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Filipino Educators Adapting to Special Education Practices in Phoenix, Arizona, U.S.A.: A Narrative Inquiry

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RYSS JOSELI R. HORTEL
hortelrj@gmail.com
New Era University, Philippines

Abstract:

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino special educators adapting to special education practices in Phoenix, Arizona, USA. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly's Narrative Inquiry framework utilizing the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place, the study examined how Filipino educators experience adaptation, what strategies they employ, and how these shape professional identity and instructional practices. A qualitative narrative inquiry design was employed involving four Filipino special educators purposively selected based on criteria including Philippine teacher education, current employment in Phoenix public and charter schools, and at least two years of U.S. experience. Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasting over 60 minutes, document analysis of lesson plans and teaching artifacts, and arts-based representations where participants visually depicted their adaptation journey. Triangulation across three sources enhanced credibility. Data were analyzed through verbatim transcription, familiarization, initial coding using participants' own words, development of a codebook, organization in Microsoft Excel, restorying using temporality, sociality, and place, and cross-narrative analysis to identify converging patterns. Findings revealed that adaptation was a dynamic, non-linear, and transformative journey. For research question one, four overarching themes emerged: navigating the transition into an unfamiliar special education landscape marked by legal, procedural, and emotional challenges; building competence through collaboration and professional learning; transforming professional identity through reflection, resilience, and cross-cultural practice; and contextual and resource adaptation. For research question two, two themes emerged: designing and implementing inclusive, learner-centered special education practices through differentiated instruction, multisensory strategies, and structured environments; and strengthening instruction through collaboration, reflection, and evidence-based professional practice. For research question three, two themes emerged: transforming professional practice through cross-context learning and responsive teaching; and reconstructing professional identity through collaboration, reflection, and lifelong growth. The study recommends strengthening structured induction programs, sustained mentoring, collaborative professional learning communities, and institutional support systems to facilitate successful integration and long-term professional growth of internationally trained special educators, contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education.

Keywords: Filipino special educators, special education practices, narrative inquiry, adaptation, professional identity, inclusive education

Introduction:

The evolution of inclusive education in the United States emphasizes quality, equity, collaborative practices, interconnective linkages, individualized support, and high regard for the welfare of learners with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) tailored to unique needs. However, the growing demand for qualified special education teachers has led states such as Arizona to employ internationally trained educators, particularly Filipinos, known for English proficiency, academic preparation, and teaching with a heart.

Filipino special educators bring cultural values and pedagogical approaches that view students through the lens of their own children. Their presence contributes to diversity while requiring adaptation to American inclusive education policies, documentation, compliance, and educational contexts. Research indicates that the dilemma encountered by international special educators is striking the balance between preserving pedagogical trademarks and adapting to U.S. school expectations (Flores & Eludo, 2025). Adaptation extends beyond instruction to include interpersonal

relationships with stakeholders of diverse cultural backgrounds (Marquez Tampus, 2025).

Filipino educators migrating abroad face transition challenges involving instructional adjustments, cultural adaptation, and professional transformation. Unfamiliar practices, collaborative initiatives, intervention systems, and legal mandates anchor the special education curriculum, prompting reflection on personal and professional practices (Gomez-Lange, 2024; Tabilin & Tombali, 2024). Although studies explored migration experiences of Filipino teachers, there remains limited narrative qualitative research specifically examining how Filipino special educators in Phoenix, Arizona make sense of adaptation within U.S. special education programs. Existing literature emphasizes general teaching experiences, coping mechanisms, or cultural adjustments, while deeply personal stories, emotional journeys, and identity reconstructions remain underexplored (Brazas, 2023; Augusto et al., 2026).

The phenomenon of adaptation reflects a complex process of adjusting to a new educational, cultural, professional, and legal environment while meeting diverse needs of learners with disabilities. Differences in instructional practices, IEP requirements, legal responsibilities, classroom management, communication, and collaboration require educators not only to modify teaching practices but also to reconstruct professional identities. Research on international teachers shows migration involves professional and cultural adjustment as teachers negotiate unfamiliar institutional expectations (Squires et al., 2024). Similarly, special education literature emphasizes teacher preparation, collaboration, and contextual support (Putjata et al., 2023).

This study is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education. By documenting experiences of Filipino special educators, it provides evidence to inform orientation, mentoring, professional development, and inclusive practices for internationally trained educators. The research setting offers unique opportunity as Phoenix has high population of Hispanic and multilingual learners, calling for culturally responsive teaching. Filipino educators deal with migrant students also adapting to American inclusive education, creating double-layered adaptation that makes teaching more responsive.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore lived experiences of Filipino educators adapting to special education practices in public and charter schools in Phoenix, Arizona. Specifically, it was guided by three research questions: What are the lived experiences of Filipino special educators in adapting to special education practices in Phoenix, Arizona? What strategies do Filipino special educators employ to adapt the Special Education practices? How do Filipino special educators narrate the evolution of their professional identity and practices through the strategies they employ?

This study focused on Filipino special educators during Academic Year 2025-2026, examining professional and cultural adaptation including instructional strategies, IEP compliance, multidisciplinary collaboration, classroom management, and engagement with culturally diverse families. It was delimited to four participants in Phoenix, excluding Filipino educators in other states, general education teachers, and college contexts, and did not measure student outcomes.

Literature Review:

Filipino Educators in International Settings. Filipino teacher migration is driven by economic, professional, and personal motivations. While financial incentives and improved conditions are strong motivators, cross-cultural adaptation and identity formation are greatest challenges (Carag et al., 2025; Canlas et al., 2025; Divinagracia & Siy, 2025). Reviewed studies show policies can be universal but frameworks are contextualized based on educational administration.

IDEA mandates FAPE and LRE, while school-based frameworks contextualize implementation affecting attitudes toward special education, especially when integrated within experiential learning frameworks emphasizing reflective practice (Hogan et al., 2024; Schladant et al., 2025). However, these policies are implemented domestically based on state provisions and profiles of public and charter schools, highlighting need for contextual experiences of foreign teachers.

Special Education Teacher Experiences Working Abroad. The presence of internationally prepared educators enriches

professional landscape while introducing cross-cultural adaptation. Studies show these educators balance U.S. instructional expectations with prior pedagogical experiences and cultural identities, engaging in professional recalibration and identity negotiation (Flores & Eludo, 2025; Macapagong et al., 2023). Qualitative inquiries demonstrate that Filipino teachers' overall experiences abroad are marked by resilience yet burdened by transition challenges. Flores and Eludo (2025) noted Filipino special educators must recalibrate competence while navigating adaptation to meet standards of U.S. inclusive education.

