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Cultural and Policy Adaptation of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Albuquerque, New Mexico: A Multiple Case Study

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Abstract:

This qualitative multiple case study examined how five Filipino special education teachers adapted culturally and professionally to teaching students with disabilities in Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), New Mexico, United States. Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Berry's acculturation model, the study asked how Filipino teachers navigated a new policy environment, built competence with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), collaborated with American colleagues and families, and preserved Filipino values while meeting United States expectations for inclusion, documentation, and student autonomy. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document review of IEPs, lesson plans, progress-monitoring records, and professional development logs, and were analysed through within-case and cross-case thematic analysis with member checking and triangulation. Seven themes emerged: institutional support as scaffolding, gradual familiarisation with IEPs, collaboration and community, student voice and autonomy, Filipino values carried into teaching, tension and bridging between policy and culture, and IEP and data-driven instruction. Findings show that adaptation was not a single adjustment but a mediated, staged process in which mentors, coaches, professional development, and administrative support gradually reduced dependence while confidence, documentation skill, and instructional precision increased. Teachers did not abandon Filipino values; they integrated malasakit, kapwa, pakikisama, and respect for elders and families into American curriculum and inclusive practice. The study concludes that structured induction, IEP-focused mentoring, and culturally responsive collaboration are essential for retaining internationally recruited special educators and for improving inclusive outcomes. In practical terms, the findings support formal induction, IEP-focused mentoring, and culturally responsive collaboration as retention strategies.

Keywords: Filipino teachers; special education; cultural adaptation; Individualized Education Program; inclusion; Albuquerque; acculturation

Introduction:

Public schools in the United States face a persistent shortage of special education teachers, and districts increasingly recruit internationally to fill vacancies in inclusive, resource, and self-contained classrooms. Among the largest groups recruited are Filipino teachers, whose English proficiency, United States licensure pathways, and strong tradition of teacher preparation make them attractive to districts, yet whose preparation occurred in a different policy, curricular, and cultural system. In Albuquerque Public Schools

(APS) in New Mexico, Filipino special educators now teach students with diverse disabilities, write and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), coordinate with general educators and related-service providers, and communicate with families whose expectations about disability, autonomy, and schooling may differ from those the teachers knew in the Philippines. Their success therefore depends not only on subject knowledge or goodwill, but on learning a new legal and procedural language, a new documentation system, and a new set of cultural scripts about childhood, independence, and professional collaboration.

The problem addressed by this study is that recruitment alone does not guarantee retention, competence, or quality inclusion. Internationally recruited teachers often arrive with strong content knowledge and caring dispositions, but without prior experience of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), free appropriate public education (FAPE), least restrictive environment (LRE), procedural safeguards, timelines, and data systems such as Synergy that organise daily work in American special education.

In the Philippines, special education is guided by Republic Act No. 11650 and Department of Education policies on inclusive education, but implementation varies, resources are limited, and IEP practice is less litigated, less standardised, and less data-intensive than in the United States. Filipino teachers may therefore experience a sharp discontinuity: they know how to care for and teach learners with disabilities, yet they must relearn how that care is named, sequenced, documented, and legally defended. Without structured support, this discontinuity can produce anxiety, overload, isolation, and early exit, harming students who need continuity and harming districts that invested in recruitment.

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain how Filipino special education teachers adapt culturally and professionally in Albuquerque, and to identify the supports, strategies, and values that made adaptation possible. Specifically, it examined (a) how teachers experienced entry into APS, including orientation, mentoring, and professional development; (b) how they learned IEP writing, implementation, progress monitoring, and compliance; (c) how they negotiated cultural differences in teaching, discipline, family communication, and student autonomy; (d) how collaboration with colleagues, administrators, and families shaped their practice; and (e) how Filipino values were retained, reshaped, or set aside in the new context. The central research question was: How do Filipino special education teachers adapt to the cultural and policy demands of teaching students with disabilities in Albuquerque Public Schools? Three sub-questions followed: What institutional supports scaffold adaptation? What strategies do teachers use to learn IEP and data-driven practice? How do Filipino cultural values interact with American expectations of inclusion and autonomy?

This study is significant for four audiences. For school leaders and district administrators, it identifies which induction practices actually reduce the learning curve and which leave teachers to learn by trial and error. For mentors, coaches, and professional development providers, it shows where scaffolding is most needed: IEP language, documentation, behaviour systems, and family communication.

For Filipino and other internationally recruited teachers, it offers a realistic map of the first months, normalises help-seeking, and affirms that cultural identity can be an asset rather than a barrier. For policymakers, it clarifies that culturally responsive induction is not an extra kindness but a condition for legal compliance, instructional quality, and retention. The study also contributes to scholarship on teacher migration, acculturation, and inclusive education by showing adaptation as integration rather than assimilation: teachers kept Filipino relational values while adopting American procedural competence.

The study is delimited to five Filipino special education teachers employed in APS at the time of data collection, with varied ages, experience, and school assignments. It does not claim to represent all Filipino

teachers in the United States, all internationally recruited teachers, or all APS schools. It focuses on lived experience rather than student achievement scores, and on qualitative depth rather than statistical generalisation. The paper is organised in IMRAD format. The literature review synthesises theory and prior research; the methodology describes the multiple case design, participants, instruments, and analysis; the results and discussion present seven themes with evidence, interpretation, and visual summaries; and the conclusion summarises contributions, limitations, and recommendations.

Literature Review:

Two theories frame this study. First, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory holds that learning is mediated by language, tools, and more knowledgeable others, and that development occurs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) when a learner can do with support what they cannot yet do alone. For a Filipino teacher entering APS, the ZPD is visible in everyday work: a mentor models an IEP meeting, a coach co-plans a lesson, a colleague explains a Synergy code, and the teacher gradually internalises the procedure until it can be done independently. Scaffolding is therefore not a metaphor but an observable practice: modelling, coaching, feedback, templates, checklists, and gradual release.

When scaffolding is present, adaptation is faster and less anxious; when it is absent, teachers improvise, misinterpret requirements, or withdraw. Sociocultural theory also explains why culture matters for learning: tools such as IEP forms, progress-monitoring charts, and behaviour plans carry American assumptions about individual goals, measurable outcomes, and parental rights, and learning to use them is learning a new cultural toolkit.

Second, Berry's (2017) acculturation model distinguishes four strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. Integration, maintaining heritage culture while participating in the host culture, is most consistently associated with psychological and sociocultural adaptation. This study treats integration as the desired outcome: Filipino teachers retain malasakit (compassionate care), kapwa (shared identity and concern for the other), pakikisama (smooth interpersonal relations), respect for elders, and family-centredness, while adopting American expectations for documentation, individualised goals, student voice, and least restrictive placement.

