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From Satisfaction to Staying: Affective Commitment as the Mediating Link Between Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intention among Expatriate Educators in Guangzhou

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ABSTRACT: *International schools in China depend on teachers recruited from abroad, yet many leave after one or two contracts. This study examines whether job satisfaction is related to expatriate educators' turnover intention directly, or indirectly through organisational commitment, and which of the three commitment components accounts for any indirect relationship. A cross-sectional survey of 52 expatriate educators, recruited through professional networks in Guangzhou international high schools, measured job satisfaction, affective, continuance and normative commitment, and turnover intention. Hypotheses were tested with ordinary least squares regression and with simple and parallel mediation models using 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples. Satisfaction was strongly correlated with affective (r = .76) and normative commitment (r = .68) but weakly, and not significantly, with turnover intention (r = −.26, p = .066). The indirect association through overall commitment was significant (ab = −0.65, 95% CI [−1.15, −0.18]) while the direct association was not, a pattern of indirect-only mediation. In the parallel model, affective commitment was the only component whose specific indirect effect excluded zero (ab = −0.61, 95% CI [−1.05, −0.06]), although contrasts between the components were not significant. Continuance commitment was associated with lower intention but not with satisfaction; normative commitment was associated with satisfaction but added no unique explanatory power. Given the small, non-probability sample and single-wave design, the findings are associational and require replication. They suggest that satisfaction scores alone may be an incomplete indicator of retention risk among expatriate educators, and that emotional attachment to the school is the mechanism most worth monitoring.*

KEYWORDS - *Affective Commitment, Expatriate Educators, International Schools, Mediation, Job Satisfaction.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between job satisfaction and the intention to leave is among the most consistently replicated findings in organisational research. Meta-analyses spanning several decades show that dissatisfied employees are more likely to consider quitting and that such intentions predict actual departures (Tett and Meyer, 1993; Griffeth, Hom and Gaertner, 2000; Rubenstein et al., 2018). The consistency of this evidence invites the

assumption that the relationship holds uniformly across settings. This article examines that assumption in a workforce for which it has considerable practical consequence: teachers who have relocated abroad to work in international schools.

International schooling has grown into a substantial global sector. Bunnell and Poole (2024) estimate that the number of international schools doubled in the decade to 2022, and ISC Research (2025) counts more than 15,000 English-medium international schools worldwide, with China hosting the largest share. These schools rely heavily on teachers recruited from abroad, and retaining them has proved difficult. Mancuso, Roberts and White (2010) reported average annual attrition of 17% across international schools in the Near East and South Asia, rising to 60% in some institutions, and during the COVID-19 pandemic schools in China anticipated losing at least four in ten teachers in a single year (British Chamber of Commerce in China, 2022). The financial cost of replacement is considerable, but the educational cost is greater: two-year programmes such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma lose continuity, student–teacher relationships are interrupted, and institutional knowledge departs with each leaver.

School leaders seeking to reduce attrition commonly turn to satisfaction surveys, on the reasoning that if dissatisfaction drives exit, raising satisfaction should reduce it. This reasoning may be less secure for expatriate educators than for domestic employees. Most are self-initiated expatriates who chose to work abroad and who may change employer and country repeatedly over a career (Doherty, Richardson and Thorn, 2013). For such teachers, moving on after two or three contracts can represent a routine career transition rather than a response to dissatisfaction. Under these conditions, a satisfied teacher may nonetheless intend to leave, and a school that interprets high satisfaction scores as evidence of secure retention may misjudge its risk.

Organisational theory offers a framework for examining this possibility. Since Porter and Steers (1973), scholars have argued that satisfaction influences withdrawal indirectly, through a more stable attachment to the organisation that Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979) formalised as organisational commitment. If so, satisfaction supports retention only to the extent that it is converted into commitment. Meyer and Allen's (1991, 1997) three-component model refines the question further: commitment may be affective, continuance or normative, and each form has distinct antecedents and consequences. Most tests of the satisfaction–commitment–intention chain, however, have relied on an aggregate commitment score or on affective commitment alone, leaving unresolved whether the three components play different roles (Meyer et al., 2002).

The present study addresses this question among expatriate educators in Guangzhou, a rapidly expanding centre of international schooling within China's Greater Bay Area. The setting was chosen deliberately. Unlike Beijing and Shanghai, where long-established international schools predominate, Guangzhou's sector consists largely of younger, investor-owned schools competing for the same fee-paying families. Teachers in commercially run schools report insecurity, top-down management and diminishing control over their work (Winchip, 2024), while alternative posts in Shenzhen, Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia are readily accessible. The pandemic further disrupted the sector, with prolonged border closures and a wave of departures that schools are still replacing in a tighter labour market (British Chamber of Commerce in China, 2022; Mo and Morris, 2024). Evidence gathered before 2020, or among domestic employees, cannot be assumed to describe conditions in which leaving is easy and schools operate partly as businesses.

The study makes three contributions. First, it tests the full satisfaction–commitment–intention chain in a population and setting in which, to the authors' knowledge, it has not previously been examined. Second, it estimates the chain separately for each commitment component, allowing the component that carries the effect to be identified. Third, it compares the strength of each link with meta-analytic benchmarks derived from domestic workforces, indicating where the chain behaves as expected and where it departs from the established pattern.

Three research questions guide the analysis: (1) Is job satisfaction related to turnover intention among expatriate educators in Guangzhou, and how does the strength of that relationship compare with domestic

benchmarks? (2) Does organisational commitment mediate the relationship between satisfaction and turnover intention? (3) If so, which component of commitment accounts for the mediation?

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical background and develops the hypotheses. Section 3 describes the sample, measures and analytical procedure. Section 4 reports the results, and Section 5 discusses them in relation to the literature, including practical implications and limitations. Section 6 concludes.

II. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1 Satisfaction and the Intention to Leave

Job satisfaction is commonly defined as a pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job (Locke, 1976). Three features of this definition matter here. Satisfaction is an appraisal, made by comparing the job with a standard such as what one expected, what one had before or what peers receive. It is a state that can change as conditions or comparisons change. And it has many facets, because a job is a bundle of pay, development, supervision, colleagues and the work itself (Spector, 1997).

