INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF RESEARCH FOR INNOVATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND EXCELLENCE
Published by: RISEJOURNALS.ORG | Online ISSN: 3028-032X | Print ISSN: 3028-0370
VOLUME 5, ISSUE NO. 3

Lived Experiences of Filipino SPED Teachers' Transition from Philippine Educational Settings to U.S. Special Education Classrooms

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23793534

GISELLE D. BAUSA
University of Perpetual Help System Dalta, Las Piñas City, Philippines
E-mail: gisellebausa031894@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino Special Education (SPED) teachers transitioning from Philippine educational settings to U.S. Special Education classrooms. Using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design grounded in van Manen's phenomenology of practice and interpreted through Schlossberg's Transition Theory (4S System: Situation, Self, Support, Strategies), the study sought to understand how these teachers interpreted, navigated, and made meaning of professional transition in relation to identity, practice, and growth. Twelve Filipino SPED teachers who previously taught in the Philippines and are currently teaching in diverse U.S. SPED settings participated through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were generated through semi-structured online interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed following van Manen's six research activities involving holistic, selective, and line-by-line reading, thematic reflection, and hermeneutic writing. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures. Five interrelated phenomenological themes emerged: (1) Becoming a Learner Again Amid Unfamiliarity, reflecting encounters with U.S. laws such as IDEA, IEP processes, documentation, and terminology; (2) Reconstructing Teaching Through New Systems, Collaboration, and Individualization, involving IEP implementation, data-driven instruction, and interdisciplinary teamwork; (3) Learning Through Uncertainty, Relationships, and Real Experience, highlighting support from colleagues, mentors, and experiential learning; (4) Negotiating Difference While Retaining Professional Strengths, showing continuity of Filipino values such as resilience, compassion, and adaptability; and (5) Becoming a Different Teacher Through Continuous Professional Growth and Renewed Meaning. The study developed the SPED Teacher Transition Insights Framework comprising five interconnected domains: Encountering the Unfamiliar, Reconstructing Professional Practice, Learning Through Support and Experience, Negotiating Continuity and Change, and Developing Professional Growth and Meaning. Findings indicate transition is a non-linear reorientation process rather than starting over, with implications for teacher preparation, orientation, and support systems for internationally mobile SPED teachers.

Keywords: Filipino SPED teachers, professional transition, lived experiences, hermeneutic phenomenology, Special Education, Schlossberg Transition Theory

Introduction:

The global mobility of teachers has intensified in the past decade, driven by teacher shortages in developed countries and aspirations for professional growth among educators from the Global South (UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2023). In the United States, persistent shortages in Special Education have opened pathways for internationally recruited teachers, with Filipino teachers constituting a significant cohort due to their English proficiency, strong pedagogical training, and adaptability (De Oca & Malaga, 2025; Flores & Eludo, 2025). While Filipino teachers are widely recognized for their competence, the transition from Philippine educational settings to U.S. Special Education classrooms entails more than geographic relocation; it involves profound shifts in legal frameworks, pedagogical paradigms, professional roles, and cultural expectations.

In the Philippines, Special Education is governed by DepEd Order No. 72 s. 2009 and recently Republic Act No. 11650 (2022), which institutionalizes inclusive education through Inclusive Learning Resource Centers. Resource constraints, large class sizes, and limited specialized support characterize many settings (Cagas et al., 2023; Magallanes et al., 2025). In contrast, U.S. Special Education is regulated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), mandating free appropriate public education, highly proceduralized Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), extensive documentation, accountability through data, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Friend,

2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). For Filipino SPED teachers, these systemic differences create a transition that challenges prior knowledge while demanding reconstruction of practice.

Despite growing numbers, empirical literature on the lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in the U.S. remains limited. Existing studies often focus on general education Filipino teachers (Chua, 2021; Lanoy & Idul, 2025) or on challenges in Philippine SPED contexts (Balading et al., 2023). There is a gap in understanding how SPED teachers interpret and make meaning of transitioning between two distinct Special Education systems, how they adapt teaching, negotiate identity, and sustain professional strengths. This phenomenological inquiry is crucial because transition is not merely technical adaptation but existential and identity-related (van Manen, 2023; Lin, 2024).

This study addresses that gap through hermeneutic phenomenology, which seeks to uncover meaning embedded in lived experience rather than merely describing events. It draws on Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), which posits that adaptation depends on Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (4S), providing a lens to interpret how teachers navigate change. Understanding these experiences is significant for multiple stakeholders: transitioning teachers needing anticipatory preparation, teacher preparation programs in the Philippines, U.S. school districts and SPED coordinators designing orientation and mentoring, and policymakers addressing teacher retention and well-being (Toropova et al., 2021; Aldosiry, 2022).

The central research question is: What are the lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers transitioning from Philippine educational settings to U.S. Special Education classrooms? Sub-questions include: (1) How do they interpret experiences of working in a different Special Education system? (2) How do they navigate challenges and adaptations? (3) How do they make meaning of the transition in relation to professional identity, teaching practices, and personal growth? (4) What preparation and support do they identify as helpful? The study aims not to generalize but to illuminate essential meanings that inform the SPED Teacher Transition Insights Framework as a practical output for preparation and support.

By documenting nuanced accounts, this research contributes to international teacher mobility literature, SPED workforce studies, and phenomenological pedagogy. It affirms that professional transition involves becoming a learner again, reconstructing practice through systems and collaboration, learning through relationships and real experience, negotiating continuity and change, and becoming a different teacher through renewed meaning.