SPED Practices and Inclusion in the US and Philippines. Inclusive education is global priority anchored on equitable access regardless of socio-economic background, language, nationalities, and needs. In the United States, federal laws protect learners with special needs guided by IDEA, which institutionalized inclusive practices through IEPs, professional development, and community linkages. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11650 or the Inclusive Education Act of 2022 mandates inclusive practices for private and public schools. Both countries advocate inclusive education but differ in capacities. U.S. facilitates implementation with robust resource provision, support system, and enforceable accommodations, while Philippines faces challenges on resource allocation, teacher preparation, facilities, support personnel, and policy inconsistencies (Floranza, 2025). Custodio (2025) emphasized that despite strong legal commitment through RA 11650, challenges remain on teacher readiness, funding, social stigma, and inter-department interconnection. Primary concern remains resource provision.

Special Education Implementation, Practices and Barriers. Evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices enhance learning outcomes when effectively applied (Fazio & Gotch, 2024; Blasco Marchan et al., 2025). Fazio and Gotch (2024) explained policies are research-informed and adhered to state mandates, yet structural and pedagogical barriers impede effective instruction and inclusion (Miller et al., 2025; Anderson et al., 2024).

General education teachers struggle with insufficient training, resource limitations, and inadequate preparation to address diverse learner needs, leading to frustration (Rivas, 2025; Gat et al., 2025). Lack of specialized training means educators feel underprepared for curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, and classroom management for students with disabilities—challenges amplified within special education frameworks demanding individualized strategies and behavior supports.

Multicultural Education and Adaptation Strategies. Dzerviniks et al. (2024) highlighted teachers engaging with culturally diverse students report higher intercultural competence. Ulbricht et al. (2022) found perceptions of diversity climate influence intercultural self-efficacy. Research on contemporary contexts highlights role of school culture and collaboration in shaping adaptation (Marmarik, 2025). While many adaptation studies focus on students, teacher acculturation research suggests positive perceptions of school diversity climate bolster educators' intercultural self-efficacy. Narrative inquiry enabled novice teachers in multicultural classrooms to articulate evolving professional identities (Smith & O'Hara, 2023; Lopez & Carpio, 2024). Cultural perspective using Filipino lenses was not explored, providing gap this research addresses.

Cultural Responsiveness and Adaptability Strategies. Perales et al. (2025) found Filipino educators faced adjustments related to institutional structures and cultural norms. International case studies of Filipino English teachers overseas reported cultural and language barriers, curriculum differences, and isolation (Obenza et al., 2025). Wang et al. (2025) found internship experiences and emotion regulation predicted growth in career adaptability among pre-service teachers, suggesting transformative experiences and adaptive psychological strategies are essential. Synthesis of pedagogical support shows inclusive education success is linked to integration of instruction and socio-emotional support (Wang, 2026).

Utilization of Strategies, Professional Development and Mentoring. Instructional practices research emphasizes balancing curricular demands with individualized support using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction (Blasco Marchan et al., 2025; Singal, 2025; Nissim, 2025). UDL advocates multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018; Miller et al., 2025) while classroom management research identifies training gaps in evidence-based practices (Fazio & Gotch, 2024; Tuerah, 2025). Meaningful inclusion involves teacher collaboration, classroom design, peer relationships, and family-school partnerships not just compliance (Hernandez-Saca et al., 2023; Dunajeva et al., 2025). In Zambia, isolated training was inadequate, recommending ongoing structured professional development incorporating assistive technology, differentiated strategies, and coaching (Donath et al., 2023;

Mpolomoka et al., 2025). Systematic reviews of professional development for autism show evidence-based learning improves competencies when incorporating targeted content, practical applications, and feedback (Petersson-Bloom et al., 2023; Ehlert et al., 2025).

Narrative Inquiry Toward Teacher Identity. Narrative inquiry emerged as prominent qualitative methodology when goal is understanding lived experiences of educators in specific contexts. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000, 2022), narrative inquiry focuses on stories as teachers navigate personal and professional worlds, capturing interplay between experience, context, and meaning-making.

Research by Tang and Nguyen (2025) explored special education teachers' reflective narratives to understand decision-making, classroom management, and adaptation. Hernandez and Salazar (2024) highlighted how storytelling revealed unarticulated challenges, ethical dilemmas, and culturally embedded practices. This underscores professional development should be multifaceted, involving ongoing training, mentoring, collaboration, and peer support.

Theoretical Framework. This study is anchored in four theories: Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) explains learning through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997, 2005) explains psychological and social adjustment with strategies of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) emphasizes self-efficacy influencing classroom management, instructional strategies, and persistence. Teacher Professional Theory (Menter et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Diamond & Bulfin, 2023) views teaching as dynamic profession where teachers construct professional knowledge, practices, identities, and agency through experience. Collectively, they explain experiential, cultural, and psychological dimensions of adaptation, providing framework for interpreting narratives across temporality, sociality, and place.

Methodology:

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research method to explore lived experiences of Filipino special educators adapting to special education practices in Phoenix, Arizona. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research captures complex meanings, reflections, and subjective realities shaping how educators navigate new educational system (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2022). Within qualitative tradition, this study utilized narrative inquiry design, grounded in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms assuming reality is socially constructed and meaning is co-created between participant and researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2023). Narrative inquiry focuses on stories, emphasizing temporality, sociality, and place that influence professional and personal adaptation. This design allowed researcher to understand not only events experienced but how teachers interpret and make sense over time (Riessman, 2022; Webster & Mertova, 2023).

