

Professional Identity of Filipino Special Education Teachers in California: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers working in California develop and shape their professional identity through their lived experiences. The study focused on understanding how factors such as teaching motivations, reflective practices, personal beliefs, cultural adjustment, institutional support, and resilience influence their growth as educators. It also aimed to provide insights into how these experiences contribute to their evolving professional identity and to propose a plan that may support their continued professional development. Using a qualitative research design, the study gathered data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six Filipino SPED teachers selected through purposive sampling. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns, experiences, and perspectives related to professional identity formation. The findings were organized into major themes that reflected the participants' experiences in adapting to U.S. school settings, managing instructional demands, and navigating cultural transitions. The findings showed that professional identity is not formed all at once, but rather develops continuously through experience, reflection, and adaptation. Participants shared that their motivations for teaching evolved over time, from external influences and opportunities to a deeper sense of purpose, calling, and commitment to serving students. Their professional identity was strengthened through resilience, reflective practice, and their ability to adapt teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners. The study also revealed the important role of institutional support, school leadership, mentorship, and collaborative professional environments in helping teachers grow professionally and personally. In addition, participants emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness and flexibility in effectively teaching students from diverse backgrounds. Overall, the study concludes that the professional identity of Filipino SPED teachers is dynamic and continuously shaped by personal experiences, cultural adjustments, reflective practice, and workplace environments. The findings highlight the need for stronger institutional support systems, mentorship opportunities, and culturally responsive professional development programs to help sustain their growth, well-being, and effectiveness as educators.

Keywords: professional identity, lived experiences, challenges, coping strategies, Filipino teachers, special education

Introduction

Professional identity is increasingly understood and a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by teachers' personal beliefs, cultural backgrounds, institutional contexts, and professional

experiences (Izadinia, 2018; Taylor et al., 2021). For special education (SPED) teachers, professional identity development is particularly significant due to the complex demands of addressing diverse learner needs, ensuring legal compliance, and managing high emotional and instructional workloads (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2021).

Filipino teachers represent one of the largest groups of internationally recruited educators in the United States, frequently employed in high-need areas such as special education (Harrison-Reid, 2025). Their professional identity development is shaped not only by the demands of SPED teaching but also by migration-related experiences, including cultural adaptation, professional recontextualization, and systemic navigation within U.S. schools.

In the Philippine context, the professionalization and development of teachers are anchored in policies such as Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013) and Republic Act No. 7277 (Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities), which emphasize inclusive education and teacher preparedness. However, limited resources, high workloads, and systemic constraints continue to influence teachers' professional growth, often prompting migration in search of better opportunities (Harrison-Reid, 2025).

In the United States, SPED teachers operate within a highly regulated program under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates individualized education programs (IEPs), accountability, and legal compliance. While these structures aim to ensure equity for students with disabilities, they also contribute to increased workload and stress, impacting teacher identity and retention (Taylor et al., 2021).

Across Asia, teacher migration is often driven by economic disparities, professional aspirations, and global labor demands. Filipino educators, in particular, bring strong cultural values such as collectivism, adaptability, and relational orientation, which influence their teaching practices and identity construction (David & Nadal, 2016). However, these strengths are often challenged by experiences of marginalization, racialization, and the need to align with Western pedagogical expectations (Deters, 2020).

Globally, internationally educated teachers face common challenges, including cultural adjustment, differences in curriculum and pedagogy, and issues of professional recognition (Collins & Shauka, 2019). For Filipino SPED teachers in California, these challenges are compounded by the demands of special education, including compliance with legal mandates, individualized instruction, and behavioral support, requiring continuous resilience and adaptation (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2021; Edwards, 2014).

Despite the growing presence of Filipino educators in U.S. schools, there remains limited research focusing specifically on the lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in California and how they construct their professional identity within this complex, transnational context. Understanding their narratives is essential to identifying the supports and barriers that shape their professional journeys.

Thus, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino special education teachers in California, with the aim of understanding how personal, cultural, and institutional factors influence their professional identity development.

