with individuals. Most of the interviews were carried out using skype, since geographic distance between the researcher and most participants made face to face interviewing impossible. The researcher took notes during the interviews as well as audio recording. These initial notes, made by hand on a printed copy of the interview schedule, consisted mostly of phrases used by the participant that seemed to be significant. Following each interview, the researcher listened to the recording twice, adding more to the notes taken during the interview and highlighting themes or ideas that were repeated or seemed to be significant in any other way. The recording of one interview (Mary) failed, so her interview was not able to be listened to again, but the notes taken during and immediately after the interview allowed her insights to still be included in the study.
The notes made during the interviews and listening to the recordings were then used to type up a summary of the interview, which included both direct quotes from the participant and some reflective comments from the researcher. The summary was then sent by email to the participant for member checking. Each participant was invited to clarify or correct any misunderstandings, and to offer further insights that they had not thought to mention during the interview. This process of member checking resulted in minor corrections being made to the notes in a few cases.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

A tentative, handwritten, list of important themes that emerged from the interviews was kept, added to and refined as the interviewing process continued. This was the initial stage of data analysis, consistent with the qualitative research process where data collection and data analysis are concurrent activities (Creswell, 2014, p. 185). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) referred to this as the “hermeneutic circle” (p. 27-28), allowing the researcher to understand parts in light of the whole, and vice versa. Sohn et al. (2017) expressed a similar idea: “The goal of coding is to see both the forest and the trees” (p. 136).

Following the completion of interviewing, the list of emerging themes was finalised and a separate document created for each theme. Each interview recording was then listened to again, and direct quotes related to each theme recorded on the relevant document, so that the data was then categorised by these emerging themes. Some pieces of data (quotes from interviews) were found to fit into more than one theme. Each document then represented a summary of what the participants had to say about that topic in their own words. This process allowed the emerging themes to be refined into a set of six major themes. Sub-themes were
then identified within four of the major themes. Data relevant to each of the sub-themes was highlighted with a different colour for each sub-theme.

A summary of the major themes and sub-themes, with brief notes outlining the researcher’s understanding of each theme, was compiled and sent to each participant for further member checking.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Mason (2002) described ways in which the core concepts of validity and reliability are useful for evaluating qualitative research, even though they need to be applied differently than they would be in quantitative research. Van Manen (2016) proposed that the validity of a phenomenological work was determined by its focus on a “valid phenomenological question” (p. 350). According to this understanding of the term, validity in this study is supported by the extent that the interview process elicited detailed and meaningful descriptions of how the participant experienced the phenomenon of transition to an international school. Planning very open-ended interview questions that allowed the conversation to flow naturally according to where the participant’s thoughts led, and asking follow-up questions to invite further explanation, were strategies used to achieve this aim.

Since phenomenological research is interested in obtaining “new and surprising insights” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 351), as well as finding commonalities in the experiences of the research participants, it is not necessarily expected that similar results would be obtained if the research was repeated. However, it is still reasonable to ask questions about the reliability of a qualitative study. Reliability is achieved in this study to the extent that the participants’ descriptions of their transition to an international Christian school are recorded
and interpreted in a way that accurately represents what was experienced. Asking clarifying questions during the interviews, repeated listening to the interview recordings, and the process of member checking all contributed to the reliability of the study.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the “primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). The researcher influences which data are collected and how that data are interpreted. Rather than attempting to be neutral, any bias introduced by the researcher is carefully identified and its potential influence on the study discussed. This enables the researcher to potentially set aside, or “bracket” (Creswell, 2006 p. 59-60; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26; Sohn et al., 2017, p. 130), their existing understanding of the phenomenon so that it does not unnecessarily interfere with hearing and reporting the voices of the participants.

It is expected that the researcher’s personal experience with transition into an international Christian school enabled a stronger sense of rapport with the participants and a greater sensitivity to the complexities of the situations they were describing, and that this outweighed the potential for blind spots and misinterpretation based on preconceived ideas that can occur when a researcher has personal involvement in the research topic. The process of member checking also provided an opportunity for any misunderstandings based on the researcher’s perceptions to be identified and corrected.

It is hoped that the relationship that already existed between the researcher and some participants led to a more open sharing of experiences. However, it is also possible that this relationship may have led to the participant responding in ways they thought the researcher would like them to, or in a way that protected their personal reputation. Sensitive
communication from the researcher reduces, though does not eliminate, the possibility of this interfering with the validity and reliability of the data collected.

### 3.6 Research Ethics

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics for Education Panel (HREEP). Each participant was provided with a letter of invitation and information for research participants, and signed an informed consent form. In scheduling each interview, the researcher accommodated the schedule and preferences of the participant as much as possible, and clarified that their on-going participation remained voluntary.

During the interviews, the researcher attempted to remain sensitive to the emotional state of the participant, and to recognise when a participant did not wish to discuss a particular topic any further. Follow up questions were used to indicate interest in and respect for the contribution that each participant was making.

In recording data in written form, any information that might be used to personally identify any participant was eliminated. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym, and reference was not made to the name of the school they had served in. Only a region of service, not the specific country, was recorded. No record was made of any names of other people that participants referred to during the interview.

### 3.7 Conclusion

The data collection and analysis process led to six major themes, with twelve sub-themes, being identified as significant in transition experience of the research participants. Some of these themes were present across the data set, while others were significant to only one of the
two cases. These themes are outlined in chapter 4, and the insights they offer regarding the
development of a PFO program for Australian teachers are discussed in chapter 5.
Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Overview of the Results.

Each of the eleven research participants had their own unique story. No participant had an experience of transition to an international school that was significantly like the experience of any other individual participant. It was a privilege to hear these stories expressed in their own words.

Dan, Lucy, Jenny, Claire and Simon (all pseudonyms adopted for this research) are American teachers who had all attended a pre-field orientation (PFO) program specifically designed to meet the needs of teachers prior to serving in an international Christian school. For both Claire and Simon, their departures were only days after the program ended. The others had a longer time to process what they had learned before making the transition.

Gary and Jill (married couple), Mary, Sarah, Andrea and Tony (all pseudonyms) are Australian teachers who made a similar transition to teaching in an international Christian school without attending such a PFO program. While they all participated in some general orientation provided by sponsoring mission organisations, they did not have the opportunity to attend training that was specifically designed to prepare them for their role in the unique setting of an international Christian school.

