Acculturation Journey of Filipino Special Education Teacher in USA: An Autoethnography

Dean Carlo S. Sagrado
Masterand, Graduate School of Education, University of the Visayas, Cebu City, Philippines
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3588-0082

Marsha H. Malbas, EdD
Professor, Graduate School of Education, University of the Visayas, Cebu City, Philippines
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8978-2691

Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to explore my acculturation journey as a Filipino special education teacher in the USA. It drew from my personal and professional journal entries to describe this experience. The primary aim was to understand how my experiences shape the acculturation process in an American context. By providing an in-depth, personal account, the study sought to fill a gap in knowledge about the acculturation experiences of Filipino educators in foreign settings. Using a qualitative methodology, the study involved analyzing my personal narratives through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method. Conducted ethnographically, it details my journey from pre-departure preparations to my ongoing adaptation in the USA. This led to the identification of key themes: Cultural Adaptation in Teaching Practices, Language and Communication Barriers, Navigating Systems and Policies, Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion, Coping Strategies and Resilience, and Preservation of my Cultural Identity. The findings were valuable for developing effective strategies in educational institutions in both the Philippines and the USA. A significant outcome of this research was the development of the Cross-Cultural SpEd Teacher Model (CCSTM). This theoretical framework was designed to explore my experiences in navigating two distinct cultural and educational environments. It captured the integration of Filipino and American educational practices and how this fusion affects my professional identity and teaching methods. The CCSTM aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics in cross-cultural educational settings, highlighting the opportunities and challenges inherent in such environments.

Keywords: autoethnography, acculturation, Filipino special education teacher, cultural identity, professional growth, Cross-Cultural SpEd Teacher Model, cultural adaptation, teaching practices.

Introduction:

Acculturation is a deeply personal journey that many of us undertake when we find ourselves immersed in a culture different from our own. It's a transformative experience that starts when we start adopting the practices, beliefs, and norms of the new culture, often driven by the need to fit in or adapt to a new environment. My own journey, as an overseas Filipino worker teaching in a U.S. school, was a dynamic exchange of cultural ideas, set within the vibrant multicultural environment of the school district. Acculturation, for me, was not merely about learning a new language or emulating behaviors. It meant understanding and adopting new values, reshaping my identity, and finding a balance between the familiar and the new. But, as enlightening as this journey was, it also had its challenges, from grappling with the fear of cultural loss to navigating potential intergroup conflicts. There were times when the process had psychological implications, making me realize the importance of having adequate support systems in place for positive acculturation outcomes (Sam & Berry, 2010).

My journey to the United States began in the humble classrooms of Guadalupe Elementary School in the Philippines, where I taught general education in the 6th grade level. Those corridors and classrooms echoed with laughter, learning, and a shared commitment to nurturing young minds. A friend of mine casually suggested the idea of applying to their school district in the U.S., a concept that was far from my plans at the eyes. The decision was far from easy. It felt like standing at the edge of a cliff, looking into the vast unknown. Yet, the gravity of my personal and family needs pulled me toward this opportunity. My heart was filled with different emotions - excitement, fear, uncertainty, hope - as I chose to embark on this new chapter of my life, a journey across oceans and continents, far away from the familiarity and comfort of my motherland.

Following my unexpected hiring in a U.S. school, I began my immersive preparation, ardently consuming American series, articles, and social media to familiarize myself with their communication patterns and the effective strategies employed by American teachers. The commitment was intense; it felt like preparing for battle, and indeed it was, in an educational arena far from my comfort zone.

My initial assignment was an Emotional Disturbance classroom for middle schoolers. The experience was daunting, to say the least, and the memories still evoke an intense emotion. Instances like being yelled at in the hallway, hit unexpectedly by a student, or hearing a student's dark thoughts of jumping off the school theater balcony were a jarring introduction to the realities of my new environment. Yet, amidst these turbulent experiences, I found solace and support in my co-teacher and paraprofessionals, who guided me in navigating these challenges. Based on data from the U.S. Department of Education, international teachers like me face similar challenges. Understanding this, I received training in a program designed for effectively managing behavior incidents in students with disabilities, aligning my responses with U.S. Special Education laws. A comparison with my previous experiences revealed the critical importance of such programs in supporting acculturating educators.

