

From the Philippines to the World: Narratives of Filipino Educators on Teaching Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative narrative inquiry explored the personal and professional evolution of Filipino educators from the Digos City Division who taught abroad for two to four years. It examined their experiences, the strategies they used to navigate challenges, the support provided by host schools, and the transformational effects of international teaching. Nine educators working in Vietnam, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected from November 2025 to January 2026 through semi-structured online interviews and participant documents, then analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework. Findings showed that migration initially

exposed educators to cultural and linguistic barriers, behavioral-management difficulties, emotional isolation, and pressure to prove their competence. However, they drew on a Filipino foundation of resilience, resourcefulness, care, and perseverance while adopting a neophyte mindset that allowed them to unlearn rigid habits and embrace student-centered, differentiated, and inclusive practices. Host-school support was strongest when it combined structured onboarding, targeted professional development, accessible leadership, anti-discriminatory policies, and mentoring. International teaching led to a reconstructed professional identity: educators became hybrid practitioners who blended Filipino relational strengths with globally responsive pedagogy. The study recommends pre-departure cultural-intelligence preparation, sustained relational mentoring, and reciprocal knowledge-sharing mechanisms for returning educators.

Keywords: *narrative inquiry; Filipino educators; teaching abroad; teacher migration; professional identity; pedagogical transformation, SDG Alignment: Goal 4 - Quality Education; Goal 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth*

INTRODUCTION

Global teacher shortages have intensified the international mobility of educators. UNESCO (2025) reported that the world needs millions of additional teachers to meet basic education goals by 2030. For Filipino educators, international teaching opportunities are shaped by both global demand and local push factors, including the search for financial stability, professional recognition, manageable workloads, and opportunities for growth. Castulo et al. (2025) showed that migration decisions among Filipino educators are increasingly linked to structural conditions within the profession, not solely to individual ambition.

Teacher migration is not merely a movement from one labor market to another. It is a cross-cultural professional transition that can disrupt familiar identities, expose educators to new systems, and require the negotiation of language, classroom norms, institutional expectations, and personal relationships. Filipino educators may enter foreign schools with extensive experience and strong pedagogical foundations, yet still

need to learn the social architecture of the host institution. Studies have documented culture shock, challenges in pedagogical alignment, homesickness, professional deskilling, and discrimination, while also noting intercultural growth and improved adaptability (Alicamen & Becamon, 2022; Macapagong et al., 2023; Salibay & Umadhay, 2023; Rosales, 2024).

The local context of this inquiry is the Digos City Division. Division records cited in the source manuscript showed that 66 teachers resigned over four years: 15 in 2022, 32 in 2023, 10 in 2024, and 9 in 2025. This pattern warranted closer examination of the experiences of educators who moved abroad. Rather than treating migration only as a workforce-loss issue, the study explored how educators reconstruct their professional identities, develop new competencies, and potentially bring global insights back into Philippine education.

This study investigated four questions: What experiences do Filipino educators encounter while teaching abroad? What strategies do they employ to navigate challenges? What support do host schools provide? What transformational effects arise from their international teaching experiences? By foregrounding educators' narratives, the study contributes to discussions on teacher retention, migrant-teacher support, culturally responsive education, and the reintegration of global best practices into local systems.

Literature Review

Experiences of Filipino Educators Teaching Abroad

Filipino educators abroad often experience an intertwined process of adaptation, negotiation, and professional reconstruction. Villaver (2024) described cross-cultural teaching as a context that compels educators to adjust language, instructional expectations, and classroom routines. Macapagong et al. (2023) similarly reported that international teaching can generate professional growth while exposing teachers to unfamiliar institutional philosophies. Some educators also encounter deskilling or role assignments below their qualifications, even as their overseas experience eventually expands their confidence and competence (Salibay & Umadhay, 2023).

The emotional dimension is equally important. Uytico and Abadiano (2020) identified homesickness, cultural disconnection, and the need to rebuild support systems as recurring features of migration. In addition, Rosales (2024) highlighted the effect of bias and professional marginalization among Filipino immigrant teachers in the United States. These experiences indicate that international teaching is not a linear success narrative; it contains tensions between opportunity and vulnerability.