Although the stories are unique, each participant’s story had at least some features that overlapped with the stories of other participants. From these areas of overlap and intersection, common themes were identified that were discussed by most, if not all, research
participants. Other themes were identified that were discussed by a smaller number of participants, but appeared to be highly significant to them. While not wishing to overlook the uniqueness of each experience, and the participants’ interpretation of that experience, the results and conclusions of this study are largely based on the identified common themes. These themes were 1) an underlying experience of stress, 2) managing expectations, 3) cultural sensitivity, 4) informants and mentors, 5) understanding transition, and 6) educational philosophy.

The first theme (underlying experience of stress) was identified as an overarching theme that seemed to permeate the discussion of the other themes. The next three themes (managing expectations, cultural sensitivity, and informants and mentors) were discussed in significant detail by all the participants. Understanding transition was discussed by participants who had attended PFO, while educational philosophy was a significant concern of the Australian participants only.

These unique transition experiences and the recurring themes within them could be represented by a series of overlapping shapes, such as in Figure 4.1. Each blue shape represents an individual participant and their experiences. The shapes are all slightly different because the “shape” of each participant’s experience of transition was different. The overlapping areas of the shapes represent experiences that were shared by some participants. Some shapes overlap significantly, others hardly at all.
Likewise, the common themes that emerged from the interviews also overlapped. This is represented by the red circles in Figure 4.2. The shapes from Figure 4.1 have been retained, but the shading has been removed for clarity.
These diagrams are a general conceptual representation only, not a geometric one. Any blue shape could represent the story of any one participant, and any red circle could represent any of the themes identified above. The idea being presented is that the stories were both unique and shared, that the themes identified arise predominantly from the shared aspects, and that the themes themselves also overlap. This “flat” diagram could be imagined as wrapping around on itself, so that the shapes on the ends also overlapped with each other.

The interconnections between the themes can be represented more specifically in a web-like manner, as in Figure 4.3. No major theme is at the centre of the figure, as there was no single theme that dominated the data set. Each of the major themes (in red font) are surrounded by a number of sub-themes (in black font). Some of the sub-themes connect with more than one major theme, or with other sub-themes. The major theme of “Underlying Experience of Stress” is represented separately at the base of the diagram, since it permeated the discussion of the other themes.

Figure 4.3: Web-like connections between the major themes and sub-themes.
The results of this study will be presented under these major themes and sub-themes, beginning with “underlying experience of stress”. Where quotes are included from participants, the designation “U” is included with the participant’s name to indicate an American participant who attended a PFO program, and the designation “A” to indicate an Australian participant who did not attend a PFO program.

4.2 Underlying Experience of Stress

It was impossible to miss the experience of stress expressed by all of the participants at some point in the interview. For some participants, it was a prominent theme. While only three participants used the words “stressed” or “stressful”, the words “overwhelmed” or “overwhelming” were used by seven out of the eleven participants to describe aspects of their transition experience. Four participants used the word more than once. Stress was also expressed by the similar terms “bewildered” and “daunting”. Three participants identified that they had felt anxiety during their transition.

Some participants used imagery to describe this overwhelming experience: “Like drinking out of a fire hose” was used by one participant (Lucy, U) to describe her experience of PFO, and by another participant (Dan, U) to describe his experience of arrival in his place of service. Or from another participant: “We were just trying to keep our head above water and not drown.” (Jill, A)

Other participants also described similar reactions to the quantity of new information, sights and sounds experienced during their first year of service:
Every day for the first couple of months, if I was off of our compound, I was staring out my window in the city at how strange it all was. (Jenny, U)

A lot to look out for, a lot of new sights and sounds and things… it was just a lot to get use to in the first few months… you’ve got a lot coming at you. (Gary, A)

Unsurprisingly, given the feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious connected with all that they were experiencing, participants also expressed feelings of tiredness and exhaustion.

It took everything out of me. I just couldn’t function. (Lucy, U)

We were just having exhausting days. (Jill, A)

One participant identified that this exhaustion begins even before arriving in the country of service, during the process of preparing to leave the home country.

People come here exhausted from the process of getting here and then you hit the ground running. There’s been a lot of an emotional and physical toll that’s been on. (Simon, U)

While stress was experienced and expressed differently by each participant, it was a theme that pervaded each interview even when it was not being discussed directly.
4.3 Managing Expectations

Encountering unanticipated expectations from others, or things in their new situation that were not as they had expected, was a topic discussed by nine of the eleven participants. In many cases, it was discussed at length, indicating that this issue had a significant impact on their transition experience. The areas that appeared to involve the most difficult expectations for participants were 1) workload, 2) school procedures and practices, 3) relationships with colleagues, and 4) expectations of self.

4.3.1 Work Load

The number and/or the complexity of tasks that they were required to take on was mentioned by six participants as a difficulty that they faced in their first year of working in an international Christian school. For some, this became a defining feature of their lives at the time.

There was just so much more than I was expecting and the work load was just so much more than what I was anticipating… I think I wasn’t coping for a while. I wasn’t coping with the hours I was doing. (Sarah, A)

Our work day doesn’t start at 8am and end at 4, although they say it does… there is very much an expectation that you are available for the students and that you take part in extra-curricular activities and that you’re here on weekends with students. (Claire, U)
These participants had to adjust to a quantity of work hours and a variety of tasks that they had not been anticipating.

4.3.2 School Procedures and Practices

Inaccurate expectations about how the school would be organised and operated, and how a teacher needed to function within the school, was another area of difficulty discussed by some participants. These inaccurate expectations worked two ways. Firstly, some participants felt they had expectations placed on them by the school that they were not anticipating, such as the high workload already mentioned, working with very diverse groups of students, and the level of involvement in the social and spiritual life of the school. One participant suggested that discussing these expectations at PFO would have been valuable:

I think that’s a thing that PFO didn’t talk a lot about but I think that would be a good thing to talk more about and that is… the expectations of teaching… in a Christian international school environment are different… More time [is needed to discuss] what do those differences look like and what are those expectations like. (Simon, U)

Secondly, some participants had expectations of the school that were not met.

I didn’t realise the state that the lab would be in… the lack of safety in terms of the kids hadn’t been trained in any sense of how to behave safely in a lab environment… I was expecting there to be a curriculum. I was expecting there to be more resources.” (Sarah, A)
As well as finding fewer teaching resources than they were expecting, some participants also found that they had less personal and professional support than they had expected. This idea overlaps with the theme of “mentors and informants” discussed in section 4.5.2 On Location.

