

Synchronizing Metrics and Malasakit: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Transnational Filipino Special Education Teachers in the United States

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between cultural identity and pedagogical practice through the lived experiences of Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers in the United States. Anchored on Cultural Identity Theory, Sociocultural Theory, Pedagogical Content Knowledge, and Transactional Theory, the study examined how Filipino educators negotiated their cultural values, professional roles, instructional practices, and workplace interactions in multicultural U.S. school settings. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed using Moustakas's modified Van Kaam method. Six Filipino SPED teachers actively teaching in U.S. public or private schools participated in the study. Data were gathered virtually through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by a researcher-developed and expert-validated interview guide. The findings revealed five major themes: cultural identity and its influence on teaching, challenges in cultural adaptation and workplace communication, shifts in instructional practices to meet U.S. educational expectations, relationship-building with students and colleagues from diverse backgrounds, and professional and personal growth. Filipino values such as malasakit, bayanihan, pakikipagkapwa, compassion, patience, resilience, and respect shaped classroom management, instructional decisions, student engagement, and professional relationships. However, participants also experienced challenges related to communication differences, cultural adjustment, behavioral expectations, documentation requirements, and adaptation to student-centered, evidence-based, and data-informed instruction. The study concluded that Filipino SPED teachers developed hybrid pedagogical identities by blending Filipino relational values with U.S. special education practices, resulting in inclusive and supportive learning environments. The study recommends culturally responsive professional development, mentorship, intercultural communication support, collaborative professional communities, and institutional recognition of immigrant teachers' cultural contributions. The study aligns with SDG 4, Quality Education, and SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities, by supporting inclusive education and recognizing the professional contributions of immigrant teachers. Its sustainability impact is primarily educational, institutional, and social, as it promotes culturally responsive teaching, teacher well-being, professional retention, and equitable learning environments.

Keywords: Bicultural Competence, Cultural Identity, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Filipino SPED Teachers, Hybrid Pedagogy, Immigrant Teachers, Pedagogical Practice, Professional Adaptation, Special Education, United States Education System

1. Introduction

Education systems are increasingly shaped by the movement of teachers across national borders, especially in fields with persistent workforce needs such as special education. In the United States, internationally trained SPED teachers help address educational demands in inclusive classrooms where individualized support is essential. For Filipino educators, overseas teaching is connected not only to professional growth and economic opportunity but also to family responsibility and community commitment. In the Philippine context, migration is shaped by social, cultural, and economic expectations. Filipino teachers abroad often support family aspirations, contribute to household stability through remittances, and maintain strong ties with their communities of origin (Oca & Malaga, 2025). Thus, Filipino teacher migration must be understood through the relationship among cultural identity, professional purpose, and social responsibility. Filipino SPED teachers occupy a distinct position within the teacher diaspora because their work requires content knowledge, instructional skill, emotional labor, and relational engagement with learners with cognitive, behavioral, and developmental needs. Special education also requires collaboration among teachers, families, paraprofessionals, and specialists, creating additional social and professional demands in culturally diverse environments (Friend & Bursuck, 2023).

The literature highlights that Filipino teachers bring relational values into their teaching, including pakikisama, bayanihan, and utang na loob. These values influence their perceptions of authority, collaboration, community, and professional relationships (Legayada & Villarente, 2025). However, when Filipino SPED teachers enter U.S. schools, they must negotiate these culturally grounded relational practices with institutional expectations that emphasize accountability, direct communication, documentation, and standardized assessment. Existing studies on internationally trained teachers in the

United States have focused mainly on structural and policy issues such as credential recognition, visa requirements, classroom management, and retention (Brazas, 2023; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). While these studies are useful, they give less attention to the identity-based and lived experiences of migrant teachers, especially Filipino SPED teachers working in U.S. special education classrooms. The related literature therefore suggests that Filipino SPED teachers' cultural identity may function not only as a background characteristic but also as a pedagogical resource. Their values of empathy, collaboration, respect, care, and adaptability may shape classroom management, instructional decisions, communication, and relationships with students and colleagues.

Locally, the study is rooted in the Philippine experience of teacher migration, where overseas employment is often linked to family welfare, professional advancement, and community responsibility. Nationally, it relates to the experiences of Filipino educators who carry Philippine cultural values into international teaching contexts. Globally, it responds to the increasing mobility of teachers and the demand for culturally responsive educators in diverse and inclusive classrooms. In the U.S. context, Filipino SPED teachers work within a structured special education system with established policies, professional development pathways, individualized support systems, and documentation requirements. However, this system may differ from the educational and cultural environments in which Filipino teachers were originally trained. These differences require Filipino SPED teachers to adapt professionally while preserving meaningful aspects of their cultural identity.