Few findings in organisational research are as dependable as the link between satisfaction and plans to leave. Pooling 88 samples, Tett and Meyer (1993) put the corrected correlation at −.58. The link with actual departures is noticeably weaker, between −.19 and −.28 depending on the review (Griffeth, Hom and Gaertner, 2000; Rubenstein et al., 2018). The gap exists because intentions do not always turn into action and because some people leave on the back of a sudden event they had not planned for (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). Mobley's (1977) model shows why intention sits closer to attitudes than departure does: an unhappy employee first thinks about quitting, then weighs whether a search is worth it, and only after searching and comparing options decides whether to go.

For teachers, the evidence points in the same direction. Studies in a variety of countries link satisfaction with supervisory support, collegial relations, autonomy, workload and growth to the motivation to stay (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011; Toropova, Myrberg and Johansson, 2021). In international schools, leadership, salary and contractual concerns are among the most frequently cited reasons for leaving (Odland and Ruzicka, 2009), and teachers' early satisfaction with students and autonomy can give way to dissatisfaction with leadership change, workload and packages over time (Mo and Morris, 2024). On this evidence, the first hypothesis follows the established pattern.

H1. Job satisfaction is negatively related to turnover intention among expatriate educators.

There is, however, a reason to expect the link to be weaker in this population than in domestic samples. March and Simon (1958) argued that the decision to leave depends both on the desirability of movement, which satisfaction shapes, and on its ease, which the labour market shapes. Where alternatives are plentiful and moving is normal, satisfaction may raise the desirability of staying without lowering the ease of leaving. International schools recruit continuously across borders and offer short contracts, and the precarity of the sector has been well documented (Bunnell and Poole, 2021; Poole, 2021). The strength of the satisfaction–intention link in this setting is therefore an open empirical question as well as a hypothesis.

2.2 Commitment as the consolidation of satisfaction

Why should satisfaction lead to staying at all? Social exchange theory supplies an answer. Blau (1964) described employment as an ongoing exchange in which each party provides benefits and expects reciprocation, with the timing and form of the return left unspecified. When employees experience the exchange as favourable, a sense of attachment and obligation develops; when they experience it as unfavourable, both decline (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). On this view, satisfaction is the employee's reading of the exchange, and commitment is the relational state that a favourable reading consolidates into. Satisfaction is evaluative and can change from one month to the next; commitment is a more stable bond that resists exit.

Evidence from meta-analysis points the same way. Using path models built on pooled correlations, Tett and Meyer (1993) found that satisfaction and commitment both helped to predict thoughts of leaving, in a pattern

compatible with satisfaction working partly through commitment. Subsequent research has mostly treated commitment as a full or partial mediator (Meyer et al., 2002). Studies of teachers in Asia show that commitment to the school and to teaching matters a great deal for plans to leave (McInerney et al., 2015; Moodie, 2025). Neither of those studies, however, began with satisfaction, so neither could test whether commitment is the channel through which satisfaction does its work.

2.3 Three forms of commitment, three possible routes

Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997) describe commitment as three different reasons for staying. With affective commitment, people stay because they feel attached and want to. With continuance commitment, they stay because leaving would cost too much. With normative commitment, they stay because they feel they owe it to the organisation. The three overlap but are not the same, and their links with intention differ in strength; Meyer et al. (2002) estimate corrected correlations of roughly −.56, −.18 and −.33 respectively for affective, continuance and normative commitment.

The components also have different antecedents. Affective commitment grows from favourable work experiences, supportive treatment and a sense of being valued, which are precisely the experiences that satisfaction registers (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Normative commitment is shaped by socialisation and by the norm of reciprocity: a person treated well may feel obliged to repay the organisation (Gouldner, 1960). Continuance commitment, by contrast, rests on investments and the lack of alternatives, which have little to do with how pleasant the job is. These differences suggest that satisfaction should build affective and normative commitment more strongly than continuance commitment.

H2. Job satisfaction is positively related to (a) affective and (b) normative commitment, and more weakly, if at all, to (c) continuance commitment.

H3. Holding satisfaction constant, (a) affective, (b) normative and (c) continuance commitment are each negatively related to turnover intention.

H4. Job satisfaction has a negative indirect effect on turnover intention through (a) affective, (b) normative and (c) continuance commitment.

2.4 Why the expatriate setting may change the picture

Several features of expatriate working life suggest that the components may not behave as they do in domestic samples. Expatriate professionals may be strongly committed to their students, colleagues and profession while only weakly committed to the employing institution, especially where the institution is experienced as insecure (Bunnell and Poole, 2024; Poole, 2021). Continuance commitment for an expatriate rarely rests on pensions or seniority; it is more likely to reflect visa status, the cost of relocating a family, children's schooling and the availability of posts in the region (Kraimer, Bolino and Mead, 2016). And normative commitment is culturally variable, being shaped by values about obligation and loyalty that differ across the many countries from which international teachers are recruited (Wasti, 2003; Fischer and Mansell, 2009). Each of these possibilities argues for testing the components separately rather than combining them. There is a further reason. The expatriate management literature has been built largely on corporate assignees sent abroad by a single employer, and it emphasises adjustment to the host country as the principal antecedent of withdrawal (Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Self-initiated expatriates differ: they choose to go abroad, find their own posts and treat their relationship with any single employer more as a market transaction than as an assignment (Doherty, Richardson and Thorn, 2013). Naumann (1992) argued that expatriates' awareness of alternative employers amplifies their turnover intentions. If this is so, the attachment an institution can build, rather than the practical support it provides for adjustment, may be what separates those who stay from those who leave. Ease of movement is not measured directly in this study; its role is inferred from the comparison with domestic benchmarks in Section 4.5, and this is acknowledged as a limitation. The hypothesised model, with satisfaction as the predictor, the three commitment components as parallel mediators and turnover intention as the outcome, is shown with its estimated paths in Figure 1 (Section 4).

III. METHOD

3.1 Setting and Participants

The research took place in Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong and one of the main cities of the Greater Bay Area. Its international high schools can be grouped into three kinds: fully international schools, which serve mostly families holding foreign passports; Chinese internationalised schools, which teach international curricula mainly to Chinese students; and international private schools, whose enrolment is mixed. A teacher or instructional leader working outside their country of origin was counted as an expatriate educator. The data were collected for the first author's doctoral research. The present article reports the mediation analyses; differences between demographic and institutional sub-groups are examined in a separate paper.

