



Go or Not Go: Choices of Special Education Teachers

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Abstract:

Special educators play a crucial part in addressing the various needs of learners with disabilities. However, the occurrence of special education teachers' attrition, particularly in the Philippines, posed a challenge or threat in the country's sustainable workforce. This research existed to understand the factors that led to the choice of the special education teachers whether to go or stay in their home country. This descriptive phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of Filipino special education teachers who went abroad and those who stayed in the Philippines to teach in the same field. A proposed policy brief was recommended by the researcher based from the findings of the study. Using thematic analysis, the researcher explored the factors that led to the special education teachers' choice and their importance. The main themes that emerged for the entire study were *I Decided to Go* and *I Decided to Stay*. The subthemes that occurred for special education teachers' abroad were as follows: 1. Cultural Differences 2. Student Success 3. Adaptability 4. Better Compensation and Support 5. Accessibility of Services 6. Professional Growth. Meanwhile, the subthemes that arose for special education teachers who remained in the Philippines were as follows: 1. Passion for Special Education. 2. Building Good Relationships 3. Career Fulfillment 4. Limited Resources 5. Cultural Familiarity 6. Emotional Exhaustion. This phenomenological study concluded that the choice between teaching special education abroad and staying was profoundly personal and professional and moreover would depend on the educator's own preference and circumstances.

Keywords: Special Education, Career Choices, Job Satisfaction, Attrition, Longevity, Phenomenological, Thematic Analysis

Introduction:

Teacher attrition is a global issue with profound impacts on education systems, leading to a shortage of high-quality instructors and a decline in specialized educators. This phenomenon, defined as the voluntary departure of teachers from the profession, poses a significant challenge to educational reform, especially in developing nations like the United States. Wushishi et al. (2014) found that school districts in the U.S. struggle to recruit, hire, and retain qualified teachers, with special education students from low-income backgrounds being particularly affected. Otto & Arnold (2005) identified that teachers with five or fewer years of experience have the highest attrition rates. The U.S. faces a critical shortage of special education teachers, a situation exacerbated over the past decade. Leko & Smith (2010) and Plash & Piotrowski (2005) highlight the high attrition rate among novice special educators, leading to a significant number of unfilled positions and the hiring of uncertified individuals to fill these roles.

The problem is particularly acute in states like Arizona and Florida, where laws permit university students and military veterans without educational degrees to teach. These supply teachers often lack the necessary skills to meet the evolving needs of special education students. The American Association for Employment in Education (2022) notes that nine out of thirteen identified areas of teacher shortages are in special education. High turnover rates harm both students and school districts, necessitating a focus on teacher retention strategies (Billingsley, 2002a). Factors influencing special education teacher attrition include training programs and support during the initial years of teaching (Griffin et al., 2007). Billingsley (1993) categorized these factors into external, employment-related, and personal groups, with subsequent research indicating that age, but not gender or race, significantly impacts attrition rates (Boe et al., 1997).

In the Philippines, special education teachers often leave for better opportunities abroad or switch careers. Brazas (2023) reported that Filipino teachers prefer the USA and Arab countries for career advancement. This trend is driven by the demand for educators in these regions, as well as the challenges faced by special educators, such as inadequate support, excessive administrative tasks, limited resources, and large class sizes (Vitek, 2021). Ingersoll and Smith (2003) noted that employee turnover negatively impacts workplace dynamics and student achievement, emphasizing the importance of teacher retention for effective education.

Attrition in special education threatens the academic progress of students with disabilities, who rely on tailored instructional approaches. Unaddressed, this issue leads to general educators, often lacking special education expertise, teaching these students. Effective retention programs are crucial to breaking this cycle and ensuring educational quality. The research aims to explore the factors influencing special education teacher attrition and job longevity in Binangonan Elementary School and selected schools in Rizal province, Philippines. This study seeks to



provide evidence-based recommendations for teacher retention programs, thereby addressing the gap in research on special education teachers in the Philippines. By understanding the choices leading to attrition, policymakers can implement strategies to retain high-quality special educators, ultimately improving the education system.

Literature Review:

Cultural differences significantly impact interactions, communication, principles, and traditions. These variations influence how individuals perceive and engage with the world around them. Understanding cultural diversity is crucial for effective interaction, cooperation, and relationship-building in both personal and professional contexts. Cultural subtleties such as timeliness, body language, communication methods, and societal standards vary widely across cultures, affecting how people connect and interpret each other's behaviors. Barton (2020) emphasized that the environment within schools plays a crucial role in influencing teachers' performance, highlighting the importance of creating a nurturing atmosphere for educators to enhance student achievement. Teachers who feel acknowledged, appreciated, and motivated are more likely to remain committed to their profession, ultimately benefiting student performance.

Saffold (2007) noted that teachers' cultural differences affect their feelings, attitudes, and teaching styles. Teachers and cultural leaders bring various beliefs and attitudes to their work, influencing how they perceive their role and interact with students from different cultures. Understanding these cultural differences is essential for creating supportive and inclusive learning environments that empower students to succeed. Alrubail (2016) highlighted the importance of teachers being aware of cultural differences to demonstrate more responsive and considerate teaching behaviors, thereby supporting the educational development of students from diverse backgrounds and promoting equality in education.

Monlinsky (2016) stressed that cultural differences are not solely based on nationality but also on personal experiences, principles, and values. Recognizing this complexity enriches human relations across different cultural environments. A quick guide to cultural differences in the classroom (2022) suggests that culturally responsive educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment, appreciating and valuing cultural differences to enhance the educational experience for all students, including those with special needs.

Ybarra et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of special education in supporting struggling students by providing tailored instructional approaches, supportive learning environments, and necessary adaptations. Inclusion strategies, such as systematic instruction and strategy-based teaching, help meet each learner's needs and achieve success. Wilson & Gonyea highlighted the significance of parent-teacher collaboration, recognizing parents as experts in their children's lives. This collaboration fosters a sense of cooperation, teamwork, and shared responsibility for students' achievements.

