



Opportunities and Assimilation in the Lived Experiences of Filipino Teachers in New York City's Alternative High Schools: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has intensified the movement of teachers across borders, yet how these educators experience the opportunities and assimilation demands of a new educational system remains underexamined for the Filipino diaspora specifically, and almost entirely unexamined within the alternative-education settings that serve some of a host system's most vulnerable learners. This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino teachers working in New York City Department of Education District 79—the city's citywide district for alternative, transfer, and second-chance high school programs—during school year 2023–2024. Using a descriptive phenomenological design informed by Acculturation Theory, Social Identity Theory, Cultural Capital Theory, and Glocalization Theory, the author collected semi-structured, Google-Forms-administered interview data from 15 Filipino high school teachers with at least five years of experience across District 79 schools, including West Side High School, Bronx Regional High School, Tenzer High School, and others, and analyzed the data using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. Two domains of experience emerged. In terms of opportunities, participants described professional advancement, cultural engagement and collaboration, positive workplace dynamics, educational growth and support, and gains in personal and family well-being. In terms of assimilation, participants described adaptation and resilience, cultural integration in teaching, community and support, professional recognition and acceptance, and cultural awareness and understanding—the last of which surfaced direct encounters with racism and discriminatory treatment. Findings informed a proposed Inclusive Integration and Professional Empowerment framework built around professional development, administrator cultural-competence training, mentorship, and inclusive policy. The article closes by noting the study's remaining scope limitation—findings drawn from one district within one city—and recommending comparative research across mainstream New York City schools and other Filipino-teacher destinations.

Keywords: Filipino teachers, lived experience, acculturation, cultural capital, social identity theory, glocalization, alternative education, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Globalization has made cross-border movement a routine feature of the teaching profession, and with it, a routine feature of the classroom itself: teachers now regularly work outside the education systems that trained them, navigating new professional cultures while still shaping how students experience an increasingly interconnected world (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). For the Philippines, whose teachers have staffed classrooms across the United States, the Middle East, and beyond for decades, this raises a specific and underexamined question—not whether Filipino teachers are qualified for global classrooms, but how they actually experience the process of entering and working within them. UNESCO (2018) has pointed to limited exposure to international education practices as a potential gap in Philippine teacher preparation for globalized settings, yet the literature offering a corrective—direct, first-person accounts of what that exposure actually involves—remains thin (Leask, 2015; Sahlberg, 2015; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

A small existing body of qualitative work has begun to fill this gap. Chua (2021) documented the migration motivations, adjustment challenges, and support-system needs of Filipino teachers in Texas; Castillo (2019) examined how Filipino-American teachers in New York City navigated cultural identity, including experiences of being racially and culturally misread and of losing fluency in their native language; Santos and Reyes (2020) found that Filipino teachers in New York City drew on cultural values such as *pakikisama* (getting along, camaraderie) to build inclusive classroom relationships; and the original dissertation on which this article is based additionally referenced an unpublished institutional account of Filipino educators at an international school in Doha, Qatar, reporting homesickness, language barriers, climate adjustment, and discrimination as recurring features of teaching abroad—a source this article was unable to independently verify and therefore does not cite as established literature. Read together, the verifiable studies above establish a consistent set of themes—identity negotiation, language and cultural adjustment, support systems, and exposure to discrimination—but do so across scattered geographic and institutional contexts, none of which examined Filipino teachers within a specific, high-need instructional setting such as an alternative or transfer school system serving over-age, under-credited, or otherwise at-risk students.

The scale of this migration is not incidental to the study's relevance. The Teachers Dignity Coalition, drawing on Philippine Overseas Employment Administration figures, estimated that an average of 1,500 Filipino public-school teachers left the country annually over the three years preceding 2024, citing low domestic salaries, heavy non-teaching workload, and comparatively weaker school facilities relative to typical postings abroad (Human Rights Online Philippines, 2024). Understanding what these teachers actually encounter once they arrive—the specific opportunities that make the move worthwhile and the specific assimilation demands it imposes—is therefore not only a question of individual adjustment but one with direct relevance to how the Philippine basic-education sector understands, and potentially responds to, continued teacher outmigration.