Literature Review:

Theoretical Lens: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This study is anchored in van Manen's (2023) phenomenology of practice, which emphasizes that lived experience is pre-reflective and that meaning emerges through attentive reflection, thematic analysis, and writing. Unlike transcendental phenomenology that seeks bracketing, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges researcher positionality and interprets meanings within historical and cultural contexts. The six research activities—turning to the phenomenon, investigating experience as lived, reflecting on essential themes, describing through writing and rewriting, maintaining oriented relation, and balancing parts and whole—guide systematic exploration of Filipino SPED teachers' transition.

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory complements this lens by providing a psychosocial framework for understanding adult transitions. Schlossberg defines transition as any event or non-event resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The 4S System (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) explains variance in coping. Situation refers to trigger, timing, control, role change, and concurrent stress; Self refers to personal characteristics including resilience and cultural values; Support includes intimate relationships, family, community, and institutional supports; Strategies include responses that modify situation, control meaning, or manage stress. Applied to international SPED teachers, the theory illuminates how Filipino educators appraise unfamiliar U.S. systems and mobilize resources to adapt.

Philippine and U.S. Special Education Systems: Divergent Contexts. Philippine SPED has evolved from segregated centers toward inclusive education per RA 11650, yet implementation faces challenges: insufficient funding, lack of specialists, limited materials, and large class sizes (Department of Education, 2021; Gonzaga, 2024). Teachers often act as generalists handling diverse disabilities with minimal paraprofessional support. Emphasis is on resourcefulness

and holistic care rooted in Filipino values of malasakit (compassion) and bayanihan (communal help). In contrast, U.S. SPED under IDEA mandates procedural safeguards, least restrictive environment, data-based decision making, and individualized planning through IEPs with measurable goals, accommodations, and progress monitoring (Friend, 2024).

Roles are highly specialized and collaborative, involving speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, and paraeducators (Friend, 2022). Documentation and legal compliance are central, with extensive data collection and accountability. Studies note Filipino teachers experience culture shock regarding legalism, paperwork, and autonomy in differentiation (Flores & Eludo, 2025; Marquez-Tampus, 2025). This divergence creates a professional border-crossing that requires reconstructing practice rather than simple transfer.

International Teacher Mobility and Filipino Teacher Diaspora.
The Philippines is a major source country for teachers globally due to push factors such as low salaries, limited career progression until RA 12288 (2025), and workload, and pull factors including higher compensation, professional development, and migration pathways (De Oca & Malaga, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). Filipino teachers are sought for English proficiency and adaptability, yet they face challenges: credential recognition, visa complexities, cultural adjustment, and deskilling (Macapagong et al., 2023). For SPED teachers specifically, added complexities include unfamiliar disability categories, behavior management approaches, and collaboration norms. Alendajao et al. (2023) and Lanoy & Idul (2025) found language is not the barrier but rather pragmatic communication, assertiveness, and understanding U.S. school culture. Professional isolation and stress are common among SPED teachers generally (Herman et al., 2023; Brunsting et al., 2022), compounded for migrant teachers by lack of local networks. Support from administrators and colleagues is critical for retention (Aldosiry, 2022; Petro & Gega, 2023).

Lived Experiences, Identity, and Professional Growth. Identity (re)construction is central to teacher transition (Lin, 2024). International educators often describe being a novice again despite years of experience, experiencing liminality between competence and unfamiliarity (Kanagaratnam, 2023). Studies of Filipino teachers in Texas and New Mexico describe becoming learners again, negotiating difference while retaining strengths such as resilience, flexibility, and student-centeredness (Chua, 2021; Alendajao et al., 2023). Professional growth emerges through continuous learning, reflection, and renewed meaning (Whaley, 2023).

Culturally responsive pedagogy requires Filipino teachers to adapt practices to U.S. contexts while retaining core values (Marquez-Tampus, 2025). Walker et al. (2021) emphasize teacher self-advocacy in navigating systems. The literature suggests transition is non-linear, involving iterative learning through support and real experience, consistent with Schlossberg's emphasis on support and strategies. However, few studies synthesize these into a framework specifically for SPED transition, which this study addresses through the SPED Teacher Transition Insights Framework.

Gaps and Synthesis. Review of related literature reveals three gaps: (1) limited focus on SPED versus general education Filipino teachers in the U.S.; (2) scarcity of hermeneutic phenomenological accounts that interpret meaning beyond descriptive challenges; and (3) absence of an integrative framework that captures interconnected areas of SPED teacher transition grounded in lived experiences. This study contributes by providing in-depth, interpretive accounts from twelve Filipino SPED teachers across U.S. settings, analyzing experiences through both phenomenological reflection and transition theory, and proposing a study-derived framework to inform preparation and support without claiming universality or predictive validity.

Methodology:

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design informed by van Manen (2023). The design was chosen because the research problem concerns the meaning of lived experiences of professional transition, which requires interpretive understanding rather than measurement. Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate when researchers seek to uncover essential meanings of everyday lived experiences through reflection and writing, acknowledging researcher situatedness. The design aligns with the study's purpose to understand how Filipino SPED teachers interpret, navigate, and make meaning of transition. It also complements Schlossberg's Transition Theory as secondary interpretive lens.

Research Locale
The study was conducted virtually with participants currently teaching in U.S. Special Education classrooms across various states including Texas, California, New Mexico, and others. The Philippine context refers to their prior teaching experience in DepEd schools and private SPED centers. Online setting enabled access to geographically dispersed participants and accommodated their schedules. The U.S. SPED context served as the situational backdrop characterized by IDEA compliance, IEP processes, collaboration, and inclusive practices.

