

Realities of Teaching in The Last Frontier: Experiences of Filipino Mentors in Alaska

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Abstract — This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino mentors in Alaska teaching in the last frontier. There were ten (10) Filipino teachers in Alaska participated in the study. This study made use of a phenomenological approach to extract the ideas of the participants. An in-depth interview and focus-group discussion were employed to gather information about their respective experiences, coping mechanisms with the challenges, and insights. Using the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged with regards to the experiences Filipino mentors in Alaska: personal sacrifices and motivations, cultural adaptation and integration and professional growth and resilience. To overcome challenges teaching in the last frontier, three themes were identified as coping mechanisms: establishing strong social networks, cultural integration and mutual respect and fostering emotional stability. The insights drawn from experiences of Filipino mentors in Alaska were emotional resilience and adaptability in educational environments, mentorship and professional support systems and nurturing faith and community relationship. The study revealed the rich experiences of Filipino mentors in Alaska along with their cultural, professional, and environmental adjustments. To make this study meaningful, publication in a reputable journal is essential.

Keywords — *teaching in the last frontier, experiences, Filipino mentors*

I. Introduction

Teaching in the last frontier presents a unique set of challenges and experiences for Filipino mentors in Alaska, as they navigate cultural adjustments, extreme weather conditions, and diverse student populations. Filipino mentors, often recruited to address teacher shortages, bring their expertise and resilience to Alaskan schools, contributing to academic development while facing personal and professional hurdles.

This study explores the experiences of Filipino mentors working in Alaska, often referred to as "the Last Frontier," where they navigate cultural adjustments, extreme weather conditions, and the demands of the U.S. education system. It examines how these educators adapt to a new environment, maintain professional resilience, and contribute to the diverse learning communities they serve. The study was chosen to highlight the unique struggles and successes of Filipino mentors in an unfamiliar landscape, shedding light on the broader experiences of migrant educators. The findings will benefit Filipino mentors aspiring to work abroad, policymakers in education, and school administrators by providing insights into the support systems needed for effective integration and professional growth. This research aims to inform recruitment strategies,

enhance teacher support programs, and foster a deeper understanding of the contributions of Filipino educators in international settings.

Teaching in the last frontier, Alaska, presents a unique set of challenges and experiences for Filipino educators who navigate cultural differences, extreme weather conditions, and educational disparities while striving to provide quality instruction. Filipino mentors, many of whom migrate through international teaching programs, face difficulties such as isolation in remote areas, limited professional support, and adapting to diverse student populations, including Indigenous communities with unique educational needs. Similar challenges are observed in other countries where Filipino mentors serve, such as Canada, where adapting to multicultural classrooms and harsh winters can be overwhelming (Gonzales & Smith, 2021), and where visa sponsorship and contractual uncertainties pose significant issues.

Research in Australia highlights the difficulties migrant teachers face in credential recognition and professional integration (Martinez, 2023). Struggles with cultural assimilation and classroom management were due to differing pedagogical approaches.

In United Kingdom, migrant teachers encounter employment barriers due to stringent licensing requirements. International teachers report difficulties in classroom management due to differing educational philosophies. In the , Filipino educators often struggle with discrimination and workplace integration (Anderson & Lee, 2023). These gaps highlight the need for targeted support systems, inclusive policies, and institutional interventions to help migrant teachers succeed in diverse educational settings.

One of the most prominent challenges faced by Filipino mentors in Alaska is the geographic isolation of many schools. Many educators are placed in small, remote villages, making it difficult to access professional development, social opportunities, and even basic supplies. The physical distance from urban centers, combined with harsh weather conditions, creates a barrier for teachers, both in terms of logistics and their emotional well-being (Gonzalez & Tan (2023) .

Recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote Alaskan schools have been longstanding issues. Many Filipino mentors are enthusiastic about the opportunity to work in the United States, the challenges they face—such as harsh weather conditions, limited social support, and professional isolation—lead to high turnover rates. This is particularly true for teachers in remote villages, where the infrastructure and community support systems are often lacking (Santos & Panganiban ,2020).

Classroom management is another significant issue for Filipino mentors in Alaska. With diverse student populations that include Native Alaskan students and students from other immigrant communities, Filipino mentors must develop strategies that address the unique cultural and behavioral needs of their students. Filipino mentors are well-equipped with classroom management techniques learned in the Philippines, they often find that these strategies do not always translate effectively in Alaska's multicultural classrooms (De Vera & Tan ,2021).

These systemic challenges have resulted in a continuous migration of skilled Filipino teachers to foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, and the Middle East, exacerbating the teacher shortage in the Philippines (Garcia & Cruz, 2022). Addressing these domestic educational gaps is crucial in ensuring that Filipino teachers are provided with better support and incentives to continue serving their home country.

