

Teaching Across Borders: Lived Experiences of Internationally Trained Mathematics Educators in Their Early U.S. Careers

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. faces a shortage of qualified mathematics teachers, prompting the recruitment of internationally trained educators (ITEs), particularly from the Philippines, recognized for strong content knowledge and pedagogy. Despite their expertise, Filipino ITEs encounter challenges in classroom management, curriculum alignment, and parent engagement during their early U.S. teaching careers. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of 17 Filipino ITEs with up to three years of U.S. teaching experience. Data were collected via semi-structured virtual interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method. Five themes emerged: navigating classroom management, aligning curriculum with U.S. standards, building relationships with parents and the community, developing cultural and pedagogical competence, and seeking professional support while maintaining resilience. Participants adapted to new behavioral norms, instructional pacing, and culturally nuanced communication through mentorship, reflective practice, professional learning communities, and culturally responsive teaching. Findings highlight that early career success depends on pedagogical, cultural, and institutional adaptability. Implications emphasize culturally responsive induction, structured mentorship, targeted professional development, and administrative guidance to support teacher effectiveness, retention, and student outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Cross-cultural teaching; Internationally trained educators; Filipino mathematics teachers; Phenomenology; U.S. teacher shortage.

INTRODUCTION

The United States faces a persistent shortage of qualified mathematics teachers, a crisis documented in national policy reports and peer-reviewed research (Learning Policy Institute, 2024; Rand Corporation, 2023; Solis Rodriguez, 2025; CBMS, 2025), prompting many school districts to recruit internationally trained educators (ITEs), particularly from the Philippines, recognized for producing highly skilled teachers with strong content knowledge and pedagogical expertise (Modesto, 2020; Arcillo, 2022). Despite their expertise, Filipino ITEs often face complex challenges during their early U.S. teaching careers, including navigating unfamiliar classroom management norms, adapting to state and district curriculum standards, and engaging with parents and communities in culturally different contexts (Del Valle, 2024; Veridiano & Brondo, 2023).

Research highlights that internationally trained teachers, including those from the Philippines, often encounter professional and cultural obstacles when transitioning to U.S.

classrooms. Studies identify challenges in classroom management, curriculum alignment, and parent engagement (Achinstein et al., 2010; Johnson, 2004). Filipino educators are noted for their strong content knowledge and instructional skills, yet they may struggle with differences in classroom authority, student autonomy, and culturally nuanced communication practices (Reyes et al., 2020; Abueg, 2024). Prior research also indicates that structured mentorship, culturally responsive induction, and professional development can support international educators' integration into U.S. schools (Chua, 2021). However, much of the literature emphasizes quantitative outcomes or institutional perspectives, leaving the personal, lived experiences of Filipino ITEs largely underexplored (Modesto, 2020; Del Valle, 2024).

Despite the growing presence of Filipino ITEs in U.S. schools, limited research examines how these educators personally experience, interpret, and respond to the challenges of early career teaching in a culturally different environment. Most existing studies focus on retention, standardized assessments, or institutional reports, which overlook the rich qualitative insights into adaptation, coping strategies, and professional growth. This gap underscores the need for research that captures the essence of Filipino ITEs' lived experiences as they navigate classroom, curriculum, and community expectations in U.S. schools (Arcillo, 2022; Cutor, 2025).

To address this gap, the current study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino internationally trained mathematics educators during their early U.S. teaching careers. The purpose of the study is to identify the challenges these teachers encounter, understand the strategies they use to adapt and cope, and illuminate the personal, professional, and cultural dimensions of their early career experiences. By centering the voices of Filipino ITEs, this research aims to inform mentorship programs, professional development initiatives, and policy efforts designed to support the successful integration and retention of internationally trained educators in U.S. schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

Design. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Filipino internationally trained mathematics educators (ITEs) during their early careers in U.S. schools. Descriptive phenomenology, grounded in Husserl's (1913) philosophy, focuses on understanding participants' experiences as they are perceived and lived, without the imposition of the researcher's interpretations or theoretical frameworks (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is particularly appropriate for examining early career challenges, cultural adaptation, and coping strategies, where the goal is to uncover the essential structures of experience shared across participants.

