

# Understanding the Factors behind Early Retirement among International School Teachers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Challenges, Impacts, and Retention Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher attrition remains a pressing issue in international schools, with early retirement contributing to instability in the education sector. This study explores the factors influencing early retirement among teachers at three International Schools in Kuala Lumpur, analysing trends, challenges, and institutional policies. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through an in-depth interview with six teachers considering early retirement. Findings reveal that high workload, administrative pressures, financial security, and career progression concerns are key contributors to early retirement decisions. The study also highlights the impact of teacher attrition on student learning and institutional stability. To mitigate these challenges, recommendations include reducing workload, offering structured career pathways, and improving financial incentives for teachers. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of teacher retention strategies in international school settings.

**Keywords:** Early teacher retirement, teacher retention, international schools, workload, financial security, career progression

## INTRODUCTION

Teacher retention is now a crisis in many parts of the world. More teachers are leaving the profession earlier than expected. International schools, with their diverse and mobile student bodies, often feel the impact even more. High turnover breaks continuity, disrupts learning, and drains budgets through constant recruitment and training (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

This study looks at the problem through the example of private schools in Kuala Lumpur, these schools recognised international curriculum with a humanistic approach. These schools are well resourced and, on paper, offers strong support. Yet teachers here face the same mix of pressures seen in many similar institutions. The workload is heavy. The multicultural setting, while enriching, brings its own challenges. For some, the strain is enough to make early retirement a serious option.

## Problem Statement

Teacher attrition is recognised worldwide. Yet a clear gap remains in understanding how it plays out in the rapidly growing private international school sector of Southeast Asia — and in Malaysia in particular. While public school systems have drawn most of the research attention, international schools face a different mix of pressures. In these schools, many teachers work on short-term contracts. They juggle high expectations from

parents, governing boards, and administrators. At the same time, they must adjust to the personal and professional challenges of working in an expatriate or cross-cultural setting. For some, early retirement is not simply a lifestyle choice. It stems from deeper structural issues: long working hours, few pathways for career advancement, and uncertainty about long-term financial security. When such conditions persist, the cycle repeats. Schools hire. Teachers burn out. Experience is lost. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the case of veteran teachers in a Malaysian international school. Centring on lived experience rather than statistics alone, it highlights the human factors behind attrition and offers insights into how teaching careers in such settings can be made more sustainable.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A teacher's decision to leave the profession before reaching the mandatory retirement age is rarely straightforward. It has been examined in depth across educational research, with studies pointing to a range of contributing factors. The literature points to a dynamic interplay of professional, personal, and institutional factors. This review will synthesize key findings under three thematic areas: the primary determinants of teacher attrition, the unique context of international schools, and a theoretical framework for understanding teacher motivation.

### Determinants of Teacher Attrition and Early Retirement

The factors driving teachers away from the profession can be broadly categorized as 'push' factors—elements within the work environment that are negative or demotivating. The most consistently cited factor is **workload and burnout**. Research by Pressley (2021) and Madigan & Kim (2021) confirms that excessive workload, encompassing not just teaching but also extensive administrative duties, reporting requirements, and pastoral care, is a primary predictor of burnout and intention to quit. This is often exacerbated by a perceived lack of professional autonomy, where teachers feel constrained by rigid curricula or administrative mandates, diminishing their sense of professional efficacy (Green & Karuppannan, 2025).

A second factor is financial and contractual insecurity. Unlike many public-sector teachers, who have pension schemes and stable employment, international school teachers often work on fixed-term contracts. This arrangement gives schools flexibility, but it leaves educators unsure about their long-term prospects. Over time, that uncertainty makes the profession feel less like a sustainable career (García & Weiss, 2020).

The problem deepens when wages fail to keep pace with rising living costs. For some teachers, the numbers simply don't add up, and the financial motivation to stay in the role weakens.

Career stagnation is another concern. Many see few options for advancement beyond moving into administration — a path not all want to take. For classroom-focused teachers, the lack of a clear ladder can be discouraging. Over time, this can push skilled educators to look for growth and recognition in other fields (Green & Karuppannan, 2025).

### The Unique Context of International Schools

While many of the factors discussed are common across education, international schools operate in their own distinctive environment. Staff often include both local and expatriate teachers, which brings diversity but also occasional cultural friction. For expatriates, the challenges can be significant: adapting to a new culture, navigating visa renewals, and managing long stretches away from family support networks. These pressures contribute to what has been described as the "revolving door" in international school staffing (Watt & Richardson, 2020).