Filipino mentors play a crucial role in addressing teacher shortages in the United States, particularly in remote areas such as Alaska. Drawn by employment opportunities and the promise of better wages, many Filipino educators migrate to Alaska, where they face unique challenges related to cultural adaptation, extreme weather conditions, and pedagogical adjustments in diverse classrooms (Sarmiento & dela Cruz, 2022). While their resilience and commitment to education are evident, navigating unfamiliar curricula, language barriers, and student behavioral differences pose significant hurdles. Understanding their lived experiences can provide insights into effective support systems that enhance their professional and personal well-being in a foreign educational landscape.

Moreover, considering all the existing issues requires stronger institutional support, policy reforms on international teacher recruitment, and professional development tailored to foreign educators' needs. Addressing these gaps requires comprehensive support systems both in the Philippines and in host countries to ensure the well-being and professional satisfaction of migrant educators.

II. Methodology

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Filipino mentors in Alaska, focusing on the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employed in adapting to a foreign educational system. Utilized a phenomenological approach, the study sought to capture the authentic voices of these educators by delving into their personal narratives, perceptions, and emotions as they navigated cultural, professional, and environmental adjustments.

Furthermore, the study aimed to identify recurring themes in their experiences, such as professional struggles, social integration, and resilience, provided a comprehensive understanding of how these teachers adapt and thrive in an unfamiliar setting. By centering on their lived realities, this research highlighted gaps and issues in teacher preparation, policy support, and the long-term impact of migration on their careers and well-being. This focused to ensure that the research not only highlighted challenges but also provided actionable recommendations for policy-makers, school administrators, and teacher training institutions to bridge existing gaps.

The philosophical assumption provided the context for the ensuring results and conclusions. Understanding the philosophical assumptions behind qualitative research begins with assessing where it fits within the overall research process, noting its importance as an element of research, and considering how to actively incorporate it into a study. As Khalifa and Khalifa (2024)

stated, these assumptions typically cover ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological educational perspectives.

As I engaged in this research, I am perpetually aware of or influenced by a range of beliefs concerning the nature of reality, how knowledge was acquired, the role values played in research, and the methodologies employed in the study.

Ontology. An ontology is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality, what can be known, and how. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions, and beliefs the researcher brings to the research endeavor are the initial basis for an ontological position. Ontological assumptions are fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality and human existence that underpin social research and policymaking.

In his 2019 work, Jack Newman explores the ontological assumptions underlying qualitative research, particularly within social policy analysis. Ontology, the study of the nature of reality, is fundamental in shaping research methodologies and interpretations. Newman critiques the dominance of positivist approaches in social analysis, which often emphasize observable phenomena and quantifiable data. He advocates for a constructivist perspective, suggesting that social realities are constructed through human interactions and shared meanings. This viewpoint aligns with qualitative research methodologies that prioritize understanding the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals.

In this study, realities on the lived experiences of Filipino mentors in Alaska, teaching in the last frontier were shared by the participants and tried to look into their ways of coping while teaching in the last frontier.

Epistemology. An epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower. It includes how the relationship between the researcher and research participant(s) is understood. Epistemological assumptions in studies highlight the importance of explicitly addressing researchers' perspectives and methodologies. McNeil (2020) emphasizes the need to challenge dominant postpositivist paradigms in social work and substance use research, advocating for critical epistemologies to promote social justice.

The participants of this study were composed of ten (10) teachers. They were the selected Filipino teachers in Alaska. The participants should have been teaching three or more years in the service, have Very Satisfactory Performance Rating for three consecutive years, male or female.

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide that featured open-ended questions. This approach allowed participants the freedom to express their thoughts while giving the researcher flexibility to probe further into significant topics. Interviews and discussions were conducted in quiet, comfortable, and private settings within the school or community, fostering openness and trust. Throughout the research process, For both in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), participants were selected using the purposive sampling since the

participants will be chosen based on the criteria or purpose of the study. It was also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling. The selection of the participants was purposefully done to ensure that the findings will be authentic.

The ethical consideration section of this study addressed the key principles that ensure the protection and well-being of the teacher-respondents involved. This includes adhering to confidentiality, informed consent, and the voluntary nature of participation, ensuring that the research is conducted with integrity and respect for the rights of all respondents and participants rights were strictly observed to protect and uphold the integrity of the research. Informed consent was obtained through clear and accessible explanations of the study's purpose and procedures. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and all data were securely stored. Risks were minimized by allowing participants to skip questions or withdraw at any time, and care was taken to respect the cultural and professional contexts of the teachers involved. Transparency, fairness, and respect guided every step of the research process, reinforcing trust between the researcher and the participants.