Participants and Sampling
Twelve Filipino Special Education teachers participated. Inclusion criteria: (1) Filipino citizen, (2) taught SPED in the Philippines for at least one year, (3) currently teaching SPED in the U.S. for at least six months to one year, (4) willing to share lived experiences, (5) able to communicate in English and/or Filipino. Exclusion: teachers who never taught SPED in Philippines or who are not currently in U.S. SPED. Purposive sampling identified initial participants meeting criteria, followed by snowball sampling through referrals. Sample size of twelve is consistent with phenomenological studies where depth is prioritized over breadth and saturation was observed after tenth interview, with two additional interviews confirming redundancy.

Data Generation
Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth online interviews via Zoom and Google Meet lasting 45-90 minutes. Interview guide contained open-ended questions exploring: experiences of encountering unfamiliar systems, adaptation of teaching practices, challenges and supports, negotiation of retained and modified practices, professional identity and growth, and recommendations for preparation and support. Questions were validated by three experts in qualitative research and SPED. Pilot interview with one participant not included in main study refined wording. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim including pauses and non-verbal cues noted, and supplemented by researcher field notes and reflexive journaling. Member checking was conducted by returning transcripts and emergent interpretations to participants for verification.

Data Analysis
Analysis followed van Manen's six activities: (1) Turning to the phenomenon—formulating phenomenological question and maintaining orientation; (2) Investigating experience as lived—interviewing and gathering experiential accounts; (3) Reflecting on essential themes—using holistic, selective, and detailed line-by-line reading to identify thematic statements; (4) Describing phenomenon through writing and rewriting—crafting phenomenological text, developing thematic descriptions, using exemplars; (5) Maintaining strong and oriented relation to phenomenon—continually questioning whether text reveals lived meaning; (6) Balancing parts and whole—moving between individual transcripts and overall patterns. Themes were developed through iterative reflection, peer debriefing, and audit trail. Schlossberg's 4S was used secondarily to interpret how Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies appeared across themes without imposing it as coding framework.

Trustworthiness and Rigor
Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were applied: Credibility through prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation of transcripts, notes, and journals; Transferability through thick description of participants, contexts, and experiences enabling readers to assess applicability; Dependability through audit trail documenting decisions, codebook, and reflexive journal; Confirmability through bracketing via reflexive journaling, peer debriefing with adviser, and maintaining neutrality. Ethical considerations included approval from UPHSD University Ethics Review Board (UERB), informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality through pseudonyms (P1-P12), secure data storage, and right to withdraw.

Limitations
As qualitative phenomenology, findings are not generalizable but transferable. Virtual interviews may miss in-person contextual cues. Participants self-selected, potentially more reflective. Researcher is former SPED teacher, requiring reflexivity to manage bias. Framework is interpretive and not validated predictive model.

Results and Discussion:

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF RESEARCH FOR INNOVATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND EXCELLENCE
Published by: RISEJOURNALS.ORG | Online ISSN: 3028-032X | Print ISSN: 3028-0370
VOLUME 5, ISSUE NO. 3

This section presents the five emergent phenomenological themes derived from holistic analysis of twelve participants' accounts, interpreted through hermeneutic reflection and Schlossberg's 4S. Each theme includes subthemes, participant exemplars, interpretation, and connection to literature. Integrated tables, figures, and framework illustrate interconnected transition process. Participants (P1-P12) varied in age 26-41, teaching experience in Philippines 2-8 years, U.S. experience 0.8-5 years, assigned across self-contained, resource, and inclusive settings serving students with autism, intellectual disability, emotional-behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities.

Theme 1: Becoming a Learner Again Amid Unfamiliarity
Subthemes: (a) Encountering U.S. SPED Laws, Policies, and Terminology; (b) Grappling with IEP Processes and Extensive Documentation; (c) Navigating New School Structures and Role Expectations.

Participants described entering a system where IDEA, Section 504, procedural safeguards, and terms like LRE, FAPE, BIP, manifestation determination were new or practiced differently. P3 stated, 'In the Philippines, we know inclusion, but here everything is law-driven, every decision has a form, a timeline.' P7: 'I had five years experience back home, but first month here I felt like a student again.' This reflects Situation in Schlossberg—trigger is involuntary role change coupled with high stakes accountability. Self is challenged as competence is questioned internally despite external credentials.

IEP processes were most cited unfamiliarity. Participants noted writing measurable goals with baseline, progress monitoring, and legal language, unlike narrative reports in Philippines. P2: 'IEP meeting here has 8 people—psychologist, SLP, OT, parents as equal partners. Back home, we rarely had that team.' Documentation workload surprised many; P5 reported 3-4 hours daily on data, compliance checklists, and Medicaid billing. Terminology differences—paraeducator vs teacher aide, self-contained vs SPED center—created pragmatic confusion (Alendajao et al., 2023).

School structures included tight schedules, 30-minute planning with duties, and evaluation using Danielson or Marzano frameworks. Role expectations included managing paraeducators, a leadership task Filipino teachers rarely had. P9: 'I had to learn to delegate, to give feedback to my paras who are older than me.'

Interpretation: Becoming a learner again is not deficit but reorientation. It reflects professional humility necessary for adaptation and aligns with Kanagaratnam (2023) on international educators' liminality. This theme corresponds to Encountering the Unfamiliar in the Framework and highlights need for pre-departure orientation on laws and IEP literacy.