Parents in these schools are usually from affluent backgrounds and expect both strong academic results and personalised attention for their children. That expectation can translate into heavy demands on teachers (Harris & Adams, 2020). On top of this, the contractual nature of the job means a teacher's long-term prospects often depend on short-term performance reviews and enrolment numbers. The result is an atmosphere where evaluation never really stops.

## Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory

To understand the motivational underpinnings of a teacher's decision to stay or leave, this study adopts the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Developed by Ryan and Deci (2020), SDT posits that human well-being and motivation are contingent on the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs:

- **Autonomy:** The need to feel a sense of control and volition over one's actions. For teachers, this relates to having a say in their curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom management.
- **Competence:** The need to feel effective and capable in one's work. This is fostered through professional development, supportive feedback, and manageable workloads that allow teachers to succeed.
- **Relatedness:** The need to feel connected to and cared for by others. This involves positive relationships with colleagues, school leadership, and students.

When a school undermines these basic needs — for example, by imposing excessive administrative control that limits autonomy, loading teachers with work that erodes their sense of competence, or failing to foster a supportive community that nurtures relatedness — Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that motivation will fade. Over time, this loss of motivation can lead to disengagement, burnout, and eventually leaving the profession. This framework offers a useful way to interpret the qualitative data provided by the informant.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilises a qualitative research methodology to explore the lived experiences of educators considering early retirement across several international schools in Kuala Lumpur. A multiple case study approach was selected to provide an in-depth, contextual understanding of the factors contributing to early retirement decisions across different institutional settings. This approach allows for a profound comprehension of instructors' experiences and motivations, generating richer, more transferable findings than a single case could provide (Miles et al., 2020).

### Participant Selection

The six informants were selected through purposive sampling from three different international schools, hereafter referred to as School A, School B, and School C. This method was chosen to ensure the participants possessed direct, relevant, and rich experience with the research topic (Patton, 2020). Two teachers were selected from each school. The criteria for inclusion were a minimum of ten years of teaching experience in the international school system and active consideration of early retirement. This ensured all participants were information-rich cases capable of providing significant insights into the challenges of workload, retention, and career decisions. Anonymity is maintained by referring to them as Respondent One through Respondent Six.

### Method of Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the six participants. This method was chosen to provide a balance between the structure of a pre-defined set of questions and the flexibility to explore emergent themes and novel insights that arose during conversation (Sultan et al., 2022). The interviews were guided by questions covering critical topics, including the determinants of early retirement (workload, job satisfaction, finances), the perceived impact of attrition on the institutions, and opinions on policies related to teacher retention.

### Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data was analysed using cross-case thematic analysis, following the structured six-step approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2021). This process allowed for both deep analysis within each case and comparative analysis across cases. The process was as follows:

Familiarisation with the data: Each of the six recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of the content.

**Generating Initial Codes:** Key phrases and statements from each transcript were coded to identify the core ideas expressed by each informant.

**Searching for Themes (Within-Case):** The initial codes for each respondent were grouped into broader, recurring patterns related to their individual experiences and motivations.

**Reviewing and Searching for Themes (Cross-Case):** The themes from all six participants were compared and contrasted to identify overarching meta-themes that were present across the different schools. This step focused on identifying the common threads and patterns that transcended the specific institutional context.

**Defining and Designating Themes:** Each refined meta-theme was given a clear definition and a concise label that accurately represented the data from the cohort of participants.

**Generating the Report:** The finalised themes were used to structure the "Findings and Discussion" section, with findings situated within the context of previous literature.

## Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. In accordance with the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2020), all participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and the informants' identities and their institutions were anonymised in the research report to ensure confidentiality. The researcher also engaged in member checking by sharing the identified themes with the participants to ensure the interpretations accurately reflected their collective experiences.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The cross-case thematic analysis of the interviews with the six teachers revealed four primary themes influencing their consideration of early retirement: (1) Overwhelming Professional Demands, (2) Financial and Contractual Precarity, (3) Limited Avenues for Professional Growth, and (4) The Pull of External Life Goals. These themes were remarkably consistent across participants from all three schools.

### Findings

The core themes are defined and illustrated in Table 1, with exemplary quotes from the participants, demonstrating the consistency of these issues across the different school contexts.