Theoretical Lens

This study draws from several contemporary theories to understand professional identity formation among Filipino SPED teachers:

Teacher Identity Development Theory, as originally conceptualized by Beijaard et al. (2004), explains that teachers construct, negotiate, and continuously reshape their sense of self as educators. Recent studies indicate that professional identity is dynamic, socially constructed, and shaped by

reflection and contextual experiences (Izadinia, 2018; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2019). This perspective helps examine how Filipino SPED teachers in California negotiate their professional selves while balancing personal pedagogical beliefs, institutional policies, and cultural expectations. Identity formation is not linear; it evolves over time as teachers encounter new experiences, roles, and professional challenges.

Acculturation and Cultural Identity Theory Berry's (2005) acculturation theory and Collier & Thomas' (1988) cultural identity theory, as cited in Deters (2020) and Yazan & Lindahl (2020), explain how immigrant teachers adapt to new cultural and institutional environments while negotiating their cultural identities. These programs highlight the strategies teachers use, such as integration, separation, assimilation, or marginalization, to navigate cross-cultural teaching contexts. For Filipino SPED teachers, acculturation impacts classroom practices, relationships with colleagues and students, and perceptions of professional legitimacy, emphasizing the ongoing negotiation between heritage values and host-country expectations.

Communities of Practice by Lave and Wenger's (1991) classical theory, as cited in Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2015), posits that learning occurs through social participation within a community rather than solely individual cognition. Teachers develop professional identities by engaging with shared practices, collaborating with colleagues, and participating in professional networks. For Filipino SPED teachers, CoPs provide spaces to exchange strategies, normalize challenges, and strengthen professional resilience. Participation in these communities enhances a sense of belonging, recognition, and professional meaning-making, particularly in culturally and institutionally unfamiliar contexts.

Resilience Theory in Education - Grounded in Garmezy's (1970s–1990s) foundational work, and expanded by Masten (2014), resilience theory emphasizes the capacity to adapt, recover, and thrive despite adversity. Contemporary research in education (Gu & Day, 2016; Dunn, 2021) applies this lens to understand how teachers sustain their professional identity amid challenges such as heavy workloads, emotional labor, and systemic constraints. Resilience is viewed as a dynamic process shaped by personal strengths, supportive relationships, and contextual resources rather than an innate trait. For Filipino SPED teachers, resilience informs adaptive strategies, reflective practice, and sustained commitment to students, allowing them to maintain a coherent professional identity despite cross-cultural and institutional pressures.

Critical Perspectives in Education by Paulo Freire (1970), as cited in Valenzuela (2021), provides a program for understanding how systemic inequities, cultural dynamics, and social structures influence teacher identity. Critical perspectives challenge top-down approaches and highlight social justice, empowerment, and equity. Teachers are encouraged to engage actively with societal and institutional structures, recognizing how these influence professional practice. For Filipino SPED teachers, this lens illuminates how institutional expectations, cultural biases, and policy pressures intersect with identity development, emphasizing advocacy, critical reflection, and culturally responsive practice.

Statement of the Problem

The study aimed to explore the professional identity development of Filipino special education (SPED) teachers in California and, based on their lived experiences, develop a professional development program that supports and strengthens their professional identity.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Filipino special education teachers in California describe their experiences in developing their professional identity?
2. What factors shape their development of professional identity as SPED teachers?

3. How do Filipino special education teachers in California navigate challenges, utilize support systems, and employ coping strategies to sustain their professional identity?
4. Based on findings of the study, what professional development program can be developed to support and strengthen their professional identity development of Filipino SPED teachers in California?

Materials and methods

This section presents the discussion of the research design, population and sample, participants in the study, research instrument, data-gathering procedure, data treatment, and ethical considerations in the conduct of the study.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is appropriate because it seeks to explore and understand individuals' lived experiences as they make sense of their worlds (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this study was to examine how Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers in California construct their professional identity, including the personal, cultural, and institutional factors that shape their narratives. A phenomenological approach allows participants to describe their experiences in depth, while the researcher identifies themes and essences that reflect their shared realities.