Strategies for Navigating Cross-Cultural Challenges

Educators use both internal and external strategies to manage international transitions. Informal peer networks can function as substitute families and professional learning communities. Obenza et al. (2026) emphasized that Filipino teachers overseas often share resources, provide emotional reassurance, and help each other interpret host-school norms. Cultural intelligence and reflective practice also enable teachers to adjust their communication, manage diverse learners, and integrate new approaches without abandoning their professional values (Earley & Ang, 2003; San Jose & Andrew, 2025).

Continuous professional development is another essential strategy. By participating in curriculum workshops, mentoring, and local training, migrant educators bridge the gap between prior preparation and the expectations of host institutions. This process reflects Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory: unfamiliar conditions can act as disorienting dilemmas that prompt critical reflection and a revised frame of reference.

Support from Host Schools

Institutional support influences both adaptation and retention. Structured orientation, curriculum-specific induction, accessible leadership, mentoring, and peer collaboration reduce uncertainty during the

first months of relocation. Tantay et al. (2024) and Macapagong et al. (2023) underscored the importance of guidance, training, and responsive administration. Host schools also shape belonging through multicultural activities and explicit anti-discriminatory frameworks. These mechanisms are especially significant when educators experience racial or nationalistic bias.

Transformational Effects of International Teaching

Teaching abroad can reshape professional identity. Educators exposed to new instructional environments often move toward more differentiated, student-centered, and inclusive pedagogies. The process can also deepen intercultural competence, self-efficacy, and reflective practice. International experience may transform teachers into hybrid practitioners who integrate the strengths of their Philippine preparation with global practices. Such transformation creates opportunities for brain gain when returning educators share strategies with local schools and professional communities.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because it enabled participants to recount their personal and professional journeys in their own words and allowed the researcher to examine how educators interpreted major transitions across cultural, institutional, and pedagogical contexts. The inquiry was informed by a social constructivist lens and Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory.

Research Locale and Participants

The study focused on educators formerly connected to the Digos City Division in Davao del Sur, Philippines, who were teaching overseas. Nine Filipino educators participated. They were working in Vietnam, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States and had two to four years of international teaching experience. Their prior service in Philippine schools ranged from several years to more than three decades. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling based on Filipino citizenship, prior connection to the Digos City Division, active teaching experience abroad, and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide served as the primary research instrument. The guide was designed to elicit narratives related to migration experiences, challenges, coping strategies, host-school support, and transformational outcomes. Two internal validators and one external validator reviewed the guide for alignment, clarity, cultural sensitivity, and relevance to qualitative inquiry. Participant documents supplemented the interview data when available.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data gathering began in November 2025 and concluded in January 2026. The researcher used professional networks and digital platforms to identify potential participants. Following informed consent, interviews were conducted through Zoom, Google Meet, Messenger, and Skype to accommodate participants' locations. Three participants joined synchronous online interviews, while the remaining participants provided written responses to the interview guide. Interview sessions lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes when conducted synchronously. Recordings and responses were transcribed, anonymized, and securely stored.

Data Analysis

The researcher and a data analyst applied thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved repeated reading of the transcripts, initial coding, grouping of related codes, review and refinement of themes, and interpretive reporting supported by selected participant excerpts. The final themes were organized according to the four research questions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Consideration

Credibility was supported through member checking and sustained engagement with the data. Transferability was strengthened through rich descriptions of the participants' backgrounds and contexts. Peer debriefing with the data analyst supported dependability, while the use of participant excerpts strengthened confirmability. Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, written informed consent, pseudonyms, removal of identifying markers, password-protected storage, and a defined plan for secure data destruction. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to the emotional vulnerability associated with migration experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of Filipino Educators Teaching Abroad

The educators' narratives described international teaching as a demanding but transformative journey. Four interconnected themes emerged: transitional challenges, personal and pedagogical growth, the Filipino foundation as a strategic asset, and professional and economic empowerment. These themes show that relocation initially destabilized familiar professional identities but also opened pathways for more responsive practice and renewed professional purpose.