I believe my experiences offered valuable insights that could guide U.S. school administrators, legislators, and the Philippine school system. We needed targeted support programs for overseas teachers that can ease their transition and improve their effectiveness. Collaborative platforms where teachers could share their experiences could be beneficial. Also, systematic orientation to legal aspects related to teaching in the U.S., such as understanding Special Education laws, could significantly help.

This study was focused on exploring the unique experiences of a Filipino SpEd teacher moving to and working in the United States. I used my personal journey as a framework to understand the challenges and opportunities this cultural transition presents. The primary aimed was to reveal the pressures I face, evaluate the effectiveness of existing support systems, and identify areas where improvements can be made. The ultimate goal was to utilize these insights to suggest practical strategies and policy changes that could make this transition smoother for future teachers. The intention was to create an environment where Filipino teachers can be more effective in U.S. classrooms, leading to an improved educational experience for everyone involved. The story of my journey from Guadalupe Elementary School to a U.S. school district was a testament to the resilience of educators who cross boundaries to provide quality education. It emphasized the importance of supporting these educators during their cultural transition. The hope was that my experiences could help shape laws and strategies that support future Filipino Special Education teachers in U.S. classrooms, bridging gaps and fostering mutual understanding for improved educational experiences.

Literature Review:

This qualitative study followed an atheoretical stance, meaning it was not specifically anchored on any pre-existing theoretical framework. The autoethnographic approach employed allowed the researcher to emphasize personal experiences, emotions, and cultural contexts without the constraint of fitting these into a preconceived theoretical construct (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I, the researcher, as an active participant in the study, used my teaching journey in various schools in the Williston Basin Public School District, located in the northwestern region of the United States, as the basis for this explorative narrative.

In this study, the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the acculturation process were acknowledged. As I navigated through different schools, from Bakken Elementary School, Williston Middle School, and ASB Innovation Academy in the academic year 2020-2021, to McVay Elementary School in 2021-2022, and finally, to Williston High School in 2022-2023, a multitude of experiences were encountered. These experiences not only contributed to my personal and professional growth but also offered unique insights into the complexities of acculturation in the context of a Filipino Special Education teacher in the American educational landscape.

Applying an atheoretical stance through the autoethnographic approach, this study aimed to present these experiences within the broader socio-cultural context, providing valuable insights into the acculturation process of Filipino Special Education teachers in the USA. I sought to contribute to the understanding of how teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds navigate their professional roles in a foreign educational landscape, while simultaneously dealing with the cultural challenges and personal transformations inherent in the acculturation process (Chang, 2008).

The philosophical underpinnings of the study aligned closely with the phenomenological approach to research. This approach emphasized the importance of deriving themes directly from the data, rather than imposing preconceived ideas or theories (Laverty, 2003). I, the researcher, therefore, allowed the unique and diverse experiences of my acculturation journey in different American schools to naturally shape the thematic contours of the study. The essence of this approach lay in interpreting the meanings of experiences through patterns that capture the essence of the phenomenon under study. The process became not just an exploration of external events, but also an internal voyage into the lived experiences, emotions, and evolving understandings as a researcher as I navigated my professional context in a foreign land.

The study embodied several key facets. (1) Ontologically, the research recognizes the subjective nature of reality, endorsing the unique, personal nature of my acculturation journey, influenced by my experiences teaching in various American schools. (2) Epistemologically, it adopted a constructivist stance, understanding knowledge as an evolving construct shaped through my experiences and interactions within my professional context, rather than a pre-defined entity. (3) Axiologically, it acknowledged the influence of the my personal beliefs, cultural background, and professional ethos on the interpretation of my acculturation process, viewing these values as enriching elements of the study, rather than biases. (4) Methodologically, the study employed an autoethnographic approach, using my narration of personal experiences within a cultural context to provide an intimate understanding of my acculturation journey within the American educational system. (5) Rhetorically, the research emphasized the narrative and reflective aspects of autoethnography. It leveraged a personalized narrative style that brought my experiences to life and provides readers with an insider's perspective on the acculturation process. This reflective writing bridged my personal experiences with broader sociocultural and political phenomena, effectively contextualizing my journey within a larger framework.