This study is grounded in four interrelated theories. Cultural Identity Theory explains identity as fluid, negotiated, and shaped by social contexts (Côté & Levine, 2002; Hall, 1990). It helps explain how Filipino SPED teachers understand belonging, professional roles, and relational engagement while working in U.S. schools. Sociocultural Theory views learning and professional practice as socially mediated through interaction and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory supports the study's focus on how Filipino values, collaboration, and relational practices influence classroom interaction, colleague relationships, and responsiveness to diverse learners. Pedagogical Content Knowledge explains effective teaching as the integration of content expertise and pedagogical strategy (Shulman, 1986). In this study, it helps frame how Filipino SPED teachers combine specialized knowledge in special education with culturally grounded instructional approaches to support learners with disabilities. Transactional Theory views teaching and learning as reciprocal processes where meaning emerges through interaction between individuals and contexts (Rosenblatt, 1978). This perspective supports the study's focus on how Filipino SPED teachers make meaning through ongoing engagement with students, school structures, and cultural expectations. The theoretical framework also draws from Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing (Rosenblatt, 1978), Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) Framework (Shulman, 1986), Cultural Identity Theory (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Hall, 1990; Côté & Levine, 2002), and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Together, these frameworks explain the relationship between cultural identity, identity negotiation, pedagogical practice, and learner outcomes in multicultural U.S. classrooms.

Although research has examined internationally trained teachers in relation to policy, credentialing, and workforce retention, fewer studies have explored the lived and identity-based experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in the United States. The experiences of SPED educators from the Philippines remain underrepresented, particularly in relation to how cultural values influence teaching methods, communication styles, classroom management, and professional belonging. This study addresses that gap by examining how Filipino SPED teachers negotiate cultural identity and pedagogical practice in U.S. special education contexts. It positions Filipino SPED teachers not simply as professionals who adapt to a new system but as educators whose cultural values may strengthen inclusive, relational, and culturally responsive teaching.

This study aligns most directly with SDG 4 – Quality Education because it focuses on inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive education for learners with diverse needs. By examining how Filipino SPED teachers support students through relational, adaptive, and inclusive practices, the study contributes to improving the quality of teaching and learning in special education. The study also relates to SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth because it addresses the professional experiences, adaptation, and support needs of migrant Filipino teachers in international educational settings. Understanding their challenges and strengths may help institutions develop better induction, mentoring, and professional support systems. The study further supports SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities because it highlights the voices of immigrant teachers and promotes recognition of cultural diversity as a professional and pedagogical asset. It also connects with SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because special education requires collaboration among teachers, families, school leaders, specialists, and teacher preparation institutions.

The study contributes to educational sustainability by supporting inclusive teaching practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and stronger support systems for internationally trained SPED teachers. Recognizing Filipino teachers' cultural assets may improve teacher integration, retention, collaboration, and classroom effectiveness. The study also contributes to socio-economic sustainability by acknowledging teacher migration as connected to professional opportunity, family stability, and transnational responsibility. It recognizes that Filipino teachers abroad operate within both personal and institutional systems that influence their professional growth and well-being. In terms of cultural sustainability, the study

emphasizes the value of preserving Filipino cultural values such as pakikisama, bayanihan, utang na loob, malasakit, and pakikipagkapwa while adapting to U.S. educational expectations. These values may enrich classroom relationships, student engagement, and inclusive learning environments. For institutional sustainability, the study provides insights that may guide school administrators, policymakers, and teacher preparation programs in designing orientation, induction, mentoring, and bicultural training programs. These supports may help immigrant teachers adapt effectively while maintaining their cultural identity as a source of pedagogical strength.

