

From Overseas to the Classroom: Lived Experiences of Selected Teachers Working Abroad Who Plan to Return to the Teaching Profession

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of overseas Filipino educators holding advanced degrees in education who are currently employed in positions not fully aligned with classroom teaching in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, yet intend to return to the profession. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved ten purposively selected participants who were licensed teachers and doctorate degree holders working in non-teaching or partially aligned roles. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological method. Findings revealed four major themes. First, Professional Identity Tension and Vocational Persistence highlighted the enduring self-concept of participants as educators despite occupational displacement. Second, Economic Pragmatism and Migration Rationalization underscored the role of financial stability and family responsibility in shaping migration decisions. Third, Skill Enrichment and Reintegration Readiness emphasized the development of transferable competencies such as intercultural communication, adaptability, and leadership, which participants perceived as assets for future teaching practice. Fourth, Structural Barriers and Occupational Mismatch described systemic constraints, including credential recognition challenges and employment regulations, that limited access to aligned teaching roles in the host country. The essence of the phenomenon suggests that overseas employment among doctorate/master degree holders in education represents a strategic and adaptive phase rather than professional abandonment. Despite structural labor constraints, professional identity remains resilient, and reintegration aspirations are sustained. The study contributes to scholarship on teacher migration, professional identity reconstruction, and reintegration readiness, offering policy implications for structured return programs and strategic talent reintegration initiatives within the Philippine education system.

Keywords: Professional Identity, Overseas Filipino Educators, Occupational Mismatch, Reintegration Readiness, Teacher Migration, Phenomenology

1. Introduction

Teacher migration continues to shape the global education landscape as increasing numbers of licensed and highly educated professionals seek employment opportunities abroad. The Philippines remains one of the world's leading labor-exporting countries, with many educators joining the overseas workforce for economic stability, professional mobility, and improved quality of life. While some Filipino teachers are employed in academic institutions overseas, others—including those with advanced graduate and doctoral degrees in education—occupy positions that are not fully aligned with classroom teaching. This phenomenon reflects broader global patterns of occupational mismatch among highly skilled migrants, often referred to as “brain waste,” where individuals are employed below or outside their formal qualifications.

Global monitoring reports from the UNESCO (2023) emphasize persistent teacher shortages worldwide, particularly in developing contexts, and call for stronger teacher retention and reintegration mechanisms. Simultaneously, the International Labour Organization (2022) reports that highly educated migrants frequently encounter barriers related to credential recognition, visa classifications, and labor market segmentation, leading to professional underutilization. Such structural constraints are evident in Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, where foreign professionals may accept administrative, technical, or corporate roles despite holding advanced academic degrees.

In the Philippine context, the professional practice of teaching is governed by Republic Act No. 7836, which institutionalizes licensure as a marker of professional identity and competence. Continuing professional growth is further reinforced by Republic Act No. 10912, mandating lifelong learning among professionals. These legal frameworks affirm that teacher identity is not extinguished by geographic relocation or temporary occupational shifts. Rather, licensure sustains professional affiliation even when educators work outside formal instructional roles.

Contemporary research conceptualizes teacher professional identity as dynamic and continuously reconstructed across contexts. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) and subsequent studies have emphasized that professional identity evolves through experience, reflection, and contextual negotiation. More recent scholarship (Trent, 2018; Mockler, 2020) demonstrates that educators undergoing career transitions often experience identity tension but maintain a strong vocational orientation toward teaching. Identity reconstruction, rather than identity loss, characterizes many professionals who temporarily exit classroom environments. Furthermore, research on return migration (Carling & Erdal, 2014; OECD, 2020) suggests that overseas employment can enhance intercultural competence, adaptability, leadership skills, and global awareness—competencies that may enrich future pedagogical practice.

This study is also informed by the researcher's positionality as an overseas worker holding a Doctorate in Education and currently employed in a role not fully aligned with classroom teaching. This lived experience provides contextual sensitivity to the phenomenon of professional identity negotiation among highly educated migrant educators. However, consistent with phenomenological principles, reflexive bracketing is exercised to minimize personal bias and ensure that participants' lived experiences remain central. Reflexivity in qualitative inquiry is increasingly recognized as essential to research credibility, particularly when investigators share experiential proximity with the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Acknowledging this positionality strengthens methodological transparency while maintaining analytical rigor.