Research Setting

Research was conducted in public and charter school special education programs in Phoenix, Arizona, where Filipino special educators are employed. Phoenix, as fifth-largest city in US, provided diverse educational environment with students from multiple cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Schools represented range of programs including self-contained classrooms, inclusive classrooms, and resource-based support models, capturing varied teaching contexts. These settings provided practical context to observe implementation of U.S. special education policies, IEPs, and evidence-based practices (Miller et al., 2025; Savolainen et al., 2022). Urban setting allowed consideration of systemic factors such as administrative support, mentorship, and community resources. Interviews, document analysis, and arts-based activities were conducted in venues free from disturbance, ensuring comfort and minimizing distraction.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Participants consisted of four Filipino special educators currently employed in Phoenix. Purposive criterion-based sampling was used, appropriate in qualitative research where focus is on rich, in-depth data rather than statistical

generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criteria: (1) Filipino educators who completed teacher education and special education training in Philippines; (2) Currently employed as special education teacher in Phoenix public or charter schools; (3) Minimum two years experience teaching in U.S. special education; (4) Willingness to share personal and professional experiences through in-depth interviews; (5) Varied demographic backgrounds; (6) Willingness to participate. Recruitment involved professional networks with permission from district administrators, Filipino educators' associations, and direct contact with schools. Sample size of four was considered appropriate for narrative inquiry prioritizing depth, richness, and contextual understanding, each participant considered bounded case, allowing deep engagement and reconstruction across temporality, sociality, and place.

Data Collection Methods

Three methods were employed for triangulation. 1) Semi-structured interviews: Primary method using interview guide consisting of three research questions, each with six interview guide questions. Open-ended questions provided flexibility. All interviews audio-recorded with consent, lasting more than 60 minutes until saturation. Follow-up interviews conducted for clarification. 2) Document Analysis: Examination of relevant participant-generated and contextual documents including reflective journals, lesson plans, professional development certificates, school communications, classroom policies voluntarily shared. Purpose was not to verify narratives but to provide contextual understanding, corroborate emerging themes, and deepen interpretation. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), documents treated as narrative texts illuminating social, institutional, and professional contexts. 3) Arts-Based Representation: Participants invited to create visual representation such as drawing depicting journey adapting to special education practices. Arts-based activity served as elicitation tool encouraging reflection on significant events, emotions, relationships, challenges, transformative experiences. Following creation, participants explained meaning behind work, allowing artwork and narrative to function as interconnected field texts. Grounded on Barone and Eisner (2012) visual narrative inquiry framework, drawing used as draw-and-explain elicitation.

Data Collection Procedure

Procedure began with approval from university ethics board and Phoenix district office. Communications sent to university authorities, district offices, school administrators. Permission secured. Identification and recruitment of participants meeting criteria done. Interested individuals given informed consent with detailed explanation of purpose, scope, voluntary nature, right to withdraw. Once consented, individual semi-structured interviews scheduled at convenient times and locations ensuring privacy. Before each interview, participants reminded of voluntary participation and confidentiality. Semi-structured guide used maintaining consistency while allowing expansion. Audio recording used. Field notes maintained to record nonverbal cues, contextual observations, immediate reflections. Transcripts organized systematically for retrieval and cross-referencing. Participants provided documents validating claims, examined via qualitative document analysis notes describing type, part validating response, how it supports response. Arts-based drawings crafted 2-3 days after interviews, participants wrote overall meaning of drawing and symbols. Qualitative notes on description and interpretation prepared and validated by expert. Member checking conducted by returning restoried narratives to participants for verification, clarifications incorporated while preserving integrity. All data stored securely on password-protected devices, hard copies locked, audio encrypted. Triangulation facilitated through integration of three sources.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed narrative inquiry approach proposed by Connelly and Clandinin (2024), emphasizing participants' narratives understood through interpretation of stories within context. Data analysis occurred concurrently with collection allowing continuous reflection. Methodological alignment observed: preliminary coding used only organizing transcripts; central analytic focus was stories as whole narratives emphasizing three-dimensional spaces. Framework of temporality, sociality, and place used to preserve stories while examining how experiences developed across time, relationships, and contexts. Temporality examined how experiences unfolded and changed across time—from Philippines, transition to US, initial encounters, challenges, adjustments, development of competence, confidence, professional identity. Significant events and turning points identified and arranged chronologically. Sociality examined personal conditions (emotions, beliefs, motivations, identities) and social conditions (relationships with students, parents, administrators, mentors, paraprofessionals, therapists). This allowed understanding of

adaptation as relational process where participants learned through interactions. Place explored physical, cultural, institutional, educational contexts, contrasting Philippines and Phoenix contexts, including curriculum, IEP implementation, legal responsibilities, documentation, collaboration, school procedures. Place understood as educational and sociocultural environment shaping what participants experienced. After analyzing through three dimensions, integrated to develop holistic restorying. Researcher identified significant events, experiences, turning points, relationships, contextual influences, changes in professional practice from transcripts. These organized according to when (temporality), who (sociality), and where (place).

Microsoft Excel used to organize transcripts, initial codes, categories, narrative threads, supporting quotations. Codebook developed containing code name, operational definition, inclusion/exclusion criteria, representative excerpts, refined as additional narratives analyzed. Peer debriefing conducted with qualified research peer/adviser examining whether codes supported by accounts. Constant comparison and triangulation across sources compared narratives with school documents and arts-based outputs to identify consistencies and variations (Patton, 2022). Finally, interpretive reflection synthesized themes into cohesive narrative accounts presented through rich descriptions and direct quotations emphasizing participants' voices.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria upheld. Credibility: Prolonged engagement and persistent observation, spending sufficient time interacting through in-depth interviews and document review. Member checking by allowing participants to review transcripts, interpretations, emerging themes. Codebook refined, peer debriefing to minimize assumptions, transparency enhanced. Dependability: Clear, consistent, systematic documentation of research process.

Detailed records of interviews, observations, coding procedures, analytical decisions maintained as audit trail. Standardized procedures followed. Confirmability: Prioritizing participants' voices while minimizing researcher bias. Reflexive journaling documenting reflections, assumptions, potential influences. Transparency in decision-making and positionality. Triangulation using multiple data sources. Transferability: Rich detailed descriptions of context, participants, educational practices, thick description, direct quotations, narrative excerpts enabling readers to determine applicability to similar contexts.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity central ensuring researcher's perspectives acknowledged and critically examined. Researcher maintained reflexive journal throughout documenting thoughts, reactions, decisions during interviews, observations, analysis, distinguishing subjective impressions from actual experiences shared. Awareness of positionality guided practice: researcher is educator with extensive Philippine education experience and familiarity with special education and educational leadership, recognizing value and potential influence. Steps taken to minimize power imbalances, foster trust, safe respectful environment encouraging open honest sharing. Reflective memoing documented interpretive decisions, emerging themes, alternative explanations, providing audit trail. Researcher consciously bracketed personal expectations, asking clarifying probing questions without leading, returning to original transcripts and exact words. Approach treated narratives not as experiences to be predetermined but as participants' accounts to be understood within own temporal, social, contextual circumstances.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations paramount ensuring protection and welfare. Study obtained ethics clearance from University Board of Ethics and Phoenix district office, ensuring compliance with institutional ethical standards and cross-country ethical standards. Justice and fairness observed by providing criteria identifying participants, ensuring not excluded arbitrarily. Informed consent critical: participants received detailed explanation of purpose, objectives, procedures, potential risks, benefits, right to voluntarily participate and withdraw without consequences. Beneficence valued motivating participation. Confidentiality and privacy rigorously maintained per Philippines Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173) and international standards. Personal information removed or replaced with pseudonyms ensuring anonymity preventing harm. Data stored securely on password-protected devices, hard copies locked, audio encrypted preventing unauthorized access. Ethical transparency and integrity ensured in analysis, reporting, dissemination,

representing narratives accurately and respectfully, avoiding misinterpretation, protecting identities, reflecting authenticity.