In this study, the adopted philosophical perspectives were expressed through the transformative and evolving actions of me, the researcher. These actions encapsulated the emotions, insights, and experiences I gained from my journey, each contributing to my unique interpretation of acculturation. Through detailed discussions and reflective analyses, I, the researcher, sought to uncover and articulate the true meaning and depth of the phenomena I encountered. This approach underlined the idea that the knowledge gathered in this study was not merely theoretical, but actively derived from real experiences, echoing the sentiment that actions indeed speak louder than words.

The study viewed acculturation as a transformative process, deeply interwoven with personal experiences and emotions. This process contributed to shared societal values, behaviors, and practices, influencing individual and group dynamics. Ultimately, it highlighted how personal transformation through acculturation shapes and is shaped by broader societal interactions.

Methodology:
The research method for this study was autoethnography, a qualitative research design that married elements of autobiography and ethnography. It enabled me, the researcher, to use my personal experiences as the primary source of data, yielding a detailed and intimate viewpoint on the subject matter. As I engaged in self-reflection and wrote about these experiences, I was able to link my individual journey to broader cultural, political, and social contexts. This process offered a nuanced understanding, sensitive to the context of his experience as a Filipino special education teacher in the American education system.
To steer this study, I had crafted an extensive personal narrative detailing my experiences as a special education teacher in the USA. This narrative was set for analysis, with a focused approach on instances of cultural interaction and adaptation.

Environment
My journey as an educator began in the Philippines, where I served as a 6th-grade general education teacher at Guadalupe Elementary School in Brgy. Guadalupe, Cebu City. This predominantly Filipino environment allowed me to hone my teaching skills and develop my pedagogy, laying the groundwork for my understanding of education. My experiences at Guadalupe Elementary School significantly shaped my approach to teaching and provided an important cultural context for my career.

This career took an exciting turn when I transitioned to the Williston Basin Public School District in North Dakota, a region that had witnessed a significant demographic shift in recent years. The economic opportunities linked to the local oil industry had attracted a multitude of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, resulting in a vibrant

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multicultural local community. This influx of cultures was prominently visible within the district's schools, offering a unique blend of cultural perspectives among students and staff.

The striking difference between my previous teaching environment in the Philippines and the culturally diverse setting of the Williston Basin Public School District posed intriguing questions regarding the process of acculturation. It provided a rich environment to explore my experiences as a Filipino special education teacher as I navigated and integrated into a multicultural setting. The rich cultural diversity of the Williston Basin Public School District, combined with my experiences from Guadalupe Elementary School, served as an invaluable resource for this autoethnographic study, enabling a nuanced exploration of cultural interaction and integration.

Informants
I was the primary informant of this autoethnographic study, drawing from my experiences as a Filipino special education teacher at the Williston Basin Public School District. My narratives, reflections, and interactions with colleagues, administrators, and parents formed the core of my investigation. As I delved into my acculturation journey within the United States, the sensitive nature of this study made it imperative to rely solely on my personal experiences as the data source. This approach was essential for protecting the privacy and rights of the Special Education (SpEd) community—a group that was both protected and vulnerable, with stringent legal guidelines governing confidentiality and data usage. By centering the study on my experiences, I aimed to sidestep potential ethical issues and preserve the trust within the SpEd community, while still offering valuable, firsthand insights into the acculturation process. Thus, the use of my personal experiences stroke a balance between safeguarding the dignity and privacy of the SpEd community, adhering to ethical research standards, and enriching our understanding of the cultural, societal, and political nuances of acculturation in special education.