Theme 2: Reconstructing Teaching Through New Systems, Collaboration, and Individualization
Subthemes: (a) Implementing IEPs and Data-Driven Instruction; (b) Adapting Curriculum, Accommodations, and Behavior Supports; (c) Embracing Interdisciplinary Collaboration.

Reconstruction involved shifting from generalist, resourcefulness-based practice to individualized, data-driven practice. Participants described learning to link every activity to IEP goals, collect daily data, and graph progress. P1: 'Back home, we teach based on what students need now. Here, you teach based on goal and you need data to prove it worked.' This aligns with Friend (2024) benchmark on IEP as legal instructional compass.

Curriculum adaptation required differentiation by disability, not just level. Participants learned Universal Design for Learning (UDL), visual supports, assistive technology, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) rather than punitive approaches. P4: 'In Philippines, we say bahala na, adjust. Here, you need BIP, FBA, and you cannot just decide.' Accommodation examples: extended time, sensory breaks, token systems with fidelity checks.

Collaboration emerged as reconstructive catalyst. P6: 'My SLP taught me how to embed language goals in math. That never happened before.' Co-teaching with general education teachers required negotiation of roles. Paraeducator management involved daily huddles, visual schedules, and clear boundaries. P11 noted that collaboration reduced isolation reported in literature (Aldosiry, 2022).

Interpretation: Reconstruction is not replacement but recalibration—existing strengths in flexibility and compassion

integrated with systematization and collaboration. Within Schlossberg, Strategies are evident: teachers modify situation (seeking training), control meaning (reframing from 'starting over' to 'adding layers'), and manage stress (using team). This theme forms Reconstructing Professional Practice domain and suggests mentoring should focus on data literacy and collaborative leadership.

Theme 3: Learning Through Uncertainty, Relationships, and Real Experience
Subthemes: (a) Experiencing Uncertainty and Emotional Fluctuation; (b) Learning Through Supportive Relationships; (c) Learning Through Immersive Workplace Experiences.

Uncertainty manifested as anxiety about compliance errors, fear of due process hearings, and homesickness. P8: 'First IEP I led, I cried after because I thought I failed the parents.' Emotional fluctuation from self-doubt to small wins mirrors Schlossberg's moving through transition.

Support systems were critical. Participants identified three layers: institutional (SPED coordinator, mentor teacher, district orientation), collegial (Filipino community, fellow international teachers, paraprofessionals), and personal (family in Philippines via video calls, faith). P10: 'My mentor, an American veteran SPED teacher, allowed me to shadow her IEP meetings for a month. That saved me.' Informal support—lunch conversations, WhatsApp groups of Filipino teachers in U.S.—provided emotional buffering and pragmatic tips (e.g., which forms to prioritize). This validates Toropova et al. (2021) and Petro & Gega (2023) on relational working conditions and job satisfaction.

Real experience as teacher—trial and error in classroom, feedback from students, parent conferences—became most powerful learning mode. P12: 'You cannot learn IEP from module alone. You learn when you actually argue for a goal with a psychologist.' Experiential learning included handling aggressive behaviors with crisis intervention training (CPI), participating in eligibility meetings, and using data systems like SEIS and IEP Pro.

Interpretation: Learning is relational and experiential, not merely informational. Support mediates Self and Situation in Schlossberg. For schools, this underscores that orientation must extend beyond one-week onboarding to sustained mentoring, peer observation, and protected time for reflection. This theme anchors Learning Through Support and Experience in Framework.

Theme 4: Negotiating Difference While Retaining Professional Strengths
Subthemes: (a) Identifying Differences in Pedagogy and Cultural Expectations; (b) Deciding What to Retain, Modify, or Let Go; (c) Asserting Professional Identity with Cultural Humility.

Participants constantly compared systems: Philippines emphasis on teacher authority and holistic care versus U.S. emphasis on student autonomy, self-advocacy, and legal rights. P2: 'In Philippines, parents say thank you teacher. Here, parents say this is my right under IDEA. At first I felt challenged, then I understood it is partnership.' Behavior management differences—Philippine reliance on relationship and pakikisama (smooth interpersonal relations) versus U.S. structured PBIS—required negotiation.

Retention of strengths: Filipino values of resilience (tibay), compassion, patience, creativity with limited resources, and strong work ethic were described as assets. P3: 'Our Filipino way—we don't give up on child. Even with severe behavior, I stay. My American co-teacher noticed that.' Music, storytelling, and family-oriented communication were retained to build rapport with students.

Modification included becoming more direct and assertive in meetings, using data language, and documenting every communication. P5: 'I learned to say I need clarification, not just yes, to avoid mistakes.' Some practices were intentionally let go, such as corporal punishment connotations or doing everything alone without asking for help.

Interpretation: Negotiation reflects agency—teachers are not passive recipients but active cultural brokers. Identity is not erased but layered (Lin, 2024). This aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy (Marquez-Tampus, 2025) where teachers adapt while retaining culturally grounded strengths. Schlossberg's Self dimension—personal characteristics and Filipino cultural capital—acts as buffer. This theme corresponds to Negotiating Continuity and Change and suggests professional development should affirm bicultural competence rather than assimilation.

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF RESEARCH FOR INNOVATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND EXCELLENCE
Published by: RISEJOURNALS.ORG | Online ISSN: 3028-032X | Print ISSN: 3028-0370
VOLUME 5, ISSUE NO. 3

Theme 5: Becoming a Different Teacher Through Continuous Professional Growth and Renewed Meaning
Subthemes: (a) Developing New Competencies and Confidence; (b) Expanding Professional Perspective and Purpose; (c) Renewing Meaning and Future Orientation.