Results and Discussion:

This section presents findings of analyzed narratives using Clandinin's narrative inquiry method. Analysis used three-dimensional narrative inquiry spaces including temporality, sociality, and place. Triangulation was done through integration of findings from document analysis and arts-based data. Operational Data Collection: interviews conducted with four participants for more than 60 minutes each. Documents including lesson plans, IEP samples, visual aids, professional development certificates were provided. Arts-based outputs provided 2-3 days after interviews with written meaning of drawings and symbols. Researcher served as main instrument immersing into data from three sources. Data transcribed verbatim, repeatedly listened and reviewed to ensure accuracy and familiarity. Three dimensions integrated to develop holistic restorying, identifying significant events, turning points, relationships, contextual influences, changes in practice.

Participants Demographic Profile: Four participants represent diverse range of professional backgrounds, teaching experiences, educational settings, and special education contexts. Three female and one male, ages 30 to 50+ years, three with Master's Degree, one with Bachelor's, all completed teacher education in Philippines. Experience in Philippines ranging 1-3 years to more than 12 years, US experience 2-3 to 4-5 years. Currently serve as Resource Teachers or Special Education Teachers in public-school settings, working across self-contained classrooms, inclusive classrooms, resource rooms serving Pre-K through Grade 12 with diverse needs including autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities, multiple disabilities, developmental disabilities, medical fragility.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

Participant	Age Group	Highest Education	Teaching Experience	Current Position / Setting	Learner Needs
Ms. Triple A	40-49	Bachelor's Degree	2-3 years US / 7+ years PH	Resource Teacher, Self-contained, K-Grade 8	Multiple disabilities, ADHD, medical fragility
Ms. Obi	30-39	Master's Degree	4-5 years US / 1-3 years PH	Special Education Teacher, Self-contained, Grades 6-8	Learning disabilities, ASD, EBD, ID, multiple disabilities, ADHD
Ms. Anne	50 & above	Master's Degree	4-5 years US / 12+ years PH	Resource Teacher, Pre-K - Grade 1	ASD, EBD, ID, developmental disabilities
Mr. Jon	30-39	Master's Degree	2-3 years US / 3-5 years PH	Resource Teacher, Grades 7-12	Learning disabilities, ASD, EBD, ID, ADHD

RQ1: Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Educators Adapting to Special Education Practices

Theme 1: Navigating the Transition into an Unfamiliar Special Education Landscape (42 coded segments).

Participants described initial encounters characterized by adjustment struggles, emotional uncertainty, cultural differences, and need to understand complex legal, procedural, and instructional expectations. Temporality traced movement from Philippines to Phoenix. Ms. Triple A: "Students vary in their needs... We're still working on the goal. No improvement is happening even if modification is done." P2: "I got into the classroom immediately not knowing what to do. I keep on reflecting on what are the things that went wrong." Stress and uncertainties pervasive: "So you also must accept the fact that there will be stress and uncertainties." P4 mixed emotions: "I felt both excited and overwhelmed at the same time." Physical and emotional stress: P3: "So this is my physical and emotional stress." Language barrier despite English proficiency, communication barrier, curriculum unfamiliarity: P4: "I don't know what curriculum that needs to be followed."

Sub-theme Compliance and Professional Identity Growth emerged within navigation. Legal compliance hardest initially. "There's a lot, I cannot memorize all the laws." "Sadly but then there are paper works to be done... papers to be signed." "The number one challenge is I must learn the IEP Pro." Learning IEP Pro platform, AAC devices, scheduling IEP meetings, documentation: "Documentation is really important in any way shape or form either positive or negative." "I going to document those requirements and of course the legal responsibilities." Enhanced digital documentation: "I've probably enhanced more here, learning digital documentation system." Medical fragility awareness: "I have to be very alert when it comes to their medical condition." Place dimension highlighted differences: US system highly regulated, legally driven, contrast to Philippine fragmented implementation.

Theme 2: Building Competence Through Collaboration and Professional Learning (38 coded segments).

Second theme reflects movement from uncertainty to competence via sociality. Relational and Integrated Practice and Collaborative Professional Growth were key categories. Participants emphasized asking questions: P2: "I had to ask so many questions from my mentor and ask so many questions." P3: "they are locals and they are actually testing... like maybe [testing me]." Building relationships: "you have to build relationship with them [paraprofessionals]." P1: "I have two parapros so we are four adults in the classroom." Meeting professionals: "So, I get to meet a lot of professionals as well." "I get to meet different colleagues." Communication with parents challenging yet transformative: "I have experienced a very challenging parent." "Yeah, not everything parents would agree." Negotiation strategies: "So, kung ano yung benefit, kahit ayaw ng parent, o di mag-meet halfway tayo." Building relationships: "but as you build relationships with them and you try to connect with them." Administrative support: "encouraging and supportive I thought that I really looked down on myself." Rude/demanding parents: "there are some parents who... can be really rude." "the parents are very demanding." Learning to negotiate: "So I learned how to negotiate with her." Need for open communication: "you need to have an open line communication." Collaborative growth: "collaborating with your colleagues." Limited support: "So the limited support system, so when I asked my coach, can you please, especially in IET." Having to ask: "the most challenging thing is that you really have to ask a lot of people." Sociality showed personal and social conditions shaping adaptation.

Theme 3: Transforming Professional Identity Through Reflection, Resilience, and Cross-Cultural Practice (35 coded segments).