Data Generation

The researcher. The guide includes open-ended questions that focus on teachers' personal and professional journeys, the influence of cultural background on their teaching identity, the institutional challenges and support systems they encounter, and narratives of resilience, challenges, and meaning-making. To ensure validity, the interview guide was subjected to expert validation. Three experts—one in qualitative research, one in education (special education), and one in Filipino studies—reviewed the instrument for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. A pilot interview with one Filipino SPED teacher (not part of the final study) was also conducted to refine the questions. Feedback was incorporated before conducting the actual interviews.

Once the interview guide questions had been validated, the following procedures were undertaken to ensure valid and ethical results: The researcher secured thesis committee approval and contacted the school district and Filipino teacher networks to recruit participants. Participants received an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded. Interviews were conducted via online platforms (e.g., Zoom or Google Meet). Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues and initial impressions. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were sent back to co-participants for member-checking to ensure accuracy. And transcripts were coded. Once coded, final themes were sent to an external auditor/intercoder to check the consistency, credibility, and reliability of the themes generated.

Selection of Participants

The target population of this study consisted of Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers currently employed in California public schools, specifically those serving in the Palmdale School District. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) Filipino by ethnicity or nationality, (2) currently employed as a Special Education teacher in a California public school, (3) with at least two years of teaching experience, and (4) willing to participate and share their personal and professional experiences. Following the screening and selection process, six (6) participants who met all the inclusion criteria were recruited for the study. The

participants varied in age, gender, years of teaching experience, educational background, and the type of SPED programs they handled (e.g., Resource Specialist Program [RSP], mild/moderate or moderate/severe Special Day Class [SDC]). This diversity enabled the study to capture rich, varied, and nuanced perspectives on the professional identity development of Filipino SPED teachers within the U.S. educational context.

Thematic Reflection

As part of the thematic reflection, data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process began with familiarization with the data through careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts, followed by the generation of initial codes to capture the significant features of the responses. These codes were then organized to identify broader patterns or themes, which were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. Once finalized, the themes were clearly defined and named, and the analysis culminated in a comprehensive narrative report. The themes were organized around the research questions, focusing on professional identity descriptions, influencing factors, and resilience or meaning-making processes. Additionally, thematic reflection was employed throughout the analysis, enabling continuous consideration of how the researcher's perspectives and interpretations shape the identification and framing of themes. This reflective practice ensures rigor, transparency, and a deeper engagement with the data.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly observed ethical research standards to ensure the protection and respect of participants. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to conducting interviews. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Data security was prioritized by storing audio files, transcripts, and consent forms in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher. Participants also retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Finally, cultural sensitivity was upheld, and participants' narratives were represented authentically and respectfully throughout the research process.

The researcher acknowledged the positionality as a Filipino educator, which may influence interpretation; reflexivity was practiced throughout the study to minimize bias.

Results and discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on the professional identity development of Filipino special education teachers in California, approached through a phenomenological lens. The focus is on the lived experiences of eight participants, purposively selected for their expertise and engagement in special education within U.S. schools. By exploring their personal narratives, this chapter aims to illuminate how these teachers perceive, construct, and negotiate their professional identity within the context of cross-cultural teaching, institutional expectations, and personal and cultural values.

Lived Experiences of the Participants on the Professional Identity Development

The findings demonstrate that the professional identity development of Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers in California is a dynamic and evolving process shaped by their personal teaching journeys, motivations for entering the profession, and continuous transformation of their teaching philosophies. The first theme, **Personal Teaching Journey**, illustrates that professional identity is constructed through interconnected experiences beginning with participants' entry into the teaching profession, whether through deliberate career aspirations or unexpected opportunities, and strengthened by their extensive teaching experience in the Philippines, which provided instructional competence and confidence prior to migration. This diversity of entry pathways is reflected in Par-

