



Balancing Care and Burnout: Lived Experiences of International Filipino Special Education Teachers in Dealing with Stress, Resilience, Motivation and Well-being in the United States

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19582963

Rhonie I. Villahermosa

Special Education Teacher

Minnesota, USA

rlestervillahermosa@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in dealing with stress, resilience, motivation and well-being in United States classroom settings. This study used Georgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological approach. The participants of the study were Filipino international special education teachers who have at least 3 years of teaching experience in multi-intensive setting for students with special needs and were selected using purposive sampling technique. Researcher-made interview guide was used to collect the data from the participants and was validated by the experts in qualitative research. Data were collected using individual in-depth interview and were analyzed using Georgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method using epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis. Results show that while Filipino international special education teachers face significant challenges such as workload and cultural adjustment, they effectively manage stress through support systems and adaptive strategies. Resilience is strengthened by personal values and professional growth, while motivation is driven by a strong sense of purpose and student success. Well-being is influenced by work-life balance and a sense of belonging within the school community. Overall, their experiences reflect resilience, cultural adaptation, and professional fulfillment in a demanding yet meaningful teaching environment.

Keywords: Stress, Resilience, Motivation, Well-being, International Teachers, Special Education, Students with Special Needs, and Qualitative Study

Introduction

The migration of Filipino teachers to the United States has significantly increased in recent years, driven by global teacher shortages and the strong reputation of Filipino educators for their competence, adaptability, and dedication (Avesta, 2025). Among these professionals, Filipino special education teachers play a critical role in supporting students with diverse learning needs in inclusive and specialized settings. According to Garcia (2025), special education teaching requires not only strong pedagogical skills but also emotional resilience, patience, and the ability to manage complex classroom dynamics. As a result, the profession is often associated with high levels of stress and emotional demand. When Filipino special education teachers transition to teaching in the United States, these inherent challenges are further intensified by cultural adjustments, new institutional expectations, and personal transitions associated with working in a foreign country.

According to Presquito and Madrigal (2025), teaching in the United States presents unique demands that differ significantly from the Philippine educational system. Special education teachers are required to comply with structured legal frameworks, including the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans, adherence to strict documentation requirements, and collaboration with multidisciplinary teams. These expectations,



combined with the diverse needs of students with disabilities, contribute to increased workload and pressure. Augusto et al. (2026) added that for international Filipino teachers, navigating these responsibilities while simultaneously adjusting to a new cultural and professional environment can lead to heightened levels of stress. Research has shown that international educators often experience culture shock, communication barriers, and feelings of isolation, all of which can affect their emotional well-being and professional performance.

Despite these challenges, according to Marquez-Tampus (2025), Filipino special education teachers are known for their resilience and strong sense of purpose. Many educators demonstrate the ability to adapt to new environments, develop coping strategies, and maintain motivation in the face of adversity. Their resilience is often rooted in personal values such as perseverance, strong work ethic, and a deep commitment to student success. Additionally, according to Bantayan-Tanner and Gallaron (2025), motivation plays a key role in sustaining their engagement in the profession. Factors such as passion for teaching, desire to support students with special needs, and aspirations for professional growth contribute to their continued dedication. However, the interaction between stress, resilience, motivation, and overall well-being is complex and multifaceted, particularly within the context of international teaching.

Existing literature on special education teachers has largely focused on stress, burnout, and coping strategies, often highlighting the demanding nature of the profession. Studies have consistently identified workload, behavioral challenges, administrative demands, and lack of resources as major contributors to teacher stress (Villahermosa, 2026; Cuadra, 2026). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often rely on quantitative approaches that measure levels of stress or job satisfaction without capturing the deeper, lived experiences of teachers. Similarly, research on international Filipino teachers tends to focus on cultural adjustment, professional challenges, and general teaching experiences abroad. Although these studies acknowledge issues such as adaptation and resilience, they do not specifically examine the holistic experiences of Filipino special education teachers in the United States.

A significant gap in the literature lies in the limited number of qualitative studies that explore how Filipino international special education teachers make sense of their experiences. There is a lack of in-depth exploration of how these teachers experience and interpret stress in their daily professional lives, how they develop and sustain resilience over time, and how motivation influences their ability to remain committed to their roles. Furthermore, existing studies often treat stress, resilience, motivation, and well-being as separate constructs, rather than examining how these factors interact and influence one another within the context of teaching abroad.