Transformative Professional Journey category reflects temporality progression to third year: P2: "But gradually, you get to know yourself well at third year." Happiness despite workload: P1: "but I'm happy aside from I have seven students." Fun: "But it's a fun way. It's fun at the same time." Mixed emotions acknowledged: "there's a lot of mixed emotions." Very glad to help: "So I'm very glad that I'm here as a special education teacher to help support our students with diverse needs." Self-control and careful word choice: "you have to have this self-control." "Another thing is your choice of words we have to be very careful you have to be aware that there are words [that are culturally sensitive]." Boundaries: "You just need to be aware of what your boundaries are." Overcoming challenges: "All that will pass as long as you try your best." "That's what I learned to overcome those challenges." Not taking personally: "I always do that I don't take it personally at first it was hard." Cultural learning: "the Native American culture, they told me that you should be more firm with them." Learning on own and patience: "I need to learn it from my own." "I became more patience." Patience emerged across all participants as transformed virtue: daily work made more patient, greater patience over time. Team player identity: "I am a team player. Well, I've always been a team player." OK to ask help: "No, it's okay to ask help." Finding routine: "I had to find that routine that would suit me best." Managing instruction and self-reflection: "I had to manage instruction I have to self-reflect." Handling tantrums: "I learned how to handle tantrums more effectively." This theme demonstrates professional identity not fixed but reconstructed through reflection, resilience.

Theme 4: Contextual and Resource Adaptation (29 coded segments).

Place dimension shows influence of physical, institutional, cultural environments. Participants described figuring out workplace culture: "challenging because you have to figure out the workplace culture." "And of course, all eyes are on you because you were new." Struggle first two years: "But for my first and second year, it was a struggle." Expectation to already know everything: "I think they're expecting that you don't know that you already know

everything and they said oh my God." Creating own materials: "Aside from that, I also made my own visual aids." "I opened books and started to research different strategies." "sometimes, I have to create my own materials for the kid." Different needs mixing in one class: "So with different needs and disabilities and you know mixing in one class and in functional." Adjusting teaching methods: "adjust my teaching methods to accommodate the different disabilities and learning styles." Teaching strategies challenge: "Teaching strategies or teaching method is one of my challenges." Addressing behavioral challenges: "How can I address properly their behavioral challenges." Resource adaptation included spending own money, making visual aids, modifying materials for differentiated instruction.

RQ2: Strategies Employed to Adapt Special Education Practices

Theme 1: Designing and Implementing Inclusive, Learner-Centered Special Education Practices (45 coded segments).

Participants designed inclusive practices utilizing digital tools, differentiated learning strategies, flexible assessment, structured learning environments, relational engagement, multisensory individualized instruction. P3: "And then, adjusting to curriculum and instruction." "effort to modify visual materials especially if you're doing differentiated." Creating own materials essential: "sometimes, I have to create my own materials for the kid." P4: "my work became more individualized because instead of just focusing on one lesson [I focus on IEP goals]." Monitoring progress: "I spent more on monitoring student progress." Accommodations: "I implement accommodation and also other challenging stuff." Digital tools: Learning IEP Pro, AAC devices, visual supports. Differentiated instruction tailored to autism, ADHD, multiple disabilities. Structured learning environments for emotional-behavioral disabilities. Multisensory instruction for learning disabilities. Relational engagement: building trust with students, seeing son in students: P3: "I started to see my son, my son in my students." Realities of life: "Like, this is the realities of life. Like, you know, that's why they're called special because they also need special care." Balance classroom and IEP management: "And also, you know how to balance your classroom management and your IEP management." Not caring what others think as long as doing job: "I started not to care about what people think as long as I'm doing my job." This theme accounted for highest frequency indicating core adaptation strategy.

Theme 2: Strengthening Instruction Through Collaboration, Reflection, and Evidence-Based Professional Practice (41 coded segments).

Second strategy theme emphasizes that effective instructional practice strengthened through collaboration, professional support, reflective growth, continuous refinement, data-informed decision-making. Participants' narratives demonstrated teaching required ongoing process of observing learners, interpreting needs, modifying practices, working collaboratively with stakeholders. Collaboration with paraprofessionals, general education teachers, therapists, nurses, parents. Professional support: mentors, instructional coaches, administrators. Reflective growth: constant reflection on what went wrong, what could improve. Evidence-based practice: opening books, researching different strategies, utilizing research-informed interventions (Fazio & Gotch, 2024). Data-informed: monitoring IEP goals, documentation important. Participants learned to exhaust all means of communication: P4: "I keep on messaging. I exhaust all the means of communication." How to collaborate with staff and parents: "how can you collaborate with the other staff or the teachers and also communicate to the parents." Instructional refinement: writing own curriculum in self-contained classroom: P2: "I ended up writing my own curriculum in the self-contained classroom." Asking: "I have to prepare you know. I have to ask." These strategies transformed approaches through integration of prior professional knowledge, new contextual understandings, continuous engagement with learners, colleagues, system.

RQ3: Evolution of Professional Identity and Practices Through Strategies

Theme 1: Transforming Professional Practice Through Cross-Context Learning and Responsive Teaching (39 coded segments).

Exposure to U.S. special education system reshaped instructional perspectives through adaptive and responsive teaching, legal-driven professional organization, deepened understanding of inclusion, student-centered practices, intentional structured differentiation, evolving instructional approaches. Participants described shift from Philippines

teacher-centered to US student-centered, legally compliant, data-driven. Cross-context learning: Philippine experience provided foundation of resilience, caring, resourcefulness; US experience added structure, compliance, collaboration, assistive technology. Responsive teaching: adjusting based on student response, not just curriculum. Legal-driven organization: IEP documentation, scheduling meetings, compliance calendar. Student-centered: individualized goals, accommodation, differentiation. Participants' daily work change: more individualized, more monitoring, more accommodation. Need to adapt: "And I need to adapt."

Theme 2: Reconstructing Professional Identity Through Collaboration, Reflection, and Lifelong Growth (44 coded segments).

Professional identity continuously reconstructed through workplace experiences, relationships, resilience, mentorship, student success, reflective engagement. Expanding professional identity, student-centered professional commitment, collaborative identity transformation, mentorship-driven collegiality, progressive professional identity development, leadership and educational advocacy, professional identity reconstruction. Participants transitioned from uncertain practitioners adapting to new system into confident, reflective, committed special educators. Narratives highlight professional transformation not linear but ongoing journey negotiating cultural differences, overcoming challenges, building collaborative relationships, developing stronger sense of purpose. Identity markers: team player, patient, resilient, firm yet caring, reflective, advocate. Leadership emerged: some began mentoring new Filipino teachers, advocating for students. Lifelong growth: greater patience over time, learning to handle tantrums, managing instruction and self-reflection, finding routine. Sociality and place interaction: relationships with diverse learners (Hispanic, multilingual, Native American) deepened culturally responsive identity. Being on same boat with migrant students created oneness amidst diversity. Professional identity reconstruction involved integration of Filipino values (family-oriented, caring, resilience) with American professional expectations (compliance, documentation, collaboration, evidence-based).

