



To Teach in a Foreign Land: The Lived Experiences of Non-Immigrant Cultural Exchange Filipino Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The study focused on the lived experiences of non-immigrant cultural exchange Filipino teachers in the United States (US). Particularly, the reasons for moving to the US to teach and leaving a permanent position at the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) were explored.

Methodology: A total of eight Filipino teachers currently teaching in the US served as participants in the study. These participants were chosen through the use of purposive and snowball sampling methods, with the following criteria taken into consideration: teachers from the Philippines who moved to the US to teach; DepEd being the previous employer; single; and holder of a J-1 visa. The descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to discover the underlying meanings of the participants' experiences. Particularly, Colaizzi's descriptive-phenomenological method was used.

Main Findings: Through Colaizzi's descriptive-phenomenological method, six themes were identified. These themes were considerations, motivations, preparations, challenges, pleasant experiences, and future outlooks.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The study provided insights into the lived experiences of former basic education teachers in the Philippines who opted to work in the US as cultural exchange teachers. The themes identified in the study can serve as guide in better understanding the experiences of these teachers as they venture into the teaching profession in a foreign environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher shortages have been a concern in the United States (US) even before the pandemic, and the increase in the percentage of unfilled teaching positions is a reflection of this concern. There is an increase in teacher attrition along with a loss of interest in the profession, as seen in the decline in enrollment and completion of preparation programs [1]. The decline in the prestige of teaching among Americans has been happening in a consistent manner over the last decade, suggesting that it is not merely caused by pandemic stress but by bigger and more consistent structural issues in the profession [2]. In contrast, the shortage of teachers in the US may only be artificial. The continuous misalignment of available teachers relative to actual needs is the real concern being experienced by school districts [3]. But regardless of the true reason, the US became dependent on teachers from other countries, and the Philippines plays an important role in supplying the needed

teachers [4]. The hiring of foreign teachers is a response to the mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act on content area specialization [5].

As early as 2014, it was estimated that between 2002 and 2008, approximately 90,000 teachers from the Philippines and other countries migrated to the US to teach, many of whom were placed in inner-city school districts that historically struggled to attract and retain educators [6]. This trend has continued in recent years. In 2017 alone, around 2,800 foreign teachers entered the US under the J-1 visa program, of whom 472 were Filipino teachers. At present, opportunities for Filipino teachers in the US remain readily available, indicating a sustained demand for their participation in the American education workforce [7].

While this transnational movement addresses staffing needs in the US, the continuing outflow of Filipino teachers particularly those originating from the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) has become an increasing concern within the Philippine education sector. Many of the teachers who leave DepEd to teach in the US are seasoned professionals with extensive training and long years of classroom experience. The migration of these highly qualified educators raises important questions about its potential implications for teacher distribution, instructional quality, and workforce sustainability in the Philippines [8].

Although existing research explains the growing reliance of US schools on Filipino teachers and explores structural drivers such as recruitment policies and push-pull factors, less attention has been given to how these teachers experience migration as a continuous and evolving process. Most studies treat overseas teaching as a single transition, overlooking the cyclical nature of adaptation, professional growth, and reflection that characterizes temporary programs such as the J-1 exchange. Addressing this gap, the present phenomenological study foregrounds the lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers and conceptualizes their journey as a dynamic, nonlinear, and iterative process, offering deeper insight into the human and professional dimensions of transnational teacher mobility.

1.1 Filipino teacher migration

In recent years, teachers have become one of the most sought-after overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Out of the 2.2 million OFWs, around 9%, or equivalent to 207,000, are professionals, teachers included. Specifically, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration recorded 1,711 OFW teachers in 2013; 1,439 in 2014; 1,426 in 2015; 1,821 in 2016; and 1,328 in 2017. Using this trend, an average of 1,500 Filipino teachers are deployed annually [9]. A number of these teachers left for China, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Thailand [10]. Since Filipino teachers are known to have good academic and language competence, they are in high demand in countries where the English language is a component of the curriculum [9].