Table 1 Thematic Analysis of Teacher Attrition Factors

Theme	Description	Exemplary Quotes
Theme 1: Overwhelming Professional Demands	Teachers reported that the scope of their duties had expanded beyond a manageable level, contributing to chronic stress and burnout. Excessive administrative work, extensive planning and reporting, and high expectations from stakeholders were cited as major contributors.	<p>"It's not that we don't love teaching, but the workload is overwhelming. Planning, marking, reports—it never ends. Sometimes it feels like there's no space to breathe." (Respondent One, School A)</p> <p>"The expectation is 24/7 availability. We are teachers, but also event planners, customer service agents, and data analysts. The burnout is real, and it's systemic." (Respondent Five, School C)</p> <p>"Parents are customers. If their child doesn't get an 'A', the first person they question is the teacher, not the student's effort. The pressure to please everyone is immense." (Respondent Four, School B)</p>
Theme 2: Financial and Contractual Precarity	Participants described the instability of fixed-term contracts in international schools, with salaries often	<p>"There's no official early retirement scheme—teachers just resign and move on. It's flexible, but that also means no job security beyond contracts." (Respondent One, School A)</p> <p>"Every two years, you have this uncertainty. Will they renew?"</p>

	failing to keep up with rising living costs. This created financial uncertainty and limited long-term career sustainability.	Will the package be the same? You can't plan a future around that, especially with a family.” (Respondent Two, School A) “Many newer teachers move for a better salary, while veterans leave because the rising cost of living in Malaysia makes our stagnant pay feel like a pay cut each year.” (Respondent Six, School C)
Theme 3: Limited Avenues for Professional Growth	Many educators described a flat career trajectory, with no structured advancement for classroom-based roles. Professional development was often unstructured and short-term, limiting growth potential.	“I love my job, but where do I go from here? There’s no ladder to climb unless you switch to leadership, and not everyone wants that. I feel like I've professionally plateaued.” (Respondent One, School A) “They talk about professional development, but it's usually a one-off workshop. There’s no structured path to becoming a ‘master teacher’ or a paid mentor. Your role and pay feel stuck.” (Respondent Three, School B)
Theme 4: The Pull of External Life Goals	Personal and family priorities influenced some teachers to leave the profession. These positive life choices were often reinforced by the push factors present within the schools.	“For me, it’s about securing a better education for my son and a fresh start abroad. Teaching is great, but life outside of school matters too.” (Respondent One, School A) “Honestly, I’m tired. I want to spend more time with my aging parents and maybe start a small business. The job just takes too much out of me to pursue anything else.” (Respondent Five, School C)

## DISCUSSION

This study offers a grounded, qualitative perspective on the drivers of early retirement intentions among experienced teachers in Malaysian international schools. Across three different institutions, the same four themes recurred, suggesting that these are not idiosyncratic to individual schools or personalities but are indicative of deeper systemic patterns in the sector.

### The Weight of Professional Demands

Participants described a working environment where the role of “teacher” had expanded far beyond the classroom. Planning, grading, administrative reporting, extra-curricular commitments, and near-constant parent communication left little room for rest or reflection. The sentiment that “it never ends” (Respondent One) and “the burnout is real” (Respondent Five) is consistent with international research linking unsustainable workloads to emotional exhaustion and attrition (Pressley, 2021; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

In the context of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), these demands can be seen as eroding two core psychological needs—competence and autonomy. When teachers are stretched so thin that they cannot meet their own professional standards, the sense of mastery that sustains motivation is undermined. In the international school setting, this is compounded by the “customer service” dynamic identified by Harris and Adams (2020), where parental expectations are heightened by the fee-paying model. The result is a persistent sense of scrutiny that leaves teachers feeling they are never “off duty,” with no safe margin for imperfection.

### The Instability of Precarity

While heavy workloads were a clear source of stress, participants were equally concerned with the economic fragility of their roles. As Respondent Two observed, the biennial contract renewal cycle creates a constant undercurrent of uncertainty—will the contract be renewed, and under what terms? This is compounded by salaries that fail to keep pace with rising living costs, effectively reducing purchasing power over time (Respondent Six).

This mirrors findings by García and Weiss (2020), who note that instability in contract terms and inadequate compensation drive skilled teachers from the profession, even when they remain committed to the work itself. In international schools, the problem is amplified because employment models are often designed for



institutional flexibility rather than teacher security. While this may be attractive to school boards, it pushes the financial and career risk onto the individual teacher. Over time, such insecurity becomes incompatible with family responsibilities or long-term financial planning, making departure—whether through early retirement or career change—a rational decision.

### **The Dead End of a Flat Trajectory**

One of the most striking aspects of the interviews was the near-unanimous perception of career stagnation. For those who wished to remain in the classroom, there was little to no opportunity for advancement, recognition, or structured professional growth. As Respondent One asked, “Where do I go from here?” Professional development opportunities, where they existed, were described as ad-hoc and disconnected from long-term career pathways (Respondent Three).