Assimilation, abandoning Filipino ways to become indistinguishable from American colleagues, would waste relational strengths that students and families value. Separation, clinging to Philippine practice while resisting American procedures, would risk non-compliance and isolation. The theoretical lens therefore predicts that successful teachers will be bicultural practitioners who code-switch between Filipino relational norms and American procedural norms, and that schools that affirm both cultures will retain teachers better than schools that demand assimilation.

International teacher migration is driven by shortages in the host country and by professional and economic opportunities in the sending country. Research on Filipino teachers abroad consistently reports strengths in English, adaptability, patience, and strong work ethic, alongside challenges in credential recognition, cultural adjustment, classroom management in a new cultural context, and navigating unfamiliar bureaucracy. Studies of internationally educated teachers in the United States and other English-speaking countries show that the first year is often the most difficult, not because teachers lack pedagogy, but because tacit knowledge does not transfer automatically: how to talk to parents, how to document a behaviour incident, how to phrase an accommodation, and how to participate in a meeting are culturally scripted. Without explicit induction, newcomers may be judged as deficient when they are simply unfamiliar. The present study extends this literature by focusing specifically on special education, where tacit knowledge is unusually dense and legally consequential.

In the United States, special education is defined by IDEA and by the procedural rights it creates. Every eligible student must have an IEP with present levels, measurable annual goals, services, accommodations, and a placement in the least restrictive environment, and progress must be monitored and reported. FAPE requires that services be provided at public expense, under public supervision, and in conformity with the IEP. These requirements create a documentation burden that is unfamiliar to many internationally recruited teachers. Research on special educator preparation and retention shows that paperwork, caseload, behaviour management, and collaboration demands predict burnout, and that mentoring and administrative support predict retention. Data-driven instruction, using curriculum-based measurement, probes, and progress-monitoring graphs to decide whether to continue, adjust, or change an intervention, is central to contemporary practice. Teachers who learn to read data as a story about a child, rather than as compliance paperwork, make more precise instructional decisions. The study therefore examined IEP and data literacy not as isolated skills but as part of professional identity formation.

Filipino cultural values shape teaching in distinctive ways. Malasakit is often described as caring that goes beyond duty, noticing a child's hunger, sadness, or confusion and responding personally. Kapwa frames the teacher and student as connected, not as distant service provider and client, and encourages empathy and shared responsibility. Pakikisama values harmony, cooperation, and avoiding open conflict, which supports collaboration but can make it difficult to disagree in meetings or to give direct corrective feedback. Respect for elders and for authority can lead teachers to defer to administrators or parents even when they have a professional concern to raise. Family-centredness treats parents as partners and honours their sacrifices, which aligns well with IDEA's emphasis on parental participation but may conflict with American norms of student autonomy when families expect deference or when adolescents are expected to speak for themselves in IEP meetings. Prior research on Filipino educators and on culturally responsive teaching suggests that these values, when recognised, enrich inclusive classrooms by making them warmer, more relational, and more attentive to the whole child. When ignored or pathologised, they can be misread as over-involvement, lack of boundaries, or lack of assertiveness.

Culture, policy, and collaboration intersect in daily classroom life. American inclusive practice emphasises student voice, self-advocacy, choice, and independence: students are encouraged to name their goals, request accommodations, and participate in their own IEP meetings. Filipino classrooms may emphasise respect, listening, and teacher guidance, so encouraging a student with a disability to speak up, disagree, or make a choice can feel like a shift in authority. Similarly, American behaviour systems often use explicit expectations, token systems, and data tracking, while Filipino teachers may rely on relational correction, moral guidance, and group harmony. Neither approach is inherently superior; the task is to translate. Research on culturally responsive classroom management and on culturally sustaining pedagogy argues that teachers should not be forced to choose one script, but should build a repertoire that is explicit about expectations, consistent in consequences, and relational in tone. Collaboration is the mechanism for that translation: co-teaching with general educators, consulting with speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists, and communicating with families require teachers to negotiate shared language and shared goals.

Despite this growing literature, three gaps remain. First, few studies focus on Filipino special educators specifically, as distinct from Filipino general educators or from internationally recruited teachers in general. Second, few studies trace adaptation over time, showing how support needs change from intensive scaffolding to independence. Third, few studies combine interviews, observations, and documents to show how what teachers say, what they do, and what they write align or diverge. This study addresses those gaps by using a multiple case design with five teachers in one district, by triangulating three data sources, and by analysing adaptation as a staged, mediated, and culturally integrated process. The synthesis predicts that

institutional support, gradual IEP familiarisation, collaboration, student voice, Filipino values, policy-culture bridging, and data-driven instruction will not appear as separate factors but as an interlocking system in which each theme enables the others.

A further strand concerns professional development and mentoring for special educators. Effective professional development is sustained, job-embedded, and focused on student work, rather than one-off workshops that present information without practice. Mentoring is most effective when mentors are trained, when meetings are scheduled and protected, and when mentors and mentees share a focus on IEPs, data, and classroom practice. Research on induction for novice special educators shows that mentoring reduces attrition, improves self-efficacy, and improves IEP quality, especially when mentors model practice and provide feedback on real artefacts. For internationally recruited teachers, mentoring must also address cultural brokering: explaining why a procedure matters, how to phrase a concern, and when to ask for help. Without such brokering, teachers may learn the form of a procedure without understanding its purpose, and may comply without confidence. The present study therefore examines mentoring not as generic emotional support but as specific, mediated teaching of American special education practice.

Finally, the literature on teacher identity and belonging shows that teachers who feel recognised for who they are, not only for what they do, are more likely to stay and to invest in a school. Belonging is built through everyday recognition: a principal who names a teacher's contribution, a colleague who asks about a family tradition, a parent who thanks a teacher in a language the teacher understands. For Filipino teachers, belonging also involves navigating homesickness, separation from extended family, and the emotional labour of caring for students while missing one's own children or parents. Research on migrant teachers highlights that emotional and social adjustment cannot be separated from professional adjustment, and that schools that attend to both retain teachers longer. This study therefore treats adaptation as holistic, encompassing procedural learning, cultural negotiation, and emotional belonging, and it examines how institutional support can address all three at once.

Methodology:

This study used a qualitative multiple case study design. A case study was appropriate because the aim was to understand adaptation as it unfolds in real classrooms, schools, and district systems, where context cannot be separated from experience. A multiple case design was chosen over a single case because comparison across five teachers in different schools, grade levels, and career stages makes it possible to distinguish patterns that are shared from those that are idiosyncratic. The design followed Yin’s (2018) logic of replication: each case was first analysed on its own, then compared with the others to test whether a pattern held, was qualified, or was absent. The study was interpretive and constructivist: it treated teachers’ accounts, observed practice, and documents as complementary constructions of reality, and it sought thick description rather than measurement. The researcher’s role was that of a fellow Filipino educator and researcher, which facilitated trust and cultural understanding but also required reflexivity, bracketing, and member checking to avoid assuming shared meaning.