In relation, the Alliance of Concerned Teachers revealed that in the year 2022, more than 100 public school teachers in the Visayas region alone resigned because of overseas employment [11]. The DepEd has been monitoring the exodus of teachers in the country because it aggravates the shortage of teachers [10]. Some of the reasons identified in extant literature as to why Filipino teachers choose to teach abroad are: higher salary, personal growth, professional growth and communication skills enhancement [12]-[15]. With reference to challenges encountered by Filipino teachers abroad, the following were identified: homesickness, new environment adjustments, language barriers, preference for native speakers, curriculum adjustment, classroom environment, and teacher-parent connection [13].

1.2 Non-immigrant cultural exchange Filipino teachers

The J-1 Teacher Program is the most common path for Filipino teachers. This is a cultural exchange program where foreign teachers work for a maximum of three years with the provision of a one- to two-year extension [16]. After the completion of the program, teachers must go back and stay in their home countries for at least two years, as stipulated in Section 212(e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act [17]. In 2021, the Philippines had the most J-1 visas issued for teachers [18]. Three main reasons have been identified that made Filipino teacher migration possible. These are: the hiring districts; private recruitment agencies facilitating the process; and Filipino teachers choosing to migrate [5].

Despite the limitations of the J-1 Visa, including contract years and benefits, together with the substantial money needed for application processing, many Filipino teachers still take part in the program [19]. OFWs are generally regarded as modern-day heroes due to the fact that supporting their families and loved ones is their main motivation to leave the country [20]. Also, recognizing the reality that a number of Philippine teachers are the breadwinners, a more competitive salary has been the greatest motivator [19].

Teacher migration to the US, as shown in both research literature and popular media, has been greatly influenced by salary considerations. Filipino teachers earning more in the US compared to what they earn in the Philippines has been a recurring theme of Filipino teacher migration. Thus, financial consideration is the main driver of migration [21]. Additionally, personal growth and cultural exchange were identified.

Some problems encountered by Filipino immigrant teachers were unfamiliarity with American society, lack of resources to support immigrant teachers in the U.S. classrooms, issues with credentialing, misconceptions

about how immigrant teachers' teaching methods affect student achievements, language barriers, adapting to new teaching methods, homesickness, family separation, and limited social opportunities [21].

In the end, aside from the competitive salary being the main consideration for leaving the country, other reasons are also possible to thoroughly understand teacher migration to the US. Therefore, this study explored the considerations, challenges, and benefits that come with teaching in the US as a non-immigrant cultural exchange teacher.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research design and setting

To be able to understand the lived experiences of Filipino teachers in the US, the phenomenological approach was used. Particularly descriptive phenomenology was utilized, which is used to explore the experience of a phenomenon using a subject's consciousness [22].

2.2 Sampling and sample size

There were eight participants in the study, selected via purposive and random sampling. Participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. In conducting phenomenological research, there should be between three and 25 participants [23]. Maximum variance sampling was also observed to guarantee heterogeneity among participants. The participants of the study are currently based in Arizona, Illinois, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and the US Virgin Islands.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Individual interviews, through semi-structured interviews, were conducted via Google Meet, taking into consideration the participants most convenient time. Using Colaizzi's descriptive-phenomenological method, conversations were transcribed and given codes. In doing so, familiarity with the narratives, recognition and coding of significant statements, establishing meanings, theme grouping, creation of in-depth descriptions, production of structure, and verification of structure were observed [24].

2.4 Ethical consideration

Prior to the conduct of interviews, the participants were asked to sign a consent form. Information such as the manner of conducting the interview and the recording of interviews was made known to the participants. Confidentiality was also assured. Explaining research chronological, including research design, research procedure (in the form of algorithms, Pseudocode or other), how to test and data acquisition [1-3]. The description of the course of research should be supported references, so the explanation can be accepted scientifically [2], [4].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Participants were chosen using the following criteria: teachers from the Philippines who moved to the US to teach; DepEd being the previous employer; single; and holder of a J-1 visa. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic profile summary

Participant (Pseudonym)	Sex	Age	Educational Background	Number of years, level, and subjects taught in DepEd	Number of years, level, and subjects taught in the US
Patrick	Male	32	Bachelor in Secondary Education major in Biological Sciences	7 years, grade 7 science	1 year, 7 th grade science
Diana	Female	25	Master of Arts in Education	3 years, grade 8 and grade 10, music and music, arts, physical education, and health	1 year, kinder to 6 th grade music
Carlo	Male	27	Bachelor in Secondary Education major in	5 years, grade 7 music and music, arts, physical education, and health,	1 year, grade 8 th science