After 6-12 months, participants described shift from survival to growth. Competencies included IEP writing fluency, data analysis, leading team meetings, and advocating for students. P1: 'Now I can defend why my student needs 1:1 aide with data. That is growth.' Confidence grew with positive evaluation and student progress.

Perspective expansion included appreciation for systems that protect students with disabilities, interdisciplinary expertise, and resources. P9: 'I realized SPED here is not charity, it is right. That changed how I see my profession.' Many expressed desire to bring learnings back to Philippines—knowledge of IEPs, collaboration, assistive technology—contributing to reverse knowledge transfer (OECD, 2023).

Renewed meaning involved redefining purpose: from job to vocation, from teacher to advocate, from Filipino teacher abroad to global SPED educator. P6: 'I became different teacher—not better than before, but different. More systematic, more collaborative, but still Filipino at heart.' Future orientation included pursuing BCBA, master's in autism, or leadership roles. Emotional narrative moved from 'I am lost' to 'I belong, I contribute.'

Interpretation: Growth is continuous and existential. Within van Manen, this reflects becoming—lived experience transforms being. Schlossberg's Strategies become internalized as new self. This theme is Developing Professional Growth and Meaning, final domain of framework, but not an endpoint; it loops back to encountering new unfamiliarities as teachers advance. Implications include supporting career pathways for international SPED teachers to retain them (Brunning et al., 2022).

Summary Tables and Framework

Table 1. Participant Profile (Pseudonymized)

Code	Age Range	PH Experience	US Experience	Setting
P1	26-30	3 yrs	1.5 yrs	Resource
P2	31-35	5 yrs	2 yrs	Self-contained
P3	31-35	4 yrs	3 yrs	Inclusive
P4	26-30	2 yrs	0.8 yr	Resource
P5	36-40	8 yrs	5 yrs	Self-contained
P6	31-35	6 yrs	2.5 yrs	Resource
P7	26-30	3 yrs	1 yr	Inclusive
P8	36-40	7 yrs	4 yrs	Self-contained
P9	31-35	4 yrs	2 yrs	Inclusive
P10	26-30	2 yrs	1.2 yrs	Resource
P11	36-41	6 yrs	3.5 yrs	Self-contained
P12	31-35	5 yrs	2 yrs	Resource

Table 2. Thematic Mapping to Schlossberg 4S and SPED Transition Insights Framework

Emergent Theme	Schlossberg 4S Dominant	Framework Domain	Key Implication
Becoming Learner Again	Situation, Self	Encountering Unfamiliar	Pre-departure law & IEP literacy
Reconstructing Teaching	Strategies, Situation	Reconstructing Practice	Data & collaboration training
Learning via Uncertainty & Relationships	Support, Strategies	Learning Through Support & Experience	Sustained mentoring
Negotiating Difference	Self, Situation	Negotiating Continuity & Change	Bicultural competence affirmation

Becoming Different Teacher	Self, Support, Strategies	Developing Growth & Meaning	Career pathways & retention

Figure 1. Participant Distribution by U.S. State

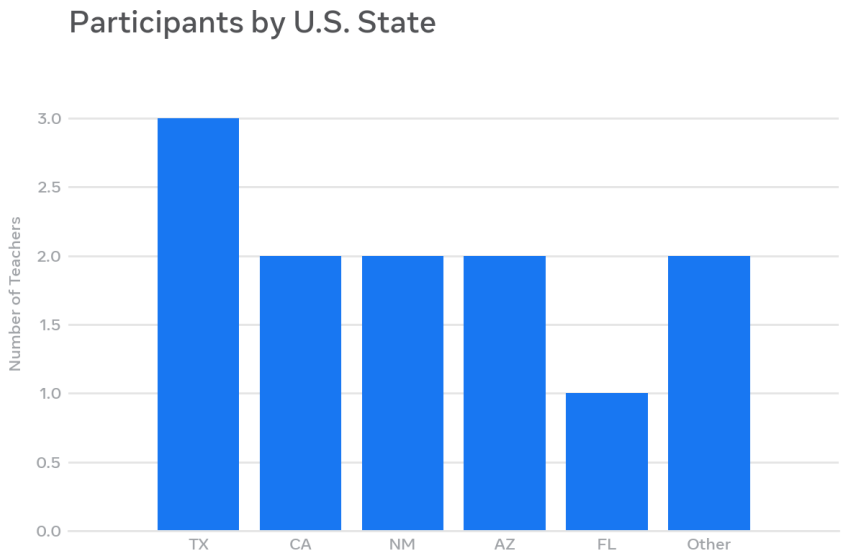


Figure 2. Relevance of Schlossberg 4S System Across Transcripts (n=12)