The study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in the United States by examining the textural and structural dimensions of their cultural identity and pedagogical practices within the U.S. educational context. The study focused on Filipino SPED teachers employed in the United States, with data collection conducted between October and November 2025. It examined how their cultural identity shaped teaching methods, classroom management, and interactions with students and colleagues. It was delimited to active Filipino SPED teachers in U.S. schools and did not include SPED teachers from other cultural backgrounds, general education teachers, Filipino educators outside the United States, retired teachers, or those no longer in the profession. The study was qualitative in nature and relied on in-depth interviews and personal narratives. Its findings were intended to provide insight into the participants' lived experiences rather than to generalize to all Filipino teachers or SPED educators. The scope was limited to cultural identity in relation to pedagogical practice and did not address broader issues such as immigration policy, certification procedures, or detailed curriculum analysis.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design using Moustakas's (1994) modified Van Kaam method to analyze the transcribed interviews of six Filipino SPED teachers in the United States. Grounded in transcendental phenomenology, the design focused on describing and understanding the essence of the participants' lived experiences through systematic reflection and analysis. The researcher applied phenomenological reduction by examining the participants' narratives while setting aside personal assumptions and biases through epoche or bracketing. The modified Van Kaam method guided the analysis through horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing, textural description, structural description, and synthesis of meanings and essences.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was coordinated from the Philippines, while the participants were Filipino SPED teachers employed in different regions of the United States. Data collection was conducted virtually to provide accessibility, flexibility, and broader geographical representation. The participants were teaching in schools located in Florida, North Carolina, New Mexico, and Texas.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were Filipino SPED teachers actively employed in U.S. public or private schools at the time of data collection. The participants consisted of female Filipino SPED teachers whose ages ranged from 21 to over 60 years old. Their marital status varied, including single, married, and annulled. Their educational attainment ranged from bachelor's degrees with masteral units to doctoral degrees. Their teaching experience in the Philippine Department of Education ranged from 0 to over 25 years, while their teaching experience in U.S. schools was mostly between 0 to 5 years, with some having 6 to 10 years of experience.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required participants to hold a valid special education teaching license from the Philippines, be actively employed in a U.S. public or private school, and have at least one year of teaching experience in the United States. A total of six participants were recruited, consistent with the phenomenological emphasis on depth and richness of individual lived experiences rather than large sample size. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological studies typically include between 5 and 25 participants. Similarly, Moustakas (1994) asserts that a small number of carefully selected participants can provide meaningful and comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Data collection ended after six participants because thematic redundancy had been reached, indicating that no new meanings or variations were emerging from the interviews.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed interview guide composed of open-ended questions aligned with the objectives of the study and the principles of phenomenological inquiry. The guide focused on the participants' lived experiences as Filipino SPED teachers in multicultural educational environments in the United States. To ensure content validity, clarity, and relevance, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by three experts in qualitative research and cross-cultural education.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Participants were recruited through professional networks, social media groups, and educational organizations related to Filipino educators and special education professionals in the United States. Before participation, each participant received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, procedures, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of participation. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which are consistent with Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach emphasizing the exploration of lived experiences through rich personal narratives. The interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences openly while enabling the researcher to probe significant meanings related to cultural identity, pedagogical practice, and professional adaptation. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, with follow-up interviews conducted when needed. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and integrity of the participants' narratives.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The transcribed data were analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) modified Van Kaam phenomenological method. The analysis began with horizontalization, where all significant statements from the transcripts were treated with equal value. Reduction and elimination followed, removing overlapping, unclear, or irrelevant statements while retaining those directly related to cultural identity and pedagogical practice. The remaining statements were clustered into invariant meaning units and themes. These themes were validated against the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected the participants' intended meanings. Individual textural descriptions were then developed to describe what each participant experienced, followed by structural descriptions explaining how the experiences occurred within cultural and institutional contexts. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to form the composite essence of the phenomenon. To strengthen rigor and trustworthiness, the study used member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Thesis Adviser and Dean before data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports. Digital recordings, transcripts, and research notes were stored on password-protected devices with access limited to the researcher, while hard copies, if any, were kept in a locked cabinet. Possible emotional discomfort during interviews was addressed by allowing participants to skip questions, pause, or end the interview at any time. Participants were also provided with debriefing and referral information when needed. Member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing were also used to support credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Main Findings on Filipino SPED Teachers' Lived Experiences

3.1.1 Cultural Identity and Its Influence on Teaching

The findings showed that Filipino SPED teachers' cultural identity strongly shaped their teaching philosophy, classroom management, and relationships with students and colleagues. Participants consistently emphasized compassion, patience, *malasakit*, *bayanihan*, *pakikipagkapwa*, respect, and relational care as central values in their teaching. Participant 1 described creating a classroom where students felt valued and respected like family, while Participant 3 emphasized carrying *malasakit* and *bayanihan* in working with families and colleagues to support student growth. Across participants, cultural identity became visible in nurturing classroom practices, gentle correction, collaborative activities, and inclusive learning environments. These findings suggest that Filipino cultural identity functioned as both a personal foundation and a professional resource. Cultural Identity Theory explains how teachers negotiate and express identity within social and institutional contexts (Côté & Levine, 2002). The findings also align with the view that Filipino values such as *malasakit*, *bayanihan*, and *pakikipagkapwa* influence communication, collaboration, and emotional support (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Related literature similarly indicates that immigrant teachers use cultural assets to build trust, enrich classroom climate, and support student learning (Santoro, 2015; Lee, 2017).