One participant who was serving in an administrative role commented:

I came assuming that everybody was ready and understood that there was a need for change. The reality was quite different, and that made the transition into the school quite complicated. (Tony, A)

The need to adjust previously held expectations about the school and their place in it was common to participants who served in administrative positions as well as those who served in classroom roles.

4.3.3 Relationships with Colleagues

Ten of the eleven participants discussed relationships that they made upon arrival in their place of service, particularly with colleagues. In general, this topic was discussed positively, however some participants experienced more difficulty or conflict than they had expected, and this impacted their transition experience.

And maybe we were a little bit surprised… that it wasn’t easy to make friends… we wonder if we kinda slipped through the cracks a bit. It was just harder than what we thought it would be. (Jill, A)
Three Australian participants indicated that they had faced more challenges than they had expected in developing good relationships with their American counterparts in particular.

What I did not expect was that the greatest issue would be with my work colleagues…

Expect that you’re going to have the greatest friction with often your American colleagues. (Sarah, A)

Experiencing more difficulties than anticipated in relationships with colleagues was discussed more by the Australian participants than the American participants.

### 4.3.4 Expectations of Self

A number of participants also discussed challenges they faced in regard to expectations that they had of themselves. Some participants expressed appreciation for the teaching they had received on this topic at PFO, or during on-site orientation programs, that had helped them to manage these expectations.

[Name of school] gives a lot of communication about grace: “look you’re not going to know everything, you’re not expected to know everything, you’re in a new setting, there’s a lot of new things to adjust to” and they communicate that you need to give yourself space for that. (Simon, U)

We actually had some pretty good conversations [with a mentor during PFO] about being introverted, and that’s ok. … that is something that we have definitely drawn on
and continue to grow in… just being ok with being an introvert and not having to change who I am to be effective as a teacher or in ministry. (Dan, U)

Those participants who had not had such training appeared to have found managing these expectations of themselves more difficult. One participant commented that, based on her experience, she would say to a new teacher preparing to serve:

It’s ok to feel like you’re not doing enough… Give yourself time to adjust to the culture and just looking after yourself. Don’t think you can be as independent as you are in your home country. You’re so dependent on other people, especially to begin with. (Jill, A)

Adjusting the expectations they had of themselves was a significant part of the transition experience for these participants.

4.4 Cultural Sensitivity

All of the participants discussed issues relating to cultural sensitivity and learning to live and work in a different, multicultural, setting. Different participants emphasised different aspects of this topic. Their comments related to 1) teaching TCKs, 2) multicultural staff teams, 3) host culture relationships and, 4) spiritual life.
4.4.1 Teaching TCKs

The joys and challenges of teaching TCKs were discussed by seven of the eleven participants. Three participants who had participated in PFO prior to serving in an international Christian school discussed how valuable they found the training they received there on working with TCKs to be.

[At PFO we discussed] All the things that would better help me understand the students and the families that I would be serving… [to] help me be more compassionate and understanding.”  (Lucy, U)

Understanding the blending of worlds that takes place with TCKs, the characteristics and some of those generalities… we found that just immensely useful and practical.”  (Dan, U)

These participants all went on to share personal stories of how learning about the characteristics of TCKs during PFO had helped them to respond to their students more effectively than if they had come in to an international school unaware of these things.

Two other participants, neither of whom had participated in PFO, reflected on their desire to understand TCKs better and therefore be able to teach them more effectively.

It’s one thing to be told, or to read, that the kids will have taken on different aspects of the culture they’re living in, but they’ll also have some of the culture of their parents… so it’s one thing to know that, it’s another thing to know what that looks
like and how that plays out and how that affects stuff, in terms of the way they behave, in terms of the way they handle things… how that can play out in the classroom… that this particular teaching style might really not work for them.”

(Sarah, A)

[I would have liked to know more about] Teaching MKs [missionary kids] and just how international schools are different to schools in your own country. And maybe also how to draw on the experiences of kids from other countries. (Jill, A)

The participants who had attended a PFO program found the training they received there about teaching TCKs to be very valuable to them, while the participants who had not received this training expressed a need for it.

4.4.2 Multicultural Staff Teams

The need for cultural sensitivity was discussed by some participants in the context of building relationships with their professional colleagues from different cultural backgrounds. The challenges that some participants experienced in forming relationships with other staff have already been mentioned under the major theme of “Managing Expectations” in section 4.3.3 Relationships with Colleagues.

So there was a whole bunch of communication and authority questions… all that power distance type of cultural stuff, that I kinda got into trouble with in different ways… I think in general Australians need to know that the way we deal with
authority is problematic for a lot of cultures… and the way that we show respect is seen as un-respectful in lots of cultures. (Andrea, A)

I sort of wish that we had had more of a brief on working within multicultural or intercultural teams. (Tony, A)

The Australian participants discussed this topic in much greater detail than the American participants, and seemed to have been impacted by it more.

4.4.3 Host-Culture Relationships

I began the study with the expectation that many who have worked in cross-cultural settings, especially missionaries, would identify this sub-theme as the most significant aspect of the theme of cultural sensitivity. This was not the case for most of the research participants in this study. Only one participant discussed it in any length, with one other discussing it in relation to work colleagues who were from the host culture. The others only mentioned it in passing, if at all. However, it is included here because the one participant who did discuss this topic in detail saw it as critical to the role of teachers in international Christian schools, and valued the training provided to her on this topic during her time at PFO.

While you’re in an international school, you’re not just serving the kids at that school, you are actually having interactions with nationals that effects how they view Christians. Missionaries come with “I have the Gospel, I have something to offer” whereas, really, when you’re entering a new culture and you don’t understand it you can be offensive on so many levels that you’re the stopper to the Gospel! You need to
understand that you don’t understand and you need to be humble. That was said a lot at PFO. (Jenny, U)

In contrast, two participants expressed that they didn’t have any meaningful interaction with people from the host culture, due to lack of ability to communicate in the local language and the expectation to be fully involved in the life of the school.

We tend to get kinda totally wrapped up in this school environment… so, that makes it a little harder to really get connected further out into the community.” (Claire, U)

The need for cultural sensitivity in developing host-culture relationships was recognised, but not emphasised, by most participants.

4.4.4 Spiritual life

Two participants discussed the interaction of their spiritual life with the experience of living in a cross-cultural setting. One participant described how maintaining a healthy prayer life in community with her colleagues helped them to overcome relational challenges generated by cultural difference.

