



A Phenomenological Study of Filipino Migrant Teachers in the United States

Jonalyn Tiu Virtudazo

Kitcharao Central Elementary School, Poblacion, Kitcharao, Agusan del Norte, Philippines

Email: jonalyn.tiu@deped.gov.ph

ORCID: 0009-0007-0948-7651

Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States using a descriptive phenomenological approach grounded in Husserlian Transcendental Phenomenology and Constructivist Ontology. Nine Filipino teachers were purposively selected and interviewed through semi-structured, in-depth conversations to capture their personal, cultural, and professional journeys. Analysis of the narratives revealed five key themes: homesickness and emotional struggles, cultural adjustment, professional challenges, support systems, and motivation and resilience. Findings showed that the migration experience was characterized by significant emotional and professional transitions that fostered personal growth, identity reconstruction, and empowerment. Support networks, opportunities for career advancement, and intrinsic motivation were identified as crucial in enabling resilience and adaptation. The study highlights the need for structured induction programs, professional development initiatives, and supportive policies that address credential recognition and create inclusive environments for migrant teachers. Insights generated provide a foundation for educational management, policy formulation, and future research on international teacher mobility.

Keywords: Filipino Migrant Teachers; Phenomenology; Cultural Adjustment; Teacher Migration; Resilience; Professional Adaptation; United States Education

1. Introduction

The international movement of teachers has intensified due to global staffing shortages and the uneven distribution of educational resources. Estimates indicated that education systems would need tens of millions of additional teachers by 2030, particularly in underserved regions (UNESCO & Teacher Task Force, 2023; World Bank, 2025). In the United States, persistent teacher shortages have been documented across states and districts, especially in high-need areas such as special education, mathematics, and science (Nguyen, Lam, & Bruno, 2024). These shortages have prompted the recruitment of teachers from abroad, often through programs such as the U.S. Department of State's BridgeUSA J-1 visa program, which provides structured pathways for international educators to teach in American schools (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

The Philippines has become a significant source of internationally recruited teachers. Research has shown that Filipino educators pursue overseas employment for economic stability, professional growth, and opportunities for career advancement, despite the emotional and cultural challenges associated with migration (Aranda, 2023; Rosales, 2024; Kreimer, 2024). Transitioning to U.S. schools often involves navigating credential recognition, adapting to new teaching systems, managing diverse classrooms, and coping with the psychological strain of being far from family and familiar environments (Aranda, 2023; Rosales, 2024).

Teacher well-being and adaptation are closely tied to school climate and professional support systems. Findings from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) emphasized the role of collaborative work environments, induction programs, and access to professional learning in enhancing teacher efficacy and resilience (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2020). Studies also highlighted that intercultural self-efficacy, supported by inclusive diversity

climates within schools, helps internationally recruited teachers successfully integrate and perform in diverse classrooms (Ulbricht, Schachner, Civitillo, & Noack, 2022).

At the same time, the recognition of foreign qualifications remains a challenge. Complex state-specific licensure requirements and inconsistent credential validation create barriers for migrant teachers, limiting their opportunities and affecting their professional trajectories (Kreimer, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Despite growing scholarship on teacher mobility, there remains limited empirical work specifically examining the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the U.S. Qualitative studies have indicated that these teachers often face initial struggles with cultural and professional adjustment but gradually build resilience through peer support, cultural adaptation, and ongoing professional development (Aranda, 2023; Rosales, 2024). This highlights the need for in-depth research to capture the nuanced realities of these educators' experiences.

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the U.S. Phenomenology is appropriate for examining how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences, making it ideal for understanding the personal and professional realities of migrant educators (Moustakas, 1994). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and resilience strategies that shape their adaptation to a foreign teaching environment.

The study provides timely insights for both practice and policy. First, it generates context-specific knowledge to inform the design of induction, mentoring, and professional development programs tailored to the needs of internationally recruited teachers (Sattin-Bajaj, Barrera Alcázar, Hong, & Romo-González, 2023). Second, it provides evidence to guide policymakers and school leaders in creating supportive environments that address the unique challenges of migrant teachers (OECD, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Third, the findings contribute to broader discussions on the ethics and sustainability of international teacher recruitment amid global teacher shortages (UNESCO & Teacher Task Force, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States of America?
2. What essence and meanings can be derived from the lived experiences of these teachers?
3. What themes may be formulated from the essence and meanings of the informants' experiences?
4. What implications can be drawn for educational management, related theories, practitioners, researchers, and policy-making?

