

Cross-Cultural Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in the USA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers working in the United States, in response to their growing presence in international classrooms. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, the research examined how these teachers adapt to professional, social, and cultural expectations; how they navigate cultural differences; and what cross-cultural framework emerged from their cross-cultural experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten Filipino special education (SpEd) teachers and analyzed using Creswell's thematic analysis method. Findings revealed that participants encountered challenges in language use, instructional practices, classroom management, and differing cultural norms. Adaptation required teachers to shift from traditional methods to student-centered approaches, manage individualized education plans (IEPs), and adjust to legal and institutional expectations. In navigating cultural differences, they employed strategies such as building relationships, showing cultural sensitivity, and seeking support from peers and professional networks. Over time, participants developed an intercultural teaching identity by blending Filipino values with foreign educational practices. Grounded in Kim's Integrative Communication Theory and Cultural Fusion Theory, the study emphasizes cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic, ongoing process that involves reflection, negotiation, and identity transformation. Thus, this study recommends engagement in professional development, participating in cultural immersion programs, and establishing policies that support the integration of international teachers.

Keyword: *Filipino Special Education Teachers, cross-cultural experiences, cultural adaptation, cultural navigation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global need for educators has heightened the international relocation of teachers, with the Philippines being a leading provider of globally qualified educators. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA, 2021) reports that thousands of Filipino educators are deployed annually, particularly to the United States, which is experiencing a significant teacher shortage. Data from the U.S. Department of State (2020) indicate that the number of Filipino teachers entering the U.S. through cultural exchange and employment-based visas has grown by over 500% in the last decade. Filipino teachers are present in various states across the country, teaching subjects ranging from general education to science, mathematics, and special education.

Although economic incentives, such as improved remuneration and job stability, frequently influence migration, recent studies suggest that Filipino educators also relocate for professional advancement, intercultural experiences, and engagement with more progressive educational frameworks (Bunnag et al., 2017). Teaching in a new cultural setting involves not only educational knowledge but also intercultural competence, adaptability, and emotional resilience. Filipino educators must adapt to differences in student behavior, classroom administration, family expectations, and institutional principles. These experiences underscore the necessity to investigate how educators not only adapt to new settings but also navigate across the social, cultural, and professional situations of their new environments.

Cross-cultural experiences are complex and frequently demanding. Research indicates that internationally recruited teachers may encounter language difficulties, cultural misinterpretations, and social isolation in their initial years overseas (Tran & Cahyani, 2020). These difficulties are not exclusive to Filipinos. Teachers from countries such as India, South Korea, and South Africa, who are employed in the U.S., Australia, and the U.K., have faced challenges related to classroom authority, discrimination, and insufficient institutional support (Lee & Hornberger, 2021). Despite these challenges, a large number of foreign educators report notable improvements in their capacity to adapt, be culturally aware, and innovate their teaching methods.

Filipino Special Education (SPED) educators face distinct challenges, as they are frequently assigned to high-need classes where they must deliver specialized instruction while accommodating diverse perspectives on disability, inclusion, and student support systems. These positions require cultural sensitivity, collaborative skills, and a sophisticated comprehension of both U.S. and Filipino educational values. Reyes et al. (2020) observed that numerous Filipino educators abroad encounter discrimination, have restricted access to professional development opportunities, and frequently endure greater workloads than their local peers yet they persist in exhibiting resilience and professionalism.

Despite the growing population of Filipino educators in the United States, research on their cross-cultural experiences remains inadequate. This study aimed to address the gap by focusing on the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in their new environment, analyzing how these teachers adapt to and navigate their daily cultural realities. Therefore, this study focused on how the teachers adapted to cross-cultural expectations and challenges, navigated cross-cultural differences, and cross-cultural framework derived from the experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers in the USA.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers working in the United States. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that aims to understand the shared experiences of individuals within a specific group or community. Its main objective is to describe the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach was suitable for the study's purpose of capturing the voices of Filipino SpEd teachers as they adapt to and navigate new cultural, social, and professional contexts. Through this approach, the study uncovered shared meanings and core themes that highlighted the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers in the U.S. The participants of this study were ten (10) Filipino special education teachers from various public-school districts in the state of New Mexico, USA. To ensure dependable and high-quality interview results, only individuals with a minimum of three years of work experience were accepted as participants. The participants consisted of nine females and one male, with the majority being married and only one participant identified as single. Their teaching experience in the Philippines varied, ranging from four to thirteen years. In New Mexico, USA, most had been teaching for four to five years, with one participant having 4.5 years of experience and another combining four years in New Mexico with additional experience in other U.S. states.