Prayer is such a source of breaking down boundaries. If you can meet and pray with someone, even if you don’t see eye to eye on everything, and you can be really honest in the way that you’re praying together, that can be a really big boundary breaker… You have to come in with a humility in prayer, and you are humbling yourself before God, and then to a certain extent you are humbling yourself before the other person,
and if they do that too, then I think you are at the point where you can [resolve the issue]. (Andrea, A)

Another participant discussed this interaction between cultural sensitivity and spiritual life the other way around, pointing out how sensitivity to the different cultural environment can help Christian teachers remain alert to the spiritual environment.

I think we need to know our enemy and we need to know his tactics and we need to know how he’s gonna fight us and how we do that and how that battle is conducted in different places is different… in different ground, in different cultures, in different settings… [potentially harmful spiritual realities] are in your face, you feel them, they are real and in a way that you, that I, had never experienced.” (Simon, U)

These participants found that cultural sensitivity was not just a relational issue, but also a spiritual one. They highlighted the need to be both humble and intentional, before God and others, in addressing cultural issues.

4.5 Informants and Mentors

All of the participants expressed appreciation for those people who provided advice, encouragement and support to them during their transition to serving in an international Christian school. These people acted as informants and mentors for the participants. Some informants and mentors were introduced to participants during PFO; others on location in their place of service. In some cases, they provided opportunity for the new teacher to ask questions ahead of arriving in their place of service.
4.5.1 During PFO

For participants who had the opportunity to attend PFO, this mentoring and informing began during their time at PFO.

The leadership and the key speakers [at PFO] were very accessible… I could ask to have lunch with one of them, to just go in more depth, they were willing to do that, to have some conversations… that was really good that they were so accessible. (Dan, U)

Really felt great about the time with a mentor. He met with us as a couple, asked a lot of questions, did some counselling specific to going to a new place, prayed with us and… spent the time with us that way. (Claire, U)

The participants who attended PFO appreciated the access to mentors that was provided to them there.

4.5.2 On Location

Even more significant to some participants, though, was the support they received from more experienced teachers and leaders who welcomed them to their new location on arrival. This informing and mentoring was a further aspect of the relationships with new colleagues already mentioned in section 4.3.3 Relationships with Colleagues.
But the people that helped take care of me in those first few months, and those first few weeks: very crucial to my own transition. They shaped my transition. (Lucy, U)

I’m really grateful for having a boss overall who was really sensitive and who really knew how to deal with different cultural stuff. That was a huge advantage to me. I was very lucky in the colleagues I had and the people I had were very supportive, and having people who looked out for me… a whole bunch of people who were very supportive in different ways. (Andrea, A)

One of the things that participants appreciated about these mentors was the opportunity to ask questions.

I found it very helpful, being able to talk with him [school principal] and ask whatever questions came to mind and he was sort of patient and very knowledgeable and just filled in the cracks in my understanding. (Gary, A)

Access to mentors and informants in the school context had a significant impact on the transition experience for these participants.

4.5.3 Intentional Conversations

In contrast, two participants found that they lacked such informants and mentors. Neither had attended PFO, so did not benefit from the access to more experienced international teachers available there, and also found that support was less than they had hoped for in their place of service. Both of these participants suggested that having intentional conversations with
someone who had experience in international schools before they arrived in their place of service would have been valuable to them.

It would have been helpful to have talked with an Aussie teacher who had worked there before… To have someone to talk you through what it’s like, what are the expectations… I would have found it really helpful… Even before you go, get as much information as you can, being provided with “these are the questions you need to ask, these are conversations you need to have”. (Sarah, A)

Several participants concurred, either expressing appreciation for the opportunities they had to ask questions or their desire to have had such opportunities.

There’s different expectations at every school, so … you’re not going to really know unless you know what questions to ask ahead of time…. If I had had more time… there probably would have been a lot of questions that I would have asked of the staff members here that I was in contact with. (Claire, U)

This sub-theme connects closely with the major theme of “Managing Expectations” discussed in section 4.3 Managing Expectations because the participants recognised that the opportunity to ask questions of informants and mentors ahead of time enabled them to form more accurate expectations regarding their new life and role.
4.6 Understanding Transition

Four of the five participants who had attended a PFO program highlighted the training they had received there about the process of transition from one culture to another as being significant in their own experience. In particular, participants appreciated the time spent during PFO discussing the transition model developed by Pollock and Van Reken (2009). It is a model that made sense of what they were already experiencing by the time they attended PFO, and it continued to be relevant after their arrival in their place of service.

We have the transition model still on the refrigerator, even now. We don’t have to look at it as often now but we still kinda take a peak at it… practical tools that provided a framework for making transition and getting started a little easier… It has actually helped us with our interaction with others - we remember that they are in transition. (Dan, U)

That was the first time [during PFO] I thought to myself “I’m normal”… I mean, all these emotions…its ok, this makes sense… That was a huge deal to me, to see that transition spelt out for me, to visually see it, to see it written in words, to talk about it – I came back to that many times. (Lucy, U)

This comment illustrates why this topic is represented in Figure 4.3 as being connected to the sub-theme discussed in section 4.3.4 Expectations of Self. An understanding of what transition involved helped the participants set realistic expectations of themselves.
In contrast, one participant who had not attended PFO discussed how he and his family had learned to navigate this process more through trial and error, making needed adjustments along the way.

This was the first time [on arriving in place of service] we had even thought of the concept of transition, of even using the term. The experience or process had never really been articulated in such a way. We lacked the vocabulary. Coming out of it now, though, I understand how significant a piece that is to get right. (Tony, A)

Three participants identified that the time and space needed to prepare for transition was important. Two of these participants found their time at PFO provided at least some of this time and space.

It was great to step out of what was the chaos of preparing to leave… and have this time in which … all we really had to do was sort of relax and prayerfully contemplate and engage in our transition. I think that was really valuable to just have space to be able to do that. (Simon, U)

The other participant, who did not attend PFO, expressed a sense of regret over the lack of time and space she had to prepare.

Particularly when you’re preparing, what you’re mostly caught up with is you’re trying to finish up your job where you are, you’re trying to do fund raising… there’s so much other stuff going on, I don’t think you actually spend enough time preparing
for where you’re going to… preparing for your specific job or role or where you’re going. (Sarah, A)

The explanation of what to expect during transition, and the time to process this information, was appreciated by those participants who experienced this during PFO.

4.7 Educational Philosophy

Facing challenges to their own philosophical approach to education, and the practical implications of this, was an issue raised by all of the Australian participants. For some it was a significant issue. In contrast, the subject was not raised at all by any of the American participants. These challenges became significant for the Australian participants in the area of instructional and assessment practices, and contributed to the challenges they faced in establishing relationships with colleagues already discussed in section 4.3.3 Relationships with Colleagues.

