

New Roots in New Soil: Adjustment Experiences of Newly-Emigrated Filipino Special Education Middle School Teachers

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Abstract

The increasing recruitment of Filipino special education (SPED) teachers to address teacher shortages in the United States has highlighted the need to better understand their transition into unfamiliar educational and cultural contexts. Although previous studies have examined teacher migration, cultural adjustment, teacher well-being, and coping mechanisms, limited research has focused specifically on newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers in U.S. middle schools and on how these dimensions intersect during their early years of transition. This study addresses this gap by providing a context-specific and multidimensional account of how migration-related adjustment interacts with the distinctive professional, cultural, and institutional demands of special education. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers during their first one to three years of teaching in California middle schools. Four Filipino SPED teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that participants experienced significant cultural, instructional, emotional, and professional adjustments as they navigated the American special education system. Five overarching themes emerged: confronting a different classroom culture, navigating the complexity of special education systems, resilience through adaptation, relationship-centered practice, and growth through unfamiliar experiences. Participants identified flexibility, collaboration, emotional regulation, organization, mentorship, family support, and faith as essential resources that enabled them to cope with the demands of teaching in a new educational environment. Despite experiencing culture shock, uncertainty, and professional stress, participants demonstrated resilience and continuous professional growth through reflection, learning, and supportive relationships. The findings suggest that the adjustment of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers is a multidimensional and transformative process shaped by personal, professional, cultural, and institutional factors. The study contributes to the literature on teacher migration and special education by showing how these interconnected dimensions of adjustment shape the early transition and professional development of internationally recruited Filipino SPED teachers within the specific context of U.S. middle schools. Based on these findings, a Transition Support Action Plan was developed to facilitate teacher adjustment and promote well-being, professional growth, and long-term retention among internationally recruited Filipino SPED teachers.

Keywords: California public schools, cultural adjustment, Filipino educators, special education, teacher migration, teacher transition, transition support

Introduction

The global shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in special education (SPED), has intensified the international recruitment of educators from countries such as the Philippines. In the United States, the persistent demand for SPED teachers has encouraged school districts to hire internationally trained professionals to address staffing shortages in public schools. Filipino SPED teachers are among the internationally trained educators recruited to address staffing needs in U.S. public schools. Despite these strengths, transitioning to a new educational system requires substantial cultural, instructional, emotional, and professional adjustment as teachers navigate unfamiliar policies, classroom expectations, and diverse student needs.

The transition is particularly demanding within special education, where teachers are expected to develop and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), fulfill documentation and compliance requirements, collaborate with multidisciplinary teams, and respond to diverse academic and behavioral needs. These responsibilities may differ considerably from teachers' previous professional experiences. More broadly, demanding working conditions and organizational factors have been identified as important influences on special education teacher attrition and retention (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Recent studies have increasingly documented the experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in the United States. Dapudong and Siy (2023) examined the experiences, challenges, teaching strategies, and coping mechanisms of Filipino teachers working with students with special needs in San Jose, California. Gomez-Lange (2024) explored cultural differences experienced by Filipino SPED teachers in the United States, identifying challenges associated with educational practices, communication, professional relationships, and adaptation. Gamez-Catiis (2024) investigated the experiential gains of Filipino special education exchange program teachers, while Flores and Eludo (2025) examined the professional, cultural, and personal transitions of Filipino SPED teachers across U.S. settings. More recently, Augusto et al. (2026) documented the instructional, organizational, behavioral, cultural, and linguistic challenges encountered by Filipino SPED teachers in U.S. public schools. These studies demonstrate growing scholarly attention to Filipino SPED teachers and show that their experiences involve multiple dimensions of professional and cultural adaptation.

Despite this growing body of research, the early transition of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers situated specifically in U.S. middle schools warrants more focused examination. Existing studies have provided valuable accounts of cultural differences, instructional challenges, coping strategies, professional transitions, and broader adaptation experiences. The present study builds on this literature by focusing on teachers within their first one to three years of U.S. teaching and examining how cultural, instructional, emotional, professional, and institutional dimensions interact within the specific context of middle school special education. Rather than treating these dimensions as isolated challenges, the study conceptualizes adjustment as an interconnected and potentially transformative process.

Addressing this area is important because understanding early transition experiences may inform induction programs, mentoring initiatives, and institutional support systems designed for internationally recruited teachers. Guided by a phenomenological approach, this study explored the lived experiences of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers during their first one to three years of teaching in California middle schools. Specifically, it examined their adjustment experiences, identified the themes emerging from those experiences, explored the coping strategies and support systems they utilized, and generated evidence to inform the development of a Transition Support Action Plan.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of newly emigrated Filipino special education (SPED) teachers during their first one to three years of teaching in California middle schools. A phenomenological approach was selected because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their lived experiences. This design enabled the researcher to examine participants' personal and professional adjustment as they transitioned into the United States educational system.

