

Lived Experiences of Filipino J-1 Exchange Teachers in a Rural School District in South Carolina: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Bartolome B. Aguilos

Doctor of Philosophy, Major in Educational Management, University of Perpetual Help System-Dalta, Las Piñas, City, Metro Manila, Philippines

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Email of Corresponding Author: teachbartaguilos@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined the lived experiences of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers in a rural school district in South Carolina, focusing on their transition, professional work, challenges, coping strategies, and meanings of thriving and surviving. The study was anchored in Differential Adaptation Theory, the Ecological Perspective on Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Identity Construction, and the Professional Identity Reconstruction Framework. It employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Six Filipino J-1 exchange teachers who had completed at least one academic year in the district were selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling. Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed through case-by-case and cross-case interpretative procedures. The findings revealed that transition involved professional relearning, cultural adjustment, emotional endurance, and teacher identity reconstruction. Major challenges included student behavior, classroom management, language and accent differences, parent communication, family separation, rural transportation, financial concerns, and emotional strain. Participants coped through patience, openness, self-reflection, continued learning, family communication, Filipino peer networks, mentoring, school leadership, and district support. Thriving and surviving were experienced simultaneously, as participants developed confidence, resilience, belonging, and professional growth while continuing to manage uncertainty and pressure. The study concluded that sustained, context-based support is necessary and recommended a year-long program covering induction, classroom management coaching, communication assistance, mentoring, well-being support, rural living guidance, transportation assistance, financial orientation, and settlement support. The study primarily supports SDG 4 on Quality Education and is also connected to SDG 8 on Decent Work and SDG 17 on international educational partnerships. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening teacher well-being, retention, instructional continuity, inclusive school environments, and responsive institutional support for internationally mobile educators.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Filipino J-1 Exchange Teachers, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Professional Identity Reconstruction, Rural Education, Teacher Support, Teacher Well-Being, Thriving and Surviving

1. Introduction

This study examines the lived experiences of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers in a rural School District in South Carolina, particularly their transition, professional work, coping, and meaning-making within a rural American school context. It is grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis, which allows the study to examine how participants understand the experience of thriving and surviving while adjusting to a new educational, cultural, and institutional environment. The introduction situates the study within teacher mobility, cross-cultural adaptation, teacher identity, institutional support, and sustainable educational development.

1.1 Background of Filipino J-1 Exchange Teachers' Transition, Professional Work, and Meaning-Making

Cross-border teacher mobility responds to workforce needs and cultural exchange, but it also involves complex lived experiences of transition, adjustment, and identity change. Under the U.S. BridgeUSA Teacher Program, foreign teachers may serve as full-time teachers of record in accredited U.S. primary and secondary schools while also participating in cultural exchange activities that connect schools and communities with their home countries (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Within this context, Filipino teachers' movement to U.S. schools should not be understood only as employment transfer, but as a lived process involving adaptation, professional work, belonging, and meaning-making. This concern aligns with broader educational priorities because SDG 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education, AmBisyon Natin 2040 connects education with improved quality of life for Filipinos, and EDCOM II continues to identify teacher quality and education reform as national concerns. Existing scholarship also shows that immigrant and international teachers often experience professional vulnerability, identity tension, and shifting belonging during transition (Yip, 2023; Yip & Saito, 2024). Immigrant educators bring cultural and professional assets to host institutions, but their identities may

be shaped by pressure to adjust to existing norms or set aside prior practices (Xu et al., 2025). In South Carolina, international teachers under J-1 or J-2 routes are especially visible in rural and high-poverty schools, which makes teacher support and retention important for instructional continuity and school stability (Starrett et al., 2024).

1.2 Related Literature on Cross-Cultural Teacher Mobility, Adaptation, and Identity

The reviewed literature shows that transition among immigrant and overseas teachers is not a single event but an ongoing process of cultural adaptation, professional reorientation, emotional response, and belonging. Transition is commonly reflected in culture shock, uncertainty, stress, isolation, student behavior concerns, and the need to balance prior teaching norms with host-school expectations (Eid & Almassry, 2025; Yip & Saito, 2024). This makes an identity-based and ecological view more appropriate than a narrow adjustment lens, because Filipino J-1 teachers do not simply adapt to a new system; they interpret that adaptation while living and working in a foreign district (Eid & Almassry, 2025; Kamali & Nazariabbasbolaghi, 2023). Professional work in cross-cultural school settings also extends beyond classroom instruction. It includes role expectations, classroom management, collegial relations, leadership demands, institutional routines, and the emotional and cultural labor required to remain effective in an unfamiliar school environment (Bright & Poole, 2025; Golis, 2025). Studies show that teachers' work adjustment is shaped by leadership, mentoring, peer relations, school climate, and institutional support, not only by personal resilience or readiness (Golis, 2025; Harrison & Hou, 2023). Thus, migrant teachers' difficulties should not be interpreted merely as individual weakness, since school conditions may either reduce or intensify the burden of adjustment (Cutor, 2025; Norris & Shriner, 2024). Meaning-making is equally central because it explains how teachers interpret their experiences in relation to identity, purpose, belonging, and future direction. Filipino and other migrant teachers may view similar demands as growth, sacrifice, strain, or a mixture of these meanings (Alicamen & Becamon, 2022; Real & Flordeliz, 2024). The literature suggests that thriving and surviving should be understood as positions along a lived continuum shaped by coping, support, identity, and work conditions rather than as simple opposites (Kamali & Nazariabbasbolaghi, 2023; Villahermosa et al., 2025). Studies further show that international teaching often involves emotional strain, homesickness, cultural adjustment, unfamiliar student behavior, and institutional pressure, but may also result in confidence, professional maturity, resilience, and renewed purpose (Balbin et al., 2025; De Oca & Malaga, 2025; Jasmin, 2025; Alicamen & Becamon, 2022; Lemana, 2022; San Jose & Cabunilas, 2025).

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Filipino J-1 Teachers in Rural U.S. Schools

The study is located within global teacher mobility, national education reform, and local rural school needs. Globally, research on immigrant and expatriate teachers has expanded, yet collaboration and context-specific studies remain limited (Ferrada Quezada & Flores-Fernández, 2025). International teaching experiences have been studied in the United States, Singapore, the Emirates, China, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, and other host systems, with recurring themes of adjustment pressure, emotional vulnerability, identity change, school support, and resilience (Al-Taneiji, 2025; Harrison & Hou, 2023; Bright & Heyting, 2024; Johnson, 2022; Vincent et al., 2023). In the Filipino context, studies show that migration decisions are influenced by heavy workloads and low pay in the Philippines, hopes for better income and living conditions, family responsibilities, and the need to adjust to new professional and social demands in the United States (Alsado & Oliveros, 2025; De Oca & Malaga, 2025). Related studies also report emotional strain, community support, faith, routine, and resilience as important features of Filipino teachers' early experiences in U.S. schools (Balbin et al., 2025; Jasmin, 2025). These findings confirm that Filipino teachers' international work cannot be understood only through migration motives, because it also involves coping, professional identity, institutional support, and lived meaning. Locally, the present inquiry focuses on Filipino J-1 exchange teachers in one rural School District in South Carolina. Existing studies on Filipino teachers in the United States have examined Texas, Illinois, Alaska, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or broader multi-state contexts, but fewer studies provide a close interpretative account of Filipino J-1 teachers in one rural public school district. This local focus is important because rural school settings may produce distinct forms of belonging, isolation, institutional