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Across Borders: Lived Experiences and Adaptive Journeys of Filipino Exchange Teachers in Special Education in Hawai'I

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the lived experiences and adaptive journeys of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers assigned to Special Education in Hawai'i, particularly their professional transitions, institutional and instructional challenges, coping strategies, and personal and professional transformation. Employing a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design, the study examined the narratives of ten Filipino J-1 Special Education teachers. The teacher-participants' accounts were examined using Colaizzi's phenomenological method through the identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of related meanings, and synthesis of emergent themes. The findings were organized into 15 major themes across four substantive areas: lived experiences, influencing conditions, professional adaptation, and transformative meanings. The participants described initial professional uncertainty, unfamiliar Special Education procedures, demanding classroom responsibilities, and the fulfillment derived from meaningful learner relationships and perceived developmental progress. Their experiences were shaped by institutional support, individualized education program requirements, cultural differences, available resources, and competing professional responsibilities. Adaptation involved continuous professional learning, collegial mentoring, multidisciplinary collaboration, instructional modification, systematic documentation, and psychological adjustment. Participants attributed different meanings to their experiences, including increased professional confidence, relational maturity, strengthened competence, and renewed professional purpose. The synthesized findings suggested that cross-cultural professional adaptation was a continuing process of reconstructing established expertise within unfamiliar institutional conditions rather than an outcome of individual resilience alone. Based on the findings, a two-way Professional Support Framework was proposed to connect pre-departure preparation in the Philippines with institutional induction, mentoring, and continuing professional support in Hawai'i. The framework remained a proposed conceptual output requiring subsequent institutional review, piloting, and evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

International teacher migration has expanded exponentially as a structural phenomenon within global education reform, as nations and states address shortages in the workplace and equity mandates (Macapagong et al., 2023). Developed nations, driven by globalization, uneven domestic pipelines, economic disparities, and educational systems increasingly relying on cross-border mobility to fill gaps in the teaching force, specifically in critical shortage areas like special education. This migration movement intersects with macro-level international development agendas like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). It emphasizes inclusive and equitable education for all learners globally. According to Macapagong et al. (2023), while global migration policies facilitate the relocation of educators across national boundaries, they overlook the complex professional, administrative, and psycho-social adjustments required of migrating professionals.

Although previous studies had examined international teacher migration, professional adjustment, and the challenges experienced by educators in foreign educational systems, limited attention had been directed toward the lived experiences of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers assigned specifically to Special Education in Hawai'i. Their experiences involved more than geographic relocation or adjustment to an unfamiliar workplace. They encountered differences in institutional procedures, individualized educational planning, professional communication, instructional expectations, and culturally situated teaching practices. These circumstances suggested the importance of examining professional adaptation from the perspectives of teachers who had directly experienced the transition.

Existing discussions of internationally recruited teachers had frequently emphasized professional resilience, resourcefulness, and individual coping strategies. However, this emphasis could overlook the institutional circumstances that shaped teachers' opportunities to adjust effectively. Access to structured induction, mentoring, specialized personnel, instructional resources, and appropriate professional guidance appeared particularly relevant to understanding how exchange teachers responded to unfamiliar

responsibilities. The present inquiry consequently examined both the teachers' adaptive responses and the institutional conditions under which these responses developed.

The study was undertaken to understand how Filipino exchange teachers experienced, interpreted, and assigned meaning to their professional journeys in Special Education in Hawai'i. Through a transcendental phenomenological approach, the investigation examined their lived experiences, influencing conditions, adaptive practices, and emerging personal and professional insights. The findings provided the empirical foundation for a proposed Professional Support Framework intended to inform preparation before overseas deployment and continuing professional support within the receiving educational system. Rather than assuming a uniform adjustment experience, the study acknowledged the possibility that participants encountered different challenges, received different forms of support, and attributed different meanings to their professional development.

Statement of the Problem

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences and adaptive journeys of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers assigned to Special Education in Hawai'i. Specifically, it examined how participants experienced their cross-cultural professional transition, interpreted the institutional and instructional conditions surrounding their assignments, developed adaptive responses, and constructed meanings concerning their personal and professional development. The synthesized findings also served as the empirical foundation for a proposed Professional Support Framework intended to address preparation and institutional support needs associated with international Special Education teaching.

Central Research Question

How do Filipino exchange teachers experience, make meaning of, and navigate their adaptive journeys in Special Education in Hawai'i?