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in Husserlian Transcendental Phenomenology and Constructivist Ontology, providing a solid philosophical and methodological foundation for exploring the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States.

Husserlian Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl, emphasizes understanding human experiences as they are consciously lived, free from presuppositions or preconceived judgments (Moustakas, 1994). The central principle of epoche or bracketing was applied throughout the study to ensure that the voices of the participants were represented authentically. By setting aside personal biases and prior knowledge, the researcher focused solely on the narratives provided by the informants, allowing their experiences to emerge naturally and without distortion.

This framework aligns with the study's goal of capturing the essence of lived experience, making it particularly suitable for exploring the personal and professional realities of migrant teachers adjusting to new cultural, educational, and social systems (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).

Constructivist Ontology

The study also adopted a constructivist ontological stance, which views reality as socially and personally constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective recognizes that each Filipino migrant teacher constructs meaning based on unique interactions with their environment, personal beliefs, cultural background, and institutional contexts.

Constructivism supports the exploration of multiple realities, acknowledging that each teacher's journey is shaped by distinct experiences, social dynamics, and professional demands. This approach enabled the study to interpret not just the shared themes across participants' narratives but also the individual nuances that define their adaptation and resilience in U.S. classrooms.

Integration of the Frameworks

By integrating Husserlian phenomenology with constructivist ontology, the study achieved a balanced understanding of the migrant teachers' experiences. The phenomenological lens provided a descriptive depth, while the constructivist paradigm facilitated an appreciation of how personal and contextual factors influenced meaning-making. Together, these frameworks ensured that the findings were grounded, authentic, and reflective of the participants' realities.

2. Literature Review

The migration of teachers from the Philippines to other countries has been widely studied, particularly in the context of economic mobility and professional growth. Teachers often leave the country seeking better compensation, stable employment, and opportunities for advancement unavailable in the local system (Aranda, 2023; Rosales, 2024). This trend is further fueled by global teacher shortages, especially in developed nations like the United States, where recruitment programs actively seek qualified educators to address staffing gaps (Nguyen, Lam, & Bruno, 2024). Despite these opportunities, migration is rarely a straightforward process. Filipino teachers face emotional and professional challenges, such as adapting to unfamiliar systems and balancing the expectations of being both financial providers and cultural ambassadors in their new environment.

Cultural and professional adaptation is a central theme in research on migrant teachers. Studies have shown that transitioning to foreign classrooms often requires rethinking instructional strategies and management approaches to fit new educational norms (Ulbricht, Schachner, Civitillo, & Noack, 2022). Filipino teachers in the United States, for instance, often encounter students with different learning behaviors, rights awareness, and expectations of classroom interaction (Modesto, 2020). Such shifts demand flexibility, intercultural competence, and resilience as teachers adjust not only their pedagogy but also their identities as educators. Support from colleagues, community networks, and mentoring programs has been shown to significantly ease these transitions and foster professional confidence (OECD, 2019; Sattin-Bajaj, Barrera Alcázar, Hong, & Romo-González, 2023).

Research on the well-being of migrant teachers highlights the interplay between professional demands and personal resilience. Emotional challenges, including homesickness and experiences of discrimination, have been consistently reported (Cervantes & Santos, 2022). At the same time, meaningful professional development, supportive work environments, and community integration enhance job satisfaction and retention among migrant educators (OECD, 2020). Phenomenological studies have emphasized that teachers derive strength from their commitment to students and from strong family ties, which motivate them to persevere despite the difficulties of migration (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). These findings support the importance of contextualized support mechanisms for migrant teachers to thrive personally and professionally in host countries.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design grounded in the framework of Moustakas (1994) to explore the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States. Using criterion-based and purposive sampling, nine former Department of Education teachers currently teaching at different grade levels across various U.S. states participated in the research. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via Facebook Messenger video calls at times convenient to the participants. The interviews focused on their personal, cultural, and professional experiences while adapting to their new environment. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following Moustakas' eight-step phenomenological analysis, which included horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering of invariant constituents, validation, and the construction of individual and composite textural-structural descriptions to identify themes and essences of the experience. Throughout the process, bracketing was employed to minimize researcher bias, ensuring that the participants' voices and meanings remained central. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation were strictly observed to protect the integrity and well-being of the participants.

4. Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1:

What are the lived experiences of the Filipino migrant teachers in the United States of America?

The participants described their transition as a complex process shaped by emotional, cultural, and professional adjustments. Five key themes emerged from their narratives, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Lived Experiences of Filipino Migrant Teachers in the United States

Theme	Description of Experience	Direct Quotations
Homesickness and Emotional Struggles	Participants experienced deep emotional distress during the early stages of migration due to being away from their families.	<i>"Living in America is not easy... homesickness is really one adjustment, that deep longing for family is a struggle." (P7)</i> <i>"Personally... the hardest part is to be away from your family. It feels so heart breaking living away from them." (P9)</i>
Cultural Adjustment	Teachers struggled to adjust to differences in lifestyle, climate, food, and social interactions as they adapted to a new environment.	<i>"Cultural adaptation... you might experience culture shock when you arrive here. There are many adjustments to make regarding food, climate, and the community." (P7)</i>
Professional Challenges	Participants found U.S. classrooms challenging, especially with managing student behaviors and adapting to unfamiliar instructional norms.	<i>"The number one problem here is the behavior of the children... they really don't listen at all." (P1)</i>
Support Systems	Support from Filipino communities and colleagues in their schools helped ease the transition and build a sense of belonging.	<i>"After a few months, I met new friends... it helped me a lot with my adjustment." (P9)</i>
Motivation and Resilience	Better compensation and opportunities for professional growth encouraged participants to remain committed despite challenges.	<i>"I need to be brave and be resilient... for the good of my family." (P1)</i>

Table 1 illustrates that **homesickness and emotional struggles** were dominant during the initial phase of migration. The emotional distress participants experienced reflects the deep importance of familial relationships in Filipino culture, supporting Cervantes and Santos (2022), who noted that strong family ties often intensify feelings of isolation among overseas workers.

Cultural adjustment was another significant theme. Teachers found themselves navigating differences in food, climate, and communication styles, which often led to cultural dissonance during their first months. These findings align with Ulbricht, Schachner, Civitillo, and Noack (2022), who stressed that developing intercultural competence is key to thriving in multicultural teaching environments.

Professional challenges centered on managing student behavior and adapting to instructional practices in U.S. schools. Participants described students as more outspoken and less deferential, which contrasted sharply with their experiences in the Philippines. Similar patterns were identified in Modesto (2020), highlighting the adjustment needed in classroom management and instructional strategies.

Support systems proved to be a vital factor in successful adaptation. Relationships with fellow Filipino teachers, supportive colleagues, and community networks helped participants navigate their personal and professional transitions. This finding reinforces the significance of peer and institutional support noted by Sattin-Bajaj, Barrera Alcázar, Hong, and Romo-González (2023).

Finally, the theme of **motivation and resilience** captured the participants' determination to persevere despite challenges. Better financial compensation and opportunities for professional development acted as strong motivators to remain committed, echoing the observations of OECD (2020) regarding the positive impact of professional growth on teacher satisfaction.

Research Question 2:

What essence and meanings can be derived from the lived experiences of the informants?

From the narratives, five core meanings were identified, summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Essence and Meanings of the Lived Experiences of Filipino Migrant Teachers

Essence / Meaning	Description	Direct Quotations
Adaptation as a Process of Growth	Migration was perceived as a transformative journey that demanded flexibility and resilience, leading to professional and personal growth.	<i>"It's not easy at first, but every challenge teaches you something new about yourself and how strong you can be." (P5)</i>
Resilience Amid Sacrifice	Teachers associated their struggles with sacrifice for their families, balancing emotional hardship with the motivation to provide a better life.	<i>"I always think of my family back home... that's why I stay strong." (P1)</i>
Identity Reconstruction	The transition fostered a redefinition of their professional and personal identities, integrating Filipino values with new cultural expectations.	<i>"I learned to adjust my way of teaching, but I keep my values as a Filipino teacher." (P9)</i>
Meaning in Service and Contribution	Participants found purpose in their work, seeing themselves as cultural and educational bridges in diverse classrooms.	<i>"I feel proud that I represent Filipino teachers here and show what we can do." (P6)</i>
Empowerment Through Opportunity	Opportunities for professional advancement and financial stability strengthened their confidence and sense of achievement.	<i>"This experience made me believe that I can compete and grow as a teacher, even in another country." (P7)</i>

The findings in Table 2 show that adaptation was an ongoing and dynamic process, allowing participants to grow personally and professionally. This supports the constructivist perspective that meaning is actively constructed through lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Resilience amid sacrifice emerged as a defining characteristic, with participants consistently framing their perseverance in terms of family obligations and aspirations. This reflects similar findings from Aranda (2023) and Rosales (2024), where familial responsibilities were central motivators for migration.