Graham (2022) advocated for individualized education programs (IEPs) tailored to each student's strengths, weaknesses, and interests. These programs provide the necessary supports to help students reach college and career opportunities, ensuring success for all. Effective strategies include evidence-based inclusion practices, collegial collaboration, and focusing on individual student strengths in the least restrictive environment. The Foster Care & Student Success article emphasized the importance of tailored support, cooperation, and necessary resources to improve the success and well-being of children with special needs.

Granziera (2019) highlighted the need for adaptability among special education teachers to address the diverse needs of learners. This adaptability includes cognitive, social, and emotional aspects, enabling teachers to modify their teaching approaches to meet challenges. Flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to adapt methodologies are vital for creating an inclusive learning environment that supports individual growth. Adaptability, creativity, and empathy are essential qualities for customizing teaching methods according to each student's requirements and goals.

Enhanced pay and support for special education teachers are crucial for addressing the challenges they face and recognizing the importance of their work. Adequate financial backing can help improve compensation, alleviate burnout, and retain professionals in the field. Performance-based salary structures can acknowledge educators' achievements and foster equity. According to Burkhart (2018), job satisfaction among special educators is influenced by working conditions, administrative support, compensation, and job content.

Yavuz (2018) found that teachers reported higher job satisfaction when their work environment was supportive, they received colleague support, appreciation from supervisors, and higher compensation. Cancio et al. (2018) noted that administrative support is crucial for job satisfaction and commitment among special education teachers. Anju and Sona (2020) emphasized the positive impact of performance-based incentives on workforce morale. Increasing salaries and improving working conditions are essential for retaining highly qualified educators and enhancing their sense of self-worth and public perception.



Continuous professional development is essential for special education teachers to adapt to the evolving educational landscape and support student success. Professional growth involves understanding data analysis, progress tracking, and technology use to enhance student outcomes. It also includes behavior management, customized learning, and collaboration to address the needs of students with special needs. McGinn & Kamman (n.d.) stressed the importance of funding opportunities for continuous learning, even amidst obstacles and time constraints.

Jennifer (2022) highlighted the benefits of professional development in enhancing educators' ability to support diverse learners. This growth includes developing strategies for working with families, fostering student independence, and improving IEP implementation. Cummings (2022) emphasized that ongoing professional development helps educators stay current with best practices, network with peers, and create inclusive learning environments. Talukder and Saif (2022) identified factors that motivate individuals at work, including incentives, job type, work environment, and recognition.

Zoloth (2024) suggested that maintaining passion for teaching involves connecting with motivations, recalling favorite mentors, celebrating small victories, and fostering a community of educators. Passionate teachers inspire students, shape lives, and drive positive change in education. Cengage (2024) described passionate teachers as role models who cultivate a love for learning and impact students' lives beyond the classroom. Munene (2003) emphasized that the ability to inspire curiosity and create meaningful learning experiences stems from a teacher's passion for their subject and desire to transform students' lives.

Building positive relationships in special education is crucial for fostering a supportive learning environment and promoting student success. Strong relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and stakeholders enhance academic achievement, mental well-being, and engagement in learning. Acardo et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of collaboration and communication between parents and educators in supporting students with diverse learning needs.

Career fulfillment for special education teachers is influenced by school policies, management, interpersonal interactions, career advancement opportunities, working conditions, and recognition. Kadtong et al. (2023) found that teachers who are satisfied with these aspects are more likely to maintain high performance levels. Herrity (2023) emphasized factors such as supervisor guidance, coworker relationships, training opportunities, and employee benefits in enhancing employee performance. Viel Ruma et al. (2020) and Vittek (2021) noted that job satisfaction among special education teachers is linked to their likelihood of remaining in their positions.

Limited resources pose significant challenges for special education teachers, impacting the quality of education and inclusive systems. Charran and Seetahal (2018) identified inadequate training, insufficient resources, and lack of government support as major issues in Trinidad and Tobago. Similar challenges are faced by educators in The Bahamas and the Philippines, affecting their ability to provide quality education to students with special needs. Continuous professional development and access to resources are essential for improving the quality of special education.

Methodology:

This research adopted a qualitative approach, employing a descriptive phenomenological design to investigate the experiences of special education instructors. Phenomenology, as described by Creswell (2022), was ideal for exploring human experiences through the personal accounts of participants. The objective was to elucidate the factors contributing to job attrition and longevity among special education teachers by capturing their lived experiences in detail. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring themes and patterns that emerged from the data.

The study focused on ten special education teachers, using purposive sampling to ensure participants could provide in-depth insights. Five participants were currently employed at Binangonan Elementary School (BES) in the Philippines, while the other five were teachers who had pursued their careers abroad. All participants had at least a bachelor's degree and experience teaching special education classes. This selection method ensured that the data gathered was rich and meaningful, reflecting diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, both in-person and virtually, depending on participant availability and location. The interviews were conducted in private, comfortable settings to encourage open and honest sharing of experiences. In-person interviews were recorded with participants' consent, while virtual interviews utilized platforms like Zoom, which offered video, audio, chat, and recording functionalities. Prior to the interviews, participants received informed consent forms and instructions, ensuring their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data.

The primary setting for this research was Binangonan Elementary School (BES), a central institution in Binangonan, Rizal, Philippines. The school catered to both regular and special education students and was situated at the border



of Brgy. Batingan and Layunan. The physical, social, and cultural contexts of this setting were considered, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

The main instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. This guide consisted of three parts: central questions focusing on the essence of the phenomenon, developmental questions exploring participants' experiences in detail, and concluding questions to wrap up the interview and address any remaining issues. The interview guide was aligned with the study's purpose and research questions, ensuring consistency and relevance.