This study employed purposive sampling as the sampling technique. Purposive sampling is commonly employed in qualitative research to identify and select individuals or cases that can provide in-depth and relevant information about the phenomenon being studied. Purposive sampling was a reasonable technique for conducting descriptive phenomenological research on the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino SpEd teachers in the USA (Palinkas et al., 2015). The primary data collection tool used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide, specifically designed to explore the lived cross-cultural experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers in the United States. Questions were carefully crafted to encourage detailed and reflective responses, allowing participants to share both their struggles and successes. The instrument underwent expert validation by faculty members with experience in qualitative research and special education. It was evaluated based on clarity, relevance, organization, objectivity, and its alignment with the study's objectives.

This study followed a systematic procedure consistent with a descriptive phenomenological research design. The process was organized into three phases: before, during, and after data collection. Before data gathering, the researcher obtained a permission letter from the Dean of the Graduate School of Education to conduct the study. Once the interview guide was validated, the researcher began contacting prospective participants. Data collection was conducted through one-on-one, in-depth interviews using online video conferencing platforms such as Zoom

and Google Meet. After data collection, all interviews were transcribed in verbatim. The transcripts were returned to participants for validation to ensure the accuracy of the recorded narratives. The data were then analyzed using Creswell's (2013) seven-step method for qualitative research: organizing and preparing the data, reading through the data, coding the data, developing themes, interrelating the themes, and interpreting the meaning of the data about the research questions. This study employed thematic analysis to examine the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers working in the United States, following Creswell's seven steps in phenomenological data analysis approach, which are designed to bring structure and rigor to the interpretation of interview data. When researching sensitive themes, such as the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino SpEd teachers in the USA, it was crucial to prioritize ethical considerations. This ethical procedure includes informed consent, confidentiality, respect for participants, and cultural sensitivity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the thematic analysis of the participants' narratives, six major themes emerged that encapsulate the cross-cultural experiences of Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers in the United States. These themes are: Language Use and Communication, Classroom Management and Teaching Approaches, and Cultural Expectations.

The first three themes, Language Use and Communication, Classroom Management and Teaching Approaches, and Cultural Expectations, address the first statement of the problem: How do these teachers adapt to cross-cultural expectations and challenges? These themes reflect the linguistic, instructional, and cultural adjustments participants undertook to align with the norms and demands of the U.S. educational system. They illustrate the personal and professional challenges encountered, as well as the strategies employed to manage expectations in a new cultural and institutional context.

The next set of themes was Building Relationships, Respecting Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity, and Seeking Support Systems responds to the second statement of the problem: How do these teachers navigate cross-cultural differences? This theme encompasses the participants' efforts to build relationships, respect cultural diversity, and access support systems in order to thrive in a foreign environment. It reveals how Filipino SpEd teachers negotiated cultural complexities through conscious adaptation, interpersonal engagement, and community participation.

3.1 Adaptation to Cross-Cultural Expectations and Challenges

The themes related to the Filipino Special Education teachers' adaptation to cross-cultural expectations and challenges highlighted the professional and personal adjustments they made to meet new expectations in a different cultural and institutional context. Each theme is defined based on how it emerged from the participants' shared experiences and was interpreted within the study.

Language Use and Communication. Language Use and Communication emerged as a key theme reflecting the initial linguistic challenges faced by Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers upon entering the U.S. educational system. Although participants were proficient in English, having used it as a medium of instruction in the Philippines, they encountered unexpected difficulties in understanding and using the nuances of American English. These included challenges related to the local accent, slang, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded communication styles.

These findings align with those of Reyes et al. (2020), who found that Filipino teachers abroad frequently encounter persistent language barriers that impact instruction, student relationships, and professional communication. The difficulty in understanding colloquial expressions and slang sometimes resulted in misunderstandings, particularly during parent-teacher conferences and student interactions. Such difficulties not only slowed down instruction but also contributed to social isolation and a decline in self-confidence among the teachers.