Instruments
In this study, I was the primary instrument, serving as a firsthand source of information. Through self-reflection and introspection, I provided valuable insights into my journey of acculturation as a Filipino special education teacher in the USA. My personal narratives, reflections, and observations formed the core of the data collection process.

To explore my acculturation process, I developed a set of self-made interview questions designed to delve into specific aspects of my experiences, as outlined in the statement of the problem. These questions aimed to elicit insights on how my experiences as a special education teacher influenced my own acculturation, the cultural integration of my colleagues, and the impact on students and parents.

Additionally, I utilized my personal and professional journal entries that focus more on my personal journey and reflections. These journal entries enabled me to delve deeper into my own experiences and provide a comprehensive understanding of my acculturation process. While the interview guide questionnaire centered on interactions with stakeholders within the school, my journal entries offered a deeper, personal exploration of my day-to-day experiences and emotions. This combination allowed me to document both external interactions and internal processes, providing a complex view of my acculturation journey, capturing its complexities, nuances, and evolution over time.

Data Gathering Procedure
The data gathering procedure for this study was currently undergoing several stages.
Preliminary. It began with a preliminary phase that took place in May 2023 at the title hearing design held at the University of the Visayas. During this session, panelists reviewed the initial title proposed and suggested a change to focus on the acculturation journey. This valuable feedback led to a refinement of the study's scope and objectives.
Actual Data Gathering. As the researcher and the main informant for data collection, I drew upon my personal experiences as a Filipino special education teacher in the USA, making me the primary source of information. The data gathering process primarily involved self-reflection and introspection, allowing me to provide a rich and detailed account of my ongoing acculturation journey.

Through the lens of autoethnography, I was documenting my personal narratives, reflections, and observations in journal entries. These first-hand accounts formed the core of the data being collected. By combining self-made interview responses and journal entries, I explored and captured various aspects of my acculturation process, including interactions with colleagues, students, and parents. This method emphasized a deep understanding of my

own experiences and allowed for a comprehensive examination of cultural integration within the American educational context.

The data collected were organized, encoded, and transcribed for presentation in Chapter 4 of this study.

Data Analysis

In this study, I employed the frames of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method to analyze the data, a choice that significantly enhanced the process of capturing themes in an autoethnographic study. This qualitative method stood out for its flexibility and utility, offering a way to derive a rich, detailed, and yet intricately complex account of the data.

Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method involved six key steps: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. I began by deeply immersing myself in the data, engaging in a thorough reading and re-reading of my self-made interview responses and journal entries. This initial immersion was crucial for gaining a foundational understanding of the content. Following this, I generated initial codes, pinpointing interesting and relevant features within the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

These codes were grouped into potential themes, capturing patterns within the data related to the researcher's experiences and interactions. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they represent the coded extracts and the overall data set effectively.

Once the themes were reviewed and finalized, each theme was clearly defined and named. This process aided in crystallizing the essence of what each theme is about and what aspect of the data each theme captured. Finally, I, the researcher, wrote up the final report. This report tied back the themes to the original research question, providing a detailed and nuanced account of the acculturation journey of a Filipino special education teacher in the United States.

The decision to employ Braun and Clarke's method in this study was motivated by the method's versatility and robustness, making it an ideal choice for an autoethnographic study. This method allowed the researcher to capture and explore the richness and complexity of my personal experiences, interactions, and reflections as I navigated my professional journey in a new cultural context. It also supported the ethical considerations of this study, as it allowed for the sole use of the my experiences, mitigating potential privacy and confidentiality issues associated with including narratives from the special education community.

Findings and Discussion:

Theme 1: Cultural Adaptation in Teaching Practices

In this theme, I delved into the significant impact of cultural differences on teaching methodologies and classroom management strategies, drawing from my experience as a Filipino Special Education (SpEd) teacher navigating the educational landscape in the USA. This theme encapsulates the challenges encountered and adaptations made while transitioning from the educational norms of the Philippines to the diverse setting of American classrooms. It involved redefining teaching strategies and classroom management approaches to accommodate varied student behaviors, learning styles, and classroom dynamics encountered in the U.S. This theme highlights the need for flexibility, continuous learning, and cultural sensitivity, especially in special education, showcasing personal and professional growth in a culturally diverse educational environment.