3.1.2 Challenges in Cultural Adaptation and Workplace Communication

The findings revealed that Filipino SPED teachers experienced challenges in adapting to U.S. workplace communication norms and professional expectations. Participants described discomfort in adjusting from indirect, humility-centered, and relationship-oriented Filipino communication to the more direct, assertive, and explicit communication style expected in American schools. Participant 1 reported initially feeling less confident in expressing opinions, while Participant 2 emphasized the need to become assertive without losing humility. Participant 4 also described feelings of isolation when cultural misunderstandings occurred. These results indicate that communication adaptation was not only behavioral but also deeply connected to identity, confidence, and professional belonging. Filipino SPED teachers had to balance cultural values of humility, harmony, and relational sensitivity with U.S. expectations for direct communication and self-advocacy. This tension reflects cross-cultural adaptation processes in which teachers must preserve cultural identity while responding

to host-country professional norms (Gudykunst, 2004; Ting-Toomey, 1999). The findings also relate to studies showing that immigrant teachers use reflection, observation, support-seeking, and communication adjustment to navigate intercultural workplaces (David, 2010; Soriano, 2016; Gudykunst, 2004).

3.1.3 Shifts in Instructional Practices to Meet U.S. Educational Expectations

The findings showed that Filipino SPED teachers adjusted their instructional practices to align with U.S. educational expectations. Participants moved from more teacher-centered approaches to student-centered, differentiated, evidence-based, and data-informed instruction. Participant 1 shifted toward encouraging active participation, Participant 5 used data-based instruction and differentiated lessons, and Participant 2 described encouraging student choice, expression, and participation while maintaining Filipino values of empathy and relational teaching. Participants also adapted to requirements related to individualized education plans, behavioral documentation, measurable outcomes, and structured intervention systems. These instructional shifts show how Filipino SPED teachers developed hybrid pedagogical identities by combining Filipino relational teaching with U.S. standards for evidence-based and individualized instruction. Sociocultural Theory explains this adaptation as a process shaped by interaction, collaboration, and engagement within the professional community (Vygotsky, 1978). Pedagogical Content Knowledge further explains how teachers integrated content mastery with adaptive instructional strategies to meet diverse learner needs (Shulman, 1986). Related literature also supports that immigrant teachers' pedagogical adjustments are influenced by reflection, social learning, coaching, and collaborative professional communities (Guo, 2013; Flores & Day, 2006).

3.1.4 Building Relationships with Students and Colleagues from Diverse Backgrounds

The findings indicated that relationship-building was central to the professional effectiveness of Filipino SPED teachers. Participants intentionally learned about students' cultures, languages, interests, and family backgrounds to build trust and inclusion. They also used Filipino relational values to promote cooperation, mutual support, and classroom belonging. Participants recognized differences between Filipino and American workplace relationships, noting that Filipino colleagues often felt more family-oriented, while American colleagues were often more formal, direct, and task-focused. These differences required patience, flexibility, and intercultural awareness. These results suggest that relationship-building served as a culturally informed strategy for strengthening student engagement and workplace collaboration. The teachers' relational practices supported inclusive classroom climates and affirmed students' diverse backgrounds. This aligns with culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes trust, inclusion, and recognition of learners' cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). The findings also support the view that immigrant teachers who adapt relationally while maintaining cultural identity demonstrate intercultural competence important for professional effectiveness (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