Table 1. *Experiences of Filipino Educators Teaching Abroad*

Major Theme	Key Subthemes	Interpretive Summary
Transitional challenges	Cultural and linguistic barriers; behavioral-management struggles; social and emotional isolation	Educators had to decode local communication styles, respond to unfamiliar classroom behaviors, manage homesickness, and overcome pressure to prove their competence.
Personal and pedagogical growth	Resilience and adaptability; student-centered practices; fulfilling student relationships	Discomfort prompted reflection, flexibility, and adoption of differentiated and relational teaching practices.
Filipino foundation as a strategic asset	Resilience forged in the homeland; resourcefulness and organization; cultural strengths in pedagogy	Prior experience in Philippine schools developed grit, patience, care, and the ability to work effectively with limited resources.
Professional and economic empowerment	Improved work-life balance; financial capability; institutional recognition	Fairer compensation, manageable workloads, and recognition strengthened professional dignity and long-term motivation.

Participants encountered cultural and linguistic barriers that extended beyond vocabulary. They had to interpret local idioms, communication styles, and institutional expectations. One educator explained, "For the first few months, I couldn't understand some students... because of the language and behavior... I adjusted slowly" (P9). Another participant described the need for caution in communicating with a local co-teacher because of the risk of misunderstanding (P1). These accounts indicate that professional success abroad requires cultural fluency, not only subject knowledge.

Behavioral management also required recalibration. Some participants were assigned to inclusive classrooms where emotional outbursts, limited attention spans, and challenging behaviors demanded more patient and trauma-informed approaches. Traditional top-down authority became less effective than positive reinforcement, clear routines, and reflective practice. This finding aligns with Villaver's (2024) argument that cross-cultural teaching requires flexible pedagogy and with Macapagong et al.'s (2023) observation that international experiences expand teachers' adaptability.

The Filipino foundation emerged as a strategic advantage. Educators repeatedly referred to their experience in Philippine schools as preparation for a professional battleground. Their resourcefulness, patience, organizational skills, and relational warmth helped them succeed in unfamiliar settings. As one participant stated, "My Filipino heritage plays a big role in how I teach. I bring a certain warmth and

patience" (P2). This relational orientation reflects a pedagogy of care that strengthened rapport with learners and families.

International employment also offered professional and economic empowerment. Participants valued clearer boundaries, reduced paperwork, fairer compensation, and recognition for their work. These conditions allowed some educators to recover a sense of vocational peace and focus more directly on teaching. The finding does not suggest that every international post offers ideal conditions, but it highlights how workload design and recognition influence retention and professional identity.

Strategies Used to Navigate Challenges

The participants employed four major strategy clusters: pedagogical adaptation and classroom management, proactive professional development, communicative and cultural navigation, and socio-emotional and spiritual resilience. These strategies were mutually reinforcing rather than sequential.

Table 2. *Strategies Used by Filipino Educators to Navigate Challenges*

Strategy Cluster	Illustrative Practices	Purpose
Pedagogical adaptation and classroom management	Consistent routines; clear behavioral expectations; positive reinforcement; differentiated instruction; hands-on learning	To establish predictable, inclusive, and engaging classrooms.
Proactive professional development	Co-planning; shared resources; regular conferences; openness to feedback; neophyte mindset	To bridge prior expertise with the expectations of the host institution.
Communicative and cultural navigation	Simplified syntax; visual cues; gestures; digital communication; translation and pronunciation tools; AI-supported planning	To reduce misunderstandings and strengthen instructional clarity.
Socio-emotional and spiritual resilience	Prayer; reflective practice; family communication; peer networks; Filipino community support	To maintain emotional stability and reduce isolation during migration.

A recurring strategy was the deliberate adoption of a neophyte mindset. Even highly experienced teachers set aside former titles and approached their host institutions as learners. One participant stated, "I approach every situation as a neophyte... I don't bring the voice of a leader from back home with 32 years of experience" (P6). This stance did not erase expertise; rather, it created the humility needed to learn local systems, receive feedback, and adjust practice.

Participants also developed multi-modal communication practices. They used short sentences, visuals, demonstrations, chat-based communication, emojis for tonal clarity, translation tools, and pronunciation applications. Some used ChatGPT to assist with lesson organization and wording. These practices show that technological integration functioned as a professional mediator: it allowed educators to preserve instructional quality while reducing language-related friction.

