

Out of the Country: Digging into the Lived Experiences of LCCians Teaching Abroad

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the lived experiences of eight alumni who are currently teaching abroad or have previously taught overseas, using a phenomenological approach. The research aimed to understand their motivations, challenges, and benefits, as well as their perspectives on employment stability, teacher turnover, and the role of their alma mater in preparing them for international teaching. Nine superordinate themes emerged: working for a worthy life, unpacking the exit, ripple of departures, lessening turnover, seeking better horizons, between the known and new, value of being valued, secured through compensation, and real-life education. All participants cited the pursuit of a better quality of life and financial stability as the primary reason for leaving DepEd, with five also seeking professional growth. Turnover factors included low salary and excessive non-teaching workload. Participants highlighted the negative impact of turnover on student learning and school quality. To lessen turnover, they recommended increased salaries, proper support, and reduced workload. Challenges abroad involved homesickness, language barriers, and cultural adjustment, while benefits included supportive work environments and higher compensation. Most viewed overseas employment as more stable and sustainable. Additionally, participants acknowledged the vital role of their alma mater in equipping them with the necessary skills and mindset for global teaching. The findings of this study were used as a basis for a developmental plan to address the issues raised and to assist future educators preparing to teach abroad.

Keywords: personal and professional growth, turnover factors, challenges, motivation, benefits

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Educators are one prominent group of workers who seek better opportunities abroad. According to York (2021), 92 percent of the teachers teaching in their local community plan to go abroad in the future, and 59 percent also plan to move abroad. In the Philippines, many teachers with different specializations leave the country to teach abroad because of the higher salaries in the neighboring countries, wherein their skills make them more employable (Gatchalian, 2024, as cited by Zurbano, 2024). According to Berger (2021), the low employment rate in the Philippines, as well as the low salary and high inflation rate, are some of the major causes why teachers in the Philippines leave to seek better opportunities abroad. In addition, many countries hire Filipino teachers because they are proficient in speaking the English language and are adept inside the classroom (Gatchalian, 2024, as cited by Zurbano, 2024). Moreover, Gatchalian (2024) stated that with a lot of job opportunities abroad, it is quite concerning because, in turn, the Philippines will lose more teachers within the country.

The Department of Education (DepEd) should be alarmed, especially since many unfilled positions within the DepEd could compromise the quality of education (Villanueva, 2023). Moreover, because of the need for teachers, the ideal ratio of 30 students per teacher is not met, which puts a heavy burden on the teachers managing the classroom (Mercado, 2023). Many countries worldwide, like China, Spain, and the UAE, need teachers who can proficiently speak the English language to teach their learners (York, 2021). In addition, according to UNESCO (2023), many countries need teachers, and 69 million teachers are needed to achieve universal basic education. The increasing global demand for teachers shows that there are many opportunities for teachers abroad.

It is important to study the experiences of teachers who are working abroad to determine their negative and positive experiences of teachers who are teaching abroad and to provide a wider and more comprehensive overview for those teachers who are planning to go abroad. Despite the existing studies that show the different challenges faced by teachers abroad, there is still a gap that needs to be filled because it is evident that teaching abroad also has risks and drawbacks.

Currently, no study examines the lived experiences of teachers abroad who graduated from La Carlota City College. Thus, this study aimed to determine the lived experiences of teachers who graduated from La Carlota City College who are able to teach abroad. Furthermore, this study aimed to shed light on different aspects like the motivation, benefits, challenges, and drawbacks of teachers abroad.

METHODS

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of teachers who transitioned from the Philippine public school system to teaching abroad. According to Jain (2023), phenomenological qualitative research seeks to uncover and explore human phenomena by capturing the essence of individuals' experiences, motivations, cultures, and behaviors. Similarly, Umanilo (2019) emphasized that the phenomenological approach aims to describe and understand individuals' experiences, emotions, and actions by revealing the essence of their lived realities. The research design enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' motivations for teaching abroad, the challenges and benefits they encountered, their perceptions of career stability, and the factors that contributed to their decision to leave the Department of Education (DepEd).