That setting is the specific context of the present study. New York City's Department of Education operates District 79, a citywide district—distinct from the borough-based geographic districts that serve the system's roughly 1,800 mainstream schools—dedicated to alternative learning: transfer high schools, GED and high-school-equivalency programs, and second-chance programs for students who have not succeeded in, or aged out of, conventional high schools. Teaching in this setting carries a different professional texture than teaching in a mainstream comprehensive high school, and the present study's participants—Filipino teachers with at least five years of experience in schools such as West Side High School, Bronx Regional High School, Tenzer High School, and other District 79 sites—bring lived experience specific to that texture, a detail the broader “Filipino teachers in New York City” literature has not yet examined directly.

Four theoretical frameworks guided the inquiry into how these teachers experienced opportunity and assimilation. Berry's (1980) Acculturation Theory frames cultural adjustment as a set of available strategies—assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization—that vary in how much of the heritage culture an individual retains while adapting to a new one, offering a lens for how participants balanced their Filipino identity against the expectations of the New York City system. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) directs attention to how individuals categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, and how that categorization shapes both a person's sense of belonging and the discriminatory treatment they may receive as a member of a distinct group; it provides a frame well matched to a study whose interview protocol asked participants broadly about acceptance, recognition, and difference rather than probing the specific legal and structural dimensions of racial inequity that a framework such as Critical Race Theory would require. Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) treats participants' language skills, cultural knowledge, and international experience as professional assets rather than deficits, offering a frame for understanding how their Filipino background actively shaped their teaching rather than merely following behind it. Finally, Glocalization Theory (Robertson, 1995) frames the adaptation of global influences to local conditions, offering a lens for how participants blended globally circulating teaching practices with the specific demands of the District 79 context.

Framed by this literature and these four theories, the study asked: (1) What are the lived experiences of Filipino high school teachers in New York City's District 79 schools in terms of (a) opportunities and (b) assimilation? (2) What policy can be proposed based on the findings? Findings are intended to inform school-level induction and support practices, give teachers a comparative reference for their own experience, help students benefit from a more globally competent and better-supported teaching workforce, and—for the Philippine basic-education sector specifically—inform how teacher-education programs prepare educators for the realities of teaching abroad before they migrate, rather than after.

2. Methods

Research Design

This study used a descriptive phenomenological qualitative design, following Creswell's (2013) framing of phenomenology as suited to capturing the essence of a lived experience and the meaning participants attribute to it. The design was appropriate given the study's aim: to understand, in participants' own terms, what it felt like to encounter opportunity and undergo assimilation while teaching in a specific, high-need New York City school district, rather than to test a predetermined set of variables.

Research Setting

The study was situated within New York City's public school system, operated by the New York City Department of Education across roughly 1,800 schools serving over one million students citywide. Participants were drawn specifically from District 79, the system's citywide district for alternative and transfer education, which operates independently of the borough-based geographic districts and serves students who have not succeeded in, or have aged out of, conventional high school programs. Participating schools included West Side High School, Bronx Regional High School, Tenzer High School, and additional District 79 sites in Queens and Manhattan. This is a materially different instructional context from a comprehensive neighborhood high school, and readers should weigh the findings accordingly—a distinction the original study did not foreground despite its relevance to interpreting participants' accounts of both opportunity and challenge.

Participants

Eligible participants were teachers who self-identified as Filipino and had at least five years of high school teaching experience within the New York City system, specifically within District 79 schools. This purposive, criterion-based approach—screening for both ethnic identity and a minimum tenure sufficient to speak knowledgeably about assimilation over time—is well matched to the study's phenomenological aims. The final sample consisted of 15 Filipino high school teachers drawn from District 79 schools, including West Side High School, Bronx Regional High School, Tenzer High School, and additional sites in Queens and Manhattan. A sample of this size sits comfortably within the range conventionally recommended for phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2013), supporting the kind of in-depth, saturated exploration of individual experience the design calls for.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the author and validated by a graduate-school faculty member. The guide was organized around three sections—opportunities, assimilation, and identity/cultural capital—with items explicitly designed to surface material relevant to the study's four guiding theories, and was administered as a self-completed questionnaire through Google Forms. This administration approach parallels the growing use of structured digital instruments in phenomenological research on cross-cultural educational experience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022), which

similarly relies on participants' own written accounts as the primary unit of analysis rather than transcribed spoken interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

The author obtained permission from the principals of participating District 79 schools prior to recruitment, followed by informed consent from each teacher participant, who could withdraw at any point without replacement. Participants completed the Google Forms questionnaire independently and at their own pace. Responses were compiled directly from participants' own written submissions, preserving their original wording for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method, applied in seven steps: immersion in the data; extraction of significant statements; formulation of meanings from those statements; clustering of meanings into themes; integration of themes into a comprehensive description; distillation into a fundamental structure; and validation of that structure through review by participants and by individuals familiar with the research context. This method was chosen specifically for its systematic, auditable path from participants' own written statements to interpreted theme, consistent with the study's phenomenological design throughout.