Participants were five Filipino special education teachers employed in Albuquerque Public Schools, purposively selected because they met three criteria: Filipino nationality and Philippine teacher preparation, current employment as a special education teacher in APS, and willingness to share interviews, observations, and documents. Maximum variation was sought in age, years in Albuquerque, and teaching assignment to capture both newcomer and veteran perspectives. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, participants ranged in age from 38 to 67 years, with a mean age of 50.6 years. Years in Albuquerque ranged from 2 to 11 years, with a mean of 5.0 years. Total teaching experience, including the Philippines, ranged from 8 to 28 years. Two participants had been in Albuquerque for 11 and 8 years respectively and served

as veteran anchors; three had been in Albuquerque for two years and represented recent entry. Participants taught in elementary, middle, and high school settings, including resource, inclusive, and self-contained assignments, and worked with students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism, emotional-behavioural disorders, and other health impairments. Pseudonyms P1 to P5 are used throughout; schools, student names, and identifying details are withheld.

Three instruments were used. First, a semi-structured interview guide explored entry and orientation, IEP learning, collaboration, cultural differences, family communication, behaviour and classroom management, data use, professional development, and identity. The guide contained open-ended questions and probes, allowing participants to narrate episodes, name turning points, and reflect on what helped or hindered them. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted in English with occasional Tagalog or Taglish for culturally specific concepts, were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. Second, a non-participant observation protocol recorded classroom routines, instructional grouping, use of accommodations, behaviour supports, student participation, teacher language, and interactions with co-teachers and support staff. Each participant was observed at least twice in natural classroom settings. Third, a document review checklist examined IEPs (with student identifiers redacted), lesson plans, progress-monitoring graphs and data sheets, behaviour plans, parent communication logs, and professional development certificates and logs. Documents were used to corroborate or qualify interview claims about IEP quality, data use, and support received.

Data were collected in phases. After ethical approval and informed consent, the researcher conducted an initial interview, followed by observations and document review, then a follow-up interview to clarify, member-check emerging interpretations, and explore episodes observed in class. This sequencing allowed the researcher to ask concrete, grounded questions rather than abstract ones. All data were stored securely, with pseudonyms applied at transcription and with audio files and identifiers kept separately. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw, skip questions, or request that an episode not be quoted.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, combined with within-case and cross-case analysis. Familiarisation involved repeated reading of transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Initial coding was open and inductive, capturing both semantic codes (what was said) and latent codes (what was implied about identity, power, or culture). Codes were then grouped into candidate themes, reviewed against coded extracts and across cases, defined and named, and finally written as a narrative with evidence. A cross-case matrix recorded which themes appeared in which case, allowing the researcher to test the strength and variation of each theme. Triangulation compared interview, observation, and document evidence for each theme. Member checking returned summaries to participants for correction and elaboration. An audit trail of codes, memos, and theme revisions was maintained, and peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with qualitative research was used to challenge interpretations. Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility (prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking), transferability (thick description of context), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (reflexivity memos and bracketing of the researcher's own experience as a Filipino educator).

Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and care not to expose participants to professional risk. Because participants were employees of the same district, the study avoided reporting details that could identify a school or a supervisor, and it reported critical experiences without attributing blame to named individuals. The study's limitations include a small, single-district sample, reliance on self-report for some experiences, and the researcher's insider position. These are addressed by triangulation and by the study's aim of analytic rather than statistical generalisation: the goal is to develop a transferable model of adaptation, not to estimate prevalence in a population.

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Results and Discussion:

This section presents the study's findings in two parts. First, it describes the participants and the overall pattern of adaptation. Second, it presents seven themes, each with evidence, interpretation, and discussion in relation to theory and prior research. Tables and figures summarise cross-case patterns; the conceptual model in Figure 4 integrates the themes. Throughout, pseudonyms P1 to P5 are used, and quotations are lightly edited for readability without changing meaning.

Table 1. Participant profile (N = 5). Ages and years are as reported at data collection; assignments are generalised to protect confidentiality.

Participant	Age	Years in APS	Total teaching exp.	Assignment (general)	Entry profile
P1	67	11	28	Secondary, resource / inclusive	Veteran; mentor to newcomers
P2	57	8	20	Elementary, inclusive / resource	Experienced; stable team
P3	50	2	12	Elementary, self-contained	Newcomer; intensive scaffolding
P4	41	2	8	Middle, resource	Newcomer; rapid learner
P5	38	2	10	Elementary, inclusive	Newcomer; strong data focus

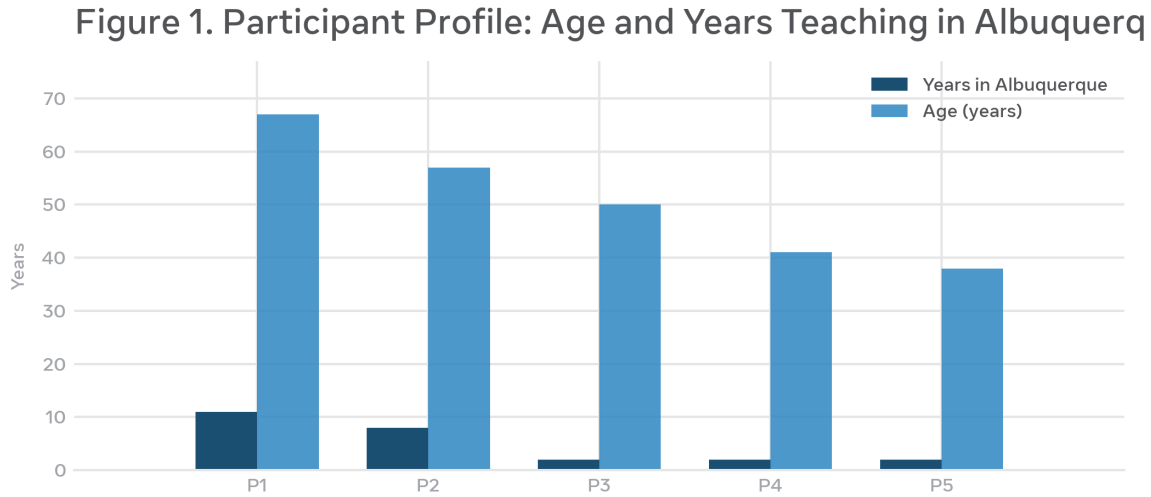


Figure 1. Participant profile. Two veteran teachers (P1, P2) anchor the sample; three teachers (P3–P5) are in their first two years in Albuquerque.