			Biological Sciences	grade 8 science and grade 9 science	
Lucille	Female	32	Bachelor in Elementary Education- Special Education	8 years, grade 5 math and social studies	2 years, special education (autism), 1 st to 5 th grade reading, language, arts, math, science, social studies and vocational and life skills
George	Male	33	Bachelor in Secondary Education major in Biological Sciences	10 years, grade 7 and grade 8 science	2 years, 11 th and 12 th grade environmental science
Gina	Female	33	Bachelor in Elementary Education- Special Education	8 years, grade 3, all subjects	4 years, special education (autism), kindergarten to 2 nd grade all subjects, except music, arts, physical education, and library
John	Male	29	Master of Arts in Education	3 years, grade 7 science	2 years, 9 th and 10 th grade earth science
Andrew	Male	28	Bachelor in Secondary Education major in Biological Sciences	4 years, grade 7 science	1 year, 6 th grade science

Table 2 presents the six themes identified using the Collaizi's descriptive phenomenological method.

Table 2. Themes, categories, and subcategories

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Considerations	Reservations	Uncertainties Doubts Safety issues
	Differences	Language barriers Cultural differences
	Opportunities	Living the 'American Dream' Adventure
Motivations	Economic-related goals	Receiving better compensation Providing financial support to family Relieving financial struggles
	Career-related goals	Provision for professional growth
	Work-related culture in the former employment	Too much workload Low salary Burnout Favoritism Limited professional growth
Preparations	Professional preparations	Prior teaching experience College degree Master's Degree/Units English proficiency Orientations
	Personal preparations	YouTube vlogs Conducting research Asking experiences of friends/colleagues
		Mental preparations
Challenges	Cultural challenges	Language barriers Cultural differences Discrimination and racism
	Professional challenges	Classroom behaviors Differences in the curriculum

		Differences in the assessment
		Adjustment in teaching strategies and methodologies
		Students' lack of motivation to learn
		Relationships with colleagues
	Personal challenges	Job stress
		Living independently
		Feeling homesick
		Diseases/illnesses
Pleasant experiences	Work-life balance	Travel opportunities
	Economic advantages	Focus on teaching only
		Higher compensation
		Ability to support the family financially
	Career advancements	Provisions for professional growth
	Job fulfillment	Students' appreciation
	Professional support	Availability teaching-learning materials
		Administrators' support
Future outlooks	Return to teaching in the Philippines	Private school teaching
		Tertiary level teaching
	Look for other opportunities	Look for work in another country
		Apply for an H1B visa
		Put up a business in the Philippines

Theme I: Considerations

Reservations on teaching in the US, such as the feeling of uncertainties, doubts, and safety issues, were shared by Patrick, Diana, and Carlo: "I'm scared because it's my first time to go abroad." "I am already stable in DepEd, and I am the breadwinner of the family, so I thought about stability." "It's the first time I've stepped out of my comfort zone."

The participants also had uncertainties and doubts. Diana shared: "Am I really ready for this?"

While for Lucille: "I was nervous."

Additionally, due to safety issues like shooting and gun-related violence incidents reported in some US schools, Carlo and George shared: "I am anxious, should I go or not?" "I also searched about my district, what came up was about guns, gun-related violence, so I thought it is very dangerous in my area."

With reference to the second category (differences), George, Lucille, and Gina shared similar concerns: "How am I going to handle my students where in fact I cannot speak English fluently? And I was also thinking about the culture of students." "I wondered if I can do it? Because the culture is different, the language is different." "Maybe language barrier, it will be difficult. The culture, the culture of the Americans is very different from ours."

Despite reservations and concerns about differences, there are still opportunities. This reflects the third category. Lucille and Patrick shared: "I want to experience the 'American Dream' that they say." "I'm also excited because it's like a new chapter, a new adventure in my life, personally and professionally."

Theme II: Motivations

This theme describes the factors and circumstances that made the participants decide to leave their permanent position in DepEd in exchange for a temporary teaching position in the US. Carlo, Diana, Gina, and Patrick, respectively, stated: "The main reason is the salary, that's a big factor." "I considered the financial aspect." "There is a big difference in salary." "The salary (laughs)."