Participants and Research Setting

The study involved four Filipino SPED teachers employed in two public school districts in Southern California. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) Filipino by nationality or ethnicity; (2) currently employed as a SPED teacher in a California public middle school; (3) had one to three years of teaching experience in the United States; and (4) were willing to participate voluntarily in the study. Limiting participants to teachers within this early transition period allowed the study to capture meaningful experiences of professional and cultural adjustment.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide that underwent expert validation prior to data collection. A pilot interview was conducted to improve the clarity and relevance of the interview questions; however, the pilot participant was excluded from the final study. Individual interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted either in person or online, depending on participant availability. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019). The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data, followed by systematic coding of meaningful statements. Related codes were then organized into broader categories, reviewed for coherence, refined into final themes, and clearly defined to capture the shared meanings of participants' experiences. Throughout the analytic process, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness to enhance transparency and trustworthiness in the interpretation of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes. Pseudonyms or participant codes were used during data analysis and reporting to protect participants' identities.

Results

Participant Profile

The study involved four Filipino special education (SPED) teachers currently teaching in California middle schools. All participants had prior teaching experience in the Philippines and had accumulated one to three years of teaching experience in the United States at the time of the study.

Table 1 summarizes their professional backgrounds, current teaching assignments, U.S. teaching experience, and primary motivations for teaching in the United States.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Participant	Previous Teaching Experience in the Philippines	Current Assignment in California	Years of Teaching Experience in the U.S.	Primary Reason for Teaching in the U.S.
P1	12 years teaching learners with intellectual disabilities	Middle School SPED Teacher	1 year	Professional growth and better career opportunities
P2	More than 13 years in private and public schools	Resource Specialist Program (RSP) Teacher	Nearly 2 years	Professional advancement and financial stability
P3	21 years as a High School Social Studies Teacher	Resource Specialist Program (RSP) Teacher	1 year	Professional growth, international experience, and family stability
P4	18 years in secondary and special education; part-time university instructor	Middle School Resource Specialist Program (RSP) Teacher	2 years	Better compensation and a well-structured educational system

Emergent Themes

The analysis of the participants' narratives revealed several recurring themes that characterized their shared experiences as Filipino SPED teachers in U.S. middle schools. These themes reflect cultural and behavioral adjustment, professional role redefinition, resilience through adaptation, relationship-centered practice, and growth through unfamiliar experiences. Table 2 presents the sample participant statements, their description, and emergent themes.

Table 2. Emergent Themes from the Participants' Lived Experiences

Sample Participant Statements	Description	Emergent Themes
"They were too blunt..." (P3)	Participants experienced challenges adjusting to differences in student behavior, classroom interaction, and communication styles in U.S. middle schools.	Confronting a Different Classroom Culture

Sample Participant Statements	Description	Emergent Themes
“The shift from being an instructor to being a case manager...” (P3)	Participants struggled with IEP documentation, legal compliance, case management, and co-teaching responsibilities.	Navigating the Complexity of Special Education Systems
“I became more patient, more adaptable...” (P1)	Participants demonstrated persistence, flexibility, and willingness to continuously learn despite stress and uncertainty.	Resilience Through Adaptation
“My mentor and coach had a strong influence...” (P4)	Participants emphasized the importance of relationships with students, colleagues, mentors, and family members in supporting adjustment.	Relationship-Centered Practice
“I define myself by how much I am willing to learn for them.” (P3)	Participants viewed unfamiliar and difficult experiences as opportunities for personal and professional growth.	Growth Through Unfamiliar Experiences

Overall, the findings indicate that participants’ adjustment extended beyond adapting to differences in classroom culture and special education procedures. Their experiences reflected an interconnected process of cultural and professional adaptation supported by resilience, relationships, and continuous learning. Although the transition was initially characterized by uncertainty and unfamiliar demands, participants described these experiences as contributing to increased confidence, adaptability, and personal and professional growth.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the adjustment of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers is a multidimensional process involving cultural adaptation, professional learning, emotional resilience, relationship-building, and institutional adjustment. Rather than occurring independently, these dimensions interacted throughout participants’ early years of teaching in U.S. middle schools. This finding complements emerging research showing that Filipino SPED teachers in the United States navigate interconnected professional, cultural, and personal transitions (Flores & Eludo, 2025).