Spirituality and social connectivity provided internal and relational scaffolds. Participants relied on faith, prayer, family calls, peer groups, and trusted colleagues to maintain emotional stability. This finding is consistent with the role of social support as a protective buffer during migration and with the importance of culturally grounded coping mechanisms among transnational professionals.

Support Mechanisms Provided by Host Schools

Participants reported that host-school support was most effective when it was structured, sustained, and relational. Five themes emerged: comprehensive institutional onboarding, targeted professional development, administrative and logistical support, inclusivity and cultural recognition, and relational mentorship.

Table 3. *Host-School Support Mechanisms*

Support Domain	Examples Reported by Participants	Contribution to Adaptation
Comprehensive institutional onboarding	Orientation to policies, routines, safety procedures, curriculum frameworks, and classroom expectations	Reduced uncertainty and supported early integration.
Targeted professional development	Workshops on Montessori practice, child development, behavior management, first aid, digital platforms, and documentation	Built context-specific competence and confidence.
Administrative and logistical support	Accessible principals; regular check-ins; classroom supplies; guidance during difficult parent interactions	Created security and allowed teachers to focus on instruction.
Inclusivity and cultural recognition	Multicultural events; language weeks; diversity training; anti-discriminatory policies	Strengthened belonging and protected professional dignity.
Relational and collaborative mentorship	Local mentors; grade leaders; co-planning; shared folders; peer advice	Provided cultural translation, practical guidance, and social anchoring.

Orientation was most useful when it went beyond basic administrative procedures and introduced educators to the pedagogical ecosystem of the school. Participants valued classroom observation, curriculum-specific training, and clear explanations of policies. Such onboarding reduced cognitive overload and allowed teachers to concentrate on instruction.

Leadership accessibility emerged as a particularly important form of support. Participants appreciated principals and managers who personally checked on them, provided resources, and stood beside them during difficult interactions. The narratives show that institutional support is not only material; it is relational. When administrators communicate that international teachers are valued members of the school community, belonging and retention are strengthened.

Anti-discriminatory frameworks were also essential. Some educators experienced racism or nationalistic bias, including a parent request for a teacher of a different nationality. Schools that enforced clear anti-racism policies and celebrated cultural identities helped participants feel protected. These findings support the need for active, not merely symbolic, inclusion policies.

Transformational Effects of International Teaching

International teaching led to a reconstructed professional identity. The educators did not simply acquire additional techniques; they changed how they understood teaching, authority, relationships, and themselves. Four themes emerged: a shift in pedagogical philosophy, an expanded professional identity and outlook, relational and communicative evolution, and personal growth.

Table 4. *Transformational Effects of International Teaching Experiences*

Transformation Domain	Key Shifts	Resulting Professional Identity
Pedagogical philosophy	From compliance-driven instruction to child-centeredness; stronger differentiation; intentional active learning	A guide-on-the-side orientation that values learner agency and inclusion.
Professional identity and outlook	Renewed pride; work-life balance; global educational perspective	A more confident educator who curates best practices across systems.
Relational and communicative evolution	Intercultural fluency; proactive parent communication; collaborative professionalism	A global liaison able to build partnerships across cultural boundaries.
Personal growth and character	Resilience; independence; humility; openness; spiritual and emotional fortitude	A reflective practitioner who balances expertise with continuous learning.

The most prominent pedagogical transformation was the shift from compliance to child-centeredness. Participants learned to slow down, trust learners' pace, use hands-on experiences, and design inquiry-based lessons. One educator explained that teaching abroad strengthened the belief in creating a calm, nurturing environment and focusing on independence and active learning (P1). Another noted the need to differentiate instruction to meet diverse needs and encourage student voice (P7).

This shift also reshaped authority. Participants moved from the "sage on the stage" model to a guide-on-the-side role. The change was especially significant for educators trained in systems where teacher authority and content delivery are strongly emphasized. International exposure showed that authority could be expressed through structure, intentional design, and supportive feedback rather than constant control.