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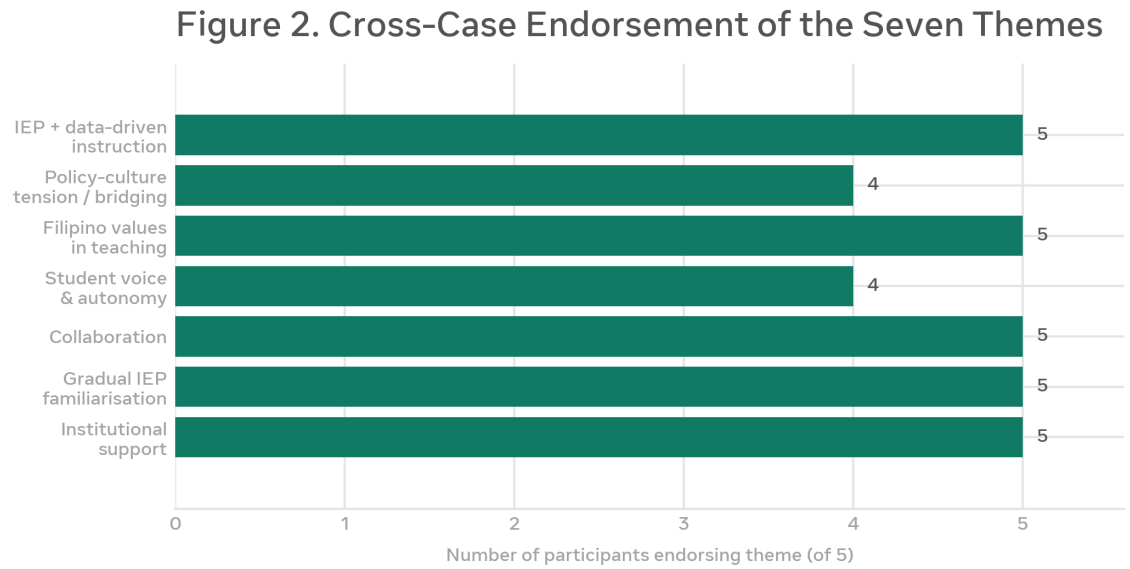


Figure 2. Cross-case endorsement. Five of seven themes were endorsed by all five participants; the remaining two were endorsed by four of five, indicating strong cross-case convergence.

4.1 Theme 1: Institutional Support as Scaffolding — Mentors, Coaches, Administrators, and Professional Development

All five participants described institutional support as the condition that made adaptation possible, not as an optional benefit. The most frequently named supports were a mentor or buddy teacher, an instructional coach, a supportive administrator, and district professional development on IEPs, Synergy, behaviour systems, and culturally responsive practice. P1, the most veteran participant, recalled that in her first year she was paired with a mentor who sat with her through her first IEP meeting, explained acronyms in plain language, and reviewed her first IEP draft line by line before it was finalised. She described that experience as the difference between feeling judged and feeling taught. P3, a newcomer, described a coach who modelled how to set up a data binder, how to take a probe, and how to graph progress, and who returned the following week to check whether the system was still working. P4 credited an administrator who made time for a brief weekly check-in, answered questions without making the teacher feel incompetent, and protected planning time during IEP season. P5 valued professional development that was hands-on rather than lecture-based, especially sessions where teachers practised writing a present level of performance and a measurable goal using a real, anonymised case.

Interpreted through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, these supports are scaffolding in the zone of proximal development. The mentor, coach, or administrator is the more knowledgeable other who makes an unfamiliar task doable by modelling, breaking it into steps, providing a template, and giving feedback. The scaffolding is then gradually withdrawn: the mentor stops co-writing IEPs and starts reviewing them, the coach stops modelling data collection and starts asking the teacher to explain the graph, the administrator stops checking weekly and starts trusting the teacher to flag problems. Participants described this fading as a sign of respect: they did not want to be helped forever, they wanted to be helped until they could help others. P1 and P2, who had been in Albuquerque for eight and eleven years, now serve as informal mentors themselves, which they described as both a responsibility and a source of pride. Their trajectory shows that scaffolding, when done well, reproduces itself: those who were scaffolded become scaffolders.

Discussion must note variation. Support was not uniform across schools. Two participants described schools where mentoring was formal, scheduled, and protected, while others described support that

depended on the goodwill of a single colleague and disappeared when that colleague was absent or reassigned. This variation matters because adaptation was faster and less anxious where support was systematic.

The finding aligns with research on special educator retention, which consistently identifies mentoring, administrative support, and manageable induction as predictors of staying, and with research on internationally educated teachers, which shows that tacit knowledge must be made explicit. A practical implication is that districts should not rely on informal kindness alone. They should formalise a first-year induction pathway for internationally recruited special educators that includes a trained mentor, a coach for IEP and data systems, scheduled check-ins, and protected time to practise documentation. The pathway should also include a second-year fading plan, so that support does not end abruptly but is gradually reduced as competence grows. When support is systematic, teachers learn faster, make fewer compliance errors, and are more likely to stay.

4.2 Theme 2: Gradual Familiarisation with IEPs — From Fear to Fluency

Every participant described the IEP as the steepest learning curve in their first months. They knew how to plan a lesson and how to care for a child, but they did not know how to write a present level that was specific, measurable, and linked to a goal, how to choose an accommodation that was legally defensible, or how to document services in Synergy so that the record matched what happened in class. P3 said she initially copied language from old IEPs because she was afraid of writing something wrong, and only later learned to write in her own words with evidence from assessments and observations. P4 described reading an IEP as like reading a legal contract in a second dialect: she understood the words, but not the weight they carried. P5 described the moment when she first led an IEP meeting as terrifying, because she had to explain data to parents, answer questions from a general educator, and keep the meeting on time, all while ensuring that the document was accurate.

Familiarisation was gradual and cumulative. It began with observation: watching a mentor or colleague run a meeting, seeing how goals were phrased, and noticing how parents were invited to speak. It continued with co-writing: drafting a section, receiving feedback, and revising. It then moved to independent writing with review, and finally to independent writing and leading meetings. Participants described three turning points. The first was understanding that an IEP is not a form to complete but a promise to a child and family, and that every goal must be traceable to data. The second was learning the language of measurable goals: condition, behaviour, criterion, and timeline, and how to avoid vague verbs such as understand or appreciate. The third was learning to use Synergy and data systems without fear, so that documentation became a routine rather than a crisis. By the end of the first year, most participants described IEP work as manageable, though still time-consuming, and by the second year they described it as a source of professional identity: they were not just teachers who taught, they were teachers who could defend a child's plan.

This theme extends the literature on special educator preparation by showing that IEP competence is not learned in a single workshop but through a sequence of mediated practice. It also shows that fear is a normal part of learning, not a sign of incompetence. When mentors normalise questions and treat early drafts as learning artefacts, teachers ask more questions and learn faster. When early mistakes are treated as compliance failures, teachers hide uncertainty and copy old language, which perpetuates errors.