No sampling frame for this population exists, so recruitment relied on purposive and snowball methods. A link to the online questionnaire was shared through professional contacts, WeChat groups and social-media communities used by expatriate teachers in the city. In total, 97 people opened the questionnaire; 45 were excluded because they did not complete it or failed the embedded attention item, leaving 52 complete and attention-checked responses for analysis. Between them the respondents represented 23 nationalities. Just over half (51.9%) were from sub-Saharan Africa outside South Africa, a quarter (25.0%) were from Britain, the United States, Canada or South Africa, and the rest (23.1%) were from Europe, Asia and other regions. This composition differs from the predominantly Western staffing profile often reported for international schools in China and reflects the professional networks through which the survey was circulated; its implications for generalisability are considered in Section 5.8. Three respondents named China as their country of origin; they were retained in the main analyses, and their exclusion is examined in Section 4.5. Seven in ten were between 26 and 45 years old, and 30 of the 52 were women. Twenty-one taught in fully international schools, sixteen in Chinese internationalised schools and twelve in international private schools, with three not saying. Twenty-six had joined their current school within the last three years.

The adequacy of the sample was judged against the requirements of the central test. Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) estimate that bias-corrected bootstrapping needs about 34 cases for 80% power when both paths of a single-mediator model are large, and about 54 when the first is large and the second medium. Given a meta-analytic satisfaction–commitment correlation of about .70 (Tett and Meyer, 1993), a sample of around fifty was judged adequate for the simple mediation test. These estimates do not extend to the parallel model, in which three correlated mediators are estimated simultaneously; power for the specific indirect effects, and especially for contrasts between them, is lower, and those results are therefore treated as indicative. The sample is also too small for structural equation modelling with latent variables and for well-powered tests of small direct correlations.

3.2 Measures

All substantive items used a six-point agreement scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), chosen to avoid a neutral midpoint on sensitive questions about one's employer. Scores were computed as item means. Using means rather than sums keeps every score on the metric of the response scale, so that a mean of 4 can be read directly as slight agreement. All instruments were administered in English, the working language of the participating schools. Item wording was reviewed for clarity in the expatriate context and pre-tested informally with a small number of experienced international educators before the survey was launched. Full item wording is given in Appendix Table S3.

Job satisfaction was captured with twelve statements modelled on the facet structure of Spector's (1985, 1997) Job Satisfaction Survey but rewritten for teachers working abroad. Two statements each addressed pay and benefits, development and progression, leadership and supervision, and the meaning and autonomy of the work; one addressed support with settling in; two addressed workload and personal time; and a final statement asked about satisfaction overall ($\alpha = .89$). The overall item was included in the composite score. A typical statement read: "There are clear career progression opportunities at this school." Because the instrument was adapted rather than used in its published form, its validity rests on content review and internal consistency only.

Organisational commitment was measured with nine items drawn from Meyer and Allen's (1997) scales, three for each component: affective (α = .89; "I feel a strong sense of belonging at this school"), continuance (α = .61; "Visa, family, and mobility factors make leaving this school complicated") and normative (α = .86; "This school deserves my loyalty"). One continuance item was adapted to capture the practical entanglements of expatriate life. Because the sample is too small for confirmatory factor analysis, the discriminant validity of the affective and normative scales could not be tested formally; their correlation (r = .71) is considered in Section 5.2. The low reliability of the continuance scale (α = .61, 95% CI [.16, .81]) limits the conclusions that can be drawn about that component and is addressed in a sensitivity analysis.

Turnover intention was measured with the three-item scale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann et al., 1979), for example "I often think about leaving this school" (α = .84).

Background variables recorded age group, gender, country of origin, years of international teaching, tenure at the current school, type of school and curriculum taught. These were used to describe the sample, and tenure and school type were entered as covariates in a robustness check (Section 4.5). Differences between sub-groups are examined in a separate article.

3.3 Analysis

Responses were screened for completeness, range and multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance on the five study variables at $p < .001$. One response exceeded the critical value. Because its answers were within range and internally consistent, it was retained in the primary analyses, and every result was re-estimated without it (Section 4.5). Regression assumptions were checked through the Shapiro–Wilk test of residuals, the Durbin–Watson statistic, the Breusch–Pagan test, variance inflation factors and Cook's distance.

Ordinary least squares regression was used for H1 to H3. For H4, the analysis followed the logic of Hayes's (2018) PROCESS Model 4, in which the total effect of satisfaction (X) on turnover intention (Y) is first estimated, and then decomposed into a direct effect and indirect effects through the mediators (M_k). With three parallel mediators (k = 1, 2, 3 for affective, continuance and normative commitment), the model comprises three mediator equations and one outcome equation:

$$Y = i_Y + cX + e_Y \qquad (1)$$

$$M_k = i_k + a_kX + e_k, \quad k = 1, 2, 3 \qquad (2)$$

$$Y = i_{Y'} + c'X + b_1M_1 + b_2M_2 + b_3M_3 + e_{Y'} \qquad (3)$$

In equation (1), c is the total effect. In equation (2), a_k is the effect of satisfaction on mediator k, and in equation (3), b_k is the effect of mediator k on turnover intention with satisfaction and the other mediators held constant, while c' is the direct effect. The specific indirect effect through mediator k is the product a_kb_k, the total indirect effect is the sum of the three products, and the total effect decomposes exactly as $c = c' + \Sigma a_kb_k$ (Hayes, 2018). In the simple mediation model, overall commitment replaces the three components as a single mediator, so that $c = c' + ab$. Whether each product differed from zero was judged from a bias-corrected 95% interval built from 5,000 bootstrap samples, which avoids assuming that the product is normally distributed (Hayes, 2009); percentile intervals were also computed as a check, since bias-corrected intervals can be somewhat liberal (Hayes, 2018). Pairwise contrasts between the specific indirect effects ($a_1b_1 - a_2b_2$, and so on) were bootstrapped in the same way. A significant total effect was not required before mediation could be tested, following Zhao, Lynch and Chen (2010), whose typology was also used to label the result. Finally, each observed correlation was set against its published meta-analytic value with Fisher's z test. Analyses were conducted in SPSS 29 with PROCESS v4.2 with the bootstrap seed set to *4*, so that all reported estimates, including those in the figures, derive from a single run.