Professional transformation was accompanied by renewed purpose. Participants who felt valued and recognized regained motivation and confidence. They also developed a wider educational perspective by integrating practices from different systems. In this sense, they became hybrid educators: practitioners who retained the Filipino strengths of care, perseverance, and organization while embracing flexible, student-centered, and globally responsive methods.

Implications

The findings have implications for both sending and receiving education systems. For the Philippine context, teacher migration highlights the need to address workload, well-being, compensation, and professional recognition. Participants' appreciation for manageable workloads abroad suggests that administrative streamlining and clear professional boundaries may reduce burnout and the intention to leave. Teacher-retention strategies should therefore include systemic wellness reforms, not only salary adjustments.

For educators preparing to work overseas, the findings support the development of pre-departure cultural-intelligence programs. These programs should address communication styles, classroom-management expectations, behavior-support practices, emotional readiness, digital tools, anti-discrimination resources, and financial planning. Preparation should frame migration as both a professional opportunity and a major identity transition.

For host schools, a brief orientation is insufficient. International educators benefit most from year-long structured transition models that include curriculum induction, mentoring, peer collaboration, accessible leadership, and enforceable inclusion policies. The goal is not simply to help teachers survive relocation, but to create conditions in which they can contribute their distinctive strengths and thrive.

Finally, international mobility can become a form of brain gain when mechanisms exist for knowledge exchange. Returning educators and overseas Filipino teachers can contribute to reciprocal mentoring networks, virtual professional communities, and curriculum innovation initiatives that transfer global best practices into Philippine classrooms.

Table 5. *Recommended Action Framework*

Stakeholder	Recommended Action	Intended Outcome
Department of Education and local school systems	Streamline administrative requirements; strengthen teacher well-being programs; create reciprocal mentoring channels for returning and overseas educators	Improved retention and reintegration of global best practices.
Pre-departure and migrant-support agencies	Provide cultural-intelligence, classroom-management, digital-literacy, mental-health, and financial-planning modules	Greater readiness for cross-cultural transition.
Host schools	Implement year-long onboarding, designated mentors, accessible leadership, anti-discriminatory policies, and multicultural recognition activities	Stronger belonging, performance, and long-term retention.

Filipino educators abroad	Document adaptive practices through portfolios and participate in professional networks	Sustained professional growth and knowledge exchange.
Future researchers	Conduct longitudinal and mixed-method studies on reintegration, return migration, and the relationship between international experience and student outcomes	More robust evidence for policy and program design.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of Filipino educators from the Digos City Division show that teaching abroad is not only an economic decision or a geographic move. It is a transformative professional journey. Educators initially confront cultural barriers, unfamiliar behavior-management demands, emotional isolation, and pressure to prove their competence. They respond by drawing on a Filipino foundation of resilience, resourcefulness, care, and perseverance while adopting new instructional practices and a neophyte mindset that keeps them open to learning.

Host institutions play a decisive role in whether this transition becomes a source of growth or strain. Structured onboarding, sustained mentoring, accessible leadership, practical support, and active anti-discriminatory policies enable educators to move from survival toward professional mastery. Through these experiences, participants became hybrid educators who blended Eastern discipline and relational warmth with flexible, differentiated, student-centered practice.

The study contributes to a more balanced understanding of teacher migration. While international mobility can intensify local workforce challenges, it can also generate globally informed professional capital. Harnessing this potential requires policies that protect educator well-being, support cross-cultural transitions, and create reciprocal channels through which global experience can enrich Philippine education.

Recommendations

The Department of Education and local school systems should strengthen teacher-retention efforts by reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, improving wellness supports, and recognizing teaching excellence. Migrant-support agencies and education partners should design pre-departure cultural-intelligence workshops that include communication, classroom management, emotional readiness, digital adaptation, and rights awareness. Host schools should provide structured year-long transition programs with designated mentors, accessible administrators, professional development, and enforceable anti-discrimination mechanisms. Overseas and returning educators should be supported in documenting and sharing their adaptive practices through reciprocal mentoring spaces and virtual professional communities. Future research should examine return migration, reintegration, long-term professional identity development, and the effects of globally informed teaching practices on learner outcomes.

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