Ethical Considerations

The study received review from Holy Name University's Ethics Review Board prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from each teacher participant, no participant who withdrew was replaced, no incentives or compensation were provided, and the study reported no anticipated risk to participants. The ethics narrative in the original source additionally referenced "parental consent, in the case of students," despite the study's participants being teachers rather than students; this appears to be carried over from a template rather than reflecting an actual student sample, and is noted here for transparency rather than treated as evidence that students were separately involved.

3. Results

Lived Experiences in Terms of Opportunities

Five themes characterized the opportunities participants associated with teaching in District 79 (Table 1).

Table 1

Lived Experiences of Filipino Teachers in Terms of Opportunities

No.	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
1	Continuous skill development; adaptability and flexibility; career advancement opportunities; multifaceted skill set	Professional Advancement
2	Cross-cultural collaboration; cultural competence; celebrating differences; global perspective; inclusivity and acceptance; mutual learning and understanding	Cultural Engagement and Collaboration
3	Positive workplace dynamics; team synergy; teamwork and cooperation; validation of dedication	Positive Workplace Dynamics
4	Holistic educational resources; student-centered assistance	Educational Growth and Support
5	Family well-being; work-life integration	Personal and Family Well-Being

Under *Professional Advancement*, participants described taking on roles well beyond classroom instruction—one served as sustainability coordinator and Green Team adviser while also teaching an Environmental Science Advanced Placement course—alongside a deliberate willingness to abandon prior teaching habits in order to adapt to New York classroom dynamics. One participant specifically described being advised to "forget previous teaching styles and embrace a complete shift," which they credited with a successful transition to teaching students with learning difficulties in an inner-city setting, a pattern consistent with the proactive stance toward career growth documented among foreign-born teachers more broadly (Furuya et

al., 2019). *Cultural Engagement and Collaboration* captured participants' active role in cross-cultural exchange: infusing lessons with personal stories from the Philippines, building friendships across and beyond the Filipino community at their schools, and extending an inclusive stance toward students with individualized education plans and varied language backgrounds. *Positive Workplace Dynamics* reflected participants' sense of being professionally recognized—one described explicit acknowledgment from human-resources staff of Filipino teachers' dedication, alongside retention through a school phase-out and appointment to key positions as evidence of validated commitment. *Educational Growth and Support* centered on participants' appreciation for the comparative abundance of instructional resources, training, and online programs available within the New York City system relative to what they had previously known, paired with a student-centered orientation reflected in free instructional materials and accessible support services. Finally, *Personal and Family Well-Being* surfaced a more complicated picture: alongside professional gains, participants described homesickness and the ongoing work of adjusting to a new culture, with family support functioning as a counterbalancing source of strength, and work-life integration named as an active, sometimes difficult, negotiation rather than a settled achievement.

Lived Experiences in Terms of Assimilation

Five further themes characterized participants' assimilation experiences (Table 2).

Table 2

Lived Experiences of Filipino Teachers in Terms of Assimilation

No.	Theme Clusters	Emergent Theme
1	Perseverance and adaptation; navigating cultural differences; coping with student behavior	Adaptation and Resilience
2	Cultural integration in teaching; cultural exchange in teaching	Cultural Integration and Teaching
3	Community and support system; preservation of cultural identity	Community and Support
4	Professional recognition and acceptance; language and cultural adaptation	Professional Recognition and Acceptance
5	Understanding academic culture; encountering racism and challenges	Cultural Awareness and Understanding