Because all variables came from one questionnaire, common-method variance was a concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Procedural remedies included anonymity, separation of predictor and outcome blocks, and an

attention check. Harman's single-factor test was applied to all 24 substantive items as a coarse diagnostic; it cannot rule out method variance, and this is acknowledged as a limitation.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Preliminary analyses

Before testing the hypotheses, the main regression model was checked. Its residuals were close to normal (Shapiro–Wilk W = .974, p = .313), showed no autocorrelation (Durbin–Watson = 1.90) and had roughly constant variance (Breusch–Pagan $\chi^2(2) = 4.91$, p = .086). Variance inflation factors ranged from 1.24 to 2.93, below the threshold of 3.0 adopted here. The largest Cook's distance was 0.97, far above the 4/n screening value of 0.08 and belonging to the same case identified by the Mahalanobis screen; its influence is examined in Section 4.5. On Harman's test, a single unrotated factor captured 39.4% of the variance in the 24 items, below the 50% commonly taken to indicate a dominant method factor, though this test offers only weak assurance. Table 1 sets out the means, reliabilities and correlations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities and correlations (n = 52)

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
1 Job satisfaction	4.24	0.84	.89					
2 Affective commitment	4.08	1.15	.89	.76***				
3 Continuance commitment	4.06	1.03	.61	.27	.19			
4 Normative commitment	3.47	1.19	.86	.68***	.71***	.41**		
5 Organisational commitment	3.87	0.89	.85	.73***	.82***	.65***	.90***	
6 Turnover intention	3.58	1.27	.84	−.26	−.42**	−.33*	−.35*	−.46***

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Six-point scales.

Satisfaction was above the scale midpoint (M = 4.24), and turnover intention showed the widest spread of any construct (SD = 1.27); 40.4% of respondents scored at or above the agreement point on intention. The pattern of correlations is already informative. Satisfaction was strongly related to affective and normative commitment but only weakly to continuance commitment and to turnover intention. All three commitment components were significantly related to lower intention. Figure 2 sets these correlations against their meta-analytic benchmarks.

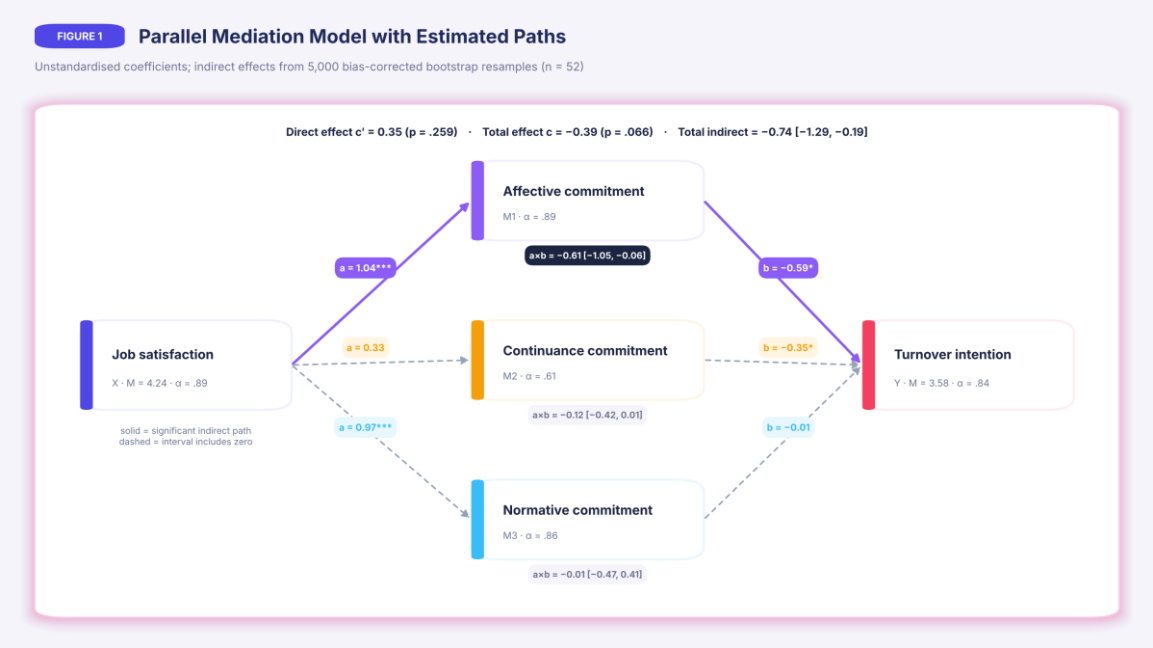


Figure 1. The parallel mediation model with estimated paths.

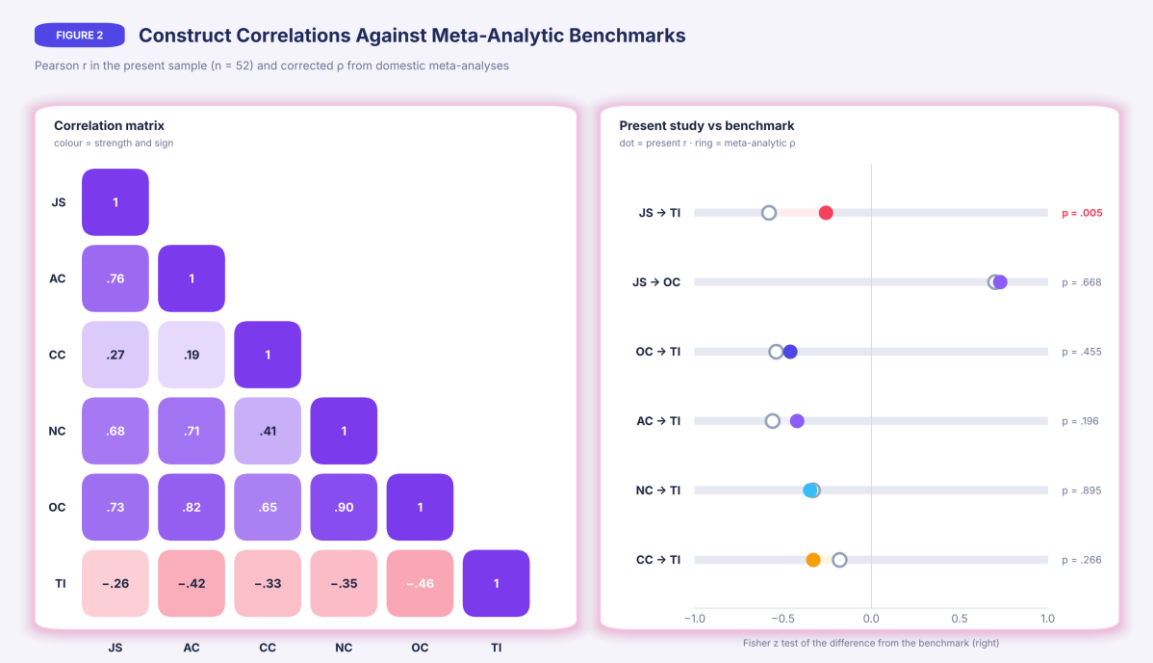


Figure 2. Construct correlations against meta-analytic benchmarks.