During my initial teaching experience in the U.S., I observed stark differences in classroom dynamics compared to what I was accustomed to in the Philippines. In my home country, the classroom environment tended to be more teacher-centered, with students often assuming a passive role. However, in the U.S., students were more outspoken, actively participating in discussions. This shift prompted me to adapt my classroom management style to foster an environment where all students, regardless of their demeanor, could thrive.

Reflecting on my journey from the Philippines to the United States, I found my experiences deeply intertwined with broader pedagogical theories. The Philippines often leans towards a teacher-centric culture, whereas the U.S. promotes a more student-centered approach, as noted by Hofstede (1986) and Darling-Hammond (2017) respectively. This transition required a significant adjustment in my approach, aligning with principles of culturally responsive teaching (Hattie, 2009) and recognizing the importance of professional growth in diverse settings (Guskey, 2002).

Another challenge I encountered was the integration of technology in the classroom, a practice more prevalent in the U.S. than in the Philippines. While traditional methods dominated my teaching in the Philippines due to limited resources, adapting to the technology-driven education system in the U.S. required quick adjustments.

In the Philippines, where resources were scarce, traditional teaching methods prevailed. However, in the U.S., technology was central to education. This transition demanded that I familiarize myself with educational software and online resources to enhance teaching effectiveness (Brown, 2021). Embracing technology not only enriched my teaching methods but also emphasized the importance of adaptability and continuous learning in the ever-evolving educational landscape.

A significant moment of cultural learning occurred during a lesson on global cultures, where I realized my own biases and generalizations about Asian cultures. This experience emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity and accurate representation of diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom.

This incident highlighted the need for educators to actively strive for cultural understanding and accuracy (Sue & Sue, 2010), aligning with the principles of multicultural education (Banks, 2006). It reinforced my commitment to present information that respects the diverse cultural identities of my students (Sleeter, 2005; Bennett, 1993), promoting inclusivity and respect in education.

Transitioning to the U.S., I had to rethink my approach to assessing students with special needs, which differed significantly from practices in the Philippines. The U.S. education system emphasized inclusive and flexible assessment strategies tailored to individual student needs.

Adapting assessments for students with special needs required a shift from standardized methods to differentiated approaches. This involved using visual aids and simplified language to make assessments more accessible, aligning with principles of inclusive education (Brownell et al., 2020; Vantieghem et al., 2020). This experience taught me the importance of balancing academic challenge with consideration for individual learning capacities.

My journey as a Filipino SpEd teacher in the U.S. has been a transformative experience, marked by the necessity to adapt to diverse educational environments. Adapting teaching practices to align with cultural differences, integrating technology, promoting cultural sensitivity, and adopting inclusive assessment strategies have been pivotal in my professional growth. These experiences underscore the importance of flexibility, continuous learning, and cultural awareness in providing effective education in diverse settings.

Theme 2: Language and Communication Barriers
In this theme, I reflect on the personal challenges I encountered due to language disparities and communication nuances within the U.S. education system. As a Filipino SpEd teacher, I not only grappled with linguistic hurdles but also navigated cultural subtleties embedded in everyday communication. Overcoming these barriers required continuous learning and adaptation, shaping my professional identity and effectiveness as an educator in a multicultural environment.

The initial challenge was not merely fluency in English but understanding and adapting to the colloquial language and slang used by my students. Their rapid speech and unfamiliar idioms posed significant hurdles, especially during academic instruction. This highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of linguistic and cultural differences between the Philippines and the U.S.