Perceived improved financial capabilities that will enable them to better support and provide for their families is the second subcategory under economic-related goals. George and Lucille shared: "My biggest reason why I went abroad is for my parents." "I also must support my siblings, especially those who are still studying in college."

A better compensation as a teacher in the US is seen as relieving financial struggles. As mentioned by Lucille: "There were financial problems, our house was demolished."

For the second category (career-related goals), John, Gina, Lucille, and Andrew stated: "I really want to experience teaching in America, so that I can at least develop myself professionally and personally." "I considered professional growth." "I felt that if I will teach in US, I might learn something new." "First is for greener pasture, second is for professional growth."

For category three, work-related culture in the former employment, Andrew and George mentioned:

"I like to teach, but we don't just teach, there are non-teaching related works." "The system in DepEd, there's too much work."

Additionally, current working conditions were compared when they were still in DepEd. John mentioned: "Aside from teaching, you do not have other work here; there are no forms, because in DepEd, there a lot of forms."

Carlo also remarked: "Because of the system, it's all 'paperworks'."

In addition, John expressed: "The workload of Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3 are the same, but the salary of Teacher 1 is the lowest, it seems very unfair."

Likewise, Carlo, John, Diana, and Patrick shared: "I no longer see the purpose of the things that they want us to do, so my frustration grew." "You still have to do things even if they are not part your job anymore." "When I was in DepEd, even if I came home late from work, I still receive messages, I still have to open my messenger until 12 midnight." "I got tired of DepEd (laughs), it's too much work, the system too, I don't like it anymore."

Moreover, Carlo expressed his dismay over his observed favoritism: "There was also a buddy-buddy system, which when you are close to someone like this (smirk), then you get favored, you don't get a lot of work."

Furthermore, limited professional growth was mentioned as one of their motivations for leaving. Lucille in particular, who is a SpEd major but taught subjects like math and social studies in the 5th grade for eight years, expressed her sentiments: "It came to the point that I felt that I was not growing anymore in DepEd."

Carlo similarly cited: "I took teaching in abroad as a challenge, because I felt that I have no professional growth in DepEd anymore."

Theme III: Preparations

This theme describes the preparations before emigrating. John, Patrick, and Lucille believe that their teaching experience in DepEd helped them. "My years of teaching in the Philippines also prepared me to teach here in America." "Professionally, I think I have been prepared with my years of teaching, especially in DepEd." "I enjoyed a lot and learned from my eight years of experience in DepEd."

Gina, a SpEd major, attributed her college and master's education units as big factors. "Our college education really prepared us." "I tried to finish my masters before coming here, but I was not able to finish it. But I think that helped me a lot because the things I learned there are really being applied here."

John also linked both of his college and master's degrees. "We learned the theories, pedagogies in college, I also finished my MA. So, it seems like I have prepared myself professionally."

Moreover, one of the participants, Andrew, disclosed that he underwent an English proficiency test. In addition, both George and Andrew mentioned: "We also had an orientation from the agency before going to the US. Then in the US, we also had orientation from teachers who were already there, and they talked about their experiences."

Focusing on personal preparations, Lucille, Diana, and Patrick, respectively, stated: "I watched YouTube vlogs, how are their classroom set-ups, what are the approaches made by the teachers, given that the students are different." "I watched vlogs to see how life is here, the cost of living, and at the same time how people survive." "I watched YouTube vlogs of J1 teachers who are already in the US."

Likewise, the culture, curriculum, and educational system of the US were learned through search engines. "I Googled, researched how is their culture, apart from what I already knew before. I read about their education system here in the US, whether their curriculum is the same as ours." "Through Google, I researched and read their curriculum guides, their education framework."

Furthermore, friends and former colleagues who were currently teaching in the US were asked for assistance and guidance. For instance, both Carlo and Diana said: "I had video calls with a co-teacher who left before me, I asked him how is the lesson planning, what their schedule was, including their breaks." "I used to ask my friends who were already teaching in the US about their workload, and they would say that difference is too big when it comes to workload."

Additionally, Diana mentioned "I really prepared myself mentally, because we are aware of homesickness."