Despite the growing body of literature on teacher migration and skilled labor mobility, limited qualitative research specifically examines doctorate degree holders in education who are employed abroad in non-teaching or partially aligned roles yet intend to return to the profession. Existing studies largely focus on teachers actively teaching overseas or on systemic "brain drain" effects. There remains insufficient phenomenological exploration of how highly credentialed overseas educators interpret occupational mismatch, sustain professional identity, and prepare for reintegration into classroom teaching.

Addressing this gap is significant in light of ongoing global teacher shortages and the potential contribution of returning educators to national education systems. By exploring the lived experiences of overseas Filipino teachers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, who possess advanced academic qualifications but are not fully engaged in teaching roles, this study aims to illuminate processes of identity reconstruction, vocational persistence, and reintegration readiness. The findings are expected to contribute to scholarship on professional identity, migration studies, and teacher workforce policy development.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of overseas Filipino teachers holding advanced degrees in education who are currently employed in positions not fully aligned with classroom teaching but intend to return to the teaching profession. Guided by the phenomenological framework of Edmund Husserl and Clark Moustakas, the study sought to describe the essence of participants' experiences by examining how they made meaning of occupational mismatch, professional identity, and reintegration intentions. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher practiced epoche (bracketing) throughout the research process to minimize personal biases and focus on the participants' lived experiences.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a major destination for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), including licensed teachers and education professionals employed in various non-teaching occupations. Riyadh was selected because it provides an appropriate setting where many Filipino educators experience occupational mismatch while pursuing employment opportunities abroad, making it suitable for exploring the phenomenon under investigation.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were licensed professional teachers from the Philippines who possess either a Master's or Doctoral degree in Education and are currently employed in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in positions not directly related to classroom teaching. These individuals were selected because they have firsthand experience with the phenomenon being studied and have expressed their intention to return to the teaching profession in the Philippines within the next five years.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study involved ten (10) participants selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon of interest. Participants met the established inclusion criteria, and data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that no new significant themes emerged from the interviews.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' migration experiences, occupational alignment, professional identity, competencies acquired abroad, and intentions to return to classroom teaching. The interview guide underwent expert validation by three specialists in qualitative research and educational leadership to ensure its content validity, clarity, and alignment with the objectives of the study before it was used for data collection.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on the participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with informed consent, and was supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations and non-verbal cues. Follow-up interviews were conducted when necessary to clarify responses, and data collection continued until saturation was reached.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological method, beginning with verbatim transcription, repeated reading of the interview data, and horizontalization of significant statements. These statements were clustered into themes that formed the basis for developing textural and structural descriptions, which were then synthesized to describe the essence of the participants' lived experiences. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking and reflexive journaling were employed throughout the analysis process.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the concerned authorities and participating manufacturing companies. All respondents were informed of the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study, and their informed consent was secured before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were strictly maintained by ensuring that no personal or company-identifiable information was disclosed in the presentation of the results. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The data gathered were used solely for academic and research purposes, stored securely, and handled in accordance with the agreed confidentiality and non-disclosure provisions to protect the privacy and integrity of both the respondents and the participating organizations.

3. Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis generated four major themes that capture the lived experiences of overseas Filipino educators holding advanced degrees in education but currently employed in non-aligned positions in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. These themes reflect professional identity negotiation, occupational mismatch, economic rationalization, and reintegration aspirations.

1.1. Theme 1: Professional Identity Tension and Vocational Persistence

Participants consistently expressed that although they are not currently engaged in classroom instruction, their identity as educators remains intact. This supports the notion that teacher identity is dynamic and persists beyond institutional roles. The internalized sense of "calling" suggests that professional identity is anchored not solely in job designation but in deeply held vocational values. The findings align with scholarship emphasizing that professional identity evolves through context yet remains resilient during transitions. Rather than abandoning teaching, participants described their current roles as temporary detours shaped by structural labor realities.

. Table 1: *Theme 1: Professional Identity Tension and Vocational Persistence*

Theme	Responses	Meaning / Implications
Professional Identity Tension and Vocational Persistence	"Kahit hindi ako nagtuturo ngayon, dala ko pa rin ang pagiging guro."	Participants experience identity tension due to occupational mismatch, yet they maintain a strong professional self-concept as educators. Teaching remains central to their identity despite current non-teaching roles.
	"Parang may kulang sa trabaho ko ngayon dahil hindi ko nagagamit ang doctorate/master ko sa education."	
	"Ang pagtuturo ay hindi lang trabaho, ito ay calling."	