ticipant A's statement, *"My journey into teaching began in the Philippines, where I spent 18 years teaching..."*, while Participant C recalled, *"I accidentally went to the Education Bldg... I got curious... I applied,"* illustrating that teaching careers emerged through both intentional aspirations and unforeseen opportunities. Participants' prior teaching experience, such as Participant B's description of having *"9 years teaching experience in Special Education Self-Contained,"* further demonstrates how professional competence developed before migration. However, the transition to the U.S. teaching context required substantial adaptation to different classroom management practices, instructional approaches, legal requirements, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) processes. Participant D summarized this transition by stating, *"Totally different—Classroom management, Instruction, IEP Process,"* emphasizing the extent of professional adjustment required. Their subsequent role evolution into more collaborative and individualized SPED positions, exemplified by Participant E's description of becoming *"more specialized and collaborative,"* further expanded their professional responsibilities. Likewise, resilience became evident as participants navigated migration-related hardships, with Participant B candidly sharing, *"Hindi okay pagpunta ko dito... na scam ako..."*, yet continuing to persevere despite these challenges. These findings reinforce the view that teacher identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated through lived experiences and changing professional contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2019; Flores & Day, 2006; Iza-dinia, 2018; Miller, 2020; Trent, 2017).

The second theme, **Motivations for Becoming a SPED Teacher**, reveals that participants' career decisions were shaped by a complex interaction of intrinsic, relational, and contextual influences that evolved throughout their professional lives. Participants consistently expressed a genuine passion for supporting learners with disabilities, as reflected in Participant A's belief that *"every student can learn and succeed,"* and Participant E's emphasis on patience and belief in every learner's potential. Personal influences likewise played a significant role, with Participant B sharing, *"My Aunt... influenced me to pursue Special Education,"* demonstrating the importance of significant role models in career choice. At the same time, several participants acknowledged that economic realities initially influenced their decisions, particularly opportunities to teach abroad and support their families. Participant C openly admitted, *"My motivation... was to teach abroad,"* while Participant B explained that the decision was *"To support my family... to pay my debt..."* and Participant D described balancing *"Financial instability and love for Special Ed..."* These responses illustrate that practical considerations coexisted with professional aspirations. Importantly, participants described how these initially external motivations gradually evolved into a deeper sense of vocation. As Participant C reflected, *"I realized that becoming a special education teacher is a vocation,"* demonstrating how meaningful professional experiences transformed practical motivations into enduring professional commitment. This progression supports Self-Determination Theory, which posits that externally driven motivations may become internalized into enduring professional values (Deci & Ryan, 2000), while also aligning with research emphasizing that teacher motivation encompasses both altruistic and pragmatic considerations (Richardson & Watt, 2010, 2016; Heinz, 2015). The findings further extend existing literature by highlighting how migration-related economic realities uniquely shape the professional identity formation of internationally educated SPED teachers.

The third theme, **Evolving Teaching Philosophy and Self-Perception**, illustrates how participants continuously refined their beliefs, instructional practices, and professional identities as they gained experience within the U.S. educational system. Their commitment to a student-centered and inclusive philosophy was reflected in Participant A's statement, *"My teaching philosophy is centered on the belief that every student has the ability to learn,"* while Participant E emphasized providing *"targeted instruction based on their IEP goals,"* highlighting their commitment to individualized

learning. Participants also described a significant shift toward more structured and evidence-based instruction. As Participant E explained, *“I am now more structured, time-bound, and data-driven,”* reflecting increased accountability and evidence-based decision-making in SPED practice. These experiences contributed to sustained growth in professional identity, fostering greater confidence, reflection, and instructional competence. Participant A described becoming *“a reflective, student-centered, and resilient teacher,”* while Participant B acknowledged that *“Working with students from different cultures shaped my identity,”* illustrating increased adaptability and cultural responsiveness. Furthermore, participants experienced a shift from teacher to advocate through active collaboration with families and multidisciplinary teams, while resilience and emotional growth enabled them to sustain long-term commitment despite demanding classroom environments. Participant B reflected on this emotional growth by stating, *“I learned to tolerate loudness and profanity,”* while Participant C admitted that *“Managing extreme student behavior was really a challenge,”* demonstrating how perseverance strengthened both their instructional practice and professional identity. Collectively, these findings support contemporary perspectives that conceptualize teacher identity as an ongoing, socially situated process shaped by reflection, contextual adaptation, advocacy, and resilience (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2019; Day & Gu, 2016; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021), and underscore that the professional identity of Filipino SPED teachers is continuously reconstructed through the intersection of prior experience, migration, motivation, and evolving professional practice.