Before data gathering, the researcher submitted title proposals to the Dean of Graduate Studies for approval, developed the research design, identified participants and setting, and created the interview guide. Following revisions and approval from the research advisor, the study underwent an Institutional Review Board (IRB) review. Upon receiving approval, the data collection commenced.

During data gathering, a transmittal letter was sent to the Dean and Division Office of Rizal, followed by informed consent forms to participants. Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, lasting no more than one hour each. In-person interviews were recorded, while virtual interviews ensured data security and privacy. Participants had the option to withdraw at any time, and all collected data was treated confidentially.

Post data collection, collected data was stored securely, adhering to the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Transcriptions were analyzed thematically to identify and report patterns within the data. The researcher ensured accuracy and consistency, with feedback from the research advisor enhancing the analysis. Data was disposed of securely once no longer needed.

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process involved open coding to categorize and label themes, bracketing to set aside researcher biases, and descriptive coding to reflect participants' statements accurately. The analysis proceeded through five steps: verbatim transcription of interviews to ensure thorough understanding and familiarization, descriptive coding of transcripts to identify patterns and themes, comparing new findings with existing codes to ensure data accuracy, grouping descriptive codes into coherent themes representing the phenomenon, and sharing findings with participants for feedback and validation from the research advisor.

The study established trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured by selecting knowledgeable participants and maintaining long-term engagement. Dependability involved detailed documentation of the research process, with peer debriefing enhancing the study's robustness. Confirmability focused on data-driven findings, avoiding researcher bias. Transferability was supported by rich, descriptive data and detailed participant information.

The study adhered to ethical norms, ensuring participants' rights and interests were respected. Beneficence, respect, and justice guided the research process, ensuring informed consent, minimizing risks, and maintaining confidentiality. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. By adhering to these methodological principles, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing special education teachers' job attrition and longevity, contributing valuable insights to the field of education.

Findings and Discussion:

Main Theme 1: I decided to Go

The following themes were based from the responses of the five special education teachers who went abroad. These subthemes are the factors why the participants decided to go to the United States of America to teach. The researcher narrowed down some subthemes into subtopics to further elaborate the subthemes that emerged from the respondents. The participants shared that their journey started as they underwent on an exchange cultural visa program to fill the gaps of teacher shortage in the United States. As per Bartlett (2013), The Exchange Visitor Program, under U.S. law, fosters good and mutual understanding between Americans and people from different nations through educational and cultural exchanges. These programs are very helpful in allowing individuals to live with them for some time and understand the American culture which leads into long term relationships that may be important forever according to the way other people could relate with them or vice versa.

The first research question was basically centered on each participant's basic profiles and experiences as they were special education teachers who first started their career in the Philippines, and later on decided to pursue their career abroad. When asked about the challenges and significant rewards they obtained throughout in their journey as Special Education teachers in the United States, each participant shared some notable commonalities, as well as differences. The respondents couldn't help but to share their lived experiences with comparisons as they used to be teachers in the Philippines and now in the United States. The subthemes are as follows:



Subtheme 1: Cultural Differences. All of the respondents mentioned about the different culture that they have encountered while staying in their respective school district and state. According to Holiday (1999), In this meaning of the word "culture," each person is a unique combination of membership in not only ethnic or national cultures, but also almost an infinite number of what were called small cultures: family, age, professional, political and social associations, etc. The participants highly mentioned the vast cultural differences in which they could elicit various responses. Since all respondents have more than five years of teaching experience as sped teachers; within those years of experiences, they have notably enumerated the differences and tried to live with them. Below are the sub-topics that show the categories in terms of the sub-theme under Cultural differences:

- **Cultural Differences in terms of Adaptability.** They highly mentioned the tremendous culture shock especially in their first year of experience. Since all of the respondents have been working in the United States for more than a year now, there were emotional reactions when talking about the cultural challenges including the feeling of uneasiness and the sense of not comprehending what or how to do things at first. Each participant shared their own way of coping to adapt in the existing culture and with the help of other fellow Filipinos and the Filipino community around them, some of them were able to thrive and to fight for their everyday struggle.

"...I guess teaching students with different cultures and backgrounds is a challenge because you have to be mindful and respect their culture. It is also a challenge that you are considered as a second-class citizen and you have to prove that you are capable of teaching the students..." (Trish)

"...I believe it is probably the hardest thing I would have to deal with. As someone who came from an Asian country, it's really not easy at first to get a grip of the culture that is not in my norm..." (Selle)

- **Cultural Differences in terms of Collaboration.** It is quite a challenge when dealing with foreign parents and the behavior they exhibited towards the teachers. Most participants were able to spot differences in collaborating with the students' parents or guardians when they taught special education in the Philippines. As described, some foreign parents of children with special needs in the United States are more advocate in terms of inclusivity and acceptance, while some do not. One of the respondents, Gina, emphasized it and described it is as one of her most daunting challenges when she started her teaching career in the USA.

"...In the United States of America, I have noted that professionals involved in the collaborative teams for children with special needs cannot achieve perfect situations. The US has a work culture, favorable compensation for teachers, and a collaborative environment..." (Gina)

"...Some parents ask questions about their child's progress. Some parents don't compromise and it affects the totality of the student's progress..." (Anita)

- **Cultural Differences in terms of Student Behavior.** Another subtopic that emerged as the participants' commonalities in the theme of Cultural Differences would be the behaviors of children and how they managed them. There was a sense of culture shock among the respondents' experiences from the beginning and even expressed the same amount of tension the moment they were being interviewed.