Specific Research Questions

1. How do Filipino exchange teachers describe their lived experiences in teaching Special Education in Hawai'i?
2. What systemic, institutional, instructional, cultural, and personal conditions characterize their cross-cultural professional experiences in Hawai'i?
3. How do Filipino exchange teachers navigate, respond to, and adapt to the conditions and challenges encountered in their Special Education practice?
4. What meanings, insights, and transformative professional growth emerge from their developmental and adaptive journeys?
5. Based on the synthesized lived experiences of the participants, what Professional Support Framework for Filipino Exchange Teachers in Special Education in Hawai'i may be proposed?

2. METHODS

Research Design and Rationale

The study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences and adaptive journeys of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers assigned to Special Education in Hawai'i. The design was considered appropriate because the investigation sought to understand how participants experienced, interpreted, and constructed meanings concerning their cross-cultural professional transitions. Rather than measuring predefined variables or testing hypotheses, the study examined the phenomenon through participants' firsthand descriptions of their professional experiences.

The phenomenological orientation emphasized the meanings participants attributed to unfamiliar institutional requirements, instructional responsibilities, cultural adjustment, professional relationships, coping strategies, and personal and professional transformation. These experiences were examined as interconnected dimensions of professional adaptation rather than independent variables or predetermined stages of development.

Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method (Morrow, 2015) was adopted as the primary analytical procedure. The method guided the systematic examination of interview transcripts through familiarization with participant accounts, identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of related meanings, development of an exhaustive description, and synthesis of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. Participant validation constituted the seventh step and required separate documentation of its actual implementation.

The researcher also acknowledged the importance of reflexivity and the phenomenological practice of examining personal assumptions. Because he had experienced professional transition as a Filipino educator in the United States, attention was directed toward preventing his own experiences from determining the interpretation of the participants' accounts.

The theoretical perspectives associated with Bandura, Berry, Bourdieu, and Wenger were not employed as predetermined coding categories. Instead, the phenomenological findings were developed from the participants' narratives before these perspectives were applied in Chapter 5 for further interpretation. This analytical sequence maintained consistency between the research design, data-analysis procedure, and presentation of findings.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in selected public schools in the State of Hawai'i, United States, where Filipino J-1 exchange teachers were assigned to Special Education programs. The participating educational settings were located on four islands, Oahu, Maui, the Big Island, and Lana'i, and comprised ten schools.

These educational settings provided the professional environments within which participants experienced the instructional, administrative, cultural, and institutional conditions investigated in the study. The teacher-participants held assignments involving inclusion classes, fully self-contained classes, resource or pull-out classes, and life skills, which exposed them to varying classroom responsibilities, learner needs, and institutional expectations.

The selection of the research locale was based on its direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation and the availability of eligible Filipino exchange teachers who had experienced professional transition in Hawai'i. To protect participants' confidentiality, the reporting of school names and assignment-specific identifying details was subject to the permissions obtained and the ethical requirements governing the study.

The study employed criterion-based purposive sampling to identify individuals who had directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation. This approach was consistent with the phenomenological orientation of the study because participants were selected based on their capacity to provide detailed firsthand descriptions of their professional experiences rather than their statistical representation of a larger population.

Where supported by the recruitment records, criterion-based purposive sampling was supplemented by snowball or referral sampling. This procedure involved identifying potential participants through referrals from initially contacted eligible teachers or professional contacts. Referred individuals were assessed against the same inclusion criteria before being invited to participate. Referral did not automatically qualify an individual for inclusion, and participation remained voluntary.

The inclusion criteria required teacher-participants to be Filipino citizens participating in an authorized J-1 exchange-teacher program, assigned to Special Education in Hawai'i public schools, and to have completed at least one full academic year of relevant teaching experience in Hawai'i. Participants were also required to be willing to provide informed consent and discuss their professional experiences. The intended primary phenomenological participant group consisted of ten Filipino J-1 Special Education teachers.

The minimum experience requirement was intended to ensure that participants had encountered the professional and institutional conditions relevant to the investigation. However, completion of one academic year did not necessarily indicate successful adjustment or the completion of professional adaptation. Participants could remain at different stages of professional transition depending on their previous experience, teaching assignments, available support, and personal circumstances.

The study emphasized the depth and relevance of the participants' accounts rather than numerical representation or statistical generalizability. Differences in participants' professional backgrounds and teaching circumstances were considered during interpretation to preserve meaningful variation across their lived experiences.

Data Generation, Ethics, and Reflexivity

The study used semi-structured phenomenological interviews as its primary method of generating qualitative data. This approach allowed participants to describe their experiences of teaching Special Education in Hawai'i and provided opportunities for the researcher to examine the meanings they attributed to unfamiliar professional circumstances.