4.7.1 Instructional and Assessment Practices

Australian teachers discovered an increased expectation to follow a prescribed textbook instead of developing a program from a syllabus outlining student outcomes.

Different staff members didn’t necessarily have the same understanding of what the syllabus was, and how a syllabus worked.” (Andrea, A)
Literally, the textbook dictated the curriculum. Rather than these are the skills, and the knowledge and understanding we want these kids to come out with. (Sarah)

It’s a different way to when, in Australia, we get a syllabus and we read what we have to cover and then we go away and we program. Australian teachers, I think, get taught how to program, and so then having a resource that we have to… like, that is the program… how would you bring your programming skills to this context? (Jill, A)

The Australian teachers also discovered a greater focus on assessment than they were accustomed to, resulting in higher expectations regarding the number of assessments to be carried out.

You are going into a school that is in many ways very American. This means you’re going to have issues with the way they do marking, you’re going to have issues with their pass mark, you’re going to have issues with the way they teach. They teach in a completely different way, they have a completely different mentality to teaching. (Sarah, A)

Assessment was hard. A lot of focus on results and marks and getting high marks. (Gary, A)

One participant noticed that she needed to adapt the instructional methods that she was used to using, and that she had found to be effective in an Australian context, in order to be effective teaching students from different cultural backgrounds.
Modelling is more a western concept, that we use modelling to explain things… but that’s a more foreign concept to some other cultures. So that was very tricky. (Sarah, A)

This comment also illustrates that this sub-theme is connected to sub-theme discussed in section 4.4.1 Teaching TCKs.

This theme connects with the major theme of “Managing Expectations”, through the sub-theme in section 4.3.2 School Procedures and Policies, as it appears that the Australian teachers were not expecting such a challenge to their educational philosophy that resulted in them needing to adjust their instructional and assessment practices.

4.8 Conclusion

The major themes and related sub-themes discussed in this chapter have provided a rich description of transition to serving in an international Christian school as experienced by the research participants. The insights contained in this description that suggest an answer to the research question are discussed in chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Overview of the Discussion

The current research sought to address the question “How could the perspectives of international Christian school teachers inform the development of a pre-field orientation (PFO) program for Australian Christian teachers intending to serve in international Christian schools?” The participants in the study, all having had an experience of transition to an international Christian school, were generous in sharing their perspectives and insights during the interviews.

The interview recordings and notes made by the researcher were analysed for significant and recurring topics which were then grouped into the smaller number of major themes and sub-themes outlined in chapter 4. The overall message of these themes and their implications for developing a PFO program was then considered. It is the outcome of this process that is presented in this chapter, which highlights the practical insights gained through the study that are relevant for the target audience of teachers, leaders of international Christian schools, and leaders of mission organisations responsible for the recruiting and pre-field training of teachers for international Christian schools.

Through this process of data analysis, it was recognised that the research participants tended to direct the discussion of their transition experience to two very practical issues that provide significant insight into the research question:

1) The factors that caused them significant stress during transition, and

2) The factors that helped, or could have helped, them to grow through the experience
The two issues were not focussed on by participants separately or sequentially, but the discussion moved back and forth between the two. This was the pattern for both cases: American participants who had attended a PFO program as well as the Australian participants who had not attended a PFO program.

That the experience of transition involved stress appeared to be taken for granted by the research participants. Perhaps because they were aware that the researcher had also experienced transition, they did not seem to feel the need to explain or describe the stress, but rather tended to direct the discussion to the two issues mentioned above. These two issues provided a lens for interpreting the common themes described in chapter 4, and form the structure of this discussion.

The causes of stress experienced by teachers during transition identified through reflection on the major themes and sub-themes were recognised to be related. This can be represented by the overlapping circles in Figure 5.1. Each of the factors that help teachers grow through this experience flow out of these areas of overlap. This is represented in Figure 4 by the arrows pointing out of the overlapping areas of the circles. While the causes of stress were seen to be common for teachers in both case 1 (American teachers who attended a PFO program prior to serving in an international Christian school) and case 2 (Australian teachers who did not attend a PFO program specifically designed for teachers), the teachers who had attended a PFO program appeared to have experienced more of the factors promoting growth than the participants who had not. The causes of stress will be discussed first, then the factors for growth that flow out of them.
5.2 Some Significant Causes of Stress During Transition

From the results reported in chapter 4, a number of causes of stress experienced by the participants during the transition to an international Christian school can be summarised. These are represented in Figure 4: 1) encountering all things new and unfamiliar, 2) unmet expectations, 3) cultural differences, and 4) the diversity in the student body. The order in which these causes of stress are discussed is not significant.
5.2.1 Encountering All Things New and Unfamiliar

The research participants commented on a wide range of new realities that they had to learn to live with on arrival in their place of service – from learning how to use the public transport system and buy groceries, following local dining etiquette and road rules, to getting along with new house-mates, and figuring out how the school administrative structures and information technology systems worked. Even if no one thing is overly stressful on its own, the teacher in transition faces a large number of new things simultaneously. For the participants, it appears that the little stressors all added up.

Moving to a foreign country to live involves leaving behind all that is familiar and comfortable. As a result of all the new and unfamiliar things in their environment, the participants found themselves as an adult dependent on others for help, even with some tasks that they had been competent to carry out by themselves as a child in their home country. This challenges the teacher's sense of efficacy and identity. It is not hard to imagine that this would be stressful.

The experience of the participants in this study suggests that teachers planning to serve in an international Christian school need to be prepared to face a large number of new things, and the resulting feelings of being overwhelmed and dependent on others. If this topic was addressed during a PFO program, it would help participants to set more realistic expectations of themselves and others, and to allow themselves the time and space needed to adjust.
5.2.2 Unmet Expectations

While teachers who decide to serve in an international Christian school do so understanding that they will encounter many new things, the exact nature of these new things is unknown. Teachers have both conscious and unconscious expectations about what their new life and role will be like, and inevitably some of these expectations turn out to be false. For the research participants, these unmet expectations added to the new teacher’s sense of unfamiliarity with their environment, and in some cases led to feelings of frustration or regret.