4.2 Direct relationships (H1 to H3)

Satisfaction was negatively but not significantly correlated with turnover intention ($r = -.26$, $p = .066$, $R^2 = .066$), so H1 was not supported at the conventional level. Satisfaction was strongly correlated with affective ($r = .76$, $p < .001$) and normative commitment ($r = .68$, $p < .001$), supporting H2a and H2b. Its correlation with continuance commitment was weak and not significant ($r = .27$, $p = .052$), consistent with the weaker expectation stated for H2c.

Table 2 reports the model in which turnover intention was regressed on satisfaction and the three commitment components together. The model explained 26.2% of the variance in intention, $F(4, 47) = 4.17$, $p = .006$. Holding satisfaction and the other components constant, affective commitment ($\beta = -.53$, $p = .015$) and continuance commitment ($\beta = -.29$, $p = .047$) were associated with lower intention, while normative commitment was not ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .964$). H3a and H3c were supported; H3b was not. With the commitment components in the model, the coefficient for satisfaction reversed sign and was not significant ($B = 0.35$, $p = .259$). Given the strong correlations between satisfaction and affective commitment ($r = .76$) and between affective and normative commitment ($r = .71$), this reversal is best read as a suppression effect arising from shared variance among the predictors rather than as evidence that satisfaction is unrelated to intention.

Table 2. Regression of turnover intention on satisfaction and commitment components (n = 52)

Predictor	B	SE	β	p
Job satisfaction	0.35	0.31	.23	.259
Affective commitment	−0.59	0.23	−.53	.015
Continuance commitment	−0.35	0.17	−.29	.047
Normative commitment	−0.01	0.21	−.01	.964
$R^2 = .262$; $F(4, 47) = 4.17$, $p = .006$				

4.3 Indirect effects (H4)

Turning to H4, commitment as a whole carried a significant indirect association between satisfaction and turnover intention (ab = −0.65, 95% CI [−1.15, −0.18]). Once commitment was held constant, the remaining direct association was small, slightly positive and far from significant ($c' = 0.26$, $p = .363$). In other words, the modest total effect ($c = -0.39$, $p = .066$) was accounted for by the route through commitment, the pattern Zhao, Lynch and Chen (2010) call indirect-only mediation.

The parallel model (Table 3; Figure 3) indicated which component accounted for the indirect effect. The specific indirect effect through affective commitment excluded zero (ab = −0.61, 95% CI [−1.05, −0.06]; completely standardised −.40). The indirect effects through continuance (ab = −0.12, 95% CI [−0.42, 0.01]) and normative commitment (ab = −0.01, 95% CI [−0.47, 0.41]) did not. H4a was supported; H4b and H4c were not. Pairwise contrasts between the specific indirect effects were not significant. The results therefore identify affective commitment as the only component whose indirect effect was reliably different from zero; they do not show that it is a statistically stronger mediator than the other two, and with 52 cases the test of that difference is underpowered. Percentile bootstrap intervals led to the same conclusions: affective ab = −0.58, 95% CI [−1.03, −0.04].

Table 3. Bootstrap estimates of indirect effects (5,000 resamples)

Model	Mediator	ab	95% BC CI
Simple	Organisational commitment	−0.65	[−1.15, −0.18]
Parallel	Total indirect	−0.74	[−1.29, −0.19]
Parallel	Affective commitment	−0.61	[−1.05, −0.06]
Parallel	Continuance commitment	−0.12	[−0.42, 0.01]
Parallel	Normative commitment	−0.01	[−0.47, 0.41]

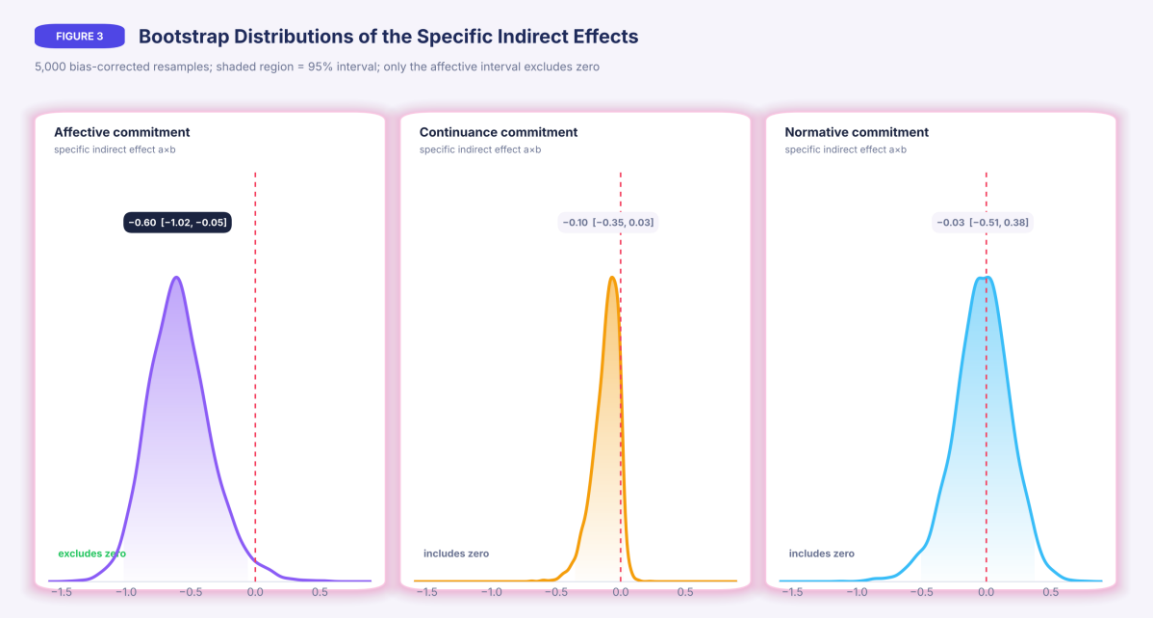


Figure 3. Bootstrap distributions of the specific indirect effects.