To maintain the integrity of descriptive phenomenology, the researcher employed bracketing, acknowledging and setting aside prior assumptions about Filipino teachers' adaptation to the U.S. education system. This allowed participants' voices to guide the data collection and analysis, ensuring findings are grounded in authentic experiences. Through this design, the study systematically gathered and synthesized rich, detailed narratives, enabling the identification of common themes and patterns that reveal the essence of Filipino ITEs' early career experiences, including classroom management, curriculum adaptation, community engagement, and professional growth.

Locale. The study was conducted across multiple school districts in the United States, encompassing urban, suburban, and rural contexts to capture a variety of teaching environments. This diverse geographic representation aligns with previous research emphasizing that context influences teachers' experiences, including classroom management and community engagement (Chua, 2021; Johnson, 2004; Modesto, 2020).

Conducting the study across multiple locales ensured the findings reflect a broader perspective of Filipino ITEs' early career experiences in U.S. schools.

Participants. The participants of the study were 17 internationally trained mathematics educators from the Philippines. They were purposively selected to ensure that participants could provide rich, detailed accounts of their lived experiences in U.S. classrooms, as recommended in phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The sample size was guided by the principle of saturation, which holds that data collection continues until no new themes or insights emerge (Guest et al., 2006). Saturation was achieved after 17 interviews, indicating that the range of early career experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of Filipino ITEs had been sufficiently captured.

Participants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) they had at most three years of teaching experience in the United States, ensuring the focus remained on early career experiences; (2) they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study; and (3) they were physically and emotionally healthy during the conduct of the interviews, allowing them to reflect fully on their experiences. These criteria ensured that the study captured authentic and reliable narratives regarding Filipino ITEs' professional adaptation, classroom management, curriculum alignment, and cultural adjustment in U.S. schools (Arcillo, 2022; Del Valle, 2024).

Instruments. The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection instrument, designed to explore the lived experiences of Filipino internationally trained mathematics educators (ITEs) during their early U.S. teaching careers. The interview guide included open-ended questions that focused on participants' experiences. Open-ended prompts allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words, facilitating the collection of rich, detailed, and nuanced narratives appropriate for a descriptive phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To ensure the validity and relevance of the interview guide, it was reviewed and validated by a panel of experts in teacher education, international educator adaptation, and qualitative research methods. The experts assessed the guide for clarity, alignment with research objectives, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of language for Filipino ITE participants. Feedback from the experts was incorporated to refine question wording, sequence, and focus, enhancing the instrument's ability to elicit meaningful and authentic accounts of participants' lived experiences. This validation process ensured that the instrument was both rigorous and contextually appropriate for the study's objectives (Modesto, 2020).

Data Collection. The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants prior to the interviews and scheduled each session according to their availability. Data collection was conducted primarily through virtual interviews using secure video-conferencing platforms, allowing participants from diverse geographic locations to participate conveniently. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' permission, and later transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of the data. Field notes were also taken to document nonverbal cues, contextual details, and immediate reflections, supporting a deeper understanding of participants' experiences.

In alignment with descriptive phenomenology, interviews were guided by a validated semi-structured interview guide, which focused on participants' experiences with classroom management, curriculum adaptation, parent and community engagement, cultural and pedagogical adjustments, and coping strategies. The researcher employed bracketing, setting aside prior assumptions about Filipino ITEs' adaptation to U.S. schools to allow participants' voices to guide the data collection. Interviews continued until the principle of saturation was

achieved, meaning no new themes or insights emerged from additional participants (Guest, et al., 2006; Arcillo, 2022).