For Patrick and John: "I prepared myself mentally, I told myself that once I get to the US, there will be no turning back no matter what happens (laughs)." "I prepared myself for the worst before coming here, so I wouldn't be disappointed (laughs)."

Theme IV: Challenges

This theme describes the experiences of the teachers as they adapt to their new teaching environment. All the participants perceived language barriers as one of their challenges. One of the participants, Carlo, narrated: "Language barrier. When we're still at the hotel, it's hard for us to speak English."

John, Andrew, and Diana additionally expressed: "I can understand other students, like it's normal English, but the African Americans, when they speak, it's like they have their own language." "Although I can express myself in English, there are students who have a different accent, that's the challenge for me." "They

have a local dialect, still English, but there are times when they talk to me, I would joke to them, like, can I ask for subtitles (laughs)?”

Cultural differences were also mentioned by all of the participants. Jonathan, Lucille, George, and Diana, respectively, recounted some of their experiences: “They (students) are very vocal and frank, like they will tell you directly when they don't like you or they don't like your class, or the activities you make them do.” “The students (Americans), unlike in the Philippines, students are obedient and polite. Here, they will talk back to you, and that will really hurt your pride.” “They have languages that are acceptable or normal to them, but not to us.” “Before, a student told me “this little-assed teacher”, something like that, I was hurt.”

Moreover, John shared: “I was really culture shocked when I taught here in America for the first time. Students will say what they want to say, they are very insensitive to their teacher's feelings.”

Gina equally mentioned: “The main challenge I think is the culture, because I'm teaching Kinder to 2nd Grade, for us they are like babies, but here you need to teach them how to be independent at a young age”

In addition, Carlo and Diana described experiences of being discriminated against. “The respect given to the local teachers is not the same respect given to us foreign teachers. I still get to experience that until now.” “Here, most of the students are African Americans, so if your skin color is different, they won't listen to you much, compared to the teachers of the same race.”

Likewise, Diana mentioned: “I've also experienced racism, that's really the challenge I've faced, up to this time.”

As for professional challenges, all of the participants experienced challenges in terms of classroom behaviors. Carlo recounted his experience: “Every now and then, students will test your patience.”

Furthermore, John shared: “They really won't listen to you. Like, they already know that they are not allowed to use a cellphone during class discussion, but they will do it anyway, they don't care.”

Some participants even shared experiences regarding student fights. Andrew, George, and John shared: “Our orientation is, when there's a fight, don't intervene. Here, every classroom has a phone, so you can call a monitor and they will go to your room, and they will take care of the problem.” “We have safety device in the hallway, in case there is an emergency or a fight, we will just press a button.”

Correspondingly, George shared: “Some of us have experienced locked-downs, like when a student is suspected of carrying a gun, we have to stay in our classrooms, no one is allowed to go out, we have to hide, we are not allowed to teach.”

Lucille, who handles students with special needs, shared: “You have to maintain the ‘tiger look’, you can't be soft-spoken, or they won't really listen to you.”

Diana made a similar realization: “Classroom management is also very challenging. I really see it as a challenge, so I would ask myself on what else can I do to improve, because we know that if you are a teacher, classroom management is very essential.”

The challenges in implementing the curriculum were equally highlighted. For Andrew: “It is different, like they only have a few competencies.”

Likewise, John shared: “When I got here, I was given the subject Biology. It seemed that I have forgotten the contents, so I really have to study the lesson every night, so it was difficult. Biology here has an end of the course test.”

George also had similar observations: “They do not have a spiral (progression) and science curriculum here, like for example in Grade 9 Earth Science, in Grade 10 Biology etc.”

While for Gina: “In terms of curriculum, the SPED curriculum is similar to the Philippines, except the IEP process.”

As for Diana: “When I was assigned to my subject for the first time, I talked to the principal, and ask about their curriculum, so that I will know how to do my lesson plans. The principal told me that they do not have a curriculum in Music, she told me to make my own curriculum.”

Another subcategory of professional challenges is the difference in assessment. Andrew shared: “I was shocked by our unit test, because there are only 7 items. I don't feel comfortable with only 7 items, it seems like it's not enough.”

For George: “In the Philippines, a 30-item test is normal. Here it should be only 7 to 12 items, or the students will be shocked.”