Factors Shaping Professional Identity

The findings indicate that the professional identity development of Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers in California is shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal, cultural, and institutional factors, reflecting the multidimensional nature of teacher identity. The **personal factors** reveal that identity construction begins with teachers' motivation and purpose in teaching, where intrinsic commitment to serving learners with special needs gradually develops into a strong sense of vocation. This commitment is reflected in Participant A's belief that *“I believe that every student can learn and succeed,”* while Participant C acknowledged that *“I realized that becoming a special education teacher is a vocation,”* illustrating how participants internalized their professional purpose over time. However, sustaining this commitment required navigating professional challenges and growth, particularly in mastering new instructional expectations, workload demands, and special education practices. Participant A admitted that *“Understanding the system, paperwork, and new teaching standards was challenging,”* while Participant F similarly identified *“learning the paperwork, IEP processes”* as one of the greatest difficulties during the transition. Participants' experiences further demonstrate that adaptation and resilience, characterized by humility, continuous learning, and openness to feedback, enabled them to respond effectively to unfamiliar educational contexts. This was exemplified by Participant B, who shared, *“I stayed open-minded, asked questions... Never ako nag marunong!”* emphasizing humility as a strategy for professional growth. Their emotional and professional experiences likewise strengthened confidence, perseverance, and reflective practice, as illustrated by Participant C's reflection that *“I felt overwhelmed because everything was new,”* and Participant B's expression of faith and perseverance, *“Sa awa ng Diyos, nakakaya ko naman.”* Collectively, these findings reinforce the view that professional identity is an evolving construct shaped through the interaction of personal beliefs, lived experiences, and emotional engagement rather than through professional preparation alone (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2019; Izadinia, 2018; Korthagen, 2017). Consistent with Gu and Day (2016), resilience emerged not merely as an individual trait but as a developmental process that enables teachers to sustain commitment and professional growth despite the complex demands of special education.

Beyond personal attributes, the findings emphasize that **cultural factors** significantly influenced participants' identity reconstruction as they transitioned into U.S. schools. Adjusting to differences in classroom behavior and student diversity required participants to reconsider traditional assumptions about authority, participation, and student engagement. Participant A observed that *"Students are often more expressive and outspoken,"* illustrating the contrast between Philippine and U.S. classroom cultures and the need to modify classroom management practices. Participants also encountered challenges in adapting their communication styles. As Participant A explained, *"Adjusting to different communication styles... was challenging,"* while Participant B emphasized the importance of *"understanding and respecting that we have different cultural backgrounds."* These adjustments encouraged participants to adopt more collaborative and culturally responsive interactions with students, families, and colleagues. Likewise, participants strengthened their ability to navigate communication and relationships by fostering openness, empathy, and respect. Participant A shared, *"I navigated these differences by being open and respectful,"* whereas Participant B described using *"clear and simple communication"* to build trust. Participants also refined their classroom management strategies by balancing consistency with relationship-centered approaches. Participant F highlighted the importance of *"clear rules, routines, and expectations,"* while Participant A emphasized *"building relationships"* as the foundation of effective classroom management. Through these experiences, participants developed greater respect for cultural diversity and recognized diversity as a resource for learning rather than a challenge to overcome. These findings support culturally responsive teaching literature, which argues that effective teaching requires educators to understand and value students' cultural backgrounds while adapting instructional and relational practices accordingly (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Moreover, participants' experiences reflect cultural humility as an ongoing reflective process that strengthens intercultural competence and contributes to the continuous reconstruction of professional identity (Hook et al., 2017; Sleeter, 2017).