Recognizing the linguistic gap was pivotal, signaling the necessity to align my teaching style with the linguistic and cultural realities of my American classroom. It underscored the importance of cultural responsiveness and adaptability in teaching, emphasizing the need to create an inclusive environment by respecting students' diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Encountering culturally embedded phrases, such as "criss-cross apple sauce," during a colleague's class session was enlightening. Integrating these phrases into my teaching improved classroom management and student engagement significantly. This experience highlighted the impact of language and cultural nuances on teaching effectiveness.

Adopting culturally resonant cues improved classroom dynamics, aligning with research emphasizing clear and culturally sensitive communication for effective classroom management. It demonstrated the importance of adapting to cultural contexts to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

During a parent-teacher meeting, I faced challenges understanding the indirect communication style of some parents. This contrasted with the direct communication style I was accustomed to in the Philippines. Deciphering subtle cues became crucial for building trust and understanding with parents.

The experience taught me to interpret indirect messages and non-verbal cues, recognizing their importance in communication. It highlighted the need for educators to be attentive to cultural differences in communication styles to foster effective partnerships with parents and support student success.

As I evolved in my role, I realized the significance of non-verbal cues in communication. Paying attention to body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice became essential for deeper understanding and connection with students and colleagues.

Developing non-verbal communication skills aligned with research highlighting its impact on classroom environment and student-teacher relationships. It emphasized the role of cultural sensitivity intertwined with non-verbal communication in fostering mutual understanding.

My journey as a Filipino SpEd teacher in the U.S. has been marked by profound learning experiences in overcoming language and communication barriers. Adapting teaching styles, understanding cultural nuances, and honing non-verbal communication skills have been essential for effective teaching in a multicultural environment. These experiences underscore the importance of continuous learning, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability in fostering inclusive education and personal growth as an educator.

Theme 3: Navigating Systems and Policies

Understanding and adapting to the U.S. educational system, including its policies, procedures, and standards, has been a significant aspect of my journey as an educator. This theme delves into the learning curve involved in navigating these systems, particularly focusing on the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), legal frameworks, and educational standards.

The introduction to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in the U.S. was a striking difference from my experience in the Philippines. Unlike the generalized support provided back home, IEPs offered a personalized approach to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. Learning to develop these plans required a deeper understanding of each student's profile and extensive collaboration with various stakeholders.

Transitioning to the U.S. system highlighted the importance of individualization in special education, aligning with research emphasizing personalized educational strategies for students with disabilities (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2013). The collaborative nature of IEP development was new to me but essential for creating effective plans tailored to each student's needs (Wilcox et al., 2021).

The legal framework governing special education in the U.S., including laws like IDEA and ADA, presented a significant adjustment from the Philippines. Adhering to legal requirements such as IDEA was essential in ensuring students with disabilities receive appropriate support. This contrasted with my prior experience, where legal mandates were less structured and enforced.

Understanding and implementing IEPs within the legal framework emphasized the importance of legally supported educational plans in providing effective support for students with special needs (Yell et al., 1998). The transition underscored the necessity of structured legal frameworks to ensure equitable educational opportunities.

The educational standards in the U.S., particularly the Common Core State Standards, required a shift in teaching strategies and curriculum planning. Adapting to a skill-based approach demanded a deeper understanding of concepts and their real-world application, contrasting with the more content-oriented approach in the Philippines.

Aligning with the Common Core highlighted the importance of rigorous, skill-based instruction, supported by research on effective teaching strategies (Hattie, 2008). It also underscored the divergence in educational philosophies between the two countries and their impact on student learning and future opportunities.

Another significant difference I encountered was in assessment practices. Unlike in the Philippines, where standardized tests often lacked accommodations for students with disabilities, the U.S. employs customized assessments mandated by IDEA, ensuring equitable opportunities for all students.

This experience emphasized the importance of personalized assessment methods in accurately evaluating students' capabilities and fostering inclusivity, aligning with research advocating for educational reforms to support diverse student needs (Artiles et al., 2010).

Navigating the U.S. educational system has been both challenging and enriching, shaping my understanding of educational inclusivity and the importance of legal frameworks and standards. It has highlighted the need for personalized approaches in special education, structured legal support, and adaptable teaching practices to ensure equitable education for all students. This journey underscores the dynamic nature of education and the ongoing need for educators to remain flexible and informed about varying educational policies and standards.