The discussion therefore recommends that induction include a scaffolded IEP curriculum: first, observe and annotate exemplar IEPs; second, co-write a goal with a mentor; third, write a full IEP with feedback; fourth, lead a meeting with a mentor present; and fifth, lead independently with a review. Each step should include explicit teaching of legal language, data language, and family communication. Districts should also provide

a bank of annotated exemplars, a checklist for IEP quality, and time for peer review. Such a curriculum would reduce anxiety, improve IEP quality, and protect students' rights.

4.3 Theme 3: Collaboration and Community — Co-Teaching, Related Services, and Belonging

All five participants described collaboration as both a professional necessity and a source of belonging. In APS, special education is not done alone: special educators co-teach with general educators, consult with speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school psychologists, social workers, and behaviour specialists, and coordinate with paraprofessionals and families. Participants described learning to co-teach as learning a new choreography: who opens the lesson, who scaffolds, who takes data, who manages behaviour, and how to signal a change without interrupting learning. P2 described a co-teaching partnership that began with awkward turn-taking and grew into a seamless routine where both teachers knew each other's strengths and could finish each other's instructional moves. P1 described a paraprofessional team that became like family, where trust allowed her to delegate data collection and small-group instruction without fear that a child would be missed. P4 described a related-services team that taught her how to embed speech and occupational therapy goals into classroom routines, so that therapy was not an interruption but part of the day.

Collaboration also meant learning to ask for help and to offer help. In the Philippines, participants said, teachers often solve problems within their own classroom and may hesitate to ask a colleague for help for fear of burdening them. In APS, they learned that asking for help is expected and that offering help is a sign of collegiality. P3 described a turning point when she asked a general educator how to differentiate a science text and received not judgment but a shared planning session and a set of adapted materials. That experience taught her that collaboration is not a sign of weakness but a professional skill. P5 described a grade-level team that shared data, celebrated a student's progress, and problem-solved when a student was not progressing, which made her feel less alone with a difficult caseload. Participants also described informal community: lunchroom conversations, Filipino teacher gatherings, and faith communities that provided emotional support, practical advice, and a place to speak Tagalog and to be understood without explanation.

Discussion connects collaboration to both sociocultural theory and acculturation. Collaboration is a mediational context: colleagues are more knowledgeable others who share tools, language, and routines. It is also an acculturation context: through collaboration, teachers learn American norms of direct communication, shared decision-making, and distributed responsibility, while also teaching colleagues about Filipino relational values. The finding aligns with research on professional learning communities and on co-teaching, which shows that collaboration improves instructional quality when it is structured, scheduled, and focused on student data. The implication is that schools should protect collaborative time, define co-teaching roles explicitly, and train both general and special educators in co-planning. They should also nurture informal community for internationally recruited teachers, including affinity groups and buddy systems, because belonging is not a soft extra but a condition for retention. When teachers feel they belong, they stay, they ask for help earlier, and they contribute more fully to the school.

4.4 Theme 4: Student Voice and Autonomy — Learning to Let Students Speak, Choose, and Lead

Four of five participants described student voice and autonomy as a significant cultural and pedagogical shift. In American inclusive practice, students are encouraged to know their goals, to request accommodations, to make choices, and to participate in their own IEP meetings, especially as they approach transition age. In Philippine classrooms, participants said, respect for teachers and elders often means that students listen, wait to be called on, and defer to adult guidance. Learning to centre student voice therefore required teachers to rethink authority, not to abandon it, but to share it. P2 described a student who, for the first time, told his IEP team that he wanted to try a general education science class with support, and how she learned to advocate for his choice even though she worried he would struggle. P5 described using choice

boards, self-monitoring checklists, and student-led conferences to help students name what helps them learn. P1 described a high school student who learned to introduce herself in her IEP meeting, explain her disability in her own words, and ask for extended time, and how that moment changed the teacher's understanding of what inclusion means.

Participants described practical strategies for fostering autonomy. They taught students to use a sentence starter to request help, to check a visual schedule independently, to choose between two tasks, and to reflect on whether a strategy worked. They used age-appropriate language to explain IEP goals, so that a student could say, in plain words, what they were working on and why. They involved students in setting a small, achievable goal and in graphing their own progress, which made data visible and motivating. They also learned to wait: to pause after a question, to allow a student to struggle productively, and to resist the urge to answer for the student. This waiting was described as difficult for teachers who had been socialised to help quickly and to prevent failure, but as essential for building independence. Participants noted that autonomy is not the same as abandonment: students still need scaffolding, clear expectations, and adult support, but the goal is to fade that support as the student grows.

Discussion frames student voice as both a cultural and a legal practice. IDEA requires that students be invited to IEP meetings when transition is discussed, and that their preferences be considered, but the spirit of the law is broader: students with disabilities have a right to be heard, to make choices, and to develop self-determination. Research on self-determination shows that students who participate in their own planning have better post-school outcomes, higher motivation, and stronger self-advocacy. For Filipino teachers, the shift is from a teacher-centred script to a student-centred script, and it requires explicit modelling and practice. The study recommends that professional development include student voice as a core topic, with video examples, role-play of IEP meetings, and strategies for teaching self-advocacy in culturally respectful ways. Teachers should be supported to explain to families why student voice matters, especially when families expect deference, so that families and teachers can align on a shared goal: a student who can speak for themselves, with support, in school and beyond.

4.5 Theme 5: Filipino Values Carried into Teaching — Malasakit, Kapwa, Pakikisama, and Respect
All five participants described Filipino values as a resource they carried into American classrooms, not as a burden they left behind. The most frequently named values were malasakit, kapwa, pakikisama, respect, and family-centredness. Malasakit was described as caring that notices the whole child: whether a student ate breakfast, whether they were anxious about a test, whether they needed a quiet word before class. P1 said she kept a small snack drawer, a box of pencils, and a calm corner, not because the curriculum required it, but because malasakit required it. Kapwa was described as seeing the student as connected to the teacher, not as a case to be managed. P2 said she learned students' interests, siblings, and favourite songs, and used that knowledge to build trust and to make learning personal. Pakikisama was described as valuing harmony and cooperation, which helped teachers build relationships with colleagues, paraprofessionals, and families, and to resolve conflicts without public confrontation. Respect was described as honouring elders, parents, and colleagues, and as teaching students to greet, listen, and thank others.

Participants gave concrete examples of how these values enriched practice. A teacher who stayed after school to help a student practise reading was showing malasakit. A teacher who called a parent not only when there was a problem but also to share good news was showing kapwa and family-centredness. A teacher who mediated a disagreement between a general educator and a paraprofessional by listening to both sides and finding a compromise was showing pakikisama. A teacher who taught students to say please, thank you, and excuse me, and to stand when an elder entered the room, was teaching respect as part of social-emotional learning. Participants were clear that these values did not conflict with American practice when they were translated thoughtfully. Malasakit aligns with trauma-informed, caring pedagogy. Kapwa

aligns with relationship-based teaching. Pakikisama aligns with collaboration and restorative practice. Respect aligns with social-emotional learning and with family engagement. The challenge was not the values themselves, but how to express them in a system that values boundaries, documentation, and individual autonomy.