"...In both the Philippines and the United States, one of the most significant challenges I encountered as a special education teacher was navigating and managing the behaviors of children with autism. The diverse range of behaviors presented a complex puzzle that required a tailored and patient approach. Understanding and addressing these behaviors demanded continuous learning and adaptation to the unique needs of each child..." (Minnie)

"...Before going here in the United States, I had to study about their culture and take note of the students' behaviors and the policies that exist here..." (Selle)

Subtheme 2: Student Success. The participants shared how they witness the changes they could bring to the lives of the children with special needs. This experience gives them motivation and promotes job longevity in their teaching field. This was supported by a study conducted by Swarnalatha and Prasanna (2018), which demonstrated that job satisfaction has a crucial role in determining an employee's commitment and longevity in a specific sector of expertise. Stated below are the sub-topics that show the categories in terms of the sub-theme under Student Success:

- **Student Success through Academic and Social Achievement.** This subtopic was conveyed because all participants stated that their teaching experience in the United States was deemed memorable and purposeful. The reward that they got from teaching abroad was anchored on their student's progress and positive outcomes.

"...On the other hand, the rewards are immense. Witnessing the progress and growth of students, both academically and socially, brings me immense joy and fulfillment. Building strong relationships with students, celebrating their victories no matter how small, and seeing them gain confidence in their abilities are truly the most rewarding aspects of being a special education teacher..." (Anita)



"...Observing the positive changes in the behaviors of children with autism, both in the Philippines and the US, brought immense joy and fulfillment. The implementation of targeted interventions, consistent support, and a nurturing environment led to the fading of challenging behaviors, replaced by more positive and adaptive responses. These moments of progress, no matter how small, served as powerful reminders of the meaningful impact educators can have on the lives of children with special needs..." (Minnie)

- **Student Success through Collaboration.** According to the respondents, student success is achieved through effective communication, collaboration, dedication, and contributions among the professionals which is called the multidisciplinary team. Therefore, the success of these students with special needs brought them joy and fulfillment in their workplace. Teachers have powerful and long-lasting influence over their students. They are a power controlled for what the students learn, how they learn, how much they learn, and how they relate to one another and the world around them. This appeared in the book, *Qualities of Effective Teachers*.

"...with proper communication between the parent and me, we can achieve the best outcomes for the child..." (Gina)

"...exposure to the inclusive and supportive educational environment in the US emphasized the importance of collaboration and teamwork. ..." (Minnie)

- **Student Success through Effective Behavior Strategies.** Given how much influence the degree of the teacher's influence has on effective teaching strategies, an important question arises to determine what teachers should do to generate positive results in students' lives – school achievement, positive attitudes toward school, interest in learning, and other desirable outcomes. Such knowledge should be guided by what experts and stakeholders believe teachers should do and focus on what educational research has revealed to be essential in the preparation and practice of effective teachers. (Stronge, J. H, 2018).

"...The most rewarding part, though, was the remarkable change in children with autism resulting from effective behavior management strategies...There is also a behavior curriculum that is implemented as well, along with staff development on this approach..." (Minnie)

There was a feeling of job satisfaction in their teaching career where they built relationships, engagement, and made a holistic change in the life of a child with special needs. Consistent with previous scholarly literature, the results of this study also suggest that employee engagement necessitates a certain degree of personal or professional accomplishment, a sense of individual competence, and the capacity to effectively manage the daily challenges encountered in the employee's work environment (Belias, 2018).

Subtheme 3: Adaptability. This theme became the most prevalent as it dealt with their professional growth and resiliency while teaching in a foreign country. The respondents who taught in different states with diverse cultures brought with them their own sense of resourcefulness and being abundant at the same time. They became team members, not just team leaders. As there were team decisions and they had to consider each faculty member's ideas and opinions. All of them learned how to tailor their teaching methods to the unique needs of each students while adapting to their cultures. Therefore, fostering their flexibility while enhancing their teaching skills.

"...: Teaching in the US taught me the importance of adaptability and openness to change...." (Gina)

"...It fueled my resiliency even more. It also helped me to be adaptable in every situation and to be open to changes..." (Selle)

Subtheme 4: Better Compensation and Support. It is feasible that this theme is related to Talukder and Saif 2014 when the examined parameters of some factors quantified in the workplace such as rewards, job characteristics, salary, work environment, appreciation, training and growth, job security, performance appraisal promotion and leadership. According to Nifadkar and Dongre as cited in the study of Unnamalai (2014), they pointed that to the lack of teacher job satisfaction that continues to be unsolved owing to insufficient salary. It is imperative that this take place in order to not only better the teachers' reputation in the public eye but also to boost their sense of self-worth. The researcher narrowed down the sub-topics that show the detailed elaboration under Better Compensation and Support:

- **Competitive Pay.** When asked about the similarities and differences of their teaching experiences in the Philippines and in a broad, all of them reservedly responded that the salary that they were getting now was incomparable to the salary they used to receive when they were still special education teachers in the Philippines. One of the respondents stated that one major reason why special education teachers decided to go abroad is "for greener pastures". They also experience attending workshops, seminars and having mentorships. In a study written by Bentea and Anghelache (2012), teachers are more satisfied with their jobs if they achieve a professional position with the help of a regular professional training which enables them to advance, get promotion, get recognized and have higher amounts of salary.

"...One of the most significant differences is the pay earned abroad, which is usually higher than that given to teachers in the Philippines..." (Anita)

"...For greener pastures and learning experiences with different cultures and backgrounds..." (Trish)



"...Another motivation is higher salary..." (Anita)

- **Work-Life Balance.** Some respondents shared that there are days when they travel and enjoy their time without thinking of loaded administrative tasks. The respondents expressed their desire of wanting a job that demanded both emotional and financial stability. Although becoming a special education teacher in the United States may not even give a chunk of emotional stability, but the financial security it holds sustained her enough to stay motivated and get up to work. According to Almaamari & Alaswad (2021), many workers found it challenging to maintain a work-life balance under the arrangement, which became the standard. It is commonly held that achieving a healthy work-life balance is of essential concern to all employees across all industries and levels.