The data analysis process followed a systematic thematic approach. Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's method. The researcher began by immersing in the data, identifying codes, and grouping them into themes that represented key aspects of teachers' experiences. Triangulation between individual and group data sources, member checking, and an external audit enhanced the study's credibility and dependability. By documenting decisions and reflecting on biases, the researcher ensured confirmability. Rich descriptions of the participants' contexts allowed for transferability, enabling others to assess the relevance of findings to their own settings.

Ultimately, the chosen methodology provided a strong foundation for exploring a complex and sensitive topic in early education. The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to gain a deep, nuanced understanding of how primary teachers perceive and manage prolonged parental presence in their classrooms. Through ethical rigor, thoughtful participant selection, and a structured yet flexible research design, the study generated insights that are both meaningful and practical. The findings aim to inform school policies and support teachers in balancing parental involvement with effective classroom management and professional autonomy.

III. Results and Discussion

This chapter served as a critical component of the study, provided insights into the practical, policy, and research implications of the findings and offering guidance. This aimed to translate the research findings into actionable recommendations and identify avenues for continued inquiry to enhance the experiences and effectiveness of Filipino teachers in Alaska.

The study showcased and discussed how its findings can inform and improve teaching in the last frontier of Filipino teachers in Alaska.

For the experiences of Filipino mentors in Alaska, three themes emerged from the responses of the participants which were personal sacrifices, cultural adaptation and integration and professional growth and resilience.

The decision to teach in a distant land like Alaska often entails leaving behind family, familiar surroundings, and established support systems. These personal sacrifices underscore the dedication and commitment of these educators to seek professional opportunities and contribute their skills in a pristine environment. The emotional toll of separation and the adjustments required in their personal lives form a critical layer of their overall experience.

Cultural adaptation and integration represent another prominent theme in the experiences of Filipino teachers in Alaska. Navigating a new culture, with its distinct social norms, communication styles, and daily practices, requires significant effort and open-mindedness. As highlighted in the participants' responses, differences in the way of life and even the educational system necessitate a period of adjustment. However, the kindness and support received from colleagues and the formation of close-knit communities, particularly among fellow Filipinos, play a crucial role in facilitating this integration. This theme underscores the importance of both individual adaptability and the presence of supportive networks in fostering a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the experiences of Filipino teachers in Alaska are characterized by professional growth and resilience. The exposure to different teaching methodologies, resources, and technologies, as indicated in the provided snippets, offers opportunities for expanding their pedagogical skills and enhancing their professional capabilities. The emphasis on independent learning and creativity, for instance, encourages teachers to adapt their approaches.

In conclusion, the emerging themes of personal sacrifices, cultural adaptation and integration, and professional growth and resilience provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Filipino teachers in Alaska. Their journey is characterized by a willingness to overcome personal challenges, adapt to a new cultural context, and embrace opportunities for professional development. The support they receive from colleagues and their own community played a vital role in their integration and overall well-being, contributing to their resilience and success in the Alaskan educational landscape.

As to the coping mechanisms of Filipino mentors in Alaska teaching in the last frontier, themes can be summarized as follows: establishing strong social networks, cultural integration and mutual respect and fostering emotional stability.

On establishing strong social networks, this theme highlights the proactive effort of teachers to build supportive relationships with colleagues, fellow Filipinos in Alaska, and potentially members of the local community. These networks provide emotional support, a sense

of belonging, and practical assistance in navigating the pristine environment and professional landscape.

On cultural integration and mutual respect, this coping mechanism involves actively engaging with the local Alaskan culture, including that of the indigenous communities, to foster understanding and comfort. By learning about and respecting the local customs, teachers can build rapport, reduce cultural misunderstandings, and promote a more harmonious and supportive environment for themselves and their students.

On fostering emotional stability, this encompasses the various strategies teachers employ to maintain their emotional well-being in the face of challenges such as homesickness, cultural adjustment, and professional demands. This may include seeking out familiar comforts, utilizing technology to connect with family, practicing self-care, and developing inner strength and resilience to cope with the unique circumstances of living and working in Alaska.

For educational insights, three themes emerged from the participants' responses, which emphasized, emotional resilience and adaptability in educational environments, mentorship and professional support systems and nurturing faith and community relationship.

On emotional resilience and adaptability in educational environments, this theme encompass the importance of cultural preparedness, sensitivity towards diverse student populations (especially indigenous cultures), and the necessity for teachers to understand the local geographical and socio-economic context to be effective educators.

On mentorship and professional support systems, this theme highlighted the challenges faced by teachers in adapting to new educational systems and environments, particularly for those coming from different countries. It underscores the critical need for robust support systems such as orientation programs, mentoring, and fostering networks among teachers, as well as addressing issues like homesickness and promoting mental well-being.

On nurturing faith and community relationship, this theme emphasized the development of resourcefulness and creativity in teaching, often necessitated by limited resources. It also points to the significant role of community engagement and effective communication with parents and the community, recognizing the importance of understanding and adapting to local customs and practices.

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