1.2. Theme 2: Economic Pragmatism and Structural Constraints

Economic considerations emerged as a dominant factor influencing participants' decisions to accept non-aligned employment. Despite holding doctorate degrees in education, respondents prioritized financial stability, family welfare, and long-term economic planning. Structural barriers in the host country, including licensing restrictions and employment sponsorship systems, limited access to academic or teaching positions. This reflects global patterns of occupational mismatch among skilled migrants, where labor market segmentation constrains professional mobility. The findings reinforce migration theories that highlight push-pull dynamics and wage differentials as powerful determinants of overseas employment decisions.

Table 2: *Theme 2: Economic Pragmatism and Structural Constraints*

Theme	Responses	Meaning / Implications
Economic Pragmatism and Structural Constraints	“Mas mataas ang sahod dito kahit hindi aligned sa degree ko.” “Hindi madaling makapasok sa teaching dito dahil sa requirements at sponsorship.” “Pinili ko muna ang stability para sa pamilya ko.”	Economic necessity and systemic barriers such as credential recognition and employment regulations influence career decisions. Financial security outweighs professional alignment in migration contexts.

1.3. Theme 3: Skill Enrichment and Reintegration Readiness

Although participants experienced occupational misalignment, they did not perceive their overseas work as professionally wasted. Instead, they identified transferable skills gained from multicultural environments, organizational management, and cross-cultural communication. These competencies were viewed as assets that could enrich future teaching practice and academic leadership. Importantly, all participants articulated a clear intention to return to classroom teaching, indicating vocational persistence despite temporary displacement. This suggests that overseas employment may function not as professional abandonment but as developmental interlude. Reintegration programs that recognize and harness these acquired competencies could strengthen teacher workforce development upon return.

Table 3: *Theme 3: Skill Enrichment and Reintegration Readiness*

Theme	Responses	Meaning / Implications
Skill Enrichment and Reintegration Readiness	“Mas naging adaptable at confident ako dahil sa exposure sa ibang kultura.” “Natuto akong mag-manage ng diverse teams.” “Balang araw, gusto kong gamitin ang mga natutunan ko sa pagtuturo.”	Overseas employment fosters transferable competencies such as intercultural communication, leadership, and adaptability, which may enhance future teaching effectiveness. Participants demonstrate long-term reintegration intentions.

1.4. Theme 4: Structural Barriers and Occupational Mismatch

Participants emphasized that occupational misalignment was not due to lack of competence but systemic constraints such as credential equivalency requirements, sponsorship regulations, and limited teaching vacancies for expatriates. These structural factors contribute to “brain waste,” where highly educated migrants are employed outside their specialization. The findings suggest that occupational mismatch is often externally imposed rather than individually chosen.

Table 4: *Theme 4: Structural Barriers and Occupational Mismatch*

Theme	Responses	Meaning / Implications
Structural Barriers and Occupational Mismatch	“Mahirap makapasok sa teaching dito dahil sa licensing requirements.” “May limitasyon ang visa at sponsorship.” “Hindi agad kinikilala ang credentials.”	Host-country labor structures and credential recognition policies restrict access to teaching roles, leading to professional underutilization.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study explored the lived experiences of overseas Filipino educators holding advanced degrees in education who are currently employed in positions not fully aligned with classroom teaching in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, yet intend to return to the profession. The findings reveal that professional identity as a teacher remains deeply rooted despite occupational mismatch and structural labor constraints. Although participants acknowledged identity tension resulting from the gap between their doctoral preparation and current employment, such tension did not diminish their commitment to teaching. Instead, migration decisions were largely framed as economically pragmatic and family-centered, influenced by financial considerations and host-country licensing and employment regulations. Overseas employment was viewed not as professional abandonment but as a temporary adaptive phase that fostered personal growth, intercultural competence, leadership skills, and reintegration readiness. The essence of the phenomenon highlights the resilience of professional identity and the enduring vocational aspiration to return to classroom practice.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Philippine education authorities and higher education institutions develop structured reintegration programs for returning overseas educators, particularly those with advanced academic qualifications. Such programs may include refresher courses, research engagement opportunities, credential revalidation support, and professional updating aligned with Republic Act No. 7836 and Republic Act No. 10912. Policymakers may also consider establishing talent-mapping initiatives to identify and strategically reintegrate overseas Filipino educators into areas with teacher shortages. Recognizing overseas-acquired competencies as valuable professional capital can strengthen national education systems while honoring the global experiences of returning scholars and practitioners.

Compliance with ethical standards

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