Adaptation and Resilience captured participants' description of overcoming initial culture shock through perseverance, with several attributing part of their composure during difficult periods to religious practice and prayer, alongside the specific work of adapting classroom-management approaches to the behavioral needs of a student population that, given the District 79 context, likely included a higher proportion of over-age, under-credited, or previously disengaged learners than a comprehensive high school would. *Cultural Integration and Teaching* and *Community and Support* together described a two-way process: participants wove Filipino cultural stories and practices into instruction while drawing on the local Filipino community—described by one participant as providing “a sense of family and security,” with fellow Filipino teachers specifically named as a resource for “navigating challenges and transitions during the early years”—to manage the most disorienting period of transition. *Professional Recognition and Acceptance* reflected participants' sense of having earned standing through their teaching itself, illustrated by one account of a principal expressing a wish that all their teachers were Filipino, alongside the more effortful work of adapting to local accent, idiom, and “street language” well enough to be understood both inside and outside the classroom. The fifth theme, *Cultural Awareness and Understanding*, combined participants' account of learning an unfamiliar academic culture—including the alternative high school system itself and the demands of teaching students with disabilities and English-language learners—with the study's most direct evidence of group-based exclusion: participants described instances of racism, derogatory comments, and direct challenges to their teaching competence, consistent with being categorized as outsiders to the school's dominant in-group, which they reported managing through what the data characterized as dignity, hard work, and cultural competence rather than through any institutional recourse described in the data.

Taken as a whole, the two domains suggest that participants experienced District 79 as a setting offering genuine professional and cultural opportunity alongside a nontrivial assimilation burden—one that included, for at least some participants, direct exposure to group-based discriminatory treatment. The comparative

weight the data give to opportunity versus to the harder edges of assimilation, and what that balance does and does not indicate about that discriminatory treatment specifically, is taken up in the Discussion.

4. Discussion

Read through Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1980), participants' accounts describe an integration strategy rather than assimilation in the theory's narrower sense: they adapted to New York City's teaching environment—abandoning prior habits where needed, adjusting to local speech and student culture—while deliberately retaining and actively deploying their Filipino cultural identity, consistent with Santos and Reyes's (2020) finding that Filipino cultural values such as *pakikisama* actively shaped participants' classroom relationships rather than receding into the background. Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) is likewise well supported: participants did not describe their Filipino background as an obstacle to overcome but as a resource they drew on directly—language, personal narrative, and cultural knowledge functioning as assets in building rapport and legitimacy, echoing Castillo's (2019) and Chua's (2021) findings among Filipino teachers elsewhere in the United States. Glocalization Theory (Robertson, 1995) is reflected in participants' evident blending of globally circulating professional practices with the specific demands of a District 79 classroom, though the data speak to this synthesis more through participants' general adaptability than through explicit description of how particular global practices were localized.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) offers a well-matched reading of the *Cultural Awareness and Understanding* and *Professional Recognition and Acceptance* themes specifically. The theory holds that people categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, derive part of their self-concept from that group membership, and seek positive distinctiveness for the group they belong to—a dynamic visible on both sides of participants' accounts. Where participants described being on the receiving end of derogatory comments or direct challenges to their competence, the theory frames this as a predictable consequence of being categorized as an out-group member within the school community, independent of any individual's teaching quality. Where participants instead described earning recognition—a principal wishing all their teachers were Filipino, colleagues validating their dedication—the theory frames this as a shift from out-group to in-group standing, achieved through sustained contact, demonstrated competence, and the visible cultural contributions captured in the Cultural Capital findings above. Read this way, professional recognition and discriminatory treatment are not separate phenomena but two ends of the same in-group/out-group dynamic, which gives the findings a coherence that a framework demanding deeper structural and legal analysis, such as Critical Race Theory, would have required additional data collection to support. Participants' reported experiences of racism remain real and worth institutional attention regardless of which framework explains them; Social Identity Theory simply matches what this particular interview protocol was actually designed to, and did, capture.

5. Conclusion

Fifteen Filipino teachers in New York City's District 79 alternative and transfer high schools described a working life marked by genuine professional and cultural opportunity—advancement, cross-cultural collaboration, workplace recognition, and access to resources—alongside a real and, at times, discriminatory assimilation burden. Their accounts support an integration-oriented reading of acculturation, in which Filipino cultural identity functioned as an active professional asset rather than something to be set aside, and a social-identity-theory reading of professional recognition and exclusion as two ends of the same in-group/out-group dynamic. Together these findings point toward a support framework built on tailored professional development, administrator cultural-competence training, mentorship, and inclusive policy. At the same time, the study's single-district scope, and the narrower structural claims that a Critical-Race-Theory-specific redesign would be needed to support, mean these findings should be read as a well-documented account of this particular setting rather than a claim to generalize across Filipino teachers' experience in New York City as a whole.