Supporting these accounts, Alghamdi and Otte (2016) and Chen and Yuh-Show (2021) observed that foreign teachers frequently experience communication breakdowns. Nanez and Viray (2023) also conducted a qualitative study on Filipino teachers working in Thailand, finding that they faced significant "communicative predicaments," including language barriers, discrimination, and intercultural communication challenges.

This form of stress, although subtle, adds an emotional burden and may hinder full participation in school activities or collaborative teaching efforts. Participants described the early phase of adjustment as a time of learning not just the curriculum but also the linguistic and social codes embedded in the school culture.

Classroom Management and Teaching Approaches. Classroom Management and Teaching Approaches emerged as a significant theme highlighting the professional adjustments Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers had to make when transitioning into the U.S. school system. Participants described initial challenges in understanding and applying inclusive education practices, classroom autonomy, and student-centered learning models, which differed substantially from the more structured, teacher-directed systems commonly used in the Philippines.

One of the key areas of adjustment involved implementing inclusive education, particularly in how students with special needs were integrated into general education classrooms. Participants expressed unfamiliarity with inclusion models and the pull-out system, where students receive specialized instruction outside the regular class. This aspect required not only pedagogical shifts but also a deeper understanding of individualized learning needs. Teachers had to learn how to manage diverse learners quickly, comply with legal requirements such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and collaborate effectively with multidisciplinary teams.

The findings of Macapagong, Geroso, and Maguate (2023) emphasized that Filipino teachers had to unlearn traditional authoritative approaches and adopt new strategies grounded in inclusivity, autonomy, and student empowerment. The legal requirements surrounding Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), along with expectations for documentation, collaboration, and differentiated instruction, required both professional recalibration and emotional resilience.

Del Valle (2024) further supports this, noting that Filipino educators working in U.S. schools must adopt a more collaborative and legally informed teaching style that aligns with national special education mandates. For many participants, the need to quickly master these unfamiliar structures initially created a sense of overwhelm; yet, over time, they demonstrated adaptability and growth.

Adapting to Cultural Expectations. Adapting to Cultural Expectations emerged as a theme that captures the personal and professional transformations Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers underwent as they adjusted to life and work in the United States. Participants described how they had to adjust their professional demeanor, communication style, and even physical appearance to align with American norms and workplace expectations. For instance, some reported becoming more mindful of their boundaries and adopting a more professional approach to dressing. This adaptation was often gradual and rooted in daily interactions that revealed the implicit expectations of the school environment.

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges was the shift in how respect is perceived and expressed. In the Philippines, respect is typically shown through formality and deference to authority. In contrast, U.S. students are often encouraged to be assertive and to question ideas openly. This cultural difference necessitated a recalibration of teachers' approaches to classroom management and student engagement. As one participant observed, respect in the U.S. is something that teachers must earn through trust and relationship-building, rather than being automatically granted due to age or position.

Adaptation, in the context of this study, referred not only to professional alignment but also to personal and cultural transformation. Participants expressed a need to modify their behaviors, values, and self-presentation to better align with American cultural norms both within and outside the classroom.

The reflections are consistent with the view of the American Psychological Association (2018), which defines adaptation as the modification of behavior and mindset to fit new environments and challenges. The findings also support the work of Käck (2024), who discussed how migrant teachers often need to constantly prove their competence and adjust to subtle cultural expectations, even when their professional qualifications are acknowledged.

Kim's (2017) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory provides a valuable lens for interpreting these findings. According to the theory, adaptation is a dynamic and ongoing process involving stress, adjustment, and growth. Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers experienced this cycle as they gradually internalized new cultural norms while reevaluating their own identities and practices. The adaptation was not simply about surviving in a foreign environment but involved a deeper process of personal transformation, reflective learning, and cultural negotiation.

3.2 Navigating Cross-Cultural Differences

Another focus of this study was how Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers navigate cross-cultural differences. The participants described proactive strategies centered on building relationships, respecting diversity and cultural sensitivity, and seeking support systems.