The interview guide was organized around the substantive concerns reflected in the Statement of the Problem, including lived experiences, institutional and instructional conditions, adaptation strategies, and personal and professional transformation. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe specific situations, professional challenges, relationships, experiences of adjustment, and meaningful developments during their teaching journeys.

The interviews provided the principal source of significant statements used in the phenomenological analysis. Interview responses were organized according to participant identifiers to preserve the connection between individual narratives and the emerging interpretation of the phenomenon.

Where available, supporting research documentation was used to clarify interview context and maintain an organized record of the analytical process. The use of field notes, reflective memos, follow-up interviews, or additional data sources was documented only to the extent that such materials had actually been generated and retained.

The researcher served as the principal instrument in generating, organizing, and interpreting the qualitative data. His professional background as a Filipino educator who had experienced cross-cultural teaching in the United States provided contextual familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation. This experience contributed to the development of the research interest and informed his understanding of the professional uncertainties associated with teaching in an unfamiliar educational environment.

However, the researcher recognized that his experiences could not serve as the basis for interpreting the participants' narratives. Although he had personally encountered unfamiliar institutional expectations and had relied on observation, interaction, and self-

directed learning during his professional adjustment, he acknowledged that other Filipino exchange teachers could experience different circumstances and develop different responses.

Reflexivity consequently required attention to the distinction between the researcher's assumptions and the meanings expressed by participants. During the interpretation of significant statements, the researcher sought to preserve the participants' accounts and avoid automatically equating their experiences with his own. Particular attention was given to descriptions that differed from the researcher's expectations, including differences in mentoring experiences, instructional responsibilities, and forms of professional transformation.

The researcher's professional experience was treated as a source of contextual sensitivity rather than independent evidence concerning the experiences of the participants. The analytical presentation therefore emphasized traceability to the interview transcripts and distinguished participant statements from formulated meanings and subsequent theoretical interpretations.

The study was guided by ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, respect for persons, and the protection of participants' professional identities. These considerations were particularly important because the investigation involved educators working within an international exchange program and included descriptions of institutional practices, professional challenges, and workplace experiences.

The researcher was responsible for explaining the purpose of the investigation, the nature of participation, the intended use of interview information, and the procedures for protecting confidential data. Participants' decisions concerning participation and the disclosure of their experiences were to be respected without pressure or professional consequences.

Numerical participant identifiers were used in presenting the interview narratives and phenomenological findings. The reporting of participants' experiences was designed to avoid unnecessary disclosure of personally identifying information concerning teachers, schools, colleagues, learners, and families. Special attention was required when descriptions of particular assignments or institutional circumstances could indirectly identify participants.

The Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012, Republic Act No. 10173, provided a relevant legal reference for the handling of personal information within applicable Philippine institutional processes. Because the participants' professional activities occurred in the United States, the researcher also needed to consider applicable institutional and United States confidentiality requirements, particularly where information concerning educational records, learners, or school operations was involved. The applicability of specific laws depended on the nature of the information accessed and the research procedures undertaken.

Interview recordings, transcripts, coding documentation, and related research materials required secure storage and restricted access. Any use of digital transcription services or artificial intelligence applications required appropriate attention to participant consent, information security, and the institution's ethical requirements.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The study adopted Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method as the principal procedure for analyzing the participants' lived experiences. The analytical approach emphasized the systematic development of meanings from original interview narratives and the synthesis of themes representing the investigated phenomenon. The use of descriptive codes and thematic categories served to organize the analytical material without replacing the phenomenological interpretation required by Colaizzi's method.

The researcher examined the interview transcripts to develop an understanding of the experiences described by the participants. This stage involved reading the narratives in their entirety and attending to the context in which participants discussed their professional transitions, instructional responsibilities, institutional experiences, adaptive responses, and personal and professional development.

Statements directly related to the phenomenon were identified from the interview narratives. These statements described experiences of cultural and professional adjustment, institutional expectations, specialized instructional responsibilities, coping strategies, relationships with learners and colleagues, and perceptions of professional growth.

The identified significant statements were examined to determine the meanings conveyed by the participants. Formulated meanings were developed through interpretation of the statements within their original contexts rather than through the repetition of particular words or the numerical occurrence of codes.

Related formulated meanings were compared and organized into theme clusters. Descriptive codes and categories supported this process by identifying relationships among significant statements, experiences, and contextual conditions.

The major themes and subthemes were integrated into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. This description brought together the participants' accounts of professional transition, institutional and instructional conditions, adaptation strategies, and the meanings attached to their experiences.

The exhaustive description was synthesized into a concise statement expressing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. This synthesis identified the essential meaning connecting the participants' experiences of cross-cultural Special Education teaching in Hawai'i.