Theme 4: Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion
This theme explores my journey of feeling included or excluded within the school environment and broader societal context, reflecting on encounters with cultural stereotypes, biases, and moments of disconnect, as well as experiences of acceptance and resilience.

During my early teaching experience in the U.S., I often grappled with a profound sense of alienation, particularly during discussions about unfamiliar topics like Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Feeling like an outsider in faculty meetings and struggling to grasp new educational systems intensified this sense of isolation. This emotional journey is common among international educators adapting to new environments, as noted by researchers (Marginson et al., 2012; Schartner, 2019).

At times, the challenges made me contemplate returning to the familiarity of the Philippines, where obstacles felt less daunting. Doubt and self-questioning were constant companions during this period, echoing experiences of many international educators facing similar challenges. However, research suggests that with time and support, adaptation is possible (Marginson et al., 2012; Sam & Berry, 2010).

The language barrier presented significant challenges in communicating with students, affecting classroom management and my role as an educator. This struggle went beyond mere communication and impacted my professional identity and relationships with students, aligning with existing research on language barriers in teaching (Choi & Lee, 2016; Kamhi-Stein, 2009).

During lunch breaks, I felt excluded from the social fabric of the school, struggling to connect with colleagues and feeling like an outsider in their conversations. This experience highlighted the cultural and social barriers to integration, reflecting existing research on acculturation and social identity (Berry, 2005; Leung & Koh, 2018).

Over time, through efforts to initiate projects like the 'Green Hands Garden,' inspired by my experiences in the Philippines, I began to feel more connected. The success of the project fostered a sense of community and belonging, echoing research on the importance of shared experiences in building connections (Smith, 1993; Swann et al., 2009).

Improvement in language proficiency played a crucial role in my transition from feeling like an outsider to being fully involved in conversations and activities. This shift reflected not just language mastery but also a deeper sense of belonging and connection, as supported by psychological research (Jones et al., 2020; Ramirez, 2017).

My journey illustrates the emotional and professional challenges of adapting to a new cultural and educational environment. Initially feeling excluded and questioning my place, I gradually transitioned to feeling included and integral to my new community. This transformation underscores our resilience and adaptability in embracing new landscapes, bridging cultural gaps, and finding belonging in unfamiliar territories.

Theme 5: Coping Strategies and Resilience

This theme explores the coping strategies I employed to manage stress, culture shock, and professional challenges while adapting to a new cultural and professional environment. It encompasses personal reflections on maintaining mental well-being, seeking support networks, and achieving a balance between work and personal life, highlighting my journey towards developing resilience.

Navigating the complexities of the U.S. educational system often left me grappling with stress, particularly at night. To address this, I incorporated meditation into my daily routine. Each morning, I took time to sit quietly and meditate, which helped me start the day with a clearer, calmer mind. This practice became essential for managing stress and maintaining mental well-being, supported by research on the benefits of meditation for anxiety and emotional regulation (Hölzel et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2007).

I found that building social connections was crucial in combating stress and isolation. Engaging with colleagues at work and joining local groups provided valuable support and reassurance that I wasn't alone in my challenges. Connecting with the Filipino community also helped lessen homesickness and made my job feel more positive in a supportive environment. Research emphasizes the importance of social support in stress management, highlighting its role in providing emotional support and practical advice (Thoits, 2011).

Balancing work and personal life was a significant challenge initially. However, I realized the importance of setting boundaries and making time for leisure activities. Encouraged by a colleague, I started to engage in activities I enjoy, like hiking and attending local events. This shift significantly improved my well-being, preventing burnout and increasing my overall satisfaction. Research supports the positive impact of a healthy work-life balance on well-being and job satisfaction (Orkibi & Brandt, 2015).