Some research participants felt that their unmet expectations resulted from a lack of communication with school leadership ahead of time, or not knowing what questions they needed to ask. Others felt that this source of stress was inevitable. As one participant so eloquently expressed it:

There is a certain point at which you could have told me a thousand things but until I was on the ground and experienced it I really wouldn’t have got it. (Andrea, A)

The experience of the participants in this study, therefore, suggests that a PFO program may be able to address this cause of stress to some extent. The potential of a PFO program for addressing self-expectations has already been noted in section 4.3.4 Expectations of Self. A PFO program could also highlight for prospective teachers the questions they might need to ask of the leadership of their intended school.
5.2.3 Cultural Differences

Many of the new things that teachers arriving to serve in an international Christian school encounter arise out of differences between the culture of their country of origin and the culture of the new place. The research participants found that the “new culture” actually consisted of two distinct cultures: the culture of the international Christian school itself, and the host culture within which the school is situated. One participant noted that stress sometimes occurred because these two cultures clashed, likening the situation to “being stuck between two time zones” (Sarah, A).

5.2.3.1 Within the School Community

The struggles that many of the participants experienced in forming positive working relationships with their colleagues suggests that Cushner’s (2015) description of international schools as being “among the most culturally diverse and interculturally complex organizations anywhere on the planet” (p. 8) was true in their experience.

The significance of the cultural differences that exist in an international Christian school was especially stressful for the teachers who had not attended PFO. The teachers who did attend PFO still experienced some challenges in this regard, but on the whole seemed more prepared to handle them. The fact that the Australian teachers are a minority in the schools represented by the participants appears to have added to the significance of this difficulty for them.
The combined experiences of these research participants suggest that there is potential for a PFO program to address this cause of stress. For Australian teachers, part of this training would need to highlight the potential causes of misunderstanding with American teachers in particular.

5.2.3.2 In the Host Community

As noted in chapter 4, section 4.4.3 Host-Culture Relationships, this cause of stress did not feature prominently. In fact, two participants specifically pointed out that adjusting to the local culture in which the school was situated was not stressful: “that was easy, surprisingly easy” (Tony, A).

Other participants did mention some cultural differences with the host community that had caused them stress. Most of these situations involved making cultural faux pas as they tried to understand how things were done in their new community. The one participant who discussed this topic at length reflected largely on the stress she had seen other teachers experience, and how the training she had received at PFO had helped her to avoid some of the potential mistakes and therefore reduce the stress that she experienced herself. She observed that, for teachers who had come with little or no training in cultural humility, “It’s just a steeper curve with more painful lessons” (Jenny, U). Glimpses of this could be seen in the interviews with participants who had not attended PFO, but it was not prominent. The cultural differences that caused the participants the largest amount of stress were those within the international school community.
5.2.4 Student Diversity

This source of stress overlaps significantly with the previous one as relationships with students are another dimension of cultural differences within the school. Most of the participants expressed an appreciation for the students that they taught, or are teaching, in their international Christian school. In the words of one participant:

I must say the kids were… having a go. Almost all of them did work really hard. I could trust them. (Sarah, A)

Many also expressed a desire to be able to serve their students more effectively. However, as has already been noted in chapter 4, section 4.4.1 Teaching TCKs, teaching TCKs was a challenge that caused stress. This stress particularly resulted from having to cater for the needs of students who had limited English language ability, or who had educational “gaps” due to their mobility from one school system to another. Meeting the needs of such a diverse group of students required a level of flexibility and insight beyond what most participants had experienced before.

5.3 Some Possible Ways Teachers Can Grow Through the Experience

As well as giving voice to the stress that they had experienced in transition to an international Christian school, and acknowledging that these stressors were not able to be eliminated completely, the participants were also generous in suggesting ways that these sources of stress could be faced productively. Some of these strategies for coping came from the training that some participants received at PFO and were able to put into practice, while
others were learnt through (often difficult) experiences and a process of trial and error in their place of service. The combined experiences of the participants suggests that teachers can grow through the stress of transition to an international Christian school if they 1) understand the nature of cross-cultural transition, 2) connect with informants and mentors, 3) discover the needs and characteristics of TCKs, 4) learn language to express cultural difference, and 5) develop a humble intentionality.

5.3.1 Understand the Nature of Cross-Cultural Transition

The teachers who had been shown a model of transition during PFO found that this was a useful tool for understanding their emotions, and therefore managing their stress, during transition. The transition model appeared to have been particularly useful to participants in coming to terms with the loss of their previous comfortable and familiar life, and the large number of new things they were trying to adjust to simultaneously.

Two participants who attended PFO only days before departing for their place of service mentioned that it would have been useful to have had this model earlier in their transition process. This would have helped them more effectively process the “leaving” phase of the cycle. However, both of these participants indicated that the model was still useful to them in processing what they were experiencing as they arrived and settled into their new place.

In addition, it appears that the transition model provided a common language for the participants to use to process their experiences with their colleagues. Most of the participants used elements of this common language during the interviews. The difference was that some had learned this language earlier in their transition, during a PFO program, while others only
learned it once they arrived in their place of service. Including the transition model as a component of the preparation of Australian teachers during a PFO would provide those teachers with a tool to process their transition both individually and with others.

5.3.2 Connect with Informants and Mentors

The extent to which participants were able to access informants and mentors appeared to be a significant factor in growing through the stress of transition to an international Christian school. Informants and mentors provided opportunity to ask questions and gave comfort and encouragement through listening and prayer. Participants who felt they had inadequate access to informants and mentors regretted this situation and believed that better access could have significantly reduced their stress.

Informants and mentors help new teachers to form more accurate expectations of what their life and work will be like when they arrive in their place of service, reducing the stress of unmet expectations. They also are available to help new teachers work through cultural differences as they arise inside or outside of the school. Even when stressful situations do occur, the presence of informants and mentors provides some support for the teacher to effectively navigate the challenge.

For Australian teachers, it seems that it would be helpful for these informants and mentors to include some who could talk them through the different educational philosophy they are likely to encounter in an international Christian school. A PFO program in Australia would have the potential to help new teachers to connect with mentors and informants, and have the conversations needed to set accurate expectations.
5.3.3 Discover the Characteristics and Needs of TCKs

Every participant referred to the significance of understanding the characteristics and needs of TCKs, either by expressing their gratitude for the training they had received on this topic or by expressing their regret that they did not have this information before arriving in their place of service. Being informed about some of the unique challenges and opportunities associated with teaching TCKs helped teachers to be prepared for them, rather than being taken by surprise.

The characteristics and needs of TCKs was another topic where the participants, regardless of cultural background or place of service, had a common language to use. The participants who had learned this language earlier in their transition process had a tool to help them think through the challenges and become more effective in meeting the needs of TCKs in the classroom. The experience of these participants suggests that training in the characteristics and needs of TCKs would be a valuable inclusion in a PFO program for Australian teachers. The training would be especially valuable if it went beyond just a description of TCKs, but also how this potentially impacts their relationships and learning in the classroom.