The **institutional factors** further demonstrate that professional identity is socially situated and continually negotiated within organizational structures and policy environments. Participants identified substantial adjustments to structural and educational system differences, particularly the accountability-oriented nature of U.S. special education, alongside extensive IEP processes and documentation. Participant A recognized *"the strong emphasis on inclusion, support, and meeting the needs of all learners,"* whereas Participant D noted that *"expectations related to IEP documentation... were new."* Participant C likewise admitted that *"The amount of documentation and meetings was new to me,"* emphasizing the complexity of legal compliance and data-driven instructional practices. These responsibilities intensified issues related to workload and time management, requiring participants to balance instructional, collaborative, and administrative responsibilities. Nevertheless, participants consistently identified institutional support systems as critical to successful adaptation. Participant A explained that *"Support from my mentor, colleagues, and administration has been very helpful,"* while Participant B stated, *"Yes, my mentor really trained me,"* highlighting the importance of mentorship and collaborative learning. Professional development opportunities also contributed to participants' growth, with Participant A noting that *"Professional development opportunities... have helped me refine my teaching practices,"* and Participant E acknowledging, *"I was accepted into the early completion option of our induction program."* At the same time, participants expressed continuing support needs and recommendations, including stronger onboarding systems for internationally educated teachers. Participant B's suggestion, *"Sana may libreng bahay... maka-pag-ipon,"* reflects broader concerns regarding financial adjustment and settlement support beyond instructional preparation. Overall, participants recognized that meeting institutional expectations and

compliance ultimately enhanced their competence as SPED professionals. These findings affirm that teacher identity is co-constructed through interactions between individual agency and institutional contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004; Flores & Day, 2006). Furthermore, they underscore the importance of organizational support, mentorship, and collaborative school cultures in promoting teacher retention, resilience, and long-term professional identity development among internationally recruited SPED teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2021; Ronfeldt et al., 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020).

Major Challenges, Support System and Network Used, Coping Strategies and Resilience Practices

The findings demonstrate that the challenges encountered by Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers in California are multidimensional and extend beyond instructional responsibilities to encompass professional, cultural, and organizational demands. Under the theme **Major Challenges**, participants consistently identified classroom management and student behavior, documentation and Individualized Education Program (IEP) processes, cultural and system adjustment, and workload and time constraints as interconnected factors that complicated their transition and professional practice. Participants described difficulties managing students with diverse academic and behavioral needs while simultaneously meeting extensive legal and documentation requirements. For example, Participant C admitted that *“Managing extreme student behavior was really a challenge,”* while Participant B reflected that *“I learned to tolerate loudness and profanity,”* illustrating the emotional adjustment required in working with diverse learners. Documentation and compliance requirements likewise emerged as significant challenges. Participant C acknowledged that *“The amount of documentation and meetings was new to me,”* whereas Participant F emphasized that *“My biggest challenges have been learning the paperwork, IEP processes.”* Participants also experienced considerable adjustment to unfamiliar educational systems and classroom expectations. Participant A admitted that *“Understanding the system, paperwork, and new teaching standards was challenging,”* reflecting the complexities of adapting to a new professional environment. At the same time, balancing instructional responsibilities, collaboration, documentation, and administrative expectations contributed to workload and time pressures. These findings are consistent with literature emphasizing that special education teachers experience significantly greater administrative demands, behavioral complexities, and emotional labor than teachers in general education, making resilience and adaptive expertise essential components of professional identity (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bettini et al., 2017; Evertson & Weinstein, 2019; Simonsen et al., 2017). Furthermore, the need to adapt to unfamiliar educational structures and cultural expectations supports the argument that teacher identity is continually reconstructed through contextual experiences and institutional pressures rather than remaining a fixed professional attribute (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2019; Izadina, 2018; Santoro, 2018).

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated that sustaining professional identity depended heavily on access to diverse **support systems and networks** operating across personal, professional, institutional, and spiritual domains. Family and personal support provided emotional stability throughout the migration and adjustment process, while colleagues and mentors fostered collaborative learning, confidence, and practical problem-solving. Participant A explained, *“I seek support from colleagues and mentors,”* while also emphasizing that *“Support from my mentor, colleagues, and administration has been very helpful,”* demonstrating the interconnected nature of professional support. Institutional support was further strengthened through structured induction and professional development. Participant E shared, *“I was accepted into the early completion option of our induction program,”* highlighting the value of formal mentoring structures in easing profession-

al transition. Beyond institutional resources, participants consistently identified faith and spirituality as central sources of strength. Participant F remarked, *“Surrender everything to God... dasal lang po talaga ang personal strategy ko,”* illustrating how prayer and spirituality sustained hope, emotional well-being, and perseverance throughout challenging experiences. These findings reinforce ecological perspectives of teacher development, suggesting that resilience is strengthened through supportive interpersonal relationships and organizational structures rather than individual effort alone (Day & Gu, 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2021; Ronfeldt et al., 2020). They also extend existing literature by illustrating how social, institutional, and spiritual resources collectively sustain internationally educated SPED teachers as they reconstruct their professional identities in culturally different educational settings (Nadal, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020).