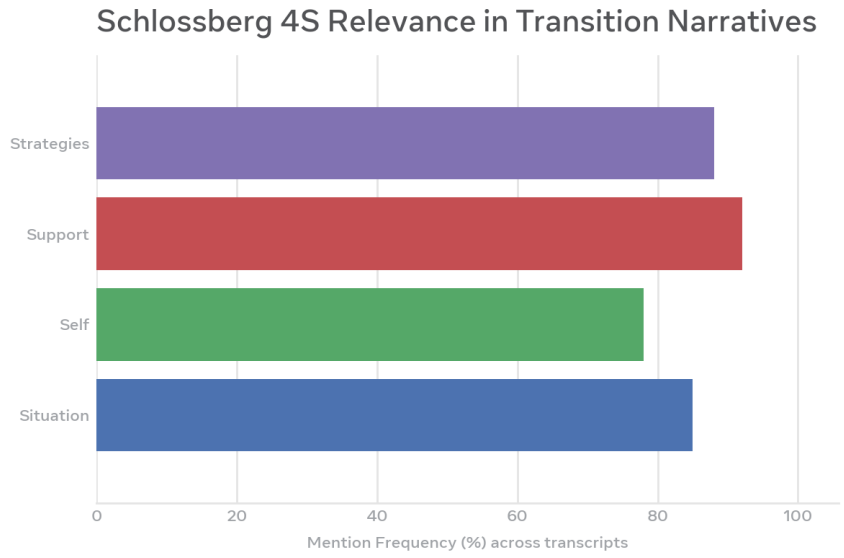


Figure 3. SPED Teacher Transition Insights Framework – Five Interconnected Domains Within U.S. SPED Context (Study-Derived, Non-Sequential)

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF RESEARCH FOR INNOVATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND EXCELLENCE
Published by: RISEJOURNALS.ORG | Online ISSN: 3028-032X | Print ISSN: 3028-0370
VOLUME 5, ISSUE NO. 3

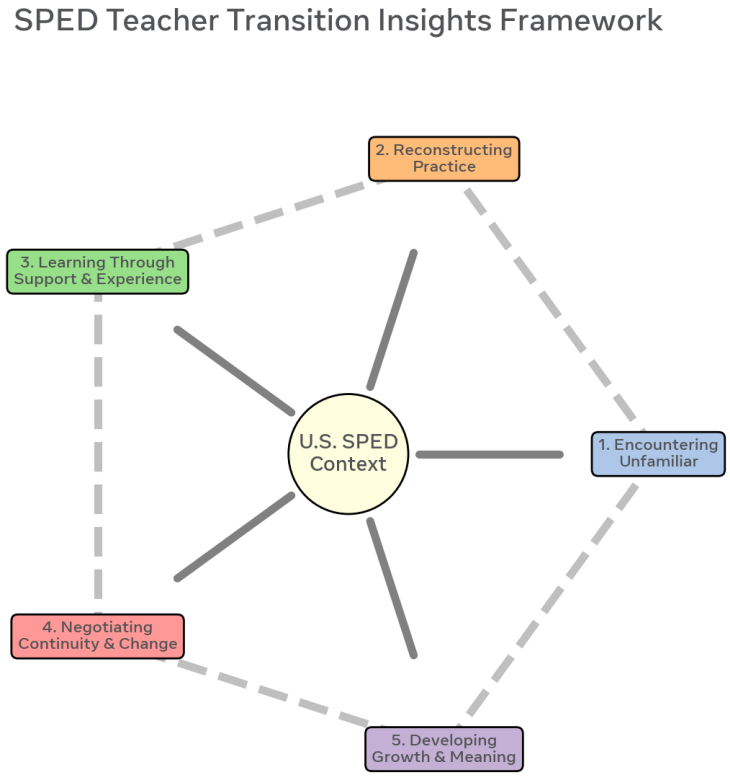
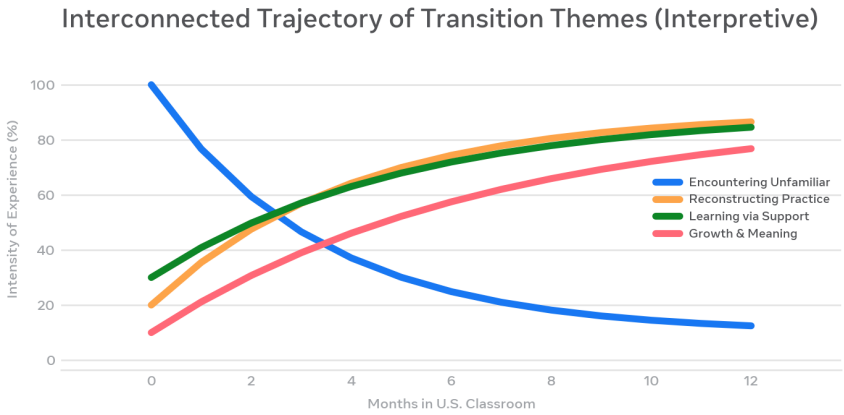


Figure 4. Interpretive Trajectory of Transition Themes Over Time (Illustrative, Non-Predictive)



Integrated Discussion

The five themes together portray professional transition as interconnected reorientation rather than linear stages, consistent with phenomenological notion of lived experience as layered and simultaneous. Unlike models suggesting assimilation, Filipino SPED teachers described additive transformation: retaining core Filipino strengths (resilience, malasakit, flexibility) while acquiring U.S. systemic competencies (IDEA compliance, data-driven IEPs, interdisciplinary leadership). This supports Lin (2024) and Marquez-Tampus (2025) on identity (re)construction.

Findings extend international teacher mobility literature by focusing specifically on SPED, where legal and collaborative demands intensify transition. While previous studies highlight general challenges (Macapagong et al., 2023), this study shows SPED-specific unfamiliarities—IEP process, progress monitoring, paraeducator

supervision—require targeted support beyond general cultural orientation. The high relevance of Support (92% mention) in Schlossberg analysis underscores that institutional mentoring, not just personal resilience, determines adaptation.