5.3.4 Learn Language to Express Cultural Differences

The main factor suggested by the participants for growing through the stress of cultural differences was to cultivate an attitude of humility. This is discussed further in section 5.3.5 Develop a Humble Intentionality. However, one participant referred to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov’s (2010) idea of “cultural dimensions” as having been helpful to her in this area. Familiarity with the six dimensions could help a new teacher to recognise when a difficulty
or conflict was arising from a cultural difference, and provide some vocabulary to think through and express the difference that was being experienced.

Having language to recognise, think through and discuss cultural differences could also help manage the stress associated with unmet expectations. Grasping just how differently people from different cultures see life in general, and education in particular, would create an expectation in the new teacher that they are going to face some significant difficulties in this area. It may even help them predict what issues are likely to be a problem for them, giving them the opportunity to consider how they will respond ahead of time.

Unlike the topics of transition and teaching TCKs, the participants did not appear to have a common language to discuss cultural differences. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov’s (2010) six cultural dimensions (Individualism/Collectivism, Small/Large Power Distance, Masculinity/Femininity, Uncertainty Tolerant/Avoiding, Short/Long Term Orientation, Indulgence/Restraint) or Meyer’s (2014) eight scales (Communicating, Evaluating, Persuading, Leading, Deciding, Trusting, Disagreeing, Scheduling), could be explored during a PFO program to provide this common vocabulary. This would be valuable to new teachers not only in their relationships with colleagues and people in their host community, but also in their relationships with their students.

5.3.5 Develop a Humble Intentionality

The two ideas of “humility” and “intentionality” arose from reflecting on the insights of three participants in particular. Once noticed, however, the ideas could be seen to be present in the
contributions of other participants as well, and form a potential growth factor that is relevant to facing all four of the areas of stress identified in Figure 5.1.

Jenny (U) and Andrea (A) both emphasised the need for humility, especially in regard to developing relationships with people from different cultures – be they work colleagues or those in the host community. Dan (U) and Jenny (U) both emphasised the significance of being intentional in making decisions about what to put time and energy into, setting expectations and building relationships.

At first glance, these two ideas of intentionality and humility seem to be contradictory. Intentionality tends to imply a degree of confidence and self-determination, while humility implies self-denial and deference to others. Upon reflection, however, it can be seen how these two character traits actually complement each other. A teacher who exercises a high level of humility, but lacks intentionality, may finish up working hard to please others without achieving the things that are most important. On the other hand, intentionality without humility could easily become self-serving.

Humble intentionality could be used to describe the ministry of Jesus. His teaching and miracles revealed that he had authority and confidence, but he never used that to serve his own needs at the expense of others. Neither was he a slave to the demands of those who called for his attention. He turned down opportunities to “put on a show” for the crowds and sought times of prayer and solitude. In other words, he was not only humble but also intentional in the way he used his resources. This model could be helpful for teachers preparing to serve in an international Christian school.
Developing humble intentionality could also be considered a pre-requisite for developing the other growth factors discussed above. To use an analogy, humble intentionality could be seen as the soil in which the other factors can be planted, and then grow and flourish. The experiences of Dan (U), Jenny (U) and Andrea (A) in particular suggest that inspiring new teachers to develop a humble intentionality could be a significant part of a PFO program.

5.4 Conclusion

The participants’ descriptions of their experience of transition tended to gravitate towards a discussion of the factors that caused them stress during this time, and the factors that helped them to grow through the stress. These insights have pointed to a number of potential topics for inclusion in a PFO program. These suggested topics are outlined in chapter 6.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The current research addressed the question “How could the perspectives of international Christian school teachers inform the development of a pre-field orientation (PFO) program for Australian Christian teachers intending to serve in international Christian schools?” The participants in the study described their experience and discussed many ideas related to transition to an international Christian school. For the participants in case 1 (American teachers who participated in a PFO program), this included their experience of PFO and how it had impacted their transition to their place of service.

While each participant’s experience of transition was unique, major themes and sub-themes were identified that were common to many of the participants, or to the participants in one of the cases. In addition, it was noted that the participants appeared to assume an understanding that the transition experience is one that involves stress. Participants tended to direct the discussion towards the things that they perceived to be the causes of that stress, and the ways they discovered to grow through that stress. For the participants in case 1 (American teachers who participated in a PFO program), some of these ways to grow through the stress of transition were discovered during their PFO program, while the participants in case 2 (Australian teachers who did not participate in a PFO program) discovered them through experience in their place of service.

From the experiences and insights shared by the participants, six potential topics for inclusion in a PFO program for Australian teachers are suggested in this chapter that arise
predominantly from the factors contributing to growth that were discussed in section 5.3

*Some Possible Ways Teachers Can Grow Through the Experience* and form an answer to the research question. These topics are outlined in section 6.2 *Suggestions of topics to include in a PFO program that arise from the experiences of the participants*, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

### 6.2 Suggestions of topics to include in a PFO program that arise from the experiences of the participants

As a result of the insights gained through this study the following topics are suggested for inclusion in a PFO program for Australian teachers:

1. Life in cross-cultural transition.
2. Conversations to have ahead of time.
3. TCKs in the classroom.
4. Building cross-cultural relationships.
6. The humble and intentional teacher.

Each of these topics is outlined in more detail in this section.

#### 6.2.1 Life in cross-cultural transition

Four of the five American participants who had attended a PFO program before arriving in their place of service highlighted the model of transition that they had been introduced to
there as being very significant for them. It seems reasonable to suggest that being introduced
to the transition model prior to arriving in their place of service would be helpful to
Australian teachers making similar transitions. A PFO program could provide the
opportunity for new teachers to be introduced to this model with its associated vocabulary for
discussing the transition process, and provide the time to reflect on how they could use it
personally.

6.2.2 Conversations to have ahead of time

The participants identified unmet expectations as a significant cause of stress during
transition, and the opportunity to connect with informants and mentors to ask questions ahead
of time as a significant help in growing through this stress. While it would not be possible
for a PFO program to provide informants and mentors with the specific contextual knowledge
for each new teacher, there are two ways that a PFO program could potentially assist in this
process.