Building Relationships. One of the most consistent strategies shared by participants for navigating cultural differences was intentionally building strong relationships with both students and parents. As newcomers to a foreign educational system, Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers found that establishing trust and rapport was not only essential to effective classroom management but also to fostering culturally responsive teaching. These relationships helped bridge communication gaps, increase student engagement, and reduce the initial feeling of isolation that often accompanies international placements. Beyond instructional effectiveness, relationship-building served as a foundation for cultural learning, mutual respect, and community integration. For many, it became a personal and professional survival skill that allowed them to connect meaningfully with learners and gain the support of families.

Cultural competence involves not only understanding and respecting the values, communication styles, and behaviors of others, but also requires ongoing self-reflection and adaptability to engage effectively with diverse groups. This competence includes awareness, knowledge, and abilities that enable individuals to navigate cultural differences, reduce misunderstandings, and foster meaningful interactions across cultural boundaries (Schriefer, 2016). This strategy is validated by Bodycott and Walker (2000, as cited in Dwyer, 2019), who highlight that fostering intercultural understanding necessitates the teacher's mindset as a starting point and is a joint obligation of both educators and learners. The participants in this study demonstrated cultural competence through deliberate efforts to build rapport with students and parents, engage respectfully with community norms, and adapt their strategies to fit local expectations. For instance, several teachers noted the importance of learning about tribal customs, language sensitivities, and family dynamics, which helped avoid cultural missteps and fostered trust. This idea aligns with Reyes et al. (2020), who observed that relationship-building is a foundational element of cross-cultural teaching, as it facilitates mutual understanding, reduces resistance, and promotes meaningful engagement in the classroom.

Respecting Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity. Respecting Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity emerged as a crucial subtheme, reflecting how Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers adapted to the multicultural and multiethnic contexts of their U.S. school communities. As foreign educators, participants recognized the importance of being aware of local customs, beliefs, and taboos—particularly in schools serving indigenous or racially diverse populations. This awareness was not only a professional responsibility but a deeply personal commitment to inclusivity and respect.

Participants shared that cultural missteps could easily strain relationships with students, families, and colleagues. To avoid this, they made conscious efforts to understand community norms and adopt culturally appropriate practices. For example, one participant highlighted the significance of learning about the symbolic meanings of certain animals, such as snakes and eagles, in Native American communities, which influenced how lessons were framed and the classroom materials used. Others noted that specific topics, such as goal setting or family matters, required careful handling due to sensitivities within specific tribal or cultural groups.

This notion reflected the findings of Serin (2017), who emphasized that international teachers, through continuous exposure to different cultural and educational contexts, develop essential traits such as self-confidence, self-determination, and tolerance for others. These traits are not innate but are cultivated as teachers navigate complex cross-cultural interactions, confront unfamiliar practices, and reflect on their assumptions. As they work with students and colleagues from diverse backgrounds, international educators gradually acquire a deeper understanding of alternative perspectives, values, and behaviors—ultimately leading to a greater capacity for empathy and intercultural awareness.

The Cultural Fusion Theory also supports this, suggesting that teachers co-construct meaning and respect across cultures. In the context of this study, Filipino SpEd teachers did not merely adopt American norms—they fused these with Filipino values such as *pakikipagkapwa* (relational connectedness) and *pagpapakatao* (humane conduct), creating hybrid approaches to teaching, communication, and community engagement.

Seeking Support Systems. Seeking Support Systems emerged as a vital theme, emphasizing how Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers navigated the emotional, professional, and cultural challenges associated with living and teaching in a foreign country. Participants emphasized that their ability to thrive in the U.S. educational environment was not solely based on personal resilience, but also on the presence of support structures that helped them navigate periods of stress, confusion, and adjustment.

Participants highlighted the importance of mentorship and collegial support in understanding unfamiliar teaching practices, institutional procedures, and legal requirements such as those related to special education services. Professional development (PD) opportunities, including workshops, in-service training, and webinars, were also described as key resources that allowed them to update their teaching strategies, enhance cultural competence, and stay compliant with U.S. educational standards.

Participants cited peer support, mentorship, and professional development opportunities as essential to overcoming initial stress, confusion, and feelings of isolation. These support structures not only helped them understand unfamiliar systems and expectations but also provided emotional reassurance and a sense of belonging. For many, connections with fellow Filipino educators or supportive colleagues served as safe spaces where they could share concerns, seek advice, and regain confidence as they navigated a new educational and social landscape. One participant noted that maintaining good rapport with parents and co-teachers fostered a collaborative atmosphere that not only enhanced classroom success but also promoted personal well-being. Others noted that attending school events, participating in community activities, and maintaining regular communication with families helped build trust and opened channels for mutual support.