Adjustments in teaching strategies and methodologies are also a subcategory of professional challenges. For Diana: “My experience in the Philippines was teaching high school students, here I taught elementary pupils. When I came here, I change a lot of things, like with the way I interact with the students.”

Additionally, John mentioned: “Although in the Philippines it's already student-centered, I still have to adjust it here. I maximized student-centered learning activities, because if not, they will not listen to you.”

Also, students' lack of motivation to learn was observed. John shared: “It's easy to teach, but it's hard to motivate the students here, they're not really motivated to study. I think it's because high school students here are already working, so after their work, they don't study (lesson) because they are already tired.”

Similarly, Carlo remarked: "There are students who go to school just for the sake of going to school, they don't really care about their studies."

Relationships with colleagues is the last subcategory under professional challenges. Lucille shared: "I'm the only Filipino teacher in our school. At first, I was hesitant, I don't really smile that often, so I was afraid that they might misinterpret it. I was nervous then, I always smiled at them, greeted them, but they were not all responsive."

The last category, personal challenges, includes four subcategories. Carlo recalled: "I felt that I was having a breakdown, like I felt like throwing up. I was stressed out that I lost a lot of weight."

He also recalled: "There were times, during Sundays, we get together with other Filipino teachers, then we cry together. We use to say "Hey it's Sunday, tomorrow is Doomsday" (laughs), because, when you to school, you just want the day to end (laughs)."

Two subcategories under personal challenges are independent living and homesickness. Considering that all participants are single and still live with their families in the Philippines, all of them mentioned that independent living is a real difficulty for them. John and Diana shared similar experiences. "I'm single, I don't have any family here, so I have to do things on my own. When I get home from work, I will have to cook, prepare my food, wash dishes, do laundry." "I'm used to being with my family in the Philippines, so everything is provided...and of course the homesickness too."

Being sick while in the US was also experienced while in the US. Carlo shared: "After a month here, I tested positive for COVID, so I was on sick leave for five days. After my sick leave, I got overwhelmed of all the work that I have to accomplish."

Additionally, John expressed: "It's hard to get sick here. That is why I don't want that to happen to me. Aside from the fact that you don't have a family to take care of you here, being sick here is very expensive even if you already have a health insurance."

George also shared: "I suffered from anxiety attack last year. I had a struggle fighting it, to the point that I wanted to go home to the Philippines."

Theme V: Pleasant experiences

This theme describes the pleasant and rewarding experience of teaching in the US. John shares travel opportunities: "Number one is really travel (laughs). At least when you are in America, you can travel to different states, you can drive, if you want to fly, you can."

Additionally, Lucille shared: "I can now travel and explore US, that's one of my dreams."

Furthermore, Andrew, George, and Gina mentioned: "You can go to different places here, it is not that expensive to travel here." "An opportunity to travel in the different states, and we are enjoying that now here."

"We really look forward to weekends and breaks because we can travel."

Teaching being the only focus was also identified by the participants. Gina and Jonathan shared similar experiences. "I enjoy my weekends because my works is always finish, there is no work to take home. Then the last day of school, is really the last day of school, no more work after. We really feel the work-life balance here." "Our only focus is teaching, and all work is completed within school hours."

Diana even compared her present situation to the former: "When you get home here, you don't have to do anything, you don't have to check your phone, you don't have to worry about getting an email, a new update on the group chat, literally when you get home, you just relax. Then on weekends, they are really weekends, when we're on holiday, you're really on holiday and when you're on a vacation, it's really a vacation. I have never experienced that when I was teaching in DepEd."

For economic advantages, John, Gina, and Andrew have similar thoughts: "The salary is really good." "The salary is bigger." "Salary, it's really higher here."

With higher compensation, Diana shared: "First of all being financially stable, you can really save."

For Lucille and George: "I can provide and support my family better now than when I was in DepEd. It is also a fulfillment for me that my parents do not need to work anymore." "When I see my parents able to buy enough food, then the fridge is full, it's not just water anymore (laughs), it is such a fulfillment for me."

The third category, career advancements, John declared: "There are trainings, there are seminars. You can have international trainings and seminars."

The fourth category, job fulfillment, also has a subcategory: appreciation from the students. Carlo shares: "There are students who emailed me, like I am sorry for what happened a while ago. I am sorry that you are handling this class. You don't serve that, things like that. When you least expect it, they will still hand you (a gift) and greet you, like during Christmas, Valentines, etc. It boosted my morale, that's what gives me energy to come back to work the following day."