3.1.5 Professional and Personal Growth as Filipino SPED Teachers in the United States

The findings revealed that teaching in the United States promoted professional and personal growth among Filipino SPED teachers. Participants reported becoming more confident, reflective, adaptable, expressive, and culturally proud. Participant 1 described becoming more flexible while maintaining Filipino respect. Participant 2 noted that the experience strengthened cultural identity and appreciation of Filipino resilience. Participant 5 gained confidence in voicing opinions and developed a deeper sense of purpose, while Participant 3 expressed pride in representing Filipino culture in the U.S. teaching context. These experiences show that professional adaptation abroad strengthened rather than weakened Filipino identity. The teachers developed hybrid professional identities by integrating Filipino cultural values with U.S. pedagogical expectations. This supports teacher identity theory, which explains that professional identity is shaped and reshaped through experience, reflection, and context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The findings also indicate that cultural grounding and reflective adaptation reinforce each other, promoting both effective pedagogy and personal empowerment (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Guo, 2013). Literature on immigrant educators further supports that cultural pride, adaptability, and reflective practice enhance professional motivation and efficacy (Flores & Day, 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

3.2 Individual Textural and Structural Experiences

The individual experiences of the six participants showed a consistent pattern of cultural negotiation and professional adaptation. Participant 1 demonstrated a nurturing teaching identity grounded in pakikipagkapwa, malasakit, and bayanihan while adapting to student-centered U.S. classrooms. Participant 2 integrated Filipino empathy, structured instruction, and individualized support while adjusting to U.S. expectations for differentiated instruction and student independence. Participant 3 showed resilience in a regulated SPED environment by blending Filipino relational sensitivity with systematic and evidence-based instruction. Participant 4 emphasized emotional resilience and classroom management adaptation. Participant 5 expressed cultural pride through compassion and patience while integrating structured, data-informed practices. Participant 6 demonstrated a relational teaching identity rooted in Filipino values while adapting to IEP compliance, behavioral documentation, and measurable outcomes. These individual experiences collectively show that Filipino SPED teachers did not simply abandon their cultural teaching practices; rather, they transformed them into hybrid pedagogical approaches. Their experiences reflected the interaction of identity, culture, pedagogy, and institutional expectations. Cultural Identity Theory explained their negotiation of Filipino values within U.S. professional norms (Côté

& Levine, 2002). Sociocultural Theory highlighted their use of collaboration, scaffolding, and relational engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). Pedagogical Content Knowledge explained their ability to connect specialized content with culturally responsive teaching (Shulman, 1986). Transactional Theory further explained how meaning was co-constructed through interactions among teachers, students, colleagues, and institutional contexts (Rosenblatt, 1978).

3.3 Relationship Between Cultural Identity and Pedagogical Practice

The findings demonstrated a strong relationship between cultural identity and pedagogical practice. Filipino values influenced how participants managed classrooms, planned lessons, communicated with students and colleagues, responded to behavior, supported learners with disabilities, and adapted to U.S. educational expectations. Their cultural identity shaped their teaching not as a separate personal trait but as an active framework for decision-making, relationship-building, and instructional adaptation. The discussion shows that cultural identity and pedagogy interacted dynamically throughout the participants' teaching experiences. Filipino SPED teachers used cultural values as strengths while learning new systems, communication norms, and instructional requirements. Their experiences show that cultural continuity and professional adaptation can coexist when teachers are supported through mentorship, culturally responsive professional development, and inclusive institutional practices. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Filipino SPED teachers contribute to U.S. special education through resilience, relational care, bicultural competence, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that Filipino SPED teachers in the United States experienced a dynamic interplay between cultural identity, professional adaptation, relational engagement, and instructional growth. Their Filipino values, including *malasakit*, *bayanihan*, *pakikipagkapwa*, compassion, patience, resilience, and cultural pride, shaped their classroom management, instructional practices, student relationships, and professional interactions. While they encountered challenges in cultural adaptation, workplace communication, and adjustment to U.S. educational expectations, they developed hybrid teaching identities by integrating Filipino relational pedagogy with student-centered, evidence-based, differentiated, and data-informed instructional practices. These experiences reflected how cultural grounding and reflective adaptation supported effective pedagogy, professional confidence, and personal empowerment (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Guo, 2013), while cultural pride, adaptability, and reflective practice enhanced professional efficacy and motivation (Flores & Day, 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

It is recommended that schools and educational institutions provide targeted professional development, mentorship, culturally responsive orientation programs, intercultural communication workshops, and collaborative professional communities that recognize and strengthen the cultural assets of Filipino SPED teachers. Schools should create structured spaces for cultural exchange, team-building initiatives, and opportunities for immigrant teachers to share culturally informed practices, while also supporting culturally responsive and evidence-based instruction. Mentorship should address both pedagogical and cultural adaptation needs, reduce isolation, strengthen confidence, promote bicultural competence, and formally recognize teachers' cultural contributions to support teacher well-being, professional growth, retention, and positive student outcomes.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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