"...No matter what, teaching is a noble profession. However, it was not rewarding enough here in the Philippines. Your interest was there, but I think you need to earn your rights and have a comfortable life. Meanwhile, the Americans respect your personal time and rest on a weekend and off days. I pushed myself by thinking about deserving a job both he enjoyed and was financially comfortable with..." (Gina)

"... I like the fact of being able to provide for my family in the Philippines while enjoying my day offs here in the United States. I can say we are in a better place now unlike before. I could enjoy my weekends without thinking of loaded administrative tasks..." (Selle)

Subtheme 5: Accessibility of Services. When asked about one the key experiences they have had as a special education teacher in abroad, most of them stressed out the valuable insights they gained into the accessibility of services. In terms of working with children from different socio-economic background, they observed the massive difference in the special education services that they have access into. Listed down below are the main subtopics which lead to a more detail statement about the Accessibility of Services.

- **Accessibility of Services for Teachers.** Since all respondents gained teaching experiences in the Philippines, they were able to compare how this accessibility was one of the factors in impeding equal opportunities to all learners with special needs. Some participants also mentioned the kind of funding that was being provided such as technical assistance and support services to the schools they were all employed in. Two of them stated that because of the higher budgets allocated to special education programs in the United States, this enabled special education teachers to implement innovative interventions and cater to the diverse needs of their students more comprehensively. Overall, these factors created a more robust and dynamic professional environment for SPED teachers working abroad. In terms of the curriculum, they said it was well-defined. There were training sessions and materials to aid teachers in their instructions. It was well noted by the researcher that the teachers did not have to think about where and how to get some instructional materials. Thus, the resources and supports were always available.

"...working abroad often entails the use of more updated resources and teaching methodologies that may not be so easily found in the Philippines. The educational system in other countries is usually more structured and organized, which enables the SPED teachers to give better support to their students..." (Anita)

"...In the United States, I taught grades 4, 5, and 6, which fall under the intermediate level. I instruct them in Math, English Language, and Arts. In the US, there is a Special Education Curriculum, and all the necessary books and materials are provided..." (Anita)

- **Accessibility of Services for Students.** One of the special education teacher participants, who was also a mom of a child with special needs shared that a big factor that lead to her decision to leave and work in the United States, was for her son to obtain proper behavioral and educational support. According to one seminar she attended for parents of children with special needs, A Filipino resource speaker who migrated to the United States told her that it would be beneficial for her family and that the resources and support needed would be provided by the state to her son in every learning area such as behavior, speech and even academics. In addition, students with disabilities were supported in many ways in terms of IEPs, accommodations and modifications, assistive technology, and by having specialized and support services.

"...What motivated me to go abroad is my son, who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I attended a seminar for parents of children with special needs, where the resource speaker was a Filipino who had migrated to the US. She shared with me the benefits that were provided to her son in terms of behavior, speech, and in academics. I'm thinking that if I teach in the US, I can bring my son and husband with me. Because of this, I can deal with my professional growth while making sure that my son receives the best instructive and behavioral provision..." (Minnie)

"...Resources and aids, like assistive technology, are provided under the institutionalized system in the United States..." (Minnie)

Subtheme 6: Professional Growth. This appeared to be one of the most prevailing theme among the participants as they described the circumstances or motivations which led to their decision to work overseas. They also shared that because of their decision to teach special education abroad, they were able to establish career fulfillment and dreams. During the interviews, the participants showcased their desires to expound their learning



experiences while exploring different cultures. All of them mentioned that their teaching skills enhanced. As one respondent respond was highlighted below,

"... My friend who's a special education teacher in Arizona told me that professional growth is immense in this field of teaching. I guess that was true. The school provided us some seminars to attend to, not to mention we are getting paid too. We can learn a lot and we get to meet a bigger multidisciplinary teams as compared in my experience in the Philippines..." (Selle)

"...Additionally, participating in professional development workshops to stay updated on best practices in inclusive education has been instrumental in my growth as a teacher dedicated to promoting the holistic development of all learners..." (Trish)

Throughout the interview process, none of the participants expressed regret about their decision to go abroad and to teach in their respective special education field. Thus, the main theme- *I Decided To Go*, was conveyed based from the findings and the analysis of the transcripts in view of the factors or the lived experiences of the special education teachers who went abroad. These experiences were led to the subthemes namely Cultural Differences, Student Success, Adaptability, Better Compensation and Support, Accessibility of Services and Professional Growth.

Main Theme II: I decided to Stay

The following interview results were based from the answers of the special education teachers who stayed within the domestic workforce. Similarly, there were asked the questions that were only pertinent to their field. The first question revolved on their basic profiles and teaching background. All of them had teaching experiences from other institutions. Some of them were employed in private schools who handled inclusive classes and the rest came from special education private centers in Rizal. In Binangonan Elementary School, the respondents taught in a self-contained and transition setting, where the students ranged from 6 to 20 years old with different disabilities. When asked about the key experiences they've had as special education teachers in the Philippines, they all answered without hesitations. There was a deep sense of pride and passion as they answered the questions. The respondents also shared some factors that influenced their decision to stay. In comparison with the special education teachers in abroad, almost all respondents in the Philippines had identical answers and commonalities.

Subtheme 1: Passion for Special Education. This theme was very evident throughout the interview. The special education teachers described their journey as somewhat in line with their passion for teaching especially for the children with special needs. They mentioned that the commitment to make a difference in the lives of the children they handled overshadowed other factors. According to Day (2004) the passion is connected to hope, loyalty care, and enthusiasm which are a character of effective teaching. Some teachers were observed as emotional as they told their stories, how the children with special needs changed them as a whole and why they stayed in the local community as special education teachers.