Similarly, Patrick shared: "There are also students, even a few, who appreciates you, by giving letters or sometimes gifts when there are occasions. It's touching because I feel that they appreciate my efforts."

For George: “Then there are some students, even though many of them don't care, there are one, two or three of them who will write a letter of appreciation for you. Then you think to yourself, maybe, I'm doing something good (laughs), someone appreciates it (laughs).”

Additionally, Andrew stated: “Here, the students are very vocal, they would compare their local teachers to me, they say that they prefer me as a teacher compared to the local teachers. Because I think we are more warm and understanding, they feel the concern even if there is a language barrier.”

In the final category, professional support, George and Jonathan, both science teachers, expressed: “Here I can do all the experiments because we have complete equipment in the laboratory, even in the classroom, everything is provided, including paper, coloring, etc.” “It's also the same in the classrooms, our materials are also complete, especially in the laboratories, so you can really do a lot of activities with the students.”

John claimed: “Here, it is easy to teach contents because all the learning materials of the students, including Chrome books are provided by the school districts.”

For Andrew: “Everything is provided and complete. I can't help but to compare my students in the Philippines, if they are brought here, Filipino students will really excel.”

The support from the administrators, the last category, was highlighted in Lucille's experience: “I am still adjusting, especially the curriculum of my students. I really sought help; I emailed my principal to help me. The school is very supportive, they will immediately give you someone to help you.”

Theme VI: Future outlooks

The last theme, future outlooks, revolves around the plans of the participants after their contracts. According to Diana: “In J-1 Visa, we have three to five years of staying here in the US, depending on the extension. Right after the contract we have to stay in the Philippines for two years, the two-year home rule. If I plan to go back here in the US, I have to be back in the academic for two years, that's part of the requirement here.”

The participants equally expressed interest to teach in private institutions in the Philippines. Lucille mentioned: “You need to be in active teaching if you want to go back to US after two years. I am still willing to teach, but I don't think it will be in DepEd again, maybe in private schools, international schools.”

John also said: “If I want to return to the Philippines, I will teach again in private schools.”

Additionally, George and Diana shared: “Maybe after five years, I will still be teaching, but not in high school, maybe at a higher level like college.” “So far my plan is to go back to the academe, but not to DepEd, maybe to a higher education institution, maybe SHS or college.”

With reference to looking for other opportunities, on the one hand, Carlo, John, and Gina expressed: “My plan is not to go back to the Philippines as a teacher. I'm planning to go to another country, to try another opportunity, whether it's teaching or something else, that's my plan now.” “I'll try to apply abroad, other countries, for example, Japan, UK, Canada.” “I'm planning maybe to go home, but currently I'm looking to apply to other countries too, like for work and migration.”

On the other hand, Andrew shared: “It's also possible that I won't be able to finish my contract. My plan is to apply next year to the district that offers H-1B visa.”

Furthermore, Andrew added: “If that doesn't work out, I'll go back to the Philippines and build a business and I won't go back to teaching.”

3.2. Discussion

Several extant works of literature have already explored Filipino teacher migration [12]-[15] and it is worth noting that some previous findings are parallel with the results of the present study; there are recurring themes. Thus, the six themes identified in the present study provided structure to thoroughly understand the lived experiences of non-immigrant cultural exchange Filipino teachers.

First, with reference to considerations, it can be observed that while reservations and concerns for differences are present, opportunities to live the American dream and adventure equally exist. This yearning for personal growth has been documented in previous studies [16], [17].

Second, as to motivations, while economic and career-related goals served as motivators, the work-related culture in former employment also served as a motivator. Motivators mentioned in previous literature like higher salary [18]-[20] and professional growth [21], [22] are also consistent with the present study. To note, most teachers in the Philippines are breadwinners [19], and financial motivations like better pay can serve as a very good motivator [23], [24]. It must be noted that teacher attrition is a concern in Philippine public schools, and teachers must be compensated commensurate with their duties [25].

Third, preparations, which include both professional and personal preparations, are deemed important. On a personal level, mental preparation is important [26]. Particularly, mental preparations are important in performance-based activities. Being mentally prepared reduces stress and leads to improvement in the control of emotions [27].