The findings aligned with the work of Podolsky, Anne, and Hammond (2019), who found that mentorship and collaboration are strong predictors of educator success and cultural adjustment. In this study, seeking support was not seen as a sign of weakness but rather as an intentional and necessary strategy for sustaining one's role as an educator in a new cultural and institutional landscape. Through these support systems, Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers were able to build professional confidence, maintain emotional balance, and find a sense of community in unfamiliar settings.

3.3 Cross-Cultural Framework

The Cross-Cultural Framework developed in this study illustrates the dynamic and interactive processes through which Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers adapt to and navigate their teaching environments in the United States, as shown in Figure 1. Grounded in the study's thematic findings and supported by Kim's Integrative Communication Theory and Cultural Fusion Theory, the framework captures three interconnected components: adaptation, navigation, and the emergence of an intercultural teaching identity.

The outermost layer of the framework represents adaptation, which describes the initial adjustments Filipino SpEd teachers make in response to differences in language and communication use, classroom management, and teaching approaches, as well as adapting to cultural expectations. Participants shared how they gradually shifted from traditional, teacher-centered approaches common in the Philippines to more student-centered methods prevalent in U.S. schools. Language use, legal compliance (e.g., IEPs), and classroom interactions were primary areas where adaptation was most evident. These experiences align with Kim's (2017) view of cross-cultural adaptation as a stress-adaptation-growth process driven by communication and experiential learning.

The inner circle represents navigation, which is defined in this study as active, intentional, and strategic, and it occurs within the process of adaptations. Once the participants overcame the initial shock, they employed intentional strategies to manage everyday cultural differences. These strategies include building relationships, respecting diversity and cultural sensitivity, and seeking support systems. Teachers developed relational agility and cultural sensitivity, enabling them to function effectively in multicultural educational settings. Hence, it reflects the premise of Cultural Fusion Theory (Croucher & Kramer, 2017), which emphasizes that cultural identities evolve through mutual influence and continuous interaction.

At the center of this framework is the emergence of an intercultural teaching identity. This identity is neither entirely Filipino nor wholly Western but rather a fusion of both, shaped by lived experience, reflection, and professional

engagement. Teachers not only adjusted to their new environments but also contributed to shaping inclusive and responsive school cultures. Through repeated cultural encounters, they developed adaptive strategies, emotional resilience, and reflective practices that enriched both their personal growth and their impact as educators.

Overall, this Cross-Cultural Framework highlights that the journey of Filipino special education (SpEd) teachers is cyclical and developmental. Their ability to adapt and navigate ultimately leads to a more profound and integrated sense of identity, as well as a more profound professional purpose. The framework serves as a guide for institutions and stakeholders seeking to support the integration and success of international educators in diverse and evolving school environments.



Fig -1: Cross-Cultural Framework of the Study

4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings revealed that Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teachers undergo a complex and dynamic process of cross-cultural adaptation. Initially, participants reported experiencing culture shock due to language use and communication barriers, unfamiliar classroom and teaching practices, and the shift from a structured, teacher-centered system to a more flexible, student-centered approach. Many struggled with communication, particularly with understanding the American accent, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded forms of speech. Additionally, legal and institutional expectations such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), inclusive teaching practices, and student autonomy posed initial challenges. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated resilience, openness to learning, and professional adaptability. Over time, they adopted culturally responsive pedagogies and revised their teaching methods better to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Beyond instructional adaptation, the findings also revealed how these teachers navigated cultural differences through intentional strategies, such as relationship-building, respecting diversity, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity, as well as seeking a support system. Peer support and mentorship played a crucial role in providing emotional stability and professional guidance. Therefore, this study recommends the Filipino SpEd teachers may engage in continuous professional development, seek mentorship, and participate in cultural immersion programs to facilitate smoother adaptation. The policymakers may establish policies that support the integration of international teachers through structured training, equitable work conditions, and mentorship initiatives. Future researchers may Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of cross-cultural adaptation, focusing on identity negotiation, emotional resilience, and best practices for international teacher integration.

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