"...It's really all about passion. Each day, I am reminded of the resilience and potential of my students, and I am grateful for the opportunity to support their growth and development..." (Marrisa)

"... I love this job. It may not be easy because handling four students in the class feels like you are handling more than 20 students in the GenEd class. It's very challenging but fulfilling and it's always my passion to teach students in the spectrum..." (Josie)

"... My love for children will always be there because I'm already a mom. The passion will always be there. I have experienced teaching in a GenEd class with inclusions and I must say that the children I teach are sweeter and they care for you. It is also hard at times, but if you love what you are doing, you'll surpass it..." (Marj)

"... It may sound cliché but I have a passion in teaching ever since I was in the university. I am from a family of teachers. I also believe that it is the noblest profession of all... Teaching here in this school is a blessing because it's near my home and I can also check on my nephew who is also in the spectrum..." (Claudia)

Subtheme 2: Building Good Relationships. It is no doubt of the close bond that were developed between the special education teachers to their students and their families. As the respondents stated, the relationships were sincerely built on trust, empathy and understanding. This fostered a friendly environment which opened the communication between the teacher and the parents. One respondent said that effective teaching goes beyond the academic instruction and it is about getting to know your student, building connections and relationships with each student in the special education class. Epstein (2018) noted that family engagement is context-dependent and may include communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. He has determined six activities that support teacher-parent collaboration as follows: 1) Parent-education activities; 2) Communications between schools and families; 3) Volunteer opportunities; 4) At-home learning activities; 5) Decision-making opportunities and 6) Community collaborations.

"... I always put to my mind that I should let the parents of my students at ease. I always see to it that I build meaningful relationships with them and with my students. By creating a supportive environment where my students feel heard, this my heart of practice..." (Josie)

"... It's about building connections with each student in my class. I take my time to listen, and respond to their needs. I believe that they should put their trust on you. It is something that doesn't happen overnight. It has to be earned. Patience is the key..." (Dina)

"... It was very hard at first. I was not born a people pleaser. But because of this job, I learned a lot, I learned to collaborate with people and establish rapport with my students and parents..." (Claudia)



Subtheme 3: Career Fulfillment. Throughout the researcher's interview, this was one of the themes that certainly emerged. Some special education teachers were assigned to help the students with special needs in their transition programs. According to Plotner (2023), the learners in the transition program will receive an educational program to become independent in their lives. The Transition Program aims to "teach students receiving special education services, from the age of 18 to 22, skills tailored to adult life, including vocational skills." They were able to share some activities they do that help these students live independently. Some activities mentioned were self-care, housekeeping, public transportation and home economics. This made an impact on students' lives, their growth which is rewarding. The special education teachers were able to make a difference in their student's lives by providing support and individualized instruction.

"...As a special education teacher in B.E.S, career fulfillment comes from knowing that I'm making a positive difference in the lives of my Filipino SPED students. I have the opportunity to inspire and support them as they work towards achieving their goals. It's rewarding to see how they grow and I feel privileged to be a part of their journey..." (Marissa)

"...Some SPED kids know how to show that they are grateful to their teachers. They are really sweet too. Knowing that I'm contributing to their success and helping them to achieve their goals is very fulfilling and it goes beyond any other profession..." (Marj)

Subtheme 4: Limited Resources. All of the respondents said that this was one of the factors that posed a challenge to their lived experience as a special education teacher. Since they are all teachers in self-contained classrooms in a public school, they were well aware on how inadequate the resources were, such as specialized materials, assistive technology, and instructional aid. One respondent even shared the news that the government funding was not enough in the field of special education. In an article that appeared in the Inquirer.net titled Zero budget for special education in 2023 makes SPED law 'meaningless' contain a statement that "The SPED law is full of things we can do for our learners and their parents but we need resources to actualize these comprehensive programs for them." The special education teachers often had to work with these limited resources and overused supplies.

"...I've been in the same department for almost 10 years. I organized them into three groups each day, labeled as Level 1, 2, and 3. I teach them Math, Reading, and Writing. Since behavior management and communication skill are important for learners with autism, my lesson plan includes social skills, how to use visual cues, and calming strategies. My students follow picture schedules as routines are crucial in reducing behavioral issues and anxiety. Teaching in a public school requires resourcefulness with manipulative materials, as we often lack the necessary supplies to support their modified academic curriculum and manipulative needs..." (Marj)

"... Sometimes we have to bring our own materials like art supplies and other crafts. There are times when I feel dishearten because I also have to provide for my kids and family. On a more positive side, it helps us fuel our creativity and determination. As you know Filipinos are known to be resilient at all times. We still do our best to provide for our students..." (Josie)

Subtheme 5: Cultural Familiarity. When asked about the factors that influenced their decision to stay, this theme also emerged to the top list. The special education teachers in Binangonan Elementary School who were interviewed thought that they could have done it when they were way younger. Some of them were observed to have fears of change. They thought that they would be more effective in their teaching roles within the Philippines' classroom setting. Due to the fact that the people and language were more familiar and comfortable. They also mentioned that they felt a strong sense of duty and purpose in serving the local community in Rizal. According to McMillan (1986), a sense of community is often defined when there is a sense of belonging among the members and when that the people in a society matter with one another, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together". However, this didn't deny the fact that they were aware of some special education teachers in the department who fled abroad to pursue their American Dreams. They were able to establish an understanding with the culture norms and communication styles which lead to their decision to stay in their homeland.

"...My sister told me I should try to apply in the J1 Visa Cultural Exchange Program for teachers. However, I told her that I am not ready yet. Actually I little scared since I am more familiar with the culture and backgrounds here in our local school..." (Marissa)

"... I know how great of an opportunity to be able to work abroad as a sped teacher, but aside from my family, I am not comfortable knowing that I would be in a foreign land. I know how racism and bullying can happen there. I also heard some horrifying experiences from some of my friends outside this institution and how they dealt with parents and their kids. I don't know how to handle that..." (Josie)

Subtheme 6: Emotional Exhaustion. As this theme remained a common challenge, some special education teachers experienced the battle of emotional exhaustion and burn out due to the high demand of their job. As noted by Yang (2023), Emotional exhaustion can lead to cognitive difficulties for individuals in the workplace. Individuals with high emotional exhaustion in the workplace will have reduced attention and memory when performing work tasks, cannot complete the set work tasks within specified deadline, and may further cause work accidents. There were students with challenging behaviors and the emotional investment was required to support students with special needs. Aside from the teaching duties, some of them also mentioned the administrative



responsibilities even in self-contained classrooms which were some about writing the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), daily records or journals, conducting assessments and meetings with other professionals and parents or guardians.