The participants in the study consisted of eight alumni teachers who are currently teaching abroad. In phenomenological research, a sample size ranging from five to twenty-five participants is considered adequate to provide rich and meaningful descriptions of lived experiences (Creswell, 1988, as cited in Bekele & Ago, 2022). To ensure the relevance and quality of the data, the following inclusion criteria were established: (1) participants must be alumni of La Carlota City College (LCCC); (2) they must have served as teachers in the Department of Education (DepEd) for at least two years; (3) they must have worked or currently be working as teachers abroad; and (4) they must have at least one year of teaching experience in a foreign country.

As a qualitative study, the primary research instrument was a semi-structured, in-depth interview. This instrument provided participants with the opportunity to freely describe their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe further into relevant issues and emerging themes. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across interviews while maintaining the flexibility necessary to capture rich and detailed narratives.

The collected data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis approach, as adapted from the study of Khaef and Karimnia (2021). The analysis followed several systematic stages, including bracketing, horizontalization, clustering of meanings into themes, the development of textural and structural descriptions, and the synthesis of meanings and essences. Through this process, the researcher identified the essential themes that characterized the participants' lived experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of their motivations, challenges, benefits, perceptions of career stability, and reasons for leaving DepEd to pursue teaching opportunities abroad.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study examined the lived experiences of eight Filipino teachers who are currently teaching abroad. The participants consisted of five males and three females who left their teaching positions in DepEd to teach in various countries in the United States of America (USA). Through the responses of the participants, the researcher was able to come up with nine (9) main themes with twenty sub-themes that emerged from their shared data through the use of Moustakas' Phenomenological Data Analysis. These main themes were working for a worthy life, unpacking the exit, ripple of departures, lessening turnover, seeking better horizons, between the known and the new, value of being valued, secured through compensation, and real-life education.

Working for a worthy life emerged as one of the significant themes, emphasizing that teachers pursued employment abroad to seek greener pastures and provide better opportunities for their families. Their narratives revealed that Filipino teachers were motivated to work abroad primarily to achieve financial stability and support their families (Uytico & Abadiano, 2020). The participants' narratives suggest that teaching abroad was not merely an economic decision but also a manifestation of their commitment to fulfilling familial responsibilities. Their lived experiences demonstrate that the pursuit of employment abroad reflected both financial aspirations and a deeply rooted sense of obligation towards their families. This finding aligns with career motivation theories, which explain that career decisions are influenced by both extrinsic factors, such as compensation, and intrinsic factors such as personal fulfillment and professional growth. Moreover, participants also sought growth through exploration in a global classroom. This reveals that the participants' aimed to socially and culturally immerse themselves in a different country to broaden their professional perspectives and competencies (Cabiladas, 2020). Their accounts further indicate that international teaching was perceived as an opportunity to develop professionally while expanding intercultural competence, thereby enriching their identities as educators.

Meanwhile, unpacking the exit highlighted the overwhelming workload and low salaries that influenced the participants decisions to leave DepEd. Teachers resigned from public schools because they were dissatisfied with responsibilities extending beyond their instructional duties (Bulauwat, 2019). The participants' narratives indicate that their decision to resign resulted from prolonged experiences of dissatisfaction rather than isolated incidents. Their lived experiences reveal how excessive workloads, insufficient compensation, and limited institutional support gradually diminished their sense of professional fulfillment, which led them to seek employment abroad.

The theme ripple of departures illustrates that teacher migration extends beyond the experiences of individual educators. Through the participants' narratives, it was evident that their departure affected colleagues, learners, and the broader educational system. Their experiences suggest that teacher migration contributes to increased workloads among remaining teachers and challenges educational continuity. This demonstrates that high teacher turnover is a systematic concern with implications for the sustainability of the Philippine educational sector.

Similarly, lessening turnover emerged from the participants' recommendations to reduce teacher attrition through increased salaries, improved administrative support, manageable workloads, and enhanced professional development opportunities. These recommendations were based in the participants lived experiences and reflected their understanding of the institutional conditions necessary for teacher retention. Their accounts indicate that supportive leadership, equitable compensation, and professional recognition contribute significantly to teacher commitment to remain in the profession.