Discussion uses Berry's integration strategy to interpret this theme. Teachers did not assimilate by abandoning Filipino values, nor did they separate by insisting on Philippine practice. They integrated: they kept the values and found American expressions for them. This integration was described as a source of professional identity and pride. Participants said they wanted to be known as teachers with a Filipino heart, a phrase that appeared in several interviews and that captures the study's central metaphor: American curriculum with a Filipino heart. The finding aligns with research on culturally sustaining pedagogy, which argues that teachers should not be asked to leave their culture at the classroom door, and with research on teacher identity, which shows that teachers who can be themselves are more effective and more likely to stay. The implication is that schools should affirm Filipino values explicitly, invite teachers to share them, and recognise them as professional strengths. When schools do so, they not only retain Filipino teachers, they enrich the school's culture for all students, who learn that caring, respect, and community are part of what it means to be educated.

4.6 Theme 6: Tension and Bridging Between Policy and Culture — When Rules and Relationships Seem to Pull Apart

Four participants described moments when American policy and Filipino culture seemed to pull in opposite directions, and how they learned to bridge the tension. The most common tensions were around directness, discipline, family communication, and boundaries. American professional culture often values direct, explicit communication: saying what you mean, giving feedback plainly, and documenting concerns in writing. Filipino culture often values indirect, harmonious communication: hinting, saving face, and resolving issues privately. P4 described a meeting where she disagreed with a proposed placement but hesitated to say so directly, and later learned to phrase her concern as a question about data and student need, which was heard as professional rather than confrontational. P3 described learning to write a behaviour incident report in factual, non-judgmental language, rather than in moral language about a child's character, and how that shift protected both the child and the teacher. P2 described learning to set boundaries: to say no to an extra duty when her caseload was full, to leave work at a reasonable hour, and to document her time, without feeling that she was being unhelpful or disloyal.

Another tension was around discipline and care. Filipino teachers may rely on relational correction, moral guidance, and group expectations, while American systems may rely on explicit behaviour plans, token systems, and data tracking. Participants learned to use both: to be warm and relational, and to be explicit and consistent. P5 described a student who responded to a calm, private conversation and a clear visual reminder better than to a public correction, and how she learned to document that strategy in the behaviour plan so that all staff used it consistently. Family communication also required bridging.

American schools expect frequent, documented communication with families, including emails, logs, and meeting notes. Filipino teachers may prefer face-to-face, personal communication and may hesitate to put a concern in writing for fear of embarrassing a family. Participants learned to combine both: to call or meet in person for sensitive matters, and to follow up with a brief, respectful written summary that protected the family and the school. They also learned to explain American expectations to families, especially when families expected the teacher to decide for the child, and to explain Filipino expectations to colleagues, especially when colleagues misread respect as passivity.

Discussion interprets bridging as bicultural competence. Teachers learned to code-switch: to be direct in an IEP meeting and indirect in a private conversation, to be explicit in a behaviour plan and relational in the classroom, to be boundaried in workload and generous in care. This code-switching is not inauthentic; it is professional flexibility. It aligns with research on cultural brokering and on bicultural identity, which shows that people who can navigate two cultural systems have better adaptation and better outcomes for those they serve. The study recommends that professional development include explicit teaching of American professional communication norms, including how to disagree, how to document, and how to set boundaries, without framing Filipino norms as deficient. It also recommends that schools create spaces for teachers to discuss cultural tensions openly, with a mentor or affinity group, so that bridging is not done alone. When schools treat cultural difference as a problem to be solved by the newcomer alone, they miss an opportunity to learn. When they treat it as a shared challenge, they build a more inclusive school for everyone.

4.7 Theme 7: IEP and Data-Driven Instruction — From Paperwork to Precision

All five participants described learning to use data to drive instruction as a transformation in how they taught. Initially, data collection felt like paperwork: taking probes, filling in graphs, and writing progress notes that seemed disconnected from teaching. Over time, they learned to see data as a story about a child: whether a reading intervention was working, whether a behaviour plan was reducing incidents, whether an accommodation was helping a student access the curriculum. P5, who had a strong interest in data, described a student whose reading fluency graph was flat for three weeks, and how she used that flat line to argue for a change in grouping and materials, which then produced growth. P1 described using exit tickets, probes, and observation notes to decide whether to reteach a skill, to change the prompt, or to move on. P4 described learning to disaggregate data by skill, so that a low score in mathematics was not treated as a general failure but as a specific need in regrouping or in word problems. P3 described a behaviour data sheet that showed a pattern: incidents peaked before lunch, which led to a change in schedule and a snack, and a reduction in incidents.

Participants described a repertoire of data practices. They used curriculum-based measurement for reading and mathematics, graphed progress weekly or biweekly, and reviewed graphs in team meetings. They used formative assessments, such as exit tickets and checks for understanding, to adjust the next day's lesson. They used IEP goal data to write present levels that were specific and to set goals that were measurable. They used accommodation logs to track whether an accommodation was actually used and whether it helped. They also learned to involve students in data: to show a student a graph, to celebrate growth, and to set a next step together. This student-involved data practice linked Theme 7 to Theme 4, student voice, and made data motivating rather than punitive. Participants noted that data use required time, systems, and support: a data binder or digital system, a routine for taking probes, and a coach or colleague to help interpret a graph. When those systems were in place, data became a tool for advocacy: teachers could show a parent, an administrator, or a colleague that a student was progressing or that a change was needed, with evidence rather than opinion.

Discussion connects data-driven instruction to both legal compliance and instructional quality. IDEA requires progress monitoring, but the deeper purpose is to ensure that students actually learn. Research on data-based decision-making shows that teachers who use data systematically make more precise decisions and achieve better student outcomes, but that data use requires training, time, and a culture that treats data as information rather than judgment. For Filipino teachers, data literacy was part of professional identity: learning to read a graph was learning to speak the language of American special education. The study recommends that induction include a data curriculum that is hands-on, with real graphs, practice in interpreting flat, variable, and growing trends, and guidance on how to write a data-based present level. It also recommends that schools protect time for data review, provide simple, consistent data systems, and

celebrate data-informed changes. When data are used well, they do not replace caring; they make caring more precise. A teacher who knows, from data, that a child is growing is a teacher who can advocate with confidence, and a child who sees their own growth is a child who believes they can learn.