"... I am the kind of teacher who always finds myself invested in my student's lives and wellbeing. When I feel like the outcomes couldn't be met, I feel pressured and stressed out. Accompanied by the limited resources that we have, this gives me feelings of emotional tiredness..." (Dina)

"... This is actually my real concern in special education teaching. Some parents were not cooperating which adds to our stress level. No matter how much you wanted them to cooperate some of them were not doing their part as parents..." (Claudia)

The special education teachers who remained in the Philippines were asked the similar question if they regretted their choice to stay despite of the career opportunity just by leaving the country. Most of them sounded uncertain. Meanwhile, some of them expressed the idea of having no regrets. Hence, the theme- *I decided To Stay*, became predominant and alongside with it were the subthemes that lead to the experiences of the participants such as their Passion for Special Education, Building Good Relationships, Career Fulfillment, Limited Resources, Cultural Familiarity and Emotional Exhaustion.

The following narratives captured the core essence of the participant's experiences within the given context. These highlighted objective reflections of the lived realities, emotions and insights of special education teachers. Exploring these narratives provided a richer comprehension of the involved experiences within their personal and professional realms.

Cultural Differences. Recognizing and knowing the differences in culture is very important for educators in the field of special education because they meet and collaborate with diverse student's families. Having knowledge and familiarity on different cultures increases understanding and empathy. This can also help the special education teachers to tailor their approaches, ways to communicate, and proper intervention to meet the demands of students with disabilities and backgrounds. If the special education teachers acknowledged that students' cultural background influence their learning preferences or style, they would be able to create an effective inclusive learning environment where all students feel supported and valued.

Student Success. In terms of students' success, it is not just the academic progress that the teachers assessed or looked into. It also encompasses the emotional, social and behavioral development of the students with special needs. The teachers make use of individualized strategies, proper accommodations, and interventions to address the students' unique needs. This is vital as it serves as the primary goal of special education teachers in their special education classes. The pivotal role of special educator is to facilitate the success and achievement of their learners. As they should somehow reach their full potential regardless of what disability they have.

Adaptability. The special education teachers in the Philippines were trained to be adaptable. Adaptability is important especially to those who aim to work in a different country as an educator. An educator can become boundless and can do more by changing the lives of the children with special needs. It serves as the special education teachers' key to survive in the changing world of education.

Better Compensation and Support. This fuels many special education teachers' job satisfaction, effectivity and attrition rate. As many special education teachers often face challenges and responsibilities such as managing classrooms, the implementation of the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), as well as the collaboration among the different multidisciplinary teams, offering a more competitive compensation and support system for special education teachers is a good way to support and importance to their field of expertise aside from professional development opportunities and such mentorship programs.

Accessibility of Services. By fostering accessibility of special education service, it is essential for meeting the needs of students with disabilities and upholding equity in education. It encompasses not just the different accommodations, but even inclusive practices, IEP support and assistive technologies.

Professional Growth. When the special education teachers are provided with opportunities, it empowers them to enhance their skills and effectiveness. This is essential for the support of students with diverse learning needs as special education teachers would be well-informed of the research findings, best practices and educational policies. Special education teachers can benefit from this growth to expand their strategies, assessment techniques and their intervention methods. When the educators are engaged with an ongoing professional growth, it contributes to the improved outcomes for students as well as their feeling of job satisfaction.

Passion for Special Education. This remained very crucial based from the experiences of the respondents. They are the special educators who invest their time and effort in producing innovative strategies, positive relationships with their students and families while staying in the field of teaching. As it is believed that when special education teachers work passionately, it drives their advocacy to teach, dedication and commitment for inclusive practices.



Building Good Relationships. Special education teachers build positive relationships with their students, families and co-workers. This experience is vital to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environments. This also leads to improve their students learning outcomes and plans.

Career Fulfillment. This increases the level of job satisfaction of the special education teachers. This is important to sustain their motivation and resilience. If there is a sense of fulfillment in the workplace, they remained committed and dedicated to their students and their role as special education teachers.

Limited Resources. The essence of experiencing limited resources shows how creative and resourceful the special educators are. The special education teachers strive their efforts to maximize the efficiency of the available resources within their field. Recognizing the challenges posed by having limited resources could inspire advocacy for adequate funding and materials. Through this, it ensures equitable access to quality education in the field of special education.

Cultural Familiarity. This is significant because it enables special education teachers to better understand and respond to the different needs and perspectives of students who came from diverse cultural backgrounds. This also promotes inclusivity and equity in the rights of the children especially in special education classes.

Emotional Exhaustion. Special education teachers are vulnerable to emotional exhaustion due to the nature of their job. This includes handling students with challenging behaviors, advocating for students' rights, making and implementing the students' Individualized Education Program, self-care strategies and navigating interactions and relationships with families and colleagues. By addressing emotional distress and exhaustion, it is important to understand how this can negatively impact the teachers' job satisfaction, performance and retention.

This chapter also presented the recommended policy brief based on the findings of the study. According to the Association for Education Finance and Policy (2013), policy briefs were seen as bridge between researcher and policy makers on a specific issue or problem. Young & Quinn (n.d) said that the purpose of the policy brief is to persuade the target audience that there is a need to take meaningful action. Indeed, the preferred alternative or course of action should be adopted and, this, therefore, serves as an impetus for action. The findings of the research showed the lived experiences of special education teachers in abroad and those who chose to stay in the Philippines. The choice of special education teachers to seek better opportunities abroad and the experiences of the special education teachers in Binangonan Elementary School in Rizal posed a significant challenge in relation to the stability and quality of the domestic education system in the field of SPED.