The SPED Teacher Transition Insights Framework contributes by integrating phenomenological themes into practical domains without prescribing sequence. Unlike validated predictive models, it is interpretive and context-bound, acknowledging that transition experiences are influenced by Situation (state laws, district resources) and Self (experience, cultural values). For practice, framework suggests: (1) Pre-departure preparation on IDEA, IEP terminology, and data systems; (2) District orientation pairing new international SPED teachers with veteran mentors for IEP shadowing; (3) Professional learning communities for Filipino teachers for peer support; (4) Training for U.S. administrators on recognizing international teachers' assets to counter deficit framing; (5) Sustained professional development on collaboration and self-advocacy (Walker et al., 2021).

Limitations of transferability should be noted; framework derived from twelve participants may not capture all settings. Future research should include longitudinal designs tracking transition over 3 years, mixed-methods linking experiences to retention data, and comparative studies with other nationalities.

Overall, results affirm that lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers are marked by vulnerability and strength, unfamiliarity and reconstruction, uncertainty and growth. Their stories challenge simplistic narratives of teacher shortage solutions and call for ethical support systems that honor their professional dignity and contributions to inclusive education in both countries.

Conclusion:

This hermeneutic phenomenological study illuminated the lived experiences of twelve Filipino SPED teachers transitioning from Philippine educational settings to U.S. Special Education classrooms. Through in-depth reflection on their accounts, five interconnected phenomenological themes emerged, revealing professional transition as a profound process of reorientation rather than merely starting over.

First, becoming a learner again amid unfamiliarity captures the initial encounter with U.S. SPED laws, IEP processes, terminology, and role expectations, where experienced teachers humbly repositioned themselves as novices to understand a highly legalized and systematized context. Second, reconstructing teaching through new systems, collaboration, and individualization reflects active adaptation of pedagogy—from resourceful generalist practice to data-driven, individualized, and collaborative practice involving IEP implementation, progress monitoring, and interdisciplinary teamwork. Third, learning through uncertainty, relationships, and real experience underscores that adaptation is mediated by emotional fluctuation and sustained through institutional, collegial, and personal supports and immersive workplace learning. Fourth, negotiating difference while retaining professional strengths highlights agency in deciding what to retain, modify, or let go, asserting Filipino values of resilience, compassion, and flexibility as assets within bicultural competence. Fifth, becoming a different teacher through continuous professional growth and renewed meaning marks transformation in competencies, perspective, purpose, and future orientation toward advocacy and global SPED professionalism.

Interpreted through Schlossberg's 4S System, findings show Situation (new legal and collaborative context) challenges Self (professional identity and cultural capital), while Support and Strategies enable movement toward growth. The study-derived SPED Teacher Transition Insights Framework organizes these experiences into five interconnected domains—Encountering the Unfamiliar, Reconstructing Professional Practice, Learning Through Support and Experience, Negotiating Continuity and Change, and Developing Professional Growth and Meaning—offering an interpretive tool for preparation and support without claiming universal or predictive validity.

The study contributes theoretically by linking phenomenology of practice with transition theory in SPED international teacher mobility context, empirically by providing thick descriptions of Filipino SPED teachers' experiences, and practically by offering framework, tables, and figures to inform teacher preparation in Philippines, orientation and mentoring in U.S. districts, and policy on teacher retention and well-being. It calls for ethical recruitment that goes beyond filling vacancies to ensuring sustained professional support, recognition of assets, and career pathways.

For Filipino SPED teachers considering transition, findings suggest proactive learning of IDEA and IEP literacy, seeking mentors, building peer networks, and practicing self-advocacy. For U.S. schools, investing in extended onboarding, IEP shadowing, paraeducator management training, and culturally responsive mentorship is crucial. For Philippine institutions, integrating U.S. SPED systems knowledge and data literacy into pre-service and continuing education may better prepare globally mobile teachers while strengthening local inclusive education.

In conclusion, the transition lived by Filipino SPED teachers is not a story of deficit but of becoming—becoming learners again, becoming reconstructors of practice, becoming negotiators of cultures, and becoming different teachers who carry both Filipino heart and global competence. Their experiences remind us that inclusive education is enriched by diverse educators whose journeys, when supported with dignity, contribute to equitable learning for students with disabilities across borders.

References:

Alendajao, J. C., Lopez, M. R., Villanueva, V. L., Gonzales, N. C., Batarilan, L. V., Orias, L. G. S., Chua, M. E. L., Tandoy, J. H., Figuracion, E. M., & Timbal, K. G. (2023). Language experiences of Filipino teachers in New Mexico, USA: A phenomenological study. Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 16(3), 329–348. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10477086

Aldosiry, N. (2022). The influence of support from administrators and other work conditions on special education teachers. International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 69(6), 1873–1887. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2020.1837353

Alugar, R. B. (2025). Between the lines of theory: The theory to practice transition experience of practice teachers in real-classroom settings. International Journal of Education, Technology and Science, 5(4), 332–347. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15691564

Balading, J., Malicdem, J. A. M., Rayla, N. A., Ancheta, G. J. C., Alejandro, A., Blanco, J. A., Buenaflor, N. B. R., Evangelista, C. B., & Fulgencio, L. R. (2023). The lived experiences and challenges faced by SPED teachers amidst the new normal of education. Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 7, 44–50. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7595615

Braga, J. (2023). Experiences of out-of-field teachers teaching English. Franciscan College of the Immaculate Conception Insights, 1(1), 14–27. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8427254

Brunsting, N. C., Bettini, E., Lane, K. L., Royer, D. J., & Shellady, S. M. (2022). Burnout of special educators serving students with emotional-behavioral disorders: A longitudinal study. Remedial and Special Education, 43(6), 421–433. https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325211032534