Dealing with professional challenges, especially in classroom management, was a source of stress. Seeking feedback and engaging in professional development opportunities, such as training programs and workshops, played a crucial role in overcoming these challenges. These proactive measures enhanced my teaching effectiveness and resilience, aligning with research on the benefits of ongoing professional development and reflective practice in teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Schön, 1983).

My journey illustrates the versatile approach I adopted to navigate the challenges of adapting to a new cultural and professional environment. Initially stressful situations were managed through mindfulness practices like meditation, while building social connections provided invaluable support. Balancing work and personal life became essential for my well-being, and continuous professional development helped me adapt to the complexities of the U.S. educational system. Overall, these coping strategies not only fostered resilience but also transformed challenges into opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Theme 6: Preservation of My Cultural Identity

This theme explores how my acculturation experience influenced my cultural identity, discussing the balance between maintaining my Filipino cultural heritage and integrating into American society. It reflects on the process of forming a bicultural identity, where Filipino values blend with American norms, shaping a unique cultural identity.

Food became a significant bridge between two cultures. Cooking traditional Filipino dishes in the U.S., like adobo and sinigang, wasn't just about culinary skills; it was about recreating memories and flavors from home. Sharing these dishes with my American friends became a delightful exchange, blending traditions and fostering a sense of belonging in both cultures. This culinary journey reflects the importance of food in cultural expression and connection (Korsmeyer, 2023; Jurafsky, 2014).

Balancing my native languages, Cebuano Bisaya and Tagalog, with English was a fascinating aspect of my cultural journey. Speaking Filipino languages kept me connected to my heritage, while English became integral to my daily life in America. This bilingual existence enriched my identity, allowing me to navigate and appreciate the diversity of both cultures, supported by research on bilingualism and cultural identity (Valdés, 1999; Fishman, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Participating in cultural celebrations from both the Philippines and America added depth to my cultural identity. From Halloween to the Sinulog festival, and from Thanksgiving to Simbang Gabi, each celebration intertwined

Filipino and American traditions, enriching my sense of belonging and cultural awareness. Engaging in diverse cultural celebrations highlighted the dynamic nature of cultural identity and promoted understanding of different cultures (Berry, 1997; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Hogg, 2016).

My experience of blending Filipino and American cultures has been a journey of learning, appreciation, and enjoyment. Cooking Filipino food, speaking my native languages, and celebrating diverse traditions allowed me to embrace both cultures fully. This experience taught me the beauty of cultural diversity and the importance of understanding and appreciating people's backgrounds. Overall, it enriched my life and expanded my perspective on cultural identity in today's interconnected world.

Conclusion:

My journey of adapting to a new cultural and professional environment in the United States has been a transformative experience, marked by various challenges, coping strategies, and the preservation of my cultural identity. Through reflective exploration, several key themes emerged, shedding light on the intricate process of acculturation and personal growth.

I encountered significant challenges in feeling included and understanding unfamiliar educational practices, which sometimes led to feelings of alienation and self-doubt. However, through resilience and perseverance, I gradually found my place within the school community, emphasizing the importance of support networks and proactive coping strategies.

Maintaining my mental well-being became crucial, and practices like meditation helped me manage stress and maintain clarity amidst cultural adjustments. Building social connections, both within the Filipino community and with colleagues, provided essential support and a sense of belonging.

Balancing work and personal life was another significant challenge, but by prioritizing self-care and leisure activities, I found a sustainable approach that prevented burnout and enhanced my overall well-being.

Preserving my cultural identity was central to my journey. Cooking Filipino dishes, speaking my native languages, and participating in cultural celebrations allowed me to maintain a connection with my roots while integrating into American society. These experiences underscored the richness of cultural diversity and the importance of embracing and celebrating differences.

My experience highlights the resilience and adaptability required when navigating new cultural landscapes. It also emphasizes the significance of support systems, self-care practices, and the preservation of cultural identity in fostering a sense of belonging and well-being. As I continue this journey, I carry with me not only the lessons learned but also a deeper appreciation for the complexities and beauty of cultural diversity in shaping individual experiences.

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