Integration of Document Analysis and Arts-Based Data. Document analysis corroborated narratives: lesson plans showed differentiation, visual aids creation, IEP goal alignment, accommodation notes. Professional development certificates indicated continuous learning. Classroom policies reflected culturally responsive adaptations. Arts-based drawings depicted journey: initial images showed isolated figure, stormy sea, bridge; later images showed connected hands, lightbulb, growing tree, heart with students. One participant drew self as bridge between Philippines and Arizona, with IEP documents as pillars. Another drew timeline from confused face to smiling teacher with students of diverse backgrounds. Symbols included books, heart, hands, clock representing patience, and scales representing balance of compliance and compassion. Drawings explained as: "Started with mixed emotions but ended with purpose." Visual narratives validated interview themes of transformation from struggle to competence and confidence. Triangulation strengthened credibility: interview narratives consistent with documents showing increased use of assistive technology, structured visual supports, data tracking sheets, and arts-based representations showing emotional journey. No contradictions found; rather, supplementary sources deepened understanding.

Comparison with Literature. Findings align with Flores and Eludo (2025) on recalibration of competence, Marquez Tampus (2025) on adaptation to varying activities, and Squires et al. (2024) on professional and cultural adjustment negotiating unfamiliar expectations. Similar to Courtney et al. (2023) on comprehensive induction essential, Takala et al. (2023) on authentic teaching practice and collaborative learning, Peters and Konrad (2025) on structured mentoring critical during first weeks. Extends literature by demonstrating how Filipino educators' narratives illustrate temporality, sociality, place interconnected, contributing to narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly) and professional identity theory (Akkerman & Meijer, 2024; Kim & Asbury, 2023; Flores & Swennen, 2025). Contrasts with general teacher migration studies focusing only on economic motivations, by highlighting emotional, relational, legal dimensions specific to special education. Findings reinforce and extend socio-constructivist and ecological perspectives: Vygotskian principles of mediated learning reflected in scaffolding, collaboration, multisensory instruction, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems evident in how institutional structures, cultural expectations, environmental conditions influence teaching practices. Study underscores place as powerful structural and cultural force mediating teaching practice, particularly in highly regulated systems such as U.S. special education. Teacher adaptation should be understood as multidimensional narrative process where time, relationships, and context continuously interact to shape professional meaning-making and identity formation.

Implications: Practical implications include strengthening structured induction and onboarding programs, sustained mentoring, collaborative professional learning communities, adequate resources, open communication channels. Theoretical implications contribute to narrative inquiry framework reinforcing significance of temporality, sociality, place, and to professional identity theory showing identity fluid, relational, context-dependent, nonlinear, involving tension, adaptation, reflective transformation. Recent studies (Akkerman & Meijer, 2024; Kim & Asbury, 2023; Flores & Swennen, 2025) support theoretical contributions.