Fourth, living in a foreign land is filled with challenges. Cultural, professional, and personal challenges were all identified. As to cultural challenges, language barriers have been identified and are in parallel with the findings of [28], [29]. Putting language barriers in the context of the classroom, it is important to note that teacher-student interactions are crucial for teaching and learning. To make this happen, language barriers must be taken out of the picture [30]. In addition, a different culture as part and parcel of new environments may be considered a challenge. The existence of this challenge among have also been equally documented among Filipino teachers abroad [31], [32]. The experience of racism and discrimination is also noted, which refers to the unjust treatment of persons or groups just because of certain traits, like race [33].

Professional challenges, as identified in the present study, were also noted in previous studies. These include: curriculum adjustments [34] adapting to new teaching methods [35], adjusting to the new work environment; and the behavior of students [36] with reference to personal challenges, homesickness has been identified. This is also true in previous studies [37]. This can be attributed to family separation [21].

Fifth, despite the many challenges faced, there are pleasant experiences. Work-life balance, economic advantages, career advancement, job fulfillment, and professional support are all linked to this theme. Focusing on the two components of work-life balance, which are work and leisure, negative influence of work-to-leisure conflict on work satisfaction and a positive influence on turnover intention among school teachers have been established. This implies that those who experience a balance between work and life and are better satisfied at their work are less likely to think of leaving their respective posts [40]. With economic advantages, salary has always been emphasized in popular media and research literature as the main reason for teachers migration to the US [41]. As to career advancements, they significantly influence job satisfaction and career retention [31]. Thus, career development should be given priority because it can be used as an action to prevent teachers from leaving the profession. As to sense of job fulfillment, the source of meaning can lead to greater engagement [33], and a sense of fulfillment strongly influences teachers decision to stay in the profession. The availability of professional support equally matters. Perceived organizational support influences teachers belonging.

Last, considering that the participants are only in the US as part of a cultural exchange program and are non-immigrants, having future outlooks after their respective programs is a must considering that the overall migration cycle includes both return migration and reintegration [35]. Thus, there is a need for better policies aimed at overcoming the psychological challenges of returning, opportunities for gainful employment, entrepreneurial activities, and income-generating activities.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching in a foreign land is a complex experience and requires a number of considerations just to be able to proceed with this life-changing decision. The results of this study confirm that preparations, motivations, and considerations serve as important preconditions to migration, while challenging and pleasant experiences arise concurrently during actual practice. However, it must be noted that migration might only be temporary; it is often influenced by changing personal, professional, and sociocultural circumstances that affect teachers' future perspectives and decisions.

The findings of the study advances the cyclical migrant teacher experience framework. Rather than a single transition, this framework conceptualizes teaching abroad as a dynamic, nonlinear and iterative process. Four interdependent stages comprised this framework: intentional readiness, formed by motivations, expectations, and preparations; transitional adaptation, established by professional adjustment, cultural negotiation, and institutional support and engagement; experiential consolidation, the integration of experiences through identity reconstruction, skill acquisition and resilience building; and reflective re-orientation, the ongoing evaluation of future pathways (stay, return, or re-migrate). This conceptualization is consistent with several researches on Filipino teacher migration, which documents patterns of motivation and preparation, cultural and pedagogical adjustment, professional growth, and subsequent re-evaluation of career paths. A similar research also identify phases of motivation driven by economic and bureaucratic factors, followed by adaptation to new cultural and pedagogical contexts, and eventual consideration of return or further mobility. By integrating these insights into a cyclical framework, the present study extends the literature by emphasizing temporality, recurrence, and reflective meaning-making as defining dimensions of the migrant teacher experience.

To implement these findings, it is recommended that institutions create comprehensive pre-departure and induction programs that go beyond basic contracts to support cultural transition and mental well-being of migrant Filipino teachers. School administrators should move past short-term onboarding by establishing long-term mentorship and peer networks that address the ongoing challenges of professional adaptation. Simultaneously, migrant teachers should prioritize reflective professional development to build personal resilience and advance their careers internationally. Finally, researchers are encouraged to test this cyclical framework in diverse global settings and academic fields to further validate its application to the evolving landscape of teacher mobility.

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