6. Recommendations / Implications

Toward an Inclusive Integration and Professional Empowerment Framework

In response to the study's second research question, the findings point toward a four-part framework schools can use to support Filipino and other internationally recruited teachers in comparable alternative-education settings. *Tailored professional development* would address the specific skills District 79-type settings demand—behavior support for over-age and under-credited students, alongside general instructional growth—rather than generic onboarding. *Cultural-competence training for administrators* would build leadership capacity to recognize and support the specific adjustment burdens international teachers carry, including the kind of racialized treatment surfaced in this study's findings. *Mentorship pairing experienced teachers with newcomers* would formalize the informal community support participants credited with easing their transition. *Inclusive policy development*, pursued in direct collaboration with the teachers affected, would translate these findings into enforceable protections and equitable-opportunity structures rather than aspirational statements alone. Any of these components would need clear ownership, a modest evaluation cycle, and, importantly, a stronger evidentiary base on the racialized-experience dimension than this study alone can provide.

Implications

For school and district leaders, the findings suggest that internationally recruited teachers in high-need settings benefit from support that goes beyond generic new-hire onboarding to address the specific combination of cultural adjustment, student-population demands, and, for at least some teachers, discriminatory treatment. That support is most credible when it comes from people who have already navigated the same transition: participants' own accounts pointed to informal peer networks, not formal district programming, as what actually got them through the earliest and most difficult period of adjustment, which argues for building mentorship structures around existing informal networks rather than replacing them with a separate administrative program. For teachers, the findings offer a point of comparison for their own experience and language for naming both the opportunities and the harder edges of assimilation, particularly the distinction between assimilation and integration that Acculturation Theory makes available: participants' experience suggests that retaining rather than suppressing Filipino cultural identity was itself a professional asset, not merely a personal comfort. For the Philippine basic-education sector, the findings argue for teacher-education programs to build intercultural competence and, specifically, intergroup-relations and anti-discrimination literacy into pre-departure preparation for teachers bound for international placements, so that these lessons are anticipated rather than learned only after migration, and for Philippine teacher-training institutions such as Holy Name University to treat studies like this one as a growing evidence base on which to build that preparation, rather than as isolated dissertation projects with no cumulative follow-through.

Recommendations

Future studies in this line of research should extend beyond District 79 to mainstream New York City schools, and to other cities with sizable Filipino teacher populations, to clarify which findings here are specific to alternative-education settings and which generalize more broadly. A study designed specifically around Critical Race Theory or a comparable structural framework, with interview items built from the outset to probe racialized and discriminatory experience in depth, would meaningfully extend what this study's broader lived-experience protocol could support. For practice, school and district leaders are encouraged to pilot the mentorship and administrator cultural-competence components of the proposed framework first, given that both draw most directly on what participants described as already working informally.

7. Limitations

Two limitations meaningfully qualify these findings. First, the study's site—District 79 alternative and transfer schools—serves a distinct student population (over-age, under-credited, or previously disengaged learners) and operates outside the borough-based geographic districts that serve New York City's mainstream high schools; findings here should therefore not be generalized to Filipino teachers in mainstream New York City schools without further comparative research. Second, because Social Identity Theory was substituted for the original study's Critical Race Theory framework specifically to match the depth of data the interview protocol actually collected, the findings on discriminatory treatment should be read as evidence of in-group/out-group dynamics rather than as a structural or legal analysis of systemic racism; a future study designed from the outset around Critical Race Theory, with interview items built to probe racialized experience with comparable depth to the opportunity and cultural-integration themes, would be needed to support that more structural claim.

8. Declarations

Ethics Statement

This study received review and approval from Holy Name University's Ethics Review Board prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each teacher participant. No participant who withdrew was replaced, no incentives or compensation were provided, and the study posed no anticipated risk to participants.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing: Annabelle S. Gonzaga. Supervision: Asuncion P. Pabalan.

Data Availability

The questionnaire responses generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to the participant confidentiality commitments made during informed consent, but de-identified excerpts may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy restrictions.

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