Figure 1: Frequency of Codes - RQ1 Lived Experiences

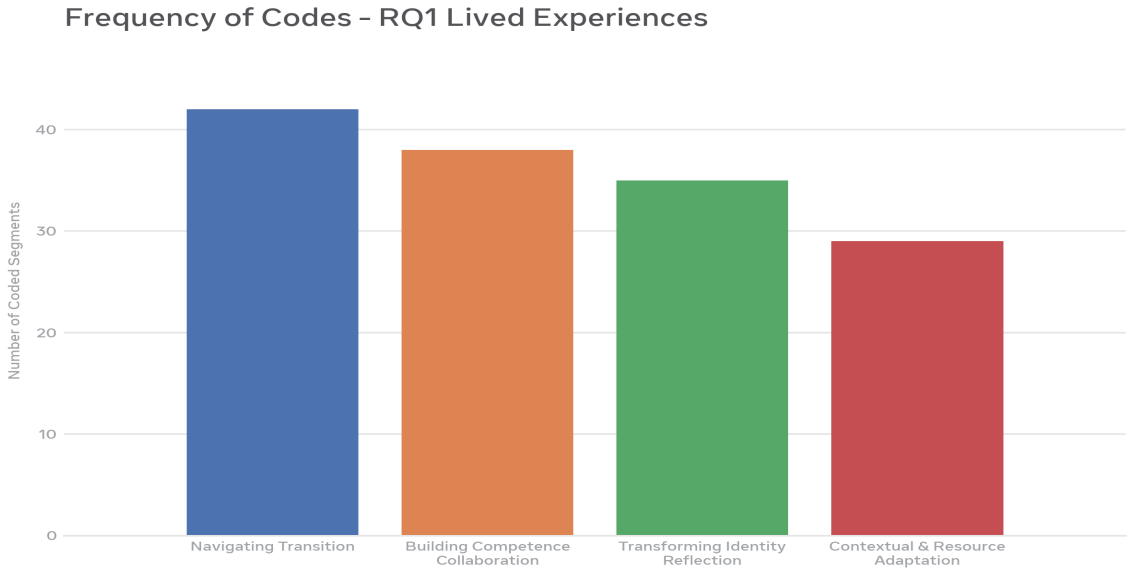


Figure 2: Frequency of Codes - RQ2 Adaptation Strategies

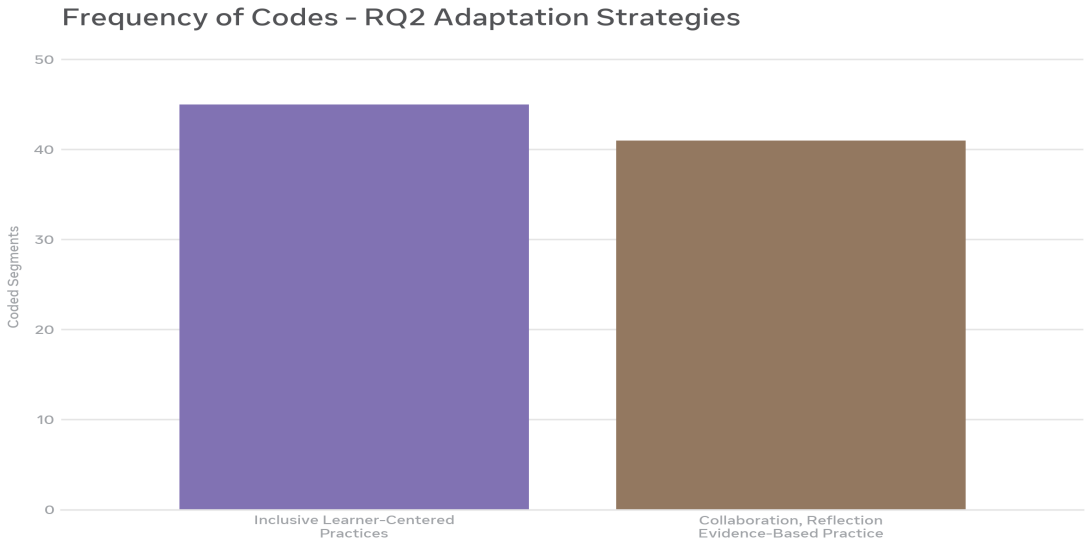


Figure 3: Frequency of Codes - RQ3 Professional Identity Evolution

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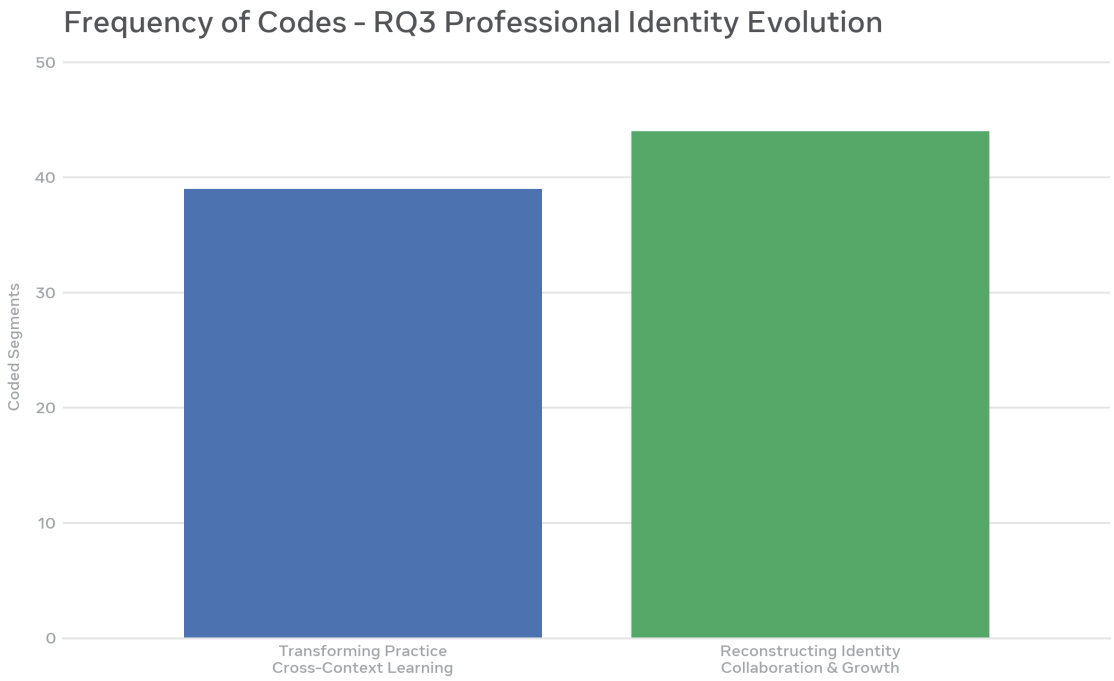


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework Diagram - Theoretical Underpinnings and Narrative Inquiry Lens

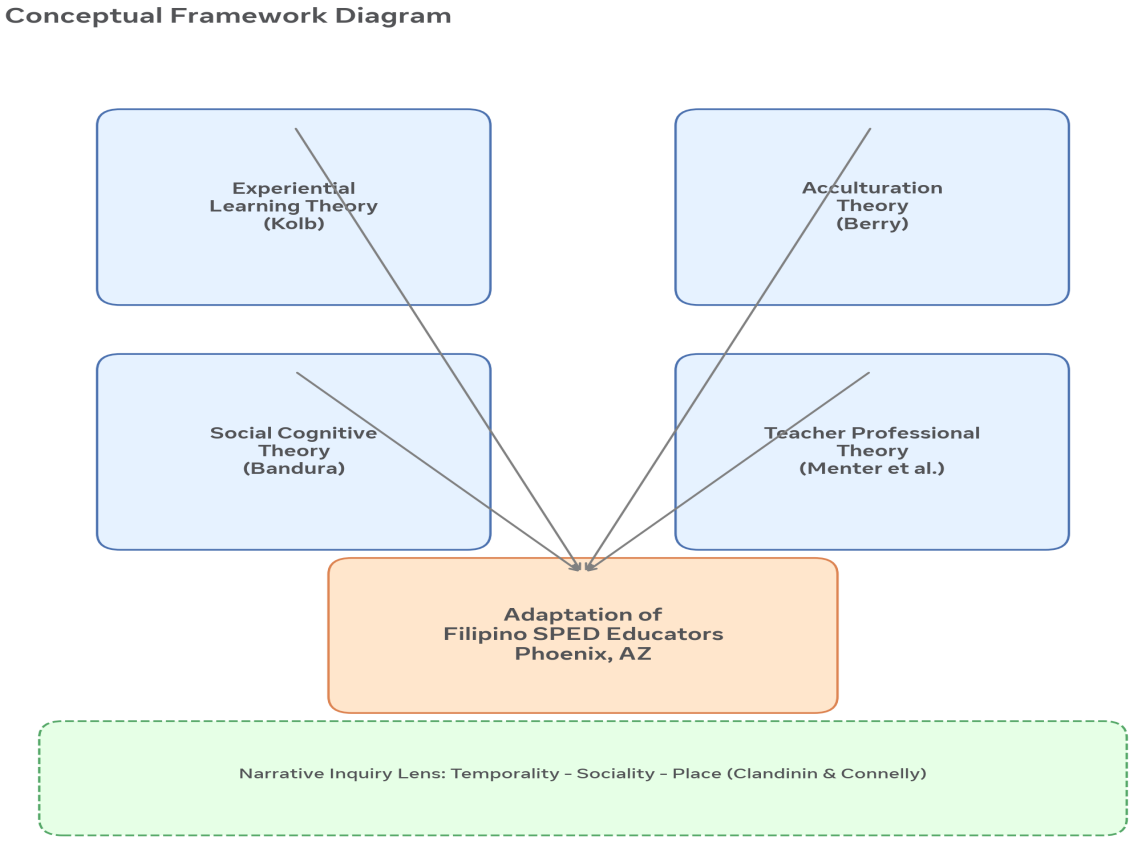


Table 2: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Across Research Questions