A Policy Brief for the Betterment of Special Education in the Philippines

Special education teachers take a vital role in providing tailored instruction and support to children with special needs in the field of education. The special education services in the Philippines are governed by the Republic Act No. 7277 or the Special Education Act of 1996, which provides equal access to education for children or individuals with disabilities. Although the services can be limited especially in the rural areas where the resources are scarce and inadequate. There is lack of specialized facilities and materials, limited funding for support and services. Moreover, if teachers are compensated well enough, they will be able to provide more quality classes and classroom strategies. It is more challenging since there is a shortage of trained special education teachers as well. Up to this date, the shortage of resources and accessibility posed a problem to one of the pressing issues in special education in the Philippines. This can cause possible detrimental effects on the quality of education and the support available to students with disabilities. This policy brief acted as a proposal for actionable strategies for the betterment of Special Education in the Philippines, most particular in the province of Rizal.

Based from the lived experience of special education teacher who remained in the Philippines and teach in Binangonan Elementary school, having limited resources and accessibility and experiencing emotional exhaustion appeared dominant to all, and should be addressed to enhance the quality of special education in the country. Moreover, this became the ground of the researcher to come up with the key findings to this proposed policy brief that is suitable for the special education teachers in the province of Rizal.

Policy Recommendation: This proposed policy brief was based from the findings of this phenomenological research. These recommendations were formed to help the special education teachers in the Philippines particularly in the province of Rizal.

Accessible Learning Materials. There should be a development of accessible digital curriculum materials or learning resources that incorporate assistive technology features and other educational resources which are necessary to deliver high - quality special education services. The special education teachers in the domestic workforce can improve their working condition even more if they are supported with specialized curriculum materials, and advanced assistive technology tools that are tailored to the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Instead of creating from scratch, they could utilize their time well to be more efficient in their class. It allows more time for direct instructions and student support. There should be an implantation of policies to minimize the paperwork duplication, simplification of process with their report, and an administrative assistance when necessary.



Supportive Work Environments. Whether a special educator chose to go abroad or not, they should know how to facilitate cross-cultural collaboration within the multidisciplinary team of special education. They should also know how to navigate different tools and instruments when facilitating their lessons. Through knowledge sharing and mutual support, they will be able to align with the goals of improving the outcome and success of the children with special needs.

Enhance Compensation and Benefits: The issue concerning salary disparities could be addressed by implementing competitive compensation packages that may somehow align with other professionals who receive a high salary grade in the government. There could be an increase of budget for special education by offering competitive salaries, incentives or bonuses, and some benefit packages that could attract and maybe retain qualified special education teachers in the country. There should be more allocation of funds and resources for ongoing professional opportunities to help support the needs of special education teachers.

Opportunities for Professional Development. As we live in the digital world, there should be more access to different opportunities for career advancement. There should be an investment for professional development programs and trainings for Filipino special education teachers to enhance their skills, knowledge and expertise in handling individuals with special needs or disabilities. These can be done virtually or in person such as inclusive teaching strategies, leadership trainings, seminars and opportunities for teacher-led innovation with initiatives. This should include training on evidence-based instructional practices, behavior management techniques, assistive technology integration, and cultural competency.

Conclusion:

This phenomenological study investigated the factors that lead to the choices of special education teachers whether to go abroad or stay in the Philippines as they continued their teaching career in the field of special education. With the widespread teacher attrition rate among special education teachers, understanding the factors by examining the lived experiences of special education teachers abroad and in the local setting was very crucial to formulate and to support a policy brief that would help Filipino special education teachers make a decision and to sustain their workforce.

The researcher conducted a semi-structured interview using a purposive sampling among five special education teachers from Rizal province who were currently teaching abroad mainly in the United States of America; and five special education teachers who are in the self-contained classrooms at a public school in Rizal province. The participants completed the questionnaires which were comprised in three parts: the main or central questions, developmental questions and concluding questions. The questions focused on the lived experiences of the participants, the essence of these experiences and the policy brief that could be recommended based from the findings of the study. This research employed a descriptive phenomenological approach by Creswell (2013) and utilized the method of thematic analysis for the data analysis plan.

The findings revealed the factors that contributed to the decisions or choices of special education teachers. For special education teachers who are in abroad teaching, the notably themes that emerged were Cultural Differences, Student Success, Adaptability, Better Compensation and Support, Professional Growth and Accessibility of Services. The results presented the advantages and positive effects of working abroad. These factors expressed persuasive reasons for special education teachers to consider teaching abroad. By leveraging their expertise through professional growth with better compensation and support, witnessing their students' success and their accessibility of services, the special educators could make meaningful impact on the lives of the students with diverse needs. However, the findings showed the decision to teach abroad is not without its challenges. The study revealed some concerns were related to cultural differences and adaptability that the teachers encountered and experienced when transitioning to a foreign educational context.

Conversely, Passion for Special Education, Building Good Relationships, Career Fulfillment, Limited Resources, Cultural Familiarity, and Emotional exhaustion appeared to be the top themes emerged during the researcher's interview with the special education teachers who stayed in the Philippines. The choice to stay in one home's country, the Philippines, posed its own advantages and challenges. Special educators highly benefitted from cultural familiarity, building good relationships, and their passion at work. On the other hand, staying rooted in familiar surroundings enabled these educators to address the needs for teaching materials and resources, career fulfillment or opportunity and emotional exhaustion.

As a conclusion, through this research, the researcher has contributed to shedding light on the lived experiences of special education teachers and their importance. The output of the study herein would be recommending a sustainable policy brief. From the attained address for the underlying factors and themes that emerged associating the lives of the special education teachers, the researcher concludes that for them, it was a profoundly personal decision on choosing to teach special education abroad or staying. With this, policymakers and stakeholders in



special education must acknowledge the essence and importance of supporting the special educators being part of the process in their decision-making.

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