The theme of identity reconstruction illustrates how participants navigated new cultural and institutional settings while maintaining their Filipino identity. This adaptation aligns with Ulbricht et al. (2022), who noted that successful integration often involves balancing personal values with new professional norms.

Teachers also derived meaning in service and contribution, seeing themselves as bridges fostering cultural understanding in diverse classrooms. This sense of purpose provided emotional resilience and strengthened their professional fulfillment. Finally, empowerment through opportunity reinforced the positive aspects of migration, as access to training, better resources, and professional networks enhanced their confidence and career trajectories.

Research Question 3:

What themes may be formulated from the essence and meanings of the informants' lived experiences?

Analysis revealed three overarching themes with specific subthemes:

- Crossing New Climates
 - Homesickness and emotional distress.
 - Cultural adjustment to lifestyle, climate, and social expectations.
- Tilling Rocky Soil
 - Challenges in classroom management.
 - Struggles with student disrespect and disruptive behavior.
 - Managing workload and occasional experiences of discrimination.
- Navigating the Winds
 - Communication barriers due to language nuances and accents.
 - Continuous learning and building intercultural competence.

These themes highlight a collective journey of resilience and adaptation, demonstrating how participants coped with emotional, cultural, and professional challenges while cultivating opportunities for growth.

Research Question 4:

What implications to the field of educational management, related theories, practitioners, informants, researchers, and policy making can be derived?

The findings yield several significant implications:

- For Educational Management: Schools should implement structured induction, mentoring, and professional support programs tailored to the needs of migrant teachers to facilitate cultural and professional integration.
- For Theories and Research: The results support constructivist and resilience frameworks, showing how meaning-making and adaptive strategies shape the migrant experience.

- For Practitioners: Aspiring migrant teachers would benefit from pre-departure orientation focusing on cultural awareness, classroom management, and mental health preparation.
- For Policymakers: There is a need for streamlined credential recognition processes and stronger institutional safeguards to address discrimination and ensure equity in the workplace.

5. Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States through a phenomenological lens, highlighting the interplay of adaptation, resilience, and identity reconstruction. The findings align with global and local studies on teacher migration, but they also present unique insights into the nuances of Filipino teachers' personal, cultural, and professional journeys.

Personal Experiences: Navigating Homesickness and Emotional Strain

The participants' experiences of homesickness and emotional stress reflect the strong familial ties deeply rooted in Filipino culture. Migrating teachers reported emotional challenges, especially during their first year abroad, consistent with Cervantes and Santos (2022), who emphasized that prolonged separation from family can lead to feelings of isolation and emotional distress. These emotional challenges, however, were not permanent. Over time, teachers developed coping mechanisms, including virtual communication with families and building new social connections, demonstrating adaptability and emotional resilience.

The findings also highlight that resilience was not solely a personal trait but was reinforced by external support systems such as school colleagues, Filipino communities, and church groups. This mirrors the observations of Sattin-Bajaj, Barrera Alcázar, Hong, and Romo-González (2023), who noted that peer and institutional support improves the well-being and integration of migrant educators.

Cultural and Professional Adjustment

Adjusting to a new culture and educational system was a complex and layered process. Participants shared difficulties in adapting to cultural norms, communication styles, and even basic lifestyle elements such as food and climate. These experiences align with Ulbricht, Schachner, Civitillo, and Noack (2022), who highlighted that cultural competence and intercultural efficacy are essential for teachers in diverse environments.

From a professional standpoint, the challenges of classroom management were prominent. Participants encountered students who were more vocal and independent, a stark contrast to the more disciplined and deferential classroom environments in the Philippines. This required teachers to rethink pedagogical approaches, develop flexible classroom management strategies, and balance authority with facilitation. Similar observations were documented by Modesto (2020), who reported that Filipino teachers often face cultural dissonance when managing student behaviors in U.S. classrooms.