Research Question	Overarching Theme	Categories / Narrative Threads	Three-Dimensional Lens
RQ1: Lived Experiences	Navigating Transition into Unfamiliar Landscape	Adjustment struggles, emotional uncertainty, legal compliance, IEP Pro learning, documentation	Temporality, Place
RQ1	Building Competence Through Collaboration	Mentorship, asking questions, paraprofessional relationships, parent negotiation, collegial collaboration	Sociality, Place
RQ1	Transforming Identity Through Reflection & Resilience	Patience development, self-control, cultural learning, team player, mixed emotions to confidence	Sociality, Temporality
RQ1	Contextual & Resource Adaptation	Workplace culture, all eyes on you, creating visual aids, modifying materials, adjusting methods	Place, Temporality
RQ2: Strategies	Designing Inclusive Learner-Centered Practices	Differentiated instruction, multisensory, digital tools, structured environment, individualized IEP goals	Place, Sociality
RQ2	Strengthening Instruction Through Collaboration & Reflection	Evidence-based practice, data-informed, continuous refinement, collaborative problem-solving	Sociality, Temporality
RQ3: Identity Evolution	Transforming Practice Through Cross-Context Learning	Adaptive teaching, legal-driven organization, student-centered, intentional differentiation	Temporality, Place
RQ3	Reconstructing Identity Through Collaboration & Growth	Mentorship-driven collegiality, leadership, advocacy, resilience, lifelong learning	Sociality, Temporality, Place

Table 3: Cross-Narrative Code Frequency Matrix

Code Cluster	Ms. Triple A	Ms. Obi	Ms. Anne	Mr. Jon
Compliance & Documentation (IEP, laws)	12	10	9	11
Collaboration & Mentorship	8	11	7	12
Emotional Adaptation / Patience	9	8	10	8
Instructional Differentiation	11	12	10	12

Cultural & Communication Adaptation	7	9	8	7
Professional Identity Growth	9	9	11	10

Conclusion:

This narrative inquiry explored lived experiences of Filipino special educators adapting to special education practices in Phoenix, Arizona. Through four participants' stories examined via temporality, sociality, and place, study revealed adaptation as dynamic, non-linear, transformative journey rather than single adjustment.

Filipino educators' adaptation involved navigating transition into unfamiliar landscape characterized by legal, procedural, instructional, cultural, and emotional challenges. Initial years marked by uncertainty, stress, language nuances, curriculum unfamiliarity, compliance demands of IDEA, IEP Pro, documentation, and medical fragility awareness. Yet through building competence via collaboration and professional learning—asking mentors many questions, building relationships with paraprofessionals, negotiating with parents, collaborating with colleagues, engaging with multidisciplinary teams—educators developed instructional competence and relational confidence.

Transformation occurred through reflection, resilience, and cross-cultural practice. Participants reconstructed professional identity from uncertain newcomers to patient, team-player, reflective, firm yet caring advocates. Daily work became more individualized, data-driven, accommodation-focused, and collaborative. Greater patience emerged as hallmark virtue, alongside self-control, careful word choice, boundary awareness, and cultural responsiveness learned from Hispanic, multilingual, and Native American learners. Being on same boat with migrant students fostered oneness amidst diversity, turning double-blade challenge into opportunity for culturally responsive reciprocity.

Strategies employed included designing and implementing inclusive learner-centered practices through differentiated instruction, multisensory strategies, flexible assessment, structured environments, digital tools, visual aids creation, and IEP goal monitoring. Effective practice strengthened through collaboration, reflection, evidence-based professional practice, continuous refinement, and exhausting all communication means. Participants learned to write own curriculum when needed, research strategies from books, modify visual materials, and balance classroom and IEP management.

Evolution of professional identity narrated as transforming practice through cross-context learning and responsive teaching—integrating Philippine foundation of resilience and caring with American structure, compliance, and evidence-based approaches—and reconstructing identity through collaboration, reflection, lifelong growth, mentorship-driven collegiality, progressive development, leadership and advocacy. Professional identity fluid, relational, context-dependent, continuously reconstructed across time, social interactions, changing contexts (Akkerman & Meijer, 2024).

Theoretical contributions reinforce significance of temporality, sociality, place as interconnected dimensions in cross-cultural teacher adaptation, expanding narrative inquiry literature by demonstrating professional identity not only temporally constructed but socially shaped through emotional labor and place-mediated. Findings support socio-constructivist (Vygotsky) mediated learning via scaffolding and collaboration, and ecological (Bronfenbrenner) influence of institutional structures.

Practical implications call for strengthening structured induction and onboarding programs orienting new internationally trained teachers to IDEA requirements, IEP processes, documentation systems, classroom management. Sustained mentoring, instructional coaching, collaborative support essential to reduce early uncertainty and emotional strain. Adequate instructional resources and paraprofessional support needed to lessen financial burden. Strengthening communication among teachers, parents, providers, administrators enhances student-centered outcomes. Training focused on differentiated instruction, data-driven teaching, multisensory strategies, collaborative systems among SPED, general educators, parents essential. Fostering collaborative school cultures reduces isolation and promotes supportive peer relationships and team-based planning.

Limitations include small sample of four participants in Phoenix, limiting transferability beyond similar urban contexts, and focus on self-contained settings. Future research can expand to other states, longitudinal designs, mixed-methods investigating adaptation and student outcomes, and comparative studies with other internationally trained groups.

Ultimately, Filipino special educators' narratives embody resilience, commitment, and teaching with a heart. Their adaptation journey from navigating unfamiliar terrain to transforming identity exemplifies professional becoming, contributing to quality inclusive education and SDG 4. Their stories provide invaluable evidence for school administrators, policymakers, and future researchers to build institutional support systems that honor international talents while ensuring equitable, inclusive, quality education for learners with disabilities.

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