Seeking better horizons highlighted the participants' aspirations to pursue broader professional and personal opportunities. Previous studies similarly found that Filipino teachers working abroad sought financial stability while also pursuing cultural immersion and career advancement (Uytico & Abadiano, 2020). The participants narratives portray migration as a deliberate pursuit of personal and professional transformation rather than merely an escape from unfavorable working conditions. Their experiences represent that teaching abroad is an opportunity to achieve career advancement, personal growth, and greater professional fulfillment.

The theme between the known and the new highlighted the challenges encountered by participants' while teaching abroad, including homesickness, language barriers, cultural differences, environmental adjustments, and student behavior (Sumalinog, 2022). Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience by adapting to unfamiliar educational systems and cultural environments. Their lived experiences suggest that professional identity evolved through continuous adaptation and reflection, allowing them to integrate their Filipino teaching values with the expectations of international educational contexts.

Conversely, the theme value of being valued explored the benefits experienced by participants while working abroad, including stronger institutional support, higher salaries, and opportunities for personal and professional development (Tanaytay et al., 2024). The participants consistently associated feeling valued with receiving professional respect, institutional trust, equitable compensation, and recognition for their contributions. Their narratives indicate that such experiences strengthened both their professional identity and job satisfaction.

Finally, the theme real-life education demonstrates how the participants' alma mater prepared them through meaningful learning experiences and practical training. High-quality teacher education institutions prepare educators not only for classroom instruction but also for reflective practice and lifelong professional learning (Bardelli et al., 2022). The participants' narratives suggest that the competencies, resilience, and professional values developed during their teacher education enabled them to navigate the complexities of teaching in international contexts.

Through the participants' verbatim narratives, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad. The findings demonstrate that teachers teaching abroad represent a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the interaction of economic aspirations, family responsibilities, professional identity, institutional conditions, and opportunities for career advancement. The interconnected themes emphasize that Filipino teachers working abroad involve continuous negotiation between sacrifice and opportunity, challenge and adaptation, and professional commitment and personal fulfillment. The findings of the study highlight the participants' motivations, challenges, benefits, and the broader factors influencing their decisions to teach abroad. This emphasizes the need for educational reforms that address teacher turnover through competitive compensation, supportive leadership, professional recognition, and sustainable working conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were drawn based on the findings. First, teachers who left DepEd and pursued teaching abroad were primarily motivated by personal and familial aspirations for a better life. All of the participants were driven by their aim to find better opportunities and improve their living conditions. Second, high teacher turnover in DepEd is significantly influenced by the mismatch between teachers' core duties and the additional workload, along with a low salaries, which contributed to their dissatisfaction and their decision to work abroad. Third, teacher turnover can affect student learning and the performance of schools, especially when competent teachers leave, which creates a gap in learning that greatly affects the quality of education. Fourth, through higher compensation and adequate resources and support, DepEd can address the high teacher turnover rate and retain teachers.

Fifth, economic motivation remains one of the strongest reasons for Filipino teachers to go abroad. Moreover, professional development also plays an important role, showing that teachers value both personal and career opportunities. Sixth, teaching abroad comes with various challenges including emotional and cultural adjustment, homesickness, and language barriers. Seventh, teaching abroad offers a more supportive and rewarding work environment with a high salary that greatly contributes to high job satisfaction and well-being. Eighth, teachers abroad perceive international teaching as a stable career path, especially due to its financial security and long-term benefits. Ninth, the alma mater of the participants played an important role in preparing them to teach abroad by providing them with foundational knowledge, skills, and professional values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were proposed. First, the school administrators and the Department of Education (DepEd) may utilize the shared lived experiences of teachers abroad to improve the department's system and raise concerns with the government about teacher salaries and their additional workloads. Second, the School Division Superintendent (SDs) may consider giving teachers less workload and wellness programs to help them cope with stress and retain them in the Philippines. Third, teachers employed locally may use this study as a guide whenever they want to pursue teaching abroad or stay in the Philippines based on the lived experiences of teachers who are currently teaching abroad.

Fourth, the suggestions made by the participants to reduce teacher turnover may be utilized to hear out the concerns of teachers and reduce teacher turnover. Fifth, Teacher Education Institutions may consider this study in their curriculum in preparing students not just for teaching employment inside the country but also abroad. Lastly, given that the participants of the study are all located in the USA, other researchers may consider getting participants from different countries to provide richer data about the reality of teaching abroad.

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