The theme **Coping Strategies and Resilience Practices** further illustrates that participants actively employed adaptive strategies to preserve both professional effectiveness and personal well-being despite persistent challenges. Organization and time management emerged as practical strategies for managing competing responsibilities. Participant A explained, *“I stay organized by breaking tasks into manageable steps,”* demonstrating deliberate planning as a means of reducing stress. Reflective practice and problem-solving likewise enabled participants to improve instructional decision-making. Participant G shared, *“I take time to reflect and think about solutions instead of focusing on the problem,”* illustrating a solution-oriented mindset. Participants also maintained a positive and purpose-driven outlook throughout their professional journey. Participant A reflected, *“I remind myself of my purpose as a teacher,”* emphasizing that reconnecting with their professional mission strengthened their commitment despite difficulties. Equally important were practices promoting self-care and work-life balance. Participant A explained, *“I make sure to take time to rest and recharge,”* recognizing the importance of maintaining personal well-being to sustain long-term effectiveness. Cultural values also strengthened participants' resilience. Participant F proudly stated, *“Filipino people are very resilient... matibay ang Pinoy,”* highlighting how cultural identity reinforced perseverance during adversity. Similarly, faith remained an enduring coping mechanism, as Participant G noted, *“I rely on prayer and self-reflection,”* while adaptability and a growth mindset enabled participants to embrace change as opportunities for learning. This was clearly expressed by Participant A, who reflected, *“You'll never understand your full capability unless you step outside your comfort zone.”* Rather than functioning as isolated coping mechanisms, these strategies interacted to create a resilient professional identity grounded in reflective practice, cultural strengths, spirituality, and lifelong learning. These findings support contemporary scholarship that conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic developmental process supported by reflection, adaptability, and meaningful purpose rather than as an inherent personal characteristic (Dweck, 2016; Gu & Day, 2016; Korthagen, 2017; Martin et al., 2019). Collectively, the findings suggest that the long-term sustainability of Filipino SPED teachers in inclusive educational settings depends on the reciprocal interaction among professional competence, supportive environments, culturally grounded resilience, and adaptive coping strategies, thereby highlighting the multidimensional processes through which professional identity is continuously constructed and sustained.

Proposed Professional Development Program

The development of a professional development program is grounded in the findings of this study, which revealed that Filipino SPED teachers in California encounter significant challenges related to instructional demands, compliance with SPED requirements, classroom management, and workload. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated strong resilience, adaptability, and commitment to their roles, supported by personal coping strategies and varying levels of professional and social support.

In response to these findings, the proposed “I-SUPPORT Program” was designed to systematically address the multifaceted needs of Filipino SPED teachers by strengthening their professional identity, enhancing instructional competencies, and fostering supportive and sustainable teaching practices. The program integrates four key components—Induction and Identity Formation, Instructional and SPED Competency Enhancement, Support Systems and Collaborative Networks, and Resilience, Well-being, and Reflective Practice—which collectively aim to provide a holistic approach to professional growth.

This program is informed by the understanding that professional identity is continuously shaped through experience, reflection, and social interaction, and that effective professional development must be ongoing, contextually relevant, and collaborative. It also recognizes that teacher resilience and well-being are essential to sustaining effective practice, particularly in demanding and specialized fields such as special education.