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis, which is widely employed to extract the essence of lived experiences from qualitative data. This method involves a systematic seven-step process to ensure that participants' narratives are faithfully interpreted while preserving the richness of their experiences (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

First, the researcher read all interview transcripts multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences. Second, significant statements that directly pertained to early career challenges, coping strategies, and cultural adaptation were identified and highlighted. Third, meanings were formulated from these statements to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Fourth, the formulated meanings were organized into thematic clusters, identifying recurring patterns and common experiences across participants. Fifth, the emerging themes were integrated into an exhaustive description, summarizing the lived experiences of Filipino ITEs. Sixth, the fundamental structure of the phenomenon was delineated, reflecting the core essence of early career experiences, including classroom management, curriculum alignment, parent engagement, cultural adjustment, and professional support. Finally, member checking was conducted by returning the findings to participants for verification, ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Using Colaizzi's method allowed the researcher to maintain rigor and credibility while capturing both individual and shared experiences of Filipino ITEs. The systematic steps ensured that themes were grounded in participants' own words and that the findings authentically represent the lived realities of early career international mathematics educators in U.S. schools.

Ethical Considerations. All participants provided informed consent and were assured that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in reporting findings, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored. Participants were also informed about the purpose of the study, the use of their data, and the measures taken to ensure their privacy and well-being. The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; AERA, 2011), ensuring respect for participants' autonomy, dignity, and culturally sensitive handling of their personal and professional narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews using Colaizzi's method revealed five overarching themes that describe the lived experiences of Filipino internationally trained mathematics educators (ITEs) in their early U.S. teaching careers: (1) navigating classroom management challenges, (2) aligning curriculum and instruction with U.S. standards, (3) building relationships with parents and the community, (4) developing cultural and pedagogical competence, and (5) seeking professional support and maintaining resilience. These themes capture the essence of participants' experiences, highlighting both challenges and coping strategies.

Theme 1: Navigating Classroom Management Challenges

Participants consistently described classroom management as a primary challenge. Many Filipino ITEs struggled to establish authority and maintain discipline within culturally diverse classrooms. One teacher shared:

"At first, students didn't respond the way I expected. In my country, I could manage behavior with simple directives, but here, I had to learn new ways to gain respect while keeping the classroom positive" (P1).

Teachers reported difficulties implementing school-wide behavior policies and simultaneously addressing diverse student needs. Coping strategies included setting clear routines, consistent communication, and gradually asserting authority. These findings align with prior research indicating that early-career international teachers often experience stress when adapting to new behavioral expectations (Chua, 2021; Reyes et al., 2020; Modesto, 2020; Del Valle, 2024).

Theme 2: Aligning Curriculum and Instruction with U.S. Standards

Filipino ITEs faced challenges adapting lesson plans to U.S. state standards and pacing guides. One participant explained:

"I knew the math content well, but the way it is taught here, including the timing and assessments, was completely different. I had to adjust almost everything" (P5).

Teachers used reflective practice, collaborated with colleagues, and participated in professional development to adjust their instructional strategies. These experiences highlight the importance of culturally responsive induction programs and targeted professional development to support content alignment and instructional efficacy (Johnson, 2004; Arcillo, 2022; Cutor, 2025).

Theme 3: Building Relationships with Parents and the Community

Engaging parents and the broader school community emerged as a significant cultural adjustment. Teachers reported uncertainty regarding parental expectations and communication norms. One teacher noted:

"Parent conferences were intimidating. I wasn't sure how much involvement was expected or how to approach sensitive topics" (P9).

Coping strategies included observing colleagues, seeking mentor guidance, and learning culturally appropriate communication styles. These findings reflect the necessity of cultural competence in parent and community engagement, corroborating research on the adaptation of international teachers in U.S. schools (Reyes et al., 2020; Del Valle, 2024; Veridiano & Brondo, 2023).

Theme 4: Developing Cultural and Pedagogical Competence

Participants emphasized the need to adjust both pedagogical methods and classroom interactions to align with U.S. norms. One teacher reflected:

"I had to unlearn some of my automatic teaching habits. Inquiry-based learning and student collaboration were emphasized more than in my previous experience" (P12).