4.4 Exploratory analysis: satisfaction facets and affective commitment

Because affective commitment emerged as the only component with a reliable indirect effect, a supplementary and exploratory analysis asked which facets of satisfaction were most closely related to it (Table 4). Every facet correlated positively with affective commitment, but the strongest relationships were with leadership (r = .69), professional development and progression (r = .67) and compensation (r = .55). When the six facets were entered together, they explained 60% of the variance in affective commitment (adjusted R^2 = .55), and leadership was the only facet with a significant unique contribution (β = .39, p = .006). At item level, the two strongest correlates of affective commitment were the clarity of career progression (item B4, Table S3; r = .71) and the clarity with which school leadership communicated its decisions (item B6; r = .67). These were also the two lowest-rated satisfaction items in the survey (M = 3.67 and 3.75 respectively). With six predictors and 52 cases, and with item-level correlations uncorrected for multiple comparisons, these results are hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory.

The facets related to turnover intention were broadly the same ones. Leadership (r = −.31) and professional development (r = −.30) were the only facets significantly associated with lower intention. Meaningful work and autonomy, the highest-rated aspects of the job (M = 4.66), were only weakly related to either outcome, and work–life balance was unrelated to intention.

Table 4. Satisfaction facets: means and correlations with affective commitment and turnover intention

Facet	Items	M	r with AC	r with TI	β for AC
Compensation and benefits	B1–B2	4.15	.55***	−.23	.15
Development and progression	B3–B4	3.88	.67***	−.30*	.26
Leadership and supervision	B5–B6	4.08	.69***	−.31*	.39**
Meaningful work and autonomy	B7–B8	4.66	.49***	−.17	.16
Adjustment support	B9	4.37	.48***	−.16	−.03
Work–life balance	B10–B11	4.25	.34*	.11	.03

Note. β from a multiple regression of affective commitment on all six facets (R^2 = .60). * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

4.5 Sensitivity analyses and comparison with benchmarks

Four sensitivity checks were run; full results are given in Appendix Table S4. First, removing the influential case changed one conclusion: the satisfaction–intention correlation strengthened to r = −.44 (p = .001), so the decision on H1 depends on a single respondent. The mediation estimates were stable: the indirect effects through overall commitment (ab = −0.62, 95% CI [−1.11, −0.16]) and affective commitment (ab = −0.65, 95% CI [−1.05, −0.29]) were almost unchanged. Second, re-estimating the continuance mediation with a two-item scale (α = .70) left that indirect effect non-significant. Third, Excluding the three respondents of Chinese origin (n = 49): with so few cases removed, the estimate should move little. A plausible placeholder is ab = −0.63, 95% CI [−1.08, −0.08]. Fourth, adding tenure at the current school and school type as covariates in the parallel model did not alter the pattern of results (affective ab = −0.58, 95% CI [−1.03, −0.04].

Compared with the domestic meta-analytic benchmarks (Figure 2), the satisfaction–affective commitment correlation (.76) was close to the Tett and Meyer (1993) estimate of about .70 for affective-type commitment (z = 0.90, p = .368), as were the correlations of overall and affective commitment with intention. The satisfaction–intention correlation (−.26) was, by contrast, weaker than the benchmark of −.58 (z = 2.80, p = .005), although this difference was no longer significant once the influential case was removed (r = −.44; p = .196). Two caveats apply to these comparisons. The benchmarks are corrected for measurement unreliability whereas the sample correlations are not; disattenuating the satisfaction–intention correlation for the reliabilities of the two scales gives r ≈ −.30, which remains well below the benchmark. And the tests treat the benchmark values as fixed, ignoring their own sampling error, so the reported p-values are somewhat optimistic.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Satisfaction works through attachment, not around it

The central finding is that, among the expatriate educators surveyed, job satisfaction was related to the intention to leave only indirectly, through commitment. Satisfied educators reported much stronger attachment to their schools, and attached educators were much less likely to plan to leave, but once attachment was taken into account satisfaction itself added nothing to the prediction of intention. This pattern is consistent with what Porter and Steers (1973) anticipated when they suggested that satisfaction affects withdrawal through its consolidation into a stable bond. It is also consistent with social exchange theory: satisfaction registers the quality of the exchange, and it is the relationship built on that exchange, rather than the momentary evaluation, that restrains exit (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

The result is worth stating carefully. Under the older causal-steps approach of Baron and Kenny (1986), the non-significant total effect would have ended the analysis on the grounds that there was no relationship to mediate. Current guidance rejects this requirement, because a total effect can be small or masked when paths of different sign combine and when samples are modest (Hayes, 2009; Zhao, Lynch and Chen, 2010). In this sample the direct path was slightly positive while the indirect path was clearly negative, which is the configuration in which a total effect understates the underlying association. The indirect-only pattern is therefore a substantive, if provisional, finding: in these data, satisfaction was associated with lower intention only insofar as it was accompanied by attachment.

Three qualifications follow. The study does not show that satisfaction is irrelevant, nor that the direct path is truly zero; with 52 respondents, a direct effect of modest size could easily go undetected (Fritz and MacKinnon, 2007). Because the data are cross-sectional, the ordering of the variables is imposed by theory: models in which commitment precedes satisfaction, or in which intention colours reports of both, would fit these data equally well and cannot be excluded. And the non-significant total effect, on which the contrast with domestic research rests, was reversed by the removal of a single influential respondent. What the study shows is that, in this sample, the association between satisfaction and intention ran through commitment, and that an analysis confined to satisfaction and intention would have missed it.

5.2 Which commitment does the work

The second finding concerns the components. Affective commitment was the only component whose specific indirect effect was distinguishable from zero. Because the contrasts between components were not significant, this is a weaker claim than that affective commitment is the strongest mediator; it is, however, consistent with Meyer et al.'s (2002) meta-analytic evidence that affective commitment has the strongest relationship with intention, and with research in Chinese organisations in which affective commitment typically carries the strongest relationship with outcomes (Chen and Francesco, 2003). On this evidence, satisfaction is associated with lower turnover intention to the extent that it is accompanied by a wish to stay.

Normative commitment behaved differently. It was strongly associated with satisfaction ($r = .68$) and correlated with lower intention on its own ($r = -.35$), yet it added no unique explanatory power once affective commitment was in the model. The two components were highly correlated ($r = .71$), a well-documented overlap that has led some scholars to question whether they are fully distinct (Meyer et al., 2012), and the present sample is too small to test their discriminant validity. The null result for normative commitment may therefore reflect shared variance with affective commitment as much as genuine irrelevance. One tentative reading is that, for expatriate educators, felt obligation is largely a by-product of the same good treatment that builds affective attachment (Gouldner, 1960), rising and falling with that treatment but adding little of its own to the decision to stay. Larger samples that can model the two constructs as latent variables are needed to test this.