Across themes, a pattern of fading support is visible in concrete artefacts. Early IEP drafts in document review showed copied phrases, vague goals, and missing data links, with heavy mentor annotations in the margins. Later drafts showed specific present levels, measurable goals linked to probes, and clearer accommodation language, with fewer annotations and more teacher-initiated revisions. Early data binders were often incomplete or inconsistently graphed, while later binders showed weekly probes, dated graphs, and notes about instructional changes. Early observation notes recorded teachers waiting to be invited to speak in team meetings, while later notes recorded teachers initiating questions, sharing data, and proposing changes. These artefacts do not prove causation, but they corroborate interview accounts of gradual competence and they show that adaptation leaves a paper trail. They also show why triangulation matters: without documents, the study would have only teachers' perceptions; with documents, it can show how perceptions correspond to observable changes in practice. Future research could quantify this trajectory by scoring IEP quality and data completeness at multiple time points, but even qualitative traces are persuasive when they converge across cases.

Another cross-cutting pattern is the role of language. Teachers were fluent in English, yet they had to learn a professional dialect: acronyms such as IEP, FAPE, LRE, BIP, FBA, and PLAAFP; verbs such as accommodate, modify, scaffold, and progress-monitor; and phrases such as least restrictive environment and measurable annual goal that carry legal meaning. Learning this dialect was not merely vocabulary learning; it was learning to think in a new category system. A student was no longer described as slow or shy but as a learner with a specific present level, a specific goal, and a specific set of supports. A lesson was no longer described as good or difficult but as aligned or not aligned to a goal, with evidence from data. Participants described moments when a word clicked: when they understood that accommodation changes access without changing expectations, while modification changes expectations; when they understood that progress monitoring is not grading but a decision tool; when they understood that least restrictive environment is a presumption, not a place. These moments of linguistic clarity were also moments of professional clarity, and they were often facilitated by a mentor who translated jargon into plain language and then back into professional language, so that teachers could use the terms accurately and confidently.

Emotional dimensions also cut across themes. Participants described pride, gratitude, homesickness, anxiety, and relief, often in the same interview. Pride came from seeing a student grow, from leading a successful IEP meeting, and from being recognised as a competent colleague. Gratitude came from mentors and administrators who helped without condescension. Homesickness came from missing family, food, fiestas, and the familiar rhythms of Philippine life, especially during holidays. Anxiety came from fear of making a compliance error, of misreading a parent, or of being judged as less competent because of accent or cultural difference. Relief came when a teacher realised that asking for help was normal, that colleagues also struggled with paperwork, and that American teachers also made mistakes. These emotions were not background noise; they shaped learning. Anxiety narrowed attention and made teachers avoid meetings, while pride and belonging broadened attention and made teachers seek challenges. Schools that acknowledged emotions, through check-ins, affinity groups, and a culture that normalises help-seeking, helped teachers regulate anxiety and sustain motivation. This finding aligns with research on teacher well-being and on migrant adjustment, which shows that emotional support is not separate from professional support but is part of it. Induction programmes should therefore include explicit attention to well-being, peer connection, and recognition, alongside technical training on IEPs and data.

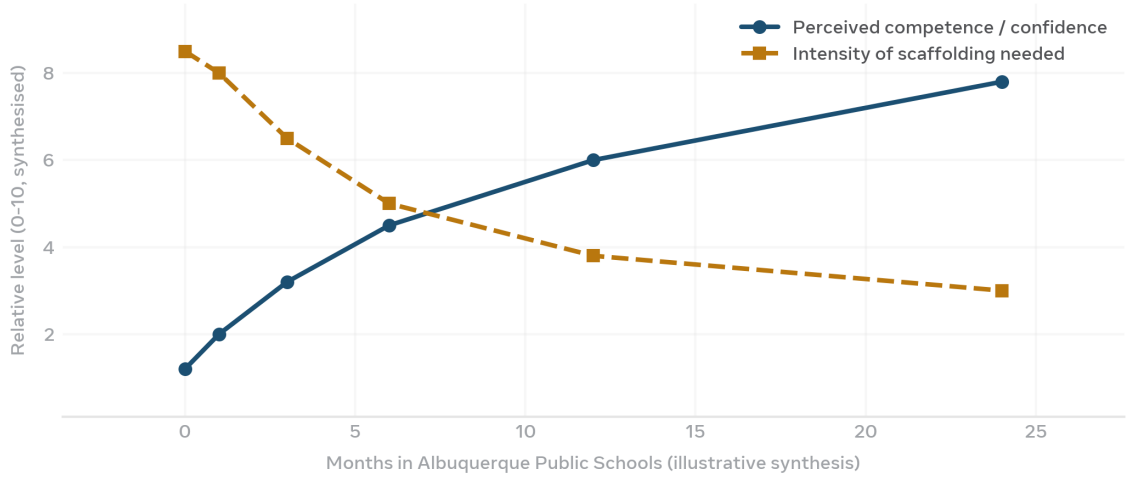
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Finally, the results invite a reconsideration of what counts as expertise in special education. In a narrow view, expertise is procedural: writing a compliant IEP, graphing data accurately, and following a behaviour plan. In the broader view emerging from this study, expertise also includes relational and cultural competence: noticing a child's distress, building trust with a family, mediating a conflict among colleagues, and adapting a lesson so that a student feels seen and capable. Filipino teachers brought relational expertise from the Philippines and learned procedural expertise in Albuquerque, and their most effective practice combined both. A teacher who can write a perfect IEP but cannot connect with a child will struggle to implement it; a teacher who can connect but cannot write a defensible IEP will struggle to protect the child's rights. The teachers in this study learned to do both, and they described their best moments as moments when procedure and relationship reinforced each other: when a data graph showed growth and a child smiled, when an IEP meeting ended with a parent thanking the team, when a colleague said that a Filipino teacher's caring had changed the tone of a classroom. That integration is the study's most important finding, and it is the reason the model in Figure 4 places Filipino values and American procedures not in opposition but in productive interaction.

4.8 Synthesis: An Integrated Model of Adaptation

Taken together, the seven themes form a system, not a list. Institutional support scaffolds IEP familiarisation; IEP familiarisation makes data-driven instruction possible; data-driven instruction makes collaboration more focused; collaboration makes student voice more likely; student voice is enriched by Filipino values; Filipino values are expressed through bridging between policy and culture; and bridging, in turn, makes institutional support more effective because teachers can name what they need. Figure 3 illustrates the trajectory: confidence rises as scaffolding is gradually withdrawn, but scaffolding never disappears entirely; it changes form, from intensive coaching to peer consultation. Figure 4 presents the conceptual model that integrates the themes. The model begins with the Philippine starting point, meets American policy demands, is mediated by mentors, coaches, and professional development, proceeds through adaptation processes of observing, practising, asking for help, and documenting adjustments, and results in integrated practice: American curriculum with a Filipino heart. This model is consistent with Vygotsky's claim that learning is mediated and with Berry's claim that integration is the most adaptive acculturation strategy. It also offers a practical map for districts: invest in mediators, sequence learning, and affirm identity.