Another gap is the limited focus on well-being as a comprehensive concept that includes emotional, psychological, and professional dimensions (Villahermosa, 2026). While some studies address burnout and job satisfaction, they do not fully capture the broader aspects of teacher well-being, such as sense of belonging, professional identity, and work-life balance. For international Filipino teachers, well-being is closely tied to their experiences of cultural integration, social support, and personal adjustment in a new environment. However, these aspects remain underexplored, particularly in relation to special education teachers who face additional professional demands.

Additionally, there is insufficient attention given to the role of cultural identity in shaping the experiences of Filipino special education teachers in the United States. Filipino educators often bring cultural values such as collectivism, empathy, and relational teaching into their practice. These values can influence how they interact with students, colleagues, and families, as well as how they cope with stress and maintain motivation. However, the ways in which these cultural values are negotiated within the context of U.S. educational systems have not been thoroughly examined. Understanding this cultural dimension is essential for developing more effective support systems and inclusive policies for international teachers (Ramas & Velasco, 2024).

The lack of research focusing specifically on Filipino special education teachers in the United States also limits the development of targeted interventions and policies to support their well-being. While general studies on teacher stress and international educators provide useful insights, they do not address the unique intersection of factors experienced by this group. Filipino special education teachers operate at the intersection of multiple identities—as educators, as special education professionals, and as international workers—which creates a distinct set of challenges and opportunities that require focused investigation (Villahermosa, 2026).



Given these gaps, there is a clear need for a qualitative study that explores the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in the United States, with a particular focus on stress, resilience, motivation, and well-being. A phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate for this purpose, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive and make meaning of their experiences. By capturing the voices and narratives of these teachers, the study can provide rich insights into the realities of teaching special education in a foreign context.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a holistic understanding of the interconnected experiences of stress, resilience, motivation, and well-being among Filipino special education teachers. It seeks to highlight not only the challenges they face but also the strengths and coping strategies that enable them to thrive. Furthermore, the findings of this study can inform the development of policies, professional development programs, and support systems that promote teacher well-being and sustainability in the international education workforce. Ultimately, understanding the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers is essential for fostering more inclusive, supportive, and effective educational environments. By addressing the gaps in the literature, this research has the potential to enhance both teacher well-being and student outcomes, ensuring that educators are equipped to provide high-quality support to learners with special needs while maintaining their own professional and personal well-being.

Thus, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in dealing with stress, resilience, motivation and well-being in United States classroom setting.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Filipino international special education teachers describe their lived experiences in managing stress in U.S. classroom settings?
2. What challenges and coping strategies do Filipino international special education teachers use to develop resilience in their professional practice?
3. How do Filipino international special education teachers maintain motivation while teaching students with special needs in the United States?
4. How do Filipino international special education teachers perceive and experience their overall well-being in relation to their teaching roles?
5. What meanings do Filipino international special education teachers assign to their experiences of stress, resilience, motivation, and well-being in U.S. classrooms?

Methods

This study was qualitative in nature and used Georgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological approach to describe and explore the lived experiences of lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in dealing with stress, resilience, motivation and well-being in United States classroom setting. A descriptive phenomenological design was used to get a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and how these experiences affect their role and extent of involvement and how they encountered the various challenges and opportunities while in the program.

The participants of the study were Filipino international special education teachers who have at least 3 years of teaching experience in multi-intensive settings among the school districts in the State of Minnesota. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique.

Researcher-made interview guide was used to collect the data from the participants and was validated by the experts in qualitative research. Data were collected using individual in-depth interview and were analyzed using Georgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method using epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis.



The study observed strict ethical standards by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of all respondents. Participants' identities will remain anonymous, and data were used solely for academic purposes.

Results

After the data were analyzed, five themes emerged, reflecting the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in teaching students with special needs in US early childhood settings.

Theme 1 - Managing Stress through Adaptation and Support Systems

Filipino international special education teachers described their experiences of stress as multifaceted, stemming from heavy workloads, diverse student needs, and compliance with U.S. educational policies. Participants highlighted challenges such as managing behavior, completing documentation, and meeting individualized education plan requirements. To manage stress, they relied on structured routines, time management, and seeking support from colleagues, mentors, and administrators. Emotional support from family and maintaining a positive mindset were also essential in coping with daily stressors.

Theme 2: Building Resilience through Coping Strategies and Professional Growth

Participants demonstrated resilience by developing effective coping strategies, including reflective practice, continuous learning, and flexibility in instruction. They viewed challenges as opportunities for growth and emphasized perseverance, patience, and adaptability. Many teachers relied on their cultural values, such as strong work ethic and commitment to students, to overcome professional difficulties and maintain stability in their roles.