The theme Confronting a Different Classroom Culture reflects participants’ experiences of adjusting to differences in student behavior, communication styles, classroom management, and teacher-student relationships. Similar challenges have been documented by Dapudong and Siy (2023) among Filipino teachers working with students with special needs in California. Gomez-Lange (2024) likewise found that Filipino SPED teachers encountered cultural differences involving educational practices, communication styles, and professional relationships and relied on professional relationships and emotional and social adjustment in adapting to the U.S. educational system. In the present study, these cultural differences were particularly salient during participants’ first years in U.S. middle schools, requiring them to reconsider previously established approaches to classroom authority, communication, and relationships with students.

The theme Navigating the Complexity of Special Education Systems demonstrates that professional adjustment involved substantially more than adapting classroom instruction. Participants simultaneously learned responsibilities involving IEP development and implementation, documentation, legal compliance, case management, co-teaching, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Augusto et al. (2026) similarly identified substantial instructional, organizational, documentation, coordination, behavioral, and systemic demands among Filipino SPED teachers in U.S. public schools. The present findings further illustrate how such demands intersect with migration-related adjustment during teachers' early transition into the U.S. educational system. This combination is important because participants were not beginning teachers; they entered U.S. schools with substantial previous teaching experience yet still had to reconstruct aspects of their professional practice within an unfamiliar special education system.

Resilience through Adaptation emerged as participants gradually developed confidence through continuous learning, reflection, constructive feedback, and changes in their instructional and organizational practices. Similar patterns of adaptation and resilience have been reported among Filipino SPED teachers in the United States. Flores and Eludo (2025), for example, identified professional adaptation, flexibility, cultural integration, and resilience as important dimensions of Filipino SPED teachers' experiences. In the present study, resilience appeared not merely as an individual characteristic but as a developmental process strengthened through repeated encounters with unfamiliar demands, professional learning, and reflection. Participants therefore demonstrated adjustment through both persistence and modification of previously established professional practices.

The theme Relationship-Centered Practice highlights the importance of mentorship, collegial collaboration, administrative encouragement, family support, and faith in participants' adjustment. Existing studies similarly emphasize the value of peer mentoring and institutional support among internationally recruited Filipino SPED teachers. Flores and Eludo (2025) identified peer mentoring, institutional support, and reflective practice as important to successful adaptation, while Gomez-Lange (2024) highlighted professional relationship-building as one of the coping strategies used by Filipino SPED teachers. For participants in the present study, supportive relationships served both professional and personal functions by providing practical guidance, emotional reassurance, and a sense of belonging within unfamiliar school communities.

Finally, Growth through Unfamiliar Experiences demonstrates that participants' transition extended beyond overcoming initial difficulties. Their experiences contributed to increased confidence, adaptability, cultural responsiveness, and broader professional perspectives. This finding complements research describing professional and personal development among Filipino SPED teachers navigating U.S. educational contexts (Flores & Eludo, 2025; Gamez-Catiis, 2024). However, the present study emphasizes how such growth emerged during the early transition period, as experienced educators reconstructed aspects of their professional identities while learning unfamiliar systems, expectations, and relationships.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the adjustment of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers is best understood as an interconnected and transformative process rather than a collection of isolated challenges. Previous research has documented many of the individual experiences identified in this study, including cultural adaptation, instructional and systemic challenges, resilience, professional relationships, and personal growth. The contribution of the present study lies in bringing these dimensions together within a specifically bounded context: experienced Filipino educators in their first one to three years of teaching in U.S. middle school special education. This perspective supports the need for induction and mentoring systems that address not only technical SPED respon-

sibilities but also the cultural, emotional, relational, and professional dimensions of international teacher transition.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of newly emigrated Filipino SPED teachers during their first one to three years of teaching in California middle schools. The findings revealed that their adjustment involved interconnected cultural, instructional, emotional, professional, and institutional dimensions. Participants encountered challenges related to classroom culture, special education systems, and unfamiliar professional expectations, yet they gradually developed resilience, confidence, and professional competence through continuous learning, supportive relationships, and adaptive practices.

This study extends the growing literature on Filipino SPED teachers in the United States by focusing specifically on the early transition experiences of newly emigrated teachers in middle school settings. Rather than examining cultural adjustment, professional challenges, coping, and support as separate concerns, the findings demonstrate how these dimensions intersect and collectively shape teachers' adjustment and professional growth during their first years in the U.S. educational system. This context-specific perspective contributes to a more integrated understanding of international teacher transition within special education.

The findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive induction programs, structured mentoring, professional development, and institutional support that address both the technical demands of special education and the cultural, emotional, and relational dimensions of teacher adjustment. The Transition Support Action Plan developed from the findings provides a practical framework for supporting internationally recruited Filipino SPED teachers and may contribute to their well-being, professional development, and long-term retention.

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