Conclusions

From the findings of the study, the following conclusions are generated:

1. Filipino SPED teachers experience professional identity as a continuous and evolving journey shaped by their prior teaching backgrounds, migration experiences, and adjustment to the U.S. education system. While many initially entered teaching due to practical or financial reasons, their motivation gradually shifted toward a deeper sense of purpose and commitment to supporting students with special needs. Over time, they developed a stronger identity as inclusive, reflective, and student-centered educators who are more confident, adaptable, and culturally responsive in their practice.
2. The professional identity of Filipino SPED teachers is shaped by a combination of personal, cultural, and institutional factors. Intrinsic motivation, resilience, and reflective practice play a major role, while everyday teaching challenges are often reframed as opportunities for growth. At the same time, cultural differences in classroom expectations and communication styles require ongoing adjustment and adaptability. Institutional structures, including policies, IEP demands, workload, and school support systems, also significantly influence how teachers construct and sustain their professional identity, with mentorship and positive school environments serving as key supports.
3. Filipino SPED teachers face persistent challenges related to classroom management, IEP documentation, cultural adaptation, and workload pressures. Despite these difficulties, they are sustained by strong support networks that include family, colleagues, mentors, school leadership, professional development programs, and faith. To manage stress and demands, teachers rely on practical and personal coping strategies such as time management, reflection, maintaining a positive mindset, self-care, cultural values of resilience, spirituality, and adaptability, all of which help them remain committed and effective in their roles.
4. The I-SUPPORT Program was developed to holistically address the needs of Filipino SPED teachers in California by strengthening their professional identity, instructional competence, and overall well-being. The program integrates four key components: Induction and Identity Formation, Instructional and SPED Competency Enhancement, Support Systems and Collaborative Networks, and Resilience, Well-being, and Reflective Practice. It is grounded in the view that professional identity develops continuously through experience, reflection, and collaboration, and that sustainable professional

growth depends on ongoing, relevant, and supportive development opportunities that also prioritize teacher resilience and well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are drawn:

1. The host school may strengthen its existing orientation program by adding SPED-specific mentoring tracks that focus on IEP processes, behavior management, and data-driven instruction to better support teachers' specialized needs. It is also recommended that the school provide targeted wellness and transition support sessions within the induction program to help new SPED teachers manage stress, workload, and emotional adjustment. These enhancements can create a more responsive and supportive entry experience for beginning SPED teachers.
2. The host district may enhance its Teacher Induction Program by incorporating a dedicated SPED strand that includes advanced training on IEP compliance, inclusive practices, and differentiated instruction. To ensure consistency, the district may standardize mentoring quality across schools through structured mentor training and clear guidelines. Additionally, it is recommended that the district systematically monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of induction programs for SPED teachers using surveys, performance data, and feedback mechanisms to continuously improve support systems.
3. Philippine teacher education institutions (TEI) may strengthen SPED preparation programs by integrating more coursework on IEP development, behavior management, and inclusive education practices. They may also provide greater exposure to real-world SPED settings through internships, simulations, and practicum experiences to better prepare future educators. In addition, TEIs are encouraged to incorporate training on international education systems to prepare graduates for global teaching contexts, particularly U.S. SPED systems and cultural differences.
4. Policymakers may strengthen SPED policies and standards by aligning them with global best practices and ensuring adequate support systems for teachers and learners with special needs. Increased funding for SPED programs is also recommended to improve resources, training opportunities, and instructional support. Furthermore, policymakers may consider supporting migration pathways for teachers by providing pre-departure training that better prepares Filipino educators for international teaching environments.
5. Non-government Organizations (NGOs) such as SPED Advocacy/Professional Groups and Associations may support SPED teachers by providing accessible training and capacity-building programs focused on classroom management, inclusive practices, and emotional resilience. They may also offer mental health and wellness services such as counseling, peer support groups, and advocacy initiatives that promote teacher well-being and sustainability in the profession.
6. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies between local and migrant SPED teachers to deepen understanding of professional identity formation, challenges, and coping strategies. Future studies may also explore longitudinal approaches to examine how professional identity evolves over time across different cultural and educational contexts.
7. Host district, NGOs and DMW may adopt and implement the **I-SUPPORT Program** as a comprehensive professional development program for SPED teachers. The program in-

tegrates Induction and Identity Formation, Instructional and SPED Competency Enhancement, Support Systems and Collaborative Networks, and Resilience, Well-being, and Reflective Practice. Its implementation can provide a structured and holistic approach to strengthening teacher preparedness, improving instructional competence, and sustaining professional identity and well-being, particularly for Filipino SPED teachers working in demanding inclusive education settings.

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