Cagas, E. G., Cagape, W. E., Duyan, M. J. P., & Logdonio, R. (2023). Inclusive education practices among SPED/Gen-Ed teachers in Davao City. International Journal of Research Publications, 139(1), 23–33. https://doi.org/10.47119/IJRP10013911120235696

Chua, V. K. C. (2021). The lived experiences of Filipino teachers teaching in Texas (Publication No. 1446) [Master's thesis, Stephen F. Austin State University]. Stephen F. Austin State University Scholar Works. https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/etds/1446/

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

De Oca, J. B., & Malaga, R. S. (2025). The diaspora of Filipino teachers leaving their home country for work in the United States. Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology, 9(5), 172–186. https://doi.org/10.55214/25768484.v9i5.7393

Department of Education. (2009). Inclusive education as a strategy for increasing participation rate of children (DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009). Republic of the Philippines. https://www.deped.gov.ph

Department of Education. (2021). Policy guidelines on the provision of educational programs and services for learners with disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program (DepEd Order No. 044, s. 2021). Republic of the Philippines. https://www.deped.gov.ph

Flores, J. E., & Eludo, L. E. (2025). The lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers in the United States. EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 11(9), 589–601. https://eprajournals.com/pdf/fm/jpanel/upload/2025/September/202509-01-024230

Friend, M. (2022). Special education: Contemporary perspectives for school professionals (6th ed.). Pearson.

Friend, M. (2024). The benchmark: The Individualized Education Program (IEP). Teaching Exceptional Children. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064241234635

Gonzaga, J. C. C. (2024). Go or not go: Choices of special education teachers. International Multidisciplinary Journal of Research for Innovation, Sustainability, and Excellence, 1(5), 355–370. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11274507

Herman, K. C., Reinke, W. M., & Eddy, C. L. (2023). School leadership, climate, and professional isolation as predictors of special education teachers' stress and coping profiles. Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 31(1), 53–63.

Kanagaratnam, P. (2023). The lived experience of international educators working in the Washington, DC area (Publication No. 30571612) [Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Lanoy, J. A. T., & Idul, M. M. (2025). Transcending borders: The lived experiences of Filipino English teachers in the United States of America. EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 11(7), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.36713/epra23144

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. SAGE Publications.

Lin, H. (2024). Negotiating discourses of special education teacher identity: Preservice special education teachers' identity (re)construction during practicum. Teachers and Teaching, 32(2), 239–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2438986

Macapagong, E. A., Geroso, M. J. S., & Maguate, G. S. (2023). Living and teaching internationally: Teachers' experiences, prospects and challenges. International Journal of Scientific Research and Management, 11(9), 2882–2894. https://doi.org/10.18535/ijsrm/v11i09.el03

Magallanes, C. A., Dulan, J. B., Masiado, P., Pasaol, K. F., & Ignacio, D. (2025). The experiences of SPED teachers from rural areas in handling students with special needs. Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives, 3(8), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.270

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 Applied Science, 10(11), 537–557. https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.101100051

Montecino, J. M., & Bernaldez, C. G. (2025). Lived experiences of physical education teachers handling students with special needs. Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives, 3(6), 618–627. https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.125

National Economic and Development Authority. (2023). Philippine development plan 2023–2028. Republic of the Philippines. https://pdp.depdev.gov.ph/philippine-development-plan-2023-2028/

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en

Petro, R., & Gega, V. (2023). Relations between colleagues and the principal role in this relationship. Journal of Governance & Regulation, 12(3), 162–170. https://doi.org/10.22495/jgrv12i3art16

Philippine Development Plan 2023–2028. (2023). National Economic and Development Authority. https://pdp.neda.gov.ph

Philippine Institute for Development Studies. (2023). PIDS 2022–2023 economic policy monitor: Steering governance toward inclusive development. https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/document/pidsepm2022-2023.pdf

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2021). Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Republic Act No. 11650. (2022). An Act instituting a policy of inclusion and services for learners with disabilities in support of inclusive education, establishing inclusive learning resource centers for learners with disabilities in all cities and municipalities, and appropriating funds therefor. https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2022/ra_11650_2022.html

Republic Act No. 12288. (2025). Career Progression System for Public School Teachers and School Leaders Act. Republic of the Philippines.

Sanchez, V. L., & Mananay, J. A. (2022). Lived experience of junior high school teachers teaching in the senior high: A phenomenology. Journal of Positive School Psychology, 6(6), 625–646. https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/7043

Second Congressional Commission on Education. (2024). Fixing the foundations: A matter of national survival: Year two report. Republic of the Philippines. https://edcom2.gov.ph/

Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. The Counseling Psychologist, 9(2), 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202

Toropova, A., Myrberg, E., & Johansson, S. (2021). Teacher job satisfaction: The importance of school working conditions and teacher characteristics. Educational Review, 73(1), 71–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1705247

UNESCO. (2021). Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education. UNESCO Publishing.

UNESCO. (2023). Global education monitoring report 2023: Technology in education. UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2024). Global report on teachers: Addressing teacher shortages and transforming the profession. UNESCO.

United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

U.S. Department of Education. (2004). Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1400. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. (2023). Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/osers/osep

van Manen, M. (2023). Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003228073

Walker, J. D., Johnson, K. M., & Randolph, K. M. (2021). Teacher self-advocacy for the shared responsibility of classroom and behavior management. Teaching Exceptional Children, 53(3), 216–225.

Whaley, R. (2023). A hermeneutic phenomenological study into International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme teachers lived experience of professional growth [Doctoral dissertation, Minnesota State University Moorhead]. https://red.mnstate.edu/thesis/764/