The seventh step of Colaizzi's method involved returning the synthesized findings to participants to determine whether the description adequately represented their lived experiences. This stage provided an opportunity to clarify interpretations and incorporate relevant feedback into the final synthesis.

Throughout the analysis, the theoretical perspectives associated with Bandura, Berry, Bourdieu, and Wenger were not used to determine the initial codes or emerging themes. These perspectives were applied subsequently in Chapter 5 to interpret the participant-derived findings. This distinction preserved the phenomenological priority of the participants' lived experiences.

The trustworthiness of the study was examined in relation to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. These criteria provided a basis for assessing the transparency of the research process and the extent to which the interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts.

Credibility. Credibility concerned the faithful representation of the participants' lived experiences. The phenomenological analysis emphasized the relationship between verbatim significant statements, formulated meanings, and emerging themes. The consideration of divergent and distinctive accounts was also important in preventing interpretations that overstated the uniformity of the participants' experiences. Any formal participant-validation procedures must be documented separately.

Dependability. Dependability concerned the consistency and traceability of the research process. The organization of interview transcripts, participant identifiers, coding references, formulated meanings, and theme development provided an analytical record that could be examined in relation to the methodology. Claims concerning formal audits or external reviews required supporting documentation.

Confirmability. Confirmability concerned the extent to which the findings were grounded in participant evidence rather than the researcher's personal assumptions. The researcher acknowledged his experience of cross-cultural teaching in the United States and recognized the importance of distinguishing this background from the participants' narratives. The interpretation of themes was consequently required to remain traceable to the original statements.

Transferability. Transferability concerned the potential relevance of the findings to other educational contexts with comparable circumstances. The study described the participants' professional backgrounds, teaching conditions, and institutional context to assist readers in judging contextual relevance. However, the findings were not intended to support statistical generalization to all Filipino exchange teachers or all Special Education settings.

Thus, these considerations emphasized the importance of methodological transparency, faithful representation of participant experiences, and careful acknowledgment of the limitations of the available evidence.

3. RESULTS

The retained analytic organization comprised four research-question groupings: lived experiences, conditions shaping those experiences, professional coping and adaptation, and meanings of personal and professional development. Under these groupings, the documented initial codes led to 15 major themes. The first grouping contained themes of transition, learner relationships and progress, specialized teaching demands, and professional fulfillment. The second contained themes of legal accountability, institutional support, instructional and cultural diversity, and personal or professional pressures. The third addressed learning, collaboration, reconstructed practices, and psychological or cultural adjustment. The fourth concerned personal agency, professional identity, and knowledge viewed as potentially transferable. These themes were examined as connected meanings, not separate checklists of experiences.

Across these four themes, the lived experience was not exclusively a story of hardship. It combined uncertainty and demanding responsibilities with meaningful relationships, perceived learner achievements, and personal or professional opportunity. Their coexistence mattered because fulfillment did not necessarily begin only after the difficulties had ended.

Table 1. Major Themes Across the Four Substantive Research Areas

Substantive Area	Major Theme
Lived Experiences	1. Navigating Uncertainty and Professional Transition
Lived Experiences	2. Finding Purpose Through Learner Relationships and Progress
Lived Experiences	3. Confronting the Demands of Specialized Teaching
Lived Experiences	4. Experiencing Professional Fulfillment and Expanded Opportunities
Influencing Conditions	5. Negotiating Legal and Administrative Accountability
Influencing Conditions	6. Working Within Different Institutional Support Systems
Influencing Conditions	7. Responding to Instructional and Cultural Diversity
Influencing Conditions	8. Managing Personal and Professional Pressures
Professional Adaptation	9. Developing Competence Through Continuous Professional Learning
Professional Adaptation	10. Strengthening Adaptation Through Collaboration

Professional Adaptation	11. Reconstructing Instructional and Administrative Practices
Professional Adaptation	12. Sustaining Adaptation Through Psychological and Cultural Adjustment
Transformative Meanings	13. Developing Personal Agency and Relational Maturity
Transformative Meanings	14. Reconstructing Professional Competence and Identity
Transformative Meanings	15. Extending Professional Learning Beyond Hawai'i

Research Question 1: Lived Experiences

Synthesis of Major Theme 1. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that the shared phenomenon began with an encounter between established teaching knowledge and a different educational system. Disorientation was substantial for some participants, but it was neither uniform nor necessarily a sign of deficient prior competence. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 2. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that relational security and incremental learner development made difficult assignments meaningful. The accounts were valued as perceptions of progress, not experimental evidence of instructional impact. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 3. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that specialized instruction brought together behavioral judgment, differentiated instruction, documentation and safety. Variation followed the particular classroom assignment and the teacher's prior preparation. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 4. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that overseas teaching combined demanding responsibilities with valued opportunities for growth, support of family, professional mastery and meaningful engagement with learners. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