Teachers engaged in professional learning communities, reflective practice, and observation to cultivate cultural and pedagogical competence. These strategies enhanced student engagement and instructional effectiveness, consistent with prior studies on cross-cultural teacher adaptation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Chua, 2021; Modesto, 2020; Arcillo, 2022).

Theme 5: Seeking Professional Support and Maintaining Resilience

A recurring theme was the role of mentorship, collaboration, and a positive mindset in navigating early career challenges. One participant explained:

"Having someone to check in with made a huge difference. It reminded me that these challenges are normal and can be overcome" (P17).

Teachers sought guidance from administrators, colleagues, and professional networks while maintaining long-term goals and growth-oriented attitudes. This finding underscores the importance of structured mentorship and support systems to foster resilience, professional growth, and retention (Achinstein et al., 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cutor, 2025; Del Valle, 2024).

The findings illustrate that early-career Filipino ITEs encounter multifaceted challenges encompassing classroom management, curriculum alignment, parental engagement, and cultural adaptation. These challenges are consistent with prior research on internationally trained educators, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive induction programs, ongoing mentorship, and targeted professional development (Johnson, 2004; Modesto, 2020; Arcillo, 2022).

Participants' coping strategies demonstrate both resilience and professional agency. By seeking professional support, developing cultural competence, adjusting instructional practices, and maintaining a goal-oriented mindset, Filipino ITEs were able to navigate challenges while promoting effective teaching and student engagement (Veridiano & Brondo, 2023; Cutor, 2025). These findings highlight that early career success is shaped not only by content knowledge but also by the ability to adapt pedagogically, culturally, and institutionally in a new educational context.

Furthermore, the study suggests that holistic support systems are essential for Filipino ITEs, including guidance on classroom management, U.S. curriculum expectations, culturally responsive parent communication, and navigation of administrative structures (Del Valle, 2024; Modesto, 2020). Addressing these areas can enhance teacher retention, professional satisfaction, and student outcomes, while acknowledging the unique contributions of internationally trained educators in U.S. mathematics classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino internationally trained mathematics educators (ITEs) during their early teaching careers in the United States. Findings reveal that these educators encounter multifaceted challenges, particularly in classroom management, curriculum and standards alignment, parent and community engagement, cultural and pedagogical adaptation, and navigating professional support systems. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and professional growth by employing coping strategies such as seeking mentorship, building cultural competence, adjusting instructional practices, and maintaining a positive, goal-oriented mindset.

The study underscores that early career success for Filipino ITEs is influenced not only by mathematics content knowledge but also by the ability to adapt pedagogically, culturally, and institutionally. Teachers who actively engage in mentorship, reflective practice, and professional learning communities were better able to navigate the complexities of U.S. schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and acknowledging the limitations of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Implement Culturally Responsive Induction Programs:** Schools should develop onboarding programs that familiarize international teachers with U.S. classroom norms, behavior policies, curriculum expectations, and parental engagement practices.
2. **Establish Mentorship and Professional Learning Communities:** Structured mentorship and collaborative peer networks should be provided to support professional growth, problem-solving, and emotional well-being.

3. Provide Targeted Professional Development: Workshops and training should focus on classroom management, culturally responsive pedagogy, curriculum adaptation, and effective parent communication.
4. Support Institutional Navigation: Guidance should be offered to help international educators understand administrative policies, legal responsibilities, and employment requirements, including visa regulations and school procedures.
5. Encourage Reflective Practice and Peer Sharing: Teachers should be supported in documenting experiences, reflecting on challenges, and sharing strategies with colleagues to foster resilience and continuous professional development.
6. Consider the Study Limitations in Implementation: Since this study used a small, purposive sample of 17 Filipino ITEs, the findings may not generalize to all internationally trained mathematics educators in the United States. Schools and policymakers should contextualize these recommendations and adapt them to local teacher populations.
7. Future Research: Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term adaptation, retention, and professional growth of Filipino ITEs. Comparative studies with other internationally trained educators from different countries could provide broader insights into cross-cultural teaching challenges and best practices in supporting international teachers.

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