This aligns with Sultan et al. (2023), who argue that the absence of meaningful advancement opportunities is an overlooked yet critical factor in teacher attrition. In Self-Determination Theory terms, the lack of structured progression thwarts the need for autonomy and competence—teachers cannot design a career that evolves over time, nor can they deepen their expertise in ways that are institutionally valued and rewarded. The result is a “plateau effect” where professional satisfaction slowly diminishes, especially for those who have already mastered their craft but see no next step short of moving into leadership roles they may not desire.

### **The Pull of a Life Outside School**

Not all decisions to leave were solely driven by negative push factors. Some teachers were drawn by positive life goals—spending more time with family, pursuing personal projects, or relocating for new opportunities. These “pull” factors are not unique to teaching, but the working conditions described earlier make them more compelling. As one teacher put it, “Teaching is great, but life outside of school matters too” (Respondent One).

This reinforces the need to view teacher attrition through a holistic lens. Focusing only on workplace reforms misses something important. Teachers’ work and personal lives are closely linked. If policies address only one side of that equation, they leave a gap. Cutting administrative tasks, improving work–life balance, and offering flexible career paths won’t stop every resignation. Still, these steps can make a difference. They can make staying in the profession feel possible — and even worthwhile — alongside family life and personal ambitions.

### **A Sector-Wide Challenge**

Overall, the findings paint a picture of a workplace where long hours, financial uncertainty, and limited chances for advancement weigh heavily on teachers. Even the most dedicated can be driven to consider leaving. This is not simply a matter of personal resilience or the culture of a single school. It reflects structural patterns in Malaysia’s private international school sector. Fixing the problem will require coordinated effort from school leaders, boards, and policymakers. Without change, experienced educators will keep walking away — not because they no longer care about teaching, but because the conditions make it impossible to stay.

## **CONCLUSION**

The experiences of six seasoned international school teachers from three Malaysian institutions tell a consistent story. Early retirement rarely comes from a single incident. It is the result of pressures that build, year after year.

Some pressures are easy to name: long teaching hours, unstable contracts, and limited chances to move up the career ladder. Others are more personal — the pull of family needs or the desire for a better work–life balance. Together, they create a tipping point where even committed teachers begin to see leaving as the most realistic path.

Self-Determination Theory helps explain this pattern. When the school environment steadily erodes a teacher’s sense of competence, autonomy, and connection with others, professional commitment starts to break down. In this study, teachers were not walking away because they had lost passion or skill. They were working within a

system that left them drained, financially uncertain, and with little room to grow, while life outside the classroom kept demanding more of them.

This is not just a personal problem. It is woven into the way many international schools are run. Heavy dependence on short-term contracts, treating parents as fee-paying “customers,” and offering few clear career paths all add to the strain. Recruitment drives may fill vacancies in the short term, but they cannot solve the deeper issues. What’s needed is a shift toward retention: fair and secure pay, smaller workloads, and real career progression for those who choose to remain in the classroom.

In the end, retaining teachers is about more than staffing classrooms. It’s about protecting the professional and personal well-being of the people who make these schools thrive. Without structural change, the cycle of hiring, burnout, and departure will keep turning — and students, along with their communities, will pay the price.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings point to one clear message: teacher retention in international schools depends on tackling both structural and human factors. No single fix will solve the attrition problem. But a set of coordinated changes can make it far more likely that experienced teachers will see a long-term future in the profession.

**Rebalance workloads.** Leaders can start by reviewing what teachers are actually being asked to do. Non-essential administrative work — the endless forms, reports, and data entry — can be trimmed or passed to support staff. Freeing up time for lesson planning, teaching, and working directly with students sends a clear message that the school values teaching time.

**Strengthen financial security.** Short-term contracts leave teachers unsure about their future. Multi-year agreements, predictable salary progression, and benefits such as housing allowances or employer-matched retirement contributions can ease that uncertainty. Retention bonuses linked to years of service could give teachers another reason to stay.

**Create career paths in the classroom.** Not every teacher wants to become a principal. Schools could offer roles like Master Teacher, Instructional Coach, or Mentor — positions that reward expertise with added responsibility, public recognition, and fair pay increases. This shows that career growth can happen without leaving the classroom behind.

Taken together, these measures would not only address the immediate drivers of attrition but also help to foster a professional culture where experienced educators feel secure, valued, and able to see themselves thriving in the long term.

## Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is its small sample size. Although including multiple schools adds breadth, the findings from six participants are illustrative and not statistically generalizable. However, their depth and consistency provide a strong foundation for future research. A logical next step would be a larger-scale, mixed-methods study across a wider range of international schools in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Such a study could use a survey to quantify the prevalence of the factors identified here, followed by focus group interviews to further explore the nuances of teacher experiences, ultimately providing a comprehensive evidence base for policy reform across the region.

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