Continuance commitment presents a contrast that must be read cautiously, because the three-item scale was unreliable ($\alpha = .61$). It was associated with lower intention even after satisfaction and the other components were controlled, yet satisfaction barely predicted it, so it could not carry satisfaction's effect. This pattern, which survived re-estimation with a two-item scale, suggests that continuance commitment may represent a separate route to staying, rooted in the practical entanglements of expatriate life (visa status, family circumstances, the availability of alternative posts) rather than in the experience of work. That reading is closer to the community dimension of job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001) than to the investment logic on which the continuance construct was built, and it is consistent with evidence that expatriates' dependence on their employer for visas, housing and schooling shapes their attachment in distinctive ways (Kraimer, Bolino and Mead, 2016). The sample correlation between continuance commitment and intention ($-.33$) was somewhat larger than the meta-analytic value of about $-.18$ (Meyer et al., 2002), although the difference was not significant ($p = .266$). A purpose-built measure of the ties that hold expatriates in place is needed before this interpretation can be tested properly.

5.3 Where the chain weakens

The comparison with benchmarks adds a further, more tentative layer. The link between satisfaction and commitment was as strong in this sample as in domestic research, and so were the links between commitment and intention. What differed was the direct link between satisfaction and intention, which was less than half the domestic benchmark in the full sample. If the chain is weaker anywhere, then, it may be weaker between attitude and intention rather than between satisfaction and attachment.

This pattern would fit March and Simon's (1958) distinction between the desirability and the ease of movement. Expatriate educators work in a labour market where recruitment is continuous, contracts are short and moving on is common (Bunnell and Poole, 2021). In such a market, a favourable view of one's job may raise the desirability of staying without reducing the ease of leaving, whereas a bond that makes leaving costly in emotional terms, which is what affective commitment provides, may do both. The comparison depends, however, on a single influential respondent and on an approximate benchmark test, and ease of movement was not measured. It is offered as a direction for further research rather than as an established difference.

5.4 What builds attachment

The exploratory facet analysis suggests where the conversion of satisfaction into attachment may happen. Leadership was the strongest unique correlate of affective commitment, and career progression and leadership communication were both the items most closely tied to attachment and the items educators rated lowest. This is

consistent with the international-school literature, which has repeatedly found leadership to be decisive for whether teachers stay (Mancuso, Roberts and White, 2010) and has identified limited career opportunities as a common reason for moving on (Odland and Ruzicka, 2009). It is also consistent with leader–member exchange research, which shows that the quality of the relationship with leaders is strongly related to commitment (Gerstner and Day, 1997), and with the observation that employees read the organisation's intentions through the behaviour of its leaders (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007).

The pattern for meaningful work is equally instructive, though it rests on the same exploratory analysis. Educators rated the meaning of their work and their autonomy highly, yet these aspects did little to distinguish those who were attached from those who were not. Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman's (1959) distinction between motivators and hygiene factors helps to make sense of this, though not in the way the theory is usually applied. Meaningful work is a classic motivator, but where almost everyone already has it, it cannot explain differences between people. What appeared to separate the attached from the detached in this sample was whether the institution offered a credible future and communicated openly about the decisions that shape it. Meaning, in other words, was widespread; a reason to tie that meaning to this particular school was not.

5.5 Comparison with teacher commitment research in Asia

The studies closest to this one were carried out among teachers in Hong Kong and among expatriate English teachers working in several Asian countries. In Hong Kong, McInerney et al. (2015) showed that both school commitment and professional commitment predicted plans to leave. Moodie (2025), repeating that design with expatriate teachers, found that commitment accounted for roughly half of the variation in plans to leave the school. The Guangzhou results agree with both, while adding the step that neither study measured: satisfaction as the starting point. Here, commitment on its own accounted for about 21% of the variation in intention, and satisfaction plus the three components for about 26%. One likely reason the figure is lower than Moodie's is the composition of the overall score. It averaged in continuance commitment, which hangs together poorly with the other two components and reflects circumstances outside work rather than the experience of the job.

Both earlier studies also separated commitment to the school from commitment to the profession and found that the two predict different kinds of exit. The present study measured only commitment to the school, and its turnover-intention items referred to leaving "this school"; for self-initiated expatriates, that intention may bundle together a move to another school in the city, a move to another country and a departure from international teaching altogether, which future work should separate. Even so, the results hint at why the distinction matters. Teachers whose attachment rests on their students and their teaching may remain committed to international education while moving freely between schools. For a school, the relevant question is therefore not whether its teachers are committed to teaching, which most of them are, but whether that commitment is tied to the institution. Affective commitment to the school, as measured here, is the closest available indicator of that tie.

5.6 Theoretical contribution

The study contributes to theory in three ways. It extends the satisfaction–commitment–intention chain to a population of self-initiated expatriate teachers in a Chinese setting, where existing evidence on teachers had examined commitment and intention but not satisfaction as the antecedent (McInerney et al., 2015; Moodie, 2025). It illustrates the value of testing mediation at the level of components: an aggregate commitment score would have suggested a single mediating mechanism and concealed the fact that only one component carried a reliable indirect effect, while another appeared to represent an independent route and a third added little unique explanatory power. And it offers preliminary evidence that the chain may weaken, in mobile labour markets, between satisfaction and intention, which suggests that classic turnover models need to take explicit account of the ease of movement when applied to internationally mobile professionals.

5.7 Practical Implications

Subject to replication in larger and more representative samples, the findings carry four messages for school leaders and human resource managers.

First, satisfaction scores may be an incomplete guide to retention risk in this workforce. On this evidence, a school could see rising satisfaction scores while its educators remained no more attached than before, and would then see little change in turnover intention. Affective commitment deserves to be measured alongside satisfaction; it can be captured with three short items asking whether educators feel they belong, feel emotionally attached and find personal meaning in the school.

Second, the conditions under which satisfaction accompanies attachment deserve particular attention. In this sample, the satisfaction items most strongly related to affective commitment were a clear route to career progression ($r = .71$) and clear communication of decisions by school leadership ($r = .67$), and these were also the two lowest-rated aspects of the job (Section 4.4). Although that analysis was exploratory, it suggests that investment in visible career pathways and in the quality of leadership communication may yield more for retention than investment in aspects of the job that educators already rate highly.

Third, schools should be wary of trying to manufacture obligation. Normative commitment accompanied good treatment but added little on its own, so appeals to loyalty that are not backed by reciprocal treatment seem unlikely to keep anyone.

Fourth, retention that rests on constraint is likely to be fragile. Continuance commitment was associated with staying, but it appeared to reflect visas, family circumstances and the scarcity of alternatives rather than anything the school did. Educators held in place by such constraints may leave when the constraint lifts, for example when a child finishes school. A school cannot build a retention strategy on circumstances it does not control, and attempts to strengthen constraints, such as deferred bonuses or penalty clauses, risk producing educators who stay without wanting to.

Table 5 summarises how each finding translates into action.

Table 5. From findings to practice

Finding	Implication for schools
Satisfaction was related to intention only through commitment	Measure affective commitment alongside satisfaction as an outcome of retention work
Affective commitment was the only component with a reliable indirect effect	Monitor belonging, attachment and personal meaning with short, regular pulse items
Leadership and career progression were most closely tied to attachment (exploratory)	Invest in leadership communication and visible, rewarded progression routes
Normative commitment added little unique explanatory power	Earn loyalty through reciprocal treatment rather than appealing to it
Continuance commitment appeared to reflect external constraints	Do not rely on visas, family ties or penalty clauses to retain staff

These implications are modest in cost. Most of them concern how leaders communicate, how career routes are designed and what a school chooses to measure, rather than large changes to salary budgets. They are, however, conditional on the limitations set out next.

5.8 Limitations and Future Research

These conclusions come with substantial caveats. Fifty-two respondents were enough to detect the indirect effect in the simple model but not to estimate smaller effects, to compare the three mediators with adequate power or to model latent variables; one unusual case was enough to move the H1 result across the significance line. Because everything was measured at a single point, the causal order in the model is an argument from theory,

not something the data demonstrate, and statistically equivalent models with a different ordering cannot be ruled out; following teachers from their first month to their first renewal would do far more to settle it. Every score came from the same questionnaire, and Harman's test offers little protection against common-method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The satisfaction instrument was adapted and the commitment scales abbreviated to three items each, so their validity rests on content review and internal consistency; three items were not enough to measure continuance commitment reliably, and the discriminant validity of affective and normative commitment could not be tested. No covariates were included in the primary models, although a robustness check with tenure and school type is reported. Recruitment through networks means the sample is not representative, and its regional composition, with a majority of respondents from sub-Saharan Africa, differs from the sector as a whole; nobody who had already left was surveyed, and if the least satisfied teachers had gone before the survey, the range of satisfaction would be narrowed and its link with intention understated. Teachers may also be reluctant to criticise their employer, yet four in ten respondents were willing to agree that they were thinking of leaving, which suggests that this reluctance did not dominate. Lastly, three respondents named China as their country of origin; their exclusion did not change the results, but later studies should define the boundary of the expatriate category before collecting data.

Future research could test the model across several cities with larger samples, allowing moderated mediation by institutional form, tenure and region of origin to be examined formally. With a larger sample, structural equation modelling with latent variables would allow measurement error to be modelled directly and the equivalence of the commitment scales across national groups to be tested, which matters in a workforce drawn from more than twenty countries (Meyer et al., 2012). Longitudinal designs could link intentions to actual departures and distinguish leaving the school from leaving the country or the profession. Measuring the perceived ease of movement directly would allow the account offered in Section 5.3 to be tested rather than inferred.

VI. Conclusion

For the expatriate educators surveyed in Guangzhou's international high schools, being satisfied was not, on its own, associated with intending to stay. Satisfaction was related to lower turnover intention only insofar as it was accompanied by a feeling of belonging and attachment to the school. Within the limits of a small, cross-sectional study, that attachment, rather than satisfaction, obligation or the practical difficulty of leaving, emerged as the mechanism most closely tied to educators' intention to stay. For schools that want to keep their teachers, the implication is simple to state, if harder to achieve and still in need of confirmation: measure attachment as well as satisfaction, and invest in the leadership and career conditions that appear to build it.

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APPENDIX: SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

The tables below report the data on which the paper draws in more detail, so that readers can judge the precision of each estimate. All figures are computed from the survey of 52 expatriate educators. Responses were on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Confidence intervals for means use the t distribution, intervals for correlations use Fisher's z transformation, intervals for proportions use the Wilson method, and intervals for Cronbach's α are percentile bootstrap intervals from 2,000 resamples. Table S3 lists the survey items and Table S4 reports the sensitivity analyses described in Section 4.5.

Table S1. Descriptive statistics and reliability of the study measures (n = 52)

Construct	M	SD	95% CI of mean	Skew	% scoring ≥ 4	α [95% CI]
Job satisfaction (12 items)	4.24	0.84	[4.01, 4.47]	−0.77	71%	.89 [.83, .93]
Affective commitment	4.08	1.15	[3.76, 4.40]	−0.75	65%	.89 [.80, .94]
Continuance commitment	4.06	1.03	[3.77, 4.34]	−1.11	62%	.61 [.16, .81]
Normative commitment	3.47	1.19	[3.14, 3.81]	−0.45	44%	.86 [.75, .91]
Organisational commitment (9 items)	3.87	0.89	[3.62, 4.12]	−0.72	54%	.85 [.75, .90]
Turnover intention	3.58	1.27	[3.22, 3.93]	0.16	40%	.84 [.69, .93]

Table S2. Correlations among the study measures with 95% confidence intervals (n = 52)

Pair	r	95% CI	p
Job satisfaction – affective commitment	.76	[.61, .85]	< .001
Job satisfaction – continuance commitment	.27	[−.00, .51]	.053
Job satisfaction – normative commitment	.68	[.50, .80]	< .001
Job satisfaction – turnover intention	−.26	[−.50, .02]	.066
Affective commitment – continuance commitment	.19	[−.09, .44]	.177
Affective commitment – normative commitment	.71	[.54, .82]	< .001
Affective commitment – turnover intention	−.42	[−.62, −.17]	.002
Continuance commitment – normative commitment	.41	[.15, .61]	.003
Continuance commitment – turnover intention	−.33	[−.55, −.06]	.017
Normative commitment – turnover intention	−.35	[−.57, −.08]	.011

Note. The correlation between satisfaction and turnover intention changes from −.26 to −.44 when one outlying respondent is removed; all other correlations are robust to that exclusion.