Despite these hurdles, the teachers demonstrated adaptability, reflecting the capacity to reconstruct their professional identities. This adaptation process not only helped them meet institutional expectations but also fostered professional growth and confidence, a finding consistent with OECD (2020), which linked continuous learning to higher teacher satisfaction and retention.

Identity Reconstruction and Resilience

The essence of the participants' narratives underscored the dynamic reconstruction of identity as they integrated Filipino values with U.S. educational practices. This process of redefining their professional and personal selves

aligns with constructivist principles, which emphasize meaning-making as a response to lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The dual pressures of meeting professional expectations while preserving cultural identity created a unique form of resilience, enabling teachers to thrive in demanding environments.

This reconstruction was often fueled by purpose and empowerment. Teachers expressed pride in representing Filipino educators abroad, viewing themselves as cultural ambassadors and advocates for quality education. These experiences fostered a sense of professional fulfillment, reflecting the intrinsic motivation described by Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, which connects autonomy and competence to sustained engagement and performance.

Support Systems and Professional Empowerment

The findings revealed that support systems were critical enablers of adaptation and resilience. Connections with fellow Filipino teachers and local colleagues provided emotional stability and practical guidance, echoing OECD (2019) recommendations for strong induction and mentoring systems for new and migrant teachers. Access to professional development programs and modern teaching resources also enhanced their skills and confidence, highlighting the value of institutional support in facilitating smooth transitions and long-term retention.

Financial incentives and opportunities for career advancement emerged as powerful motivators. These factors not only justified the sacrifices associated with migration but also reinforced a sense of professional achievement. This reflects the global findings of Nguyen, Lam, and Bruno (2024), who identified economic mobility and career growth as key drivers in international teacher mobility.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings carry several practical and policy-oriented implications. First, school leaders should prioritize structured induction and mentoring programs tailored to the needs of migrant teachers. Providing guidance on cultural nuances, classroom management, and communication strategies can significantly ease the transition process. Second, policy frameworks should address systemic barriers such as complex credential recognition processes to allow for a smoother integration into the U.S. education system (Kreimer, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Lastly, creating inclusive and culturally responsive environments will not only benefit migrant teachers but also support diverse student populations. By fostering intercultural dialogue and collaboration, schools can maximize the contributions of internationally recruited teachers to the broader educational landscape.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers in the United States through a phenomenological approach. Findings revealed that the migration journey was characterized by emotional, cultural, and professional challenges, but also by resilience, adaptability, and empowerment.

The participants' narratives emphasized the emotional toll of homesickness during the early stages of migration, underscoring the central role of family in Filipino culture. Despite these struggles, the presence of support systems, including peers, school colleagues, and Filipino communities, provided the emotional stability needed to adapt.

Professionally, teachers faced significant classroom management and pedagogical challenges due to differences in student behaviors, educational expectations, and systemic structures. However, their ability to adjust their

instructional strategies and integrate into the U.S. educational environment facilitated their professional growth and reinforced their sense of competence.

At the core of their stories was the reconstruction of identity, where participants blended their Filipino values with the demands of their host institutions. This process fostered both personal fulfilment and professional empowerment, reflecting the complex but rewarding journey of international mobility in the teaching profession.

Recommendations

For Educational Management

Develop structured induction and mentoring programs to guide migrant teachers in adjusting to new cultural and professional environments.

Provide ongoing professional development focusing on intercultural competence, classroom management, and differentiated instruction.

Encourage peer support groups to foster collaboration and emotional resilience among teachers.

For Policymakers

Streamline credential recognition processes across states to make teacher integration more efficient and equitable.

Establish policies protecting migrant teachers from discrimination and promoting inclusive work environments.

Create incentives for districts to implement support frameworks that address the unique needs of international educators.

For Practitioners

Participate in pre-departure orientation programs that prepare teachers for cultural and professional adjustments.

Engage in continuous learning and networking to enhance resilience and professional growth.

Maintain strong communication with families to balance personal well-being with professional responsibilities.

For Researchers

Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the evolving experiences of Filipino migrant teachers over time.

Explore comparative studies across different states or countries to identify context-specific supports and challenges.

Investigate the impact of institutional support on retention, well-being, and professional satisfaction among migrant educators.

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