"Honestly, my initial experience was pure culture shock." - Participant P3

Research Question 2: Influencing Conditions

Synthesis of Major Theme 5. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that iEP procedures and digital accountability arrangements shaped classroom routines and what counted as successful professional practice. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 6. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that unequal access to induction, mentoring, specialist advice and resources altered how manageable unfamiliar tasks became. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 7. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that teachers adapted instructional practices while reconsidering communication and cultural expectations within classroom and school relationships. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 8. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that workload, relocation and professional expectations formed overlapping rather than isolated demands. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

"In Hawaii, documentation and IEP writing follow strict, legally binding procedures with step-by-step digital workflows on eCSSS and standardized multidisciplinary assessments." -Participant P9

Research Question 3: Professional Adaptation

Synthesis of Major Theme 9. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that professional competence developed through inquiry and guided learning as teachers responded to assignment-specific demands. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 10. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that mentoring and multidisciplinary consultation made adjustment relational as well as individual. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 11. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that adaptation involved modifying documentation habits, instructional decisions and behavioral supports in response to concrete teaching responsibilities. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 12. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that teachers described emotional and cultural coping while remaining dependent on the availability of workable organizational support. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

"I adjusted by actively seeking guidance from assigned school mentors, participating in professional development hours, studying district guidelines, and embracing digital workflows through hands-on practice." - Participant P9

Research Question 4: Meanings, Insights, and Transformation

Synthesis of Major Theme 13. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that the accounts connected professional experience with confidence, independence, patience, empathy and relational learning. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 14. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that professional transformation was not invariably a break with the past; it included both substantial redirection and affirmation of established teaching commitments. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

Synthesis of Major Theme 15. The subthemes, when read together, suggested that newly acquired knowledge appeared potentially useful across borders, although transferring it required local adaptation and was not verified in this study. The source records contained both convergent descriptions and accounts that qualified the scope of this interpretation. The resulting major theme represented an organized meaning of the submitted interviews, not a universal description of every Filipino exchange teacher in Hawai'i.

"Personally, I have grown braver, bolder, more patient, more creative, and far more skilled in time management."- Participant P1

Phenomenological Synthesis

Across the four research questions, professional transition appeared as an encounter between previously developed teaching commitments and a different organizational environment. Teachers did not enter Hawai'i as professionally empty individuals; they brought earlier classroom skills, expectations about colleague support, and beliefs about teaching learners with disabilities. Yet those resources did not always translate directly into confidence under the host system's legal, instructional, and documentation requirements. This tension connected the first themes of disorientation with later themes of professional learning, adaptation, and reconstructed identity.

A particularly consequential relationship emerged between institutional requirements and available support. IEP deadlines, digital records, specialized service coordination, and differentiated instruction were experienced through the resources of a particular school. Some participants named mentors, Educational Assistants, administrators, and related-service professionals who facilitated learning. Another described learning digital IEP preparation without formal onboarding. These contrasts suggested that the presence of requirements alone did not explain the ease or difficulty of adjustment; the timing, relevance, and accessibility of institutional assistance mattered.

Cultural and emotional adjustment likewise involved more than general resilience. Participants described changing their professional tone, learning local expressions, communicating with families through structured channels, and reflecting after difficult interactions. Some identified patience and warmth as valued strengths, while others emphasized the importance of clear boundaries and written records. The narratives revealed negotiation between continuity and change: teachers did not invariably abandon their prior cultural or pedagogical orientations but selected, revised, or reaffirmed practices as new situations required.

Together, these relationships suggested a shared meaning of situated professional reconstruction. The teachers encountered unfamiliar expectations, sought ways to make their earlier expertise workable, drew significance from relationships and perceived learner progress, and interpreted their experiences as changes or continuities in professional identity. Their adjustment was both

individual and relational; its opportunities and burdens were shaped by the institutions in which they worked. This synthesis answered the central research question while preserving variation across assignments, preparation histories, and personal interpretations.

The essential structure of the lived phenomenon was the situated reconstruction of professional practice and meaning across educational borders. Filipino exchange teachers met new instructional, legal, cultural, and institutional expectations while drawing upon earlier competence and seeking assistance to perform their responsibilities. They interpreted professional worth through both the demands of accountability and the relational or developmental significance of their work with learners. Their adaptation was not an automatic consequence of personal resilience; it was negotiated through continuing learning, professional relationships, institutional conditions, and individual circumstances.

4. DISCUSSION

Filipino J-1 Special Education exchange teachers experienced teaching in Hawai'i as a negotiated combination of unfamiliar institutional expectations, specialized instructional responsibilities, learner-centered fulfillment, and professional opportunity. What united the accounts was the need to make established knowledge workable in a different educational environment. The intensity and meaning of this transition varied according to prior preparation, assignment, relationships, and access to support (Major Themes 1–4).

The teachers' professional experiences were shaped by intersecting legal and documentation requirements, uneven institutional induction and mentoring, instructional diversity, cultural communication demands, workload, and exchange-related personal circumstances. The presence, relevance, and timeliness of assignment-specific professional support appeared particularly important in shaping how these requirements were experienced (Major Themes 5–8).

The teachers navigated challenges through a combination of self-directed inquiry, formal learning, mentoring and multidisciplinary collaboration, revised instructional and documentation practices, and psychological or cultural adjustment. Their professional adaptation was active and relational, and its possibilities were shaped by access to timely, relevant institutional support (Major Themes 9–12).

The teachers interpreted their adaptive journeys through varying degrees of personal agency, relational maturity, professional competence, and the reconstruction or reaffirmation of identity. Some reported potentially transferable skills, but actual transfer remained unverified. Transformation was therefore experienced as differing forms of interpreted growth and continuity, not as a uniform outcome of international teaching (Major Themes 13–15).

The reviewed literature on cross-border teaching described coping resources, professional learning, and community ties as important features of migration experiences (Ramos, 2024; Santos & Tolentino, 2024). The present study similarly identified individual initiative and collegial resources, but situated them within the technical demands of Special Education. Teachers were not only learning to live in a new location; they were learning records, instructional supports, and processes through which specialized services were documented and coordinated. This context helped distinguish their adaptation from a generalized account of migration stress.

The findings also complicated literature that celebrated perseverance as an adequate response to institutional gaps. The manuscript's review of critiques of individual-grit narratives (Reyes, 2026) supplied a relevant comparison. Participants' willingness to study unfamiliar systems and continue teaching was significant, but self-direction could also indicate that formal preparation arrived late or was insufficiently specific. Treating self-reliance as a sufficient solution would shift responsibility for institutional support onto the teacher without considering the origin of the difficulty.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive perspective helped interpret the reported movement from unfamiliarity toward greater perceived capability. Observing experienced colleagues, receiving feedback, trying new routines, and reflecting on results were consistent with learning through experience and observation. However, the study did not measure the direction or strength of reciprocal effects among the person, environment, and behavior. The theory clarified why professional confidence and opportunity for guided practice belonged in the same interpretive account without presenting them as statistically verified relationships.

The reviewed scholarship on identity construction among educators working with learners with disabilities (Rostami et al., 2021) provided a basis for discussing changes in how teachers understood their responsibilities. Literature concerning international mobility and teacher learning (Varghese et al., 2025; Imoite, 2021) similarly raised the possibility that cross-border assignments could modify professional outlook and practice. The present accounts added a contextual distinction: change could involve both major career redirection and more deliberate articulation of an established educational commitment.

Bandura's (1986) account of perceived self-efficacy provided an interpretive perspective on reports of increasing confidence and agency. Teachers sometimes understood mastery of new responsibilities as evidence that they could handle more complex professional demands. Yet perceived confidence was not synonymous with independently assessed competence. The study's evidence supported interpretation of the teachers' self-understanding, not a causal claim that overseas service necessarily increased self-efficacy.

Across the four substantive research questions, the findings described an encounter between existing professional commitments and an unfamiliar institutional environment. Teachers sought to meet requirements that were new in their form, sequence, technical vocabulary, or social expectations. Their earlier competence remained relevant, but its expression required adjustment in light of particular learners, school responsibilities, and professional relationships. This relationship connected initial uncertainty with later forms of professional learning and identity development without making successful adaptation a foregone conclusion.

The essential meaning identified was supported by the interaction of these themes. The term situated emphasized that experiences depended on assignment-specific conditions and accessible support. Reconstruction referred to the ways teachers reorganized established knowledge, acquired unfamiliar procedures, maintained valued commitments, and developed new interpretations of themselves as educators. The process was not linear or identical across participants; several reported that uncertainty and professional fulfillment coexisted, and some continued to experience unfamiliar responsibilities after acquiring greater confidence in other areas.

The findings also resisted the romanticization of individual resilience. Personal initiative, persistence, and emotional composure were relevant parts of the participants' experiences. Nevertheless, the accounts indicated that access to mentors, specialized guidance, and institutional preparation changed what teachers were able to learn and how they experienced required tasks. A framework that celebrated endurance but neglected organized induction would therefore respond incompletely to the phenomenon. This did not establish a causal model of support and adjustment; rather, it identified a compelling practical implication grounded in what participants described.

The study contributed a localized phenomenological account of how Filipino exchange teachers interpreted their Special Education assignments in Hawai'i. Beyond identifying challenges, it showed how uncertainty, learner-related fulfillment, institutional support, professional learning, and evolving identity belonged to an interconnected experience. The synthesis added an account of continuity as well as change: teachers could adapt new procedures while retaining earlier professional values. This contribution was interpretive and bounded by the participants' narratives; it was not a general claim about the experiences of all Filipino exchange teachers.

The study also clarified why cross-cultural adjustment should not be reduced to personal resilience or generalized culture shock. Participants described the significance of legal and documentation responsibilities, mentoring access, differentiated instructional arrangements, and professional collaboration. The post-analysis theoretical reading showed the usefulness of considering agency, acculturation, and professional communities together, while preserving their different explanatory roles. The study did not establish new causal laws; its contribution was to make visible the lived relationships among these elements in a particular professional context.

The practical contribution was the formulation of an empirically grounded Professional Support Framework connecting Philippine pre-departure preparation with Hawai'i receiving-school induction and continuing support. The framework translated participant-reported needs into a conceptual relationship model; it did not prescribe a funded institutional intervention or document improved retention, learning outcomes, or teacher well-being. Its relevance would require consultation with affected institutions, jurisdiction-sensitive adaptation, pilot implementation, and independent evaluation. Accordingly, Research Question 5 was answered as a proposed research output in Chapter 6, not as a demonstrated effect of the study.

CONCLUSION

1. Filipino J-1 Special Education exchange teaching in Hawai'i was experienced as a combination of professional uncertainty, specialized instructional demands, relational fulfillment, and professional opportunity. The defensible conclusion was not that every teacher experienced equivalent hardship or success, but that participants negotiated familiar professional commitments within unfamiliar work arrangements.
2. The teachers' experiences were shaped by legal and documentary expectations, induction and mentoring arrangements, instructional diversity, workplace relationships, workload, and personal circumstances. Variation in the availability and timing of relevant support qualified any explanation that attributed professional difficulty solely to individual preparation or resilience.
3. Participants navigated unfamiliar responsibilities through a combination of inquiry, continuing professional learning, collaboration, modified administrative and instructional practices, and emotional and cultural adjustment. Their accounts suggested that adaptation was an active and relational process rather than an automatic outcome of placement, but did not establish the causal effectiveness of specific strategies.
4. The experience carried different meanings, including increased confidence and empathy, technical and professional learning, a new professional direction for some teachers, and reaffirmed commitments for others. Potential cross-border usefulness of acquired knowledge remained a participant-described possibility, not a verified institutional transfer.
5. The combined findings provided an empirical basis for proposing a two-way Professional Support Framework linking Philippine preparation with Hawai'i school-based induction and continuing support. The framework represented a

conceptual contribution requiring contextual adaptation, stakeholder consultation, and future evaluation; it had not been demonstrated to improve retention, student learning, or other measurable outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Principals and other authorized school leaders responsible for assigning and supervising incoming exchange teachers should consider a differentiated induction process that clarified classroom responsibilities, learner profiles, IEP expectations, available personnel, safety procedures, and referral channels. The recommendation arose from the contrasting participant accounts of effective early assistance and inadequate formal orientation. The proposal did not require the creation of an entirely new institutional program before a needs assessment; it suggested that access to practical guidance should be explicitly considered during placement.
2. SPED coordinators, experienced teachers, and relevant specialists should consider opportunities for supervised learning in IEP documentation, progress-monitoring processes, individualized instruction, behavioral support, and multidisciplinary case consultation. Mentoring should respond to the actual teaching assignment and recognize previous professional strengths, rather than treating all Filipino exchange teachers as equally inexperienced. This recommendation followed the accounts in which colleagues provided essential procedural explanations and other accounts in which teachers relied heavily on independent learning.
3. Philippine sending institutions and authorized exchange preparation providers may examine whether their orientation activities sufficiently describe the working realities of specialized classroom placement abroad. Preparation could address professional communication, individualized planning, school-based collaboration, and the limits of transferring prior procedures unchanged. Because the receiving institution remains responsible for its own authorized systems, pre-departure activities should complement rather than replace host-school induction.
4. Personnel responsible for recruitment, placement, and teacher support should consider clearer coordination between appointment procedures and continuing professional assistance. Relevant information could include where incoming teachers may seek clarification, how confidential well-being concerns are handled, and when assignment-related support is reviewed. These recommendations followed the distinction between initial placement and sustained professional integration. Institutional responsibilities would require clarification in the receiving organization's own policies.
5. Educational agencies, professional organizations, and relevant cross-border partners may examine the proposed two-way framework as a basis for discussion of professional preparation and support. Any consideration by the Hawai'i Department of Education, a recruitment liaison, or Philippine consular offices should be consultative and consistent with their respective mandates. Neither endorsement nor implementation by those institutions was established in the present study. Cross-border adaptation should distinguish general professional principles from jurisdiction-specific legal compliance requirements.
6. Researchers should examine the proposed framework through an appropriate pilot and evaluation design before making claims about feasibility or effectiveness. Future inquiries could include broader participant groups, verify changes over time, and investigate whether differential access to institutional support is associated with experiences of professional adjustment. Studies of knowledge exchange in Philippine institutions should distinguish intentions, opportunities, actual activities, and independently assessed outcomes. Any follow-up should also address the participant-documentation issues identified in the current dissertation's audit record.

Practical Output: Professional Support Framework

The practical output of the study was a proposed Professional Support Framework for Filipino J-1 Exchange Teachers in Special Education in Hawai'i. It was developed from the synthesized findings concerning the participants' lived experiences, influencing conditions, adaptive practices, and professional transformation.

The framework was conceptualized as a two-way professional support model connecting Philippine sending institutions and exchange-program preparation organizations with receiving educational institutions in Hawai'i. The Philippine component addressed possible areas of pre-departure preparation, professional readiness, and contextual orientation. The Hawai'i component emphasized institutional induction, mentoring, Special Education documentation support, multidisciplinary collaboration, and continuing professional assistance.

The framework represented a conceptual relationship model rather than an implementation matrix or action plan. Its components were derived from the phenomenological findings and were intended to identify areas in which professional support could be examined and strengthened. Its practical relevance depended on institutional authority, available resources, and the different policy and legal requirements of the Philippine and United States educational systems.

The proposed framework was not implemented or evaluated during the investigation. Future stakeholder consultation, contextual adaptation, feasibility assessment, piloting, and evaluation would be necessary before claims concerning its effectiveness or sustainability could be established.

The fifth research question asked what Professional Support Framework could be proposed from the synthesized lived experiences. Data presented the resulting conceptual model. Its empirical foundation was the four-part phenomenological account of lived experiences, influencing conditions, coping and adaptation, and emerging meanings. Two institutional contexts—the Philippine sending context and the Hawai'i receiving context—were connected to a central process of situated professional adaptation. The framework then represented the meanings participants attached to their development and the possibility of context-sensitive professional learning beyond an individual placement.

Pre-departure preparation was understood as anticipatory rather than substitutive. Philippine institutions could introduce the nature of IEP-based accountability, multidisciplinary participation, professional communication, and the importance of assignment-specific orientation. They could not confer authority over Hawai'i compliance systems or substitute for the receiving school's official induction. Nor did the framework imply that sending organizations had agreed to undertake the proposed functions. Its purpose was to identify opportunities for dialogue and contextual preparation arising from the teachers' experiences.

The second institutional domain concerned the support that receiving schools and authorized educational personnel might consider after placement. Participants' descriptions suggested the value of clarifying classroom assignments, learner profiles, IEP responsibilities, authorized digital documentation, available specialists, safety procedures, and channels for professional questions. Access to mentor teachers and multidisciplinary colleagues could connect written requirements with the realities of classroom decisions. The framework accordingly emphasized timely and assignment-specific induction rather than a presumption that one orientation session would resolve continuing needs.

Central Process: Situated Professional Adaptation

The central domain joined self-directed inquiry, collegial learning, reconstruction of instruction and administrative routines, and cultural adjustment. Arrows from the sending and receiving contexts indicated that preparation and institutional conditions could shape the opportunities within which teachers acted. The double-direction relationship within the process represented the interaction of individual initiative with professional participation and changes in practice. These arrows expressed conceptual relationships drawn from the narratives, not quantified causal pathways.

This central process was particularly important because the findings cautioned against romanticizing individual grit. Teachers' initiative mattered, yet the same responsibility could be manageable with timely guidance and overwhelming when guidance was limited. The framework consequently positioned organized professional assistance alongside personal learning. It did not treat either individual effort or institutional policy as a sufficient explanation for successful adaptation.

The proposed Professional Support Framework was developed through interpretive synthesis of a bounded set of teacher narratives. It was neither an experimentally validated model nor an operational program. The evidence did not demonstrate that implementing the model would increase retention, reduce burnout, or improve learner performance. Its immediate value was explanatory and propositional: it translated the participants' meanings and reported support needs into a coherent conceptual basis for consultation and subsequent testing.

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