Firstly, a PFO program could provide access to some mentors who could give general advice
about transition, cultural sensitivity and teaching TCKs. Australian teachers with experience
in making the transition to an international Christian school could be invited to share their
stories to provide new teachers with some examples of the expectations that can arise. These
teachers may be able to act as informants for some of the new teachers, if they have
experience in the location where the new teacher is intending to serve.
Secondly, a PFO program could include presenting new teachers with a list of topics that they are encouraged to have intentional conversations about with someone as early in the transition process as possible. It is difficult for a teacher transitioning to an international Christian school for the first time to know what questions they need to ask ahead of time. Having a list of topics given to them would help them make the most of any opportunities to connect with informants and mentors that they have.

6.2.3 TCKs in the classroom

Another topic discussed by participants that could be addressed during a PFO program is the nature and characteristics of TCKs, and how those generalities can impact learning in the classroom. The American participants who had attended PFO valued having some training in this area before they arrived in their place of service. Prospective new Australian teachers could be provided with articles or links to websites dedicated to TCKs to read ahead of time, so that the material could be discussed during the PFO program. Teachers with experience teaching TCKs could be invited to provide their insights, and TCKs, or former TCKs who are now adults, could be invited to share their stories.

6.2.4 Building Culturally Sensitive Relationships

As well as the need to develop culturally sensitive relationships with TCKs in the classroom, the participants in this study also highlighted this same need in the staffroom and in the host community. A PFO program could provide teachers with training and tools for growth in this area.
The six cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010), or the eight scales described by Meyer (2014), could be introduced to provide a common vocabulary. Activities could be developed that engage the new teachers in investigating the culture of their intended place of service and articulating what they believe will be the most significant cultural differences between this culture and their own. Since the Australian participants identified relationships with American colleagues as being particularly challenging, this vocabulary could also be used to engage in a discussion about the differences between Australian and American culture.

6.2.5 Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment in an International Context

The Australian participants in this study found adjustment to the curriculum, instructional and assessment practices in an international Christian school surprising and challenging. In order to prepare Australian teachers for this reality, a PFO program could include some time to discuss the differences between a “typical” approach to things like the purpose of a syllabus, the role of a textbook and the quantity of assessment in an Australian school, and a “typical” approach to these things in an international Christian school. Having been provided with this information, teachers could be encouraged to identify which differences are the most problematic for them and plan ways of working through them.

6.2.6 The Humble and Intentional Teacher

While the insights of the participants in this study suggest that the information and the development of specific skills outlined through this section will likely be helpful, their insights also pointed to the importance of developing a spiritual life and character marked by
humility and intentionality. This could be presented as an inspiring and foundational theme throughout the PFO program. If it was introduced at the beginning, participants could reflect on how these ideas guide their application of each of the other topics as they are presented. A journal could be provided to participants to encourage this reflection.

6.3 Limitations of the study

A major limitation of the study was the small sample size. Interviewing a larger number of participants from a greater variety of places of service would have provided confirmation or clarification of the insights gained. The major themes discussed by participants in this study may be, to some extent, dependent on their location. Including participants who had served in regions not represented in this sample (such as Latin America or the Middle East) may have provided additional themes that led to different suggestions regarding the development of a PFO program.

While the insider position of the researcher, and the resulting familiarity with the research topic, provided the benefit of being able to relate to the experiences of the participants, it also had some limitations. The researcher’s experience with the topic influenced the preparation of the interview schedule and may have influenced what topics were given attention too and followed up on during the interview. The researcher’s experience may also have influenced the interpretation of the data. Member checking at two points during the data collection and analysis process, after each interview and again once themes and recommendations had been identified, was employed to counter this potential influence.
The results and conclusions of the study are preliminary and suggestive. The topics in section 6.2 have been outlined briefly, and merit further elaboration. A further useful step to counter this limitation would be to run a pilot program with Australian teachers.

6.4 Recommendations from the study

The study suggests that some of the training and preparation needs of prospective international Christian school teachers from Australia could be addressed by the establishment of a PFO program. However, the limitations of this study just mentioned also suggest that further research is needed.

1) The suggestive findings of this study could benefit from being verified by consultation with a larger group of Australian teachers who have had experience with serving in international Christian schools.

2) Insights from leaders of international Christian schools, who have worked with Australian teachers on their teams, would be valuable. It is possible there are areas of potential growth that teachers themselves do not recognise, but may be able to be identified by school leaders.

3) Further development and piloting of the suggested content for a PFO program would be needed to establish an effective program.

6.5 Conclusion

The perspectives shared by the eleven participants in this study who have served in an international Christian school have provided valuable insight into the experience of transition. The experiences of participants in case 1 (American teachers who participated in a PFO
program) suggest that such preparation has high value, as the PFO program provided them with some of the factors that enabled them to grow through the stress of transition. The experiences of the participants also provided insight into the content and structure of a PFO program that could be developed to meet the needs of Australian teachers making the transition to an international Christian school in the future. In particular, a PFO program could encourage the development of a humble intentionality as a foundation for the growth of other relevant knowledge and skills. Such preparation could lead to a more effective transition experience for these teachers, enabling them to better serve their school and its students.
REFERENCES


## Appendix 1
### Interview Schedule – Case 1 (American teachers who participated in a PFO program)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Topic</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of PFO</td>
<td>Basic data: Where? When? How long? Who?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When you think back to your time at PFO, what experiences immediately come to mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you remember about the topics you covered in the PFO program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What types of activities were used to present these topics?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of transition to an international Christian school.</td>
<td>What was it like to arrive in <em>(place of service)</em> for the first time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What was it like to be a new staff member at <em>(name of school)</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What new situations did you encounter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of PFO on transition experience.</td>
<td>Can you describe a time when something you had learned during PFO helped you handle a new situation in your new setting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What, if anything, did you do differently in your new setting as a result of what you learned at PFO?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What, if any, topics or activities from PFO did you find yourself reflecting on during your first year in <em>(place of service)</em>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2
### Interview Schedule – Case 2 (Australian teachers who did not participate in PFO)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Topic</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of transition to an international Christian school.</td>
<td>What was it like to arrive in <em>(place of service)</em> for the first time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What was it like to be a new staff member at <em>(name of school)</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What new situations did you encounter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation needs</td>
<td>Can you describe a situation when you found yourself thinking “I wish someone had told me that before…”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can you describe a situation that took you by surprise, or that you felt you handled ineffectively, during your first year in <em>(place of service)</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What information or training, if any, do you think might have helped you handle this situation differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imagine you are having coffee with an Australian teacher who is about to begin serving in an international Christian school for the first time. What would you tell them?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>