Figure 3. From Scaffolded Entry to Confident Practice: Adaptatior



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Figure 3. Adaptation trajectory (illustrative synthesis from cross-case accounts). Confidence rises as the intensity of scaffolding is gradually faded, not withdrawn abruptly.

Figure 4. Cultural and Policy Adaptation Model: How Filipino Special Educators Adapt in Albuquerque

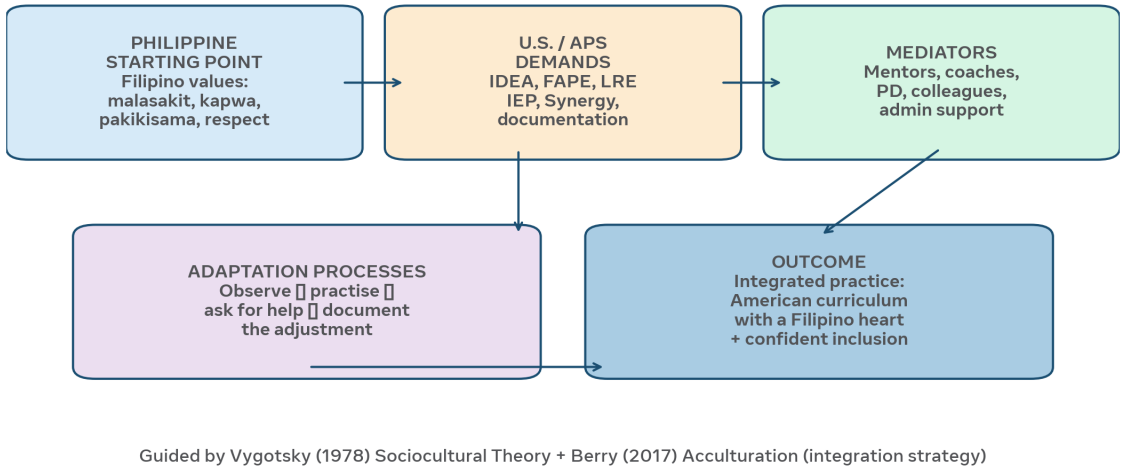


Figure 4. Cultural and Policy Adaptation Model. The model shows how Filipino values, American policy demands, mediators, adaptation processes, and integrated practice interact.

Table 2. Cross-case synthesis: themes, mediators, and implications.

Theme	Cross-case pattern	Primary mediator	Implication for practice
1. Institutional support	All 5; scaffolding is essential	Mentor, coach, admin	Formalise induction; fade support gradually
2. IEP familiarisation	All 5; staged learning	Mentor, exemplars, PD	Scaffolded IEP curriculum
3. Collaboration	All 5; belonging + skill	Co-teachers, teams	Protect collaborative time
4. Student voice	4 of 5; shift in authority	Coach, student artefacts	Teach self-advocacy explicitly
5. Filipino values	All 5; asset, not barrier	Affinity, mentors	Affirm values as strengths
6. Policy-culture bridging	4 of 5; bicultural skill	Mentor, dialogue	Teach code-switching; discuss tensions
7. Data-driven instruction	All 5; from paperwork to precision	Coach, data systems	Hands-on data curriculum; protected time

Table 3. Triangulation: how three sources were used to strengthen trustworthiness.

Source	What it showed	How it was used
Interviews	Lived experience, turning points, values	Primary source for themes
Observations	Actual classroom practice, collaboration, student voice	Corroborated or qualified interview claims

Documents	IEP quality, data graphs, PD logs	Verified IEP and data claims; traced support

Limitations of the results should be noted. The sample is small and from one district, so the model should be tested in other districts and with larger samples. The trajectory in Figure 3 is an illustrative synthesis, not a measured growth curve, and should not be read as a precise timeline for every teacher. The study relies in part on self-report, though triangulation mitigates that risk. Despite these limits, the convergence across cases, sources, and methods strengthens confidence that the seven themes capture a real pattern of adaptation, and that the model can guide induction design and future research.

Conclusion:

This study examined how five Filipino special education teachers adapted culturally and professionally in Albuquerque Public Schools, and it found that adaptation is a mediated, staged, and integrative process, not a single adjustment. Teachers did not simply learn a new curriculum or a new set of forms; they learned a new legal language, a new documentation system, a new set of cultural scripts about autonomy and collaboration, and a new way of being a teacher in a different country. They did so with the help of mentors, coaches, administrators, and colleagues who scaffolded their learning, with professional development that was hands-on and practical, and with Filipino values that gave them a relational foundation for caring, respectful, and family-centred practice. The seven themes, institutional support, gradual IEP familiarisation, collaboration, student voice, Filipino values, policy-culture bridging, and data-driven instruction, together describe how adaptation works when it works well.

The study's main contribution is the Cultural and Policy Adaptation Model, which shows that successful adaptation is integration: retaining Filipino values while adopting American procedural competence, and expressing care through data, documentation, and student voice. The model challenges deficit views of internationally recruited teachers, which treat unfamiliarity as incompetence, and it challenges assimilationist views, which treat cultural identity as a barrier. Instead, it shows that Filipino values are professional assets that enrich inclusive classrooms, and that schools that affirm those values while teaching American procedures retain teachers better and serve students better. The study also contributes a practical induction map: formalise mentoring, sequence IEP learning, protect collaboration time, teach student voice and data literacy explicitly, and create spaces to discuss cultural tensions openly.

For practice, the study recommends that Albuquerque Public Schools and similar districts adopt a structured two-year induction pathway for internationally recruited special educators, with a trained mentor, an IEP and data coach, scheduled check-ins, a bank of annotated IEP exemplars, and a fading plan that gradually reduces scaffolding as competence grows. Districts should also provide professional development on culturally responsive communication, behaviour systems, and family engagement, and should recognise Filipino teachers as mentors and cultural brokers once they are established. For teachers, the study offers reassurance: feeling overwhelmed in the first months is normal, asking for help is professional, and keeping one's cultural identity is not a weakness but a strength. For researchers, the study suggests future work with larger samples, longitudinal designs that follow teachers from entry through year three, and studies that link induction practices to student progress and to teacher retention.

In closing, the teachers in this study described themselves as teaching American curriculum with a Filipino heart. That phrase captures the study's central finding: adaptation is not about becoming someone else, but about becoming more fully oneself in a new place, with new tools, new colleagues, and new students to serve. When schools provide scaffolding, honour culture, and teach procedures with patience, Filipino special educators do not merely survive in Albuquerque; they thrive, they lead, and they help students with

disabilities learn, speak, choose, and grow. That is the promise of inclusive education, and it is a promise that culturally responsive induction can help keep.

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