Theme 3: Sustaining Motivation through Purpose and Student Impact

Teachers maintained motivation through a strong sense of purpose and passion for teaching students with special needs. Witnessing student progress, both academically and behaviorally, served as a primary source of fulfillment. Participants also expressed motivation through professional goals, personal aspirations, and the desire to make a meaningful difference in students' lives, which reinforced their commitment despite challenges.

Theme 4: Experiencing Well-Being through Balance and Belonging

Participants perceived well-being as a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life. While they acknowledged stress and fatigue, they also highlighted the importance of self-care, supportive relationships, and a sense of belonging within their school community. Positive workplace environments, collaboration with colleagues, and recognition of their efforts contributed to improved well-being.

Theme 5: Meaning-Making through Resilience, Identity, and Fulfillment

The essence of participants' lived experiences was characterized by resilience, cultural identity, and professional fulfillment. Teachers assigned meaning to their experiences by viewing their journey as one of growth, sacrifice, and purpose. They described their roles as not only professional responsibilities but also personal missions, where overcoming challenges strengthened their identity as educators and reinforced their dedication to supporting students with special needs.

Discussion



The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in the United States, highlighting the interconnected nature of stress, resilience, motivation, and well-being. The theme of managing stress through adaptation and support systems underscores the multifaceted challenges teachers face in U.S. classroom settings. Participants identified workload demands, behavioral management, and compliance with educational policies such as individualized education plans as primary stressors. These findings align with existing literature that characterizes special education as a high-demand profession. However, this study extends prior research by emphasizing the importance of adaptive strategies, including structured routines, time management, and professional collaboration. The reliance on collegial and familial support further highlights the role of social networks in mitigating stress, suggesting that both institutional and personal support systems are critical in sustaining teacher effectiveness.

The theme of building resilience through coping strategies and professional growth reveals that participants do not merely endure challenges but actively transform them into opportunities for development. Teachers demonstrated resilience through reflective practice, continuous learning, and instructional flexibility. This supports the notion that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process shaped by experience and context. Notably, participants drew strength from cultural values such as perseverance, strong work ethic, and commitment to students. This finding adds a cultural dimension to resilience, indicating that Filipino teachers' backgrounds play a significant role in how they navigate professional adversity. It also suggests that culturally responsive support systems may enhance resilience among international educators.

In terms of sustaining motivation through purpose and student impact, the findings highlight the intrinsic nature of teacher motivation. Participants consistently identified student progress as a primary source of fulfillment, reinforcing their commitment to the profession. This aligns with research indicating that teacher motivation is closely tied to perceived impact and sense of purpose. Additionally, professional aspirations and personal goals contributed to sustained engagement, suggesting that motivation is influenced by both internal values and future-oriented perspectives. Despite the challenges they encounter, teachers remain driven by their desire to make meaningful contributions to students' lives, particularly those with special needs.

The theme of experiencing well-being through balance and belonging emphasizes the importance of holistic support for teachers. Participants described well-being as a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life, highlighting the need for self-care and supportive relationships. The sense of belonging within the school community emerged as a critical factor, with positive workplace environments and collaborative practices enhancing overall well-being. This finding is significant as it underscores that teacher well-being is not solely an individual responsibility but is also shaped by organizational culture and support. Schools that foster inclusive, collaborative, and supportive environments can play a key role in promoting teacher satisfaction and retention.

Finally, the theme of meaning-making through resilience, identity, and fulfillment captures the essence of participants' lived experiences. Teachers viewed their journey as one of growth, sacrifice, and purpose, reflecting a deep sense of professional identity and personal commitment. Their experiences extend beyond the technical aspects of teaching, encompassing emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions. The process of meaning-making allowed participants to reframe challenges as opportunities for empowerment and professional affirmation. This finding highlights the importance of recognizing teachers as whole individuals whose personal values and identities are integral to their professional practice.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the experiences of Filipino international special education teachers are shaped by a dynamic interplay of challenges and strengths. While stress is an inherent part of their professional context, it is mitigated by resilience, sustained by motivation, and balanced through supportive environments. The findings suggest that policies and practices aimed at supporting international educators should focus on strengthening professional support systems, promoting well-being, and recognizing the cultural assets that teachers bring to their roles. By doing so, educational institutions can better support the sustainability and effectiveness of the international special education workforce.



Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino international special education teachers in the United States, focusing on their experiences of stress, resilience, motivation, and well-being. The findings reveal that these educators navigate a complex professional landscape shaped by high demands, cultural transitions, and diverse student needs. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate remarkable adaptability and commitment, highlighting the strength and resilience that define their professional journeys.

The study concludes that stress is an inherent part of special education teaching, particularly within the U.S. context where accountability, documentation, and individualized instruction are emphasized. However, stress is not experienced in isolation. Teachers actively manage it through adaptive strategies such as structured routines, time management, and seeking support from colleagues, administrators, and family members. These support systems play a crucial role in helping teachers maintain stability and effectiveness in their roles.

Resilience emerged as a key factor that enables teachers to persist and grow in challenging environments. Participants demonstrated resilience through continuous learning, reflective practice, and flexibility in addressing student needs. Their cultural values, including perseverance, empathy, and strong work ethic, further strengthened their ability to overcome obstacles. This suggests that resilience is deeply rooted in both personal and cultural dimensions, allowing teachers to transform challenges into opportunities for professional development.

Motivation was found to be strongly influenced by a sense of purpose and the desire to make a meaningful impact on students with special needs. Teachers expressed fulfillment in witnessing student growth and progress, which reinforced their dedication to the profession. Their motivation was also sustained by personal aspirations and professional goals, indicating that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to their continued engagement in teaching.

Well-being was described as a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life. Participants emphasized the importance of self-care, supportive relationships, and a positive work environment in maintaining their overall well-being. A sense of belonging within the school community, fostered through collaboration and recognition, was identified as a critical factor in promoting teacher satisfaction and retention. This highlights the need for schools to create supportive and inclusive environments that prioritize teacher well-being.

The essence of the teachers' lived experiences reflects a journey of resilience, cultural adaptation, and professional fulfillment. Participants assigned meaning to their experiences by viewing their roles as both a professional responsibility and a personal mission. Their ability to navigate challenges while maintaining a strong sense of identity and purpose underscores the transformative nature of their work.

Overall, this study concludes that Filipino international special education teachers play a vital role in supporting students with special needs while navigating complex professional and cultural contexts. Their experiences highlight the importance of providing adequate support systems, fostering inclusive work environments, and recognizing the cultural strengths they bring to the field. By addressing these factors, educational institutions can better support teacher well-being, enhance retention, and ultimately improve outcomes for students with special needs.

References

Augusto, W., Perez, N., & Enoc, J. (2026). "Challenges of Filipino Special Education Teachers in the United States." *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Viewpoints*, 2(3), 1–11..



- Avesta III, M. J. D. (2025). Bridging Borders in Education: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Filipino Teachers as International Educators in US Public Schools (Doctoral dissertation, University of Perpetual Help System DALTA).
- Bantayan-Tanner, B. C., & Gallaron, J. B. (2025). "Navigating Stress: Self-Care and Mental Well-Being among Filipino Teachers in the U.S." *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 38(3), 252-262. DOI: 10.70838/pemj.380304.
- Cuadra, J. M. (2025). "The dynamics of the mental and physical health of Filipino special education educators during the COVID-19 pandemic: a hermeneutics approach." *Qualitative Research Journal* (Ahead-of-print). DOI: 10.1108/QRJ-07-2024-0161.
- Garcia, J. R. E. (2025). Lived Realities of Filipino Educators in Foreign Educational Contexts. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies*, 20(3).
- Marquez-Tampus, P. (2025). "Adapting Culturally Responsive Pedagogies: A Study of Filipino Special Education Teachers' Strategies, Challenges, and Perceived Impact in U.S. Classrooms." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, 10(11), 302-322. DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.101100027.
- Presquito, R. M. E., & Madrigal, D. V. (2025). Job Satisfaction, Mental Well-Being, Motivations, and Challenges of Selected Migrant Filipino Teachers Working in the United States of America. *Technium Soc. Sci. J.*, 78, 33.
- Ramas, M. ., & Velasco, M. C. (2024). Well- Being and Mental Health among Overseas Filipino Special Education Teachers. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of Research for Innovation, Sustainability, and Excellence (IMJRISE)*, 1(7), 268-285. <https://risejournals.org/index.php/imjrise/article/view/587>
- Villahermosa, R. I. (2026). Workforce Sustainability of Special Education in the United States: The Role of Wellness and Retention. *European Journal of Innovation in Nonformal Education*, 6(4).
- Villahermosa, R. I. (2026). Health is Wealth: Health and Wellness Status of International Special Education Teachers in United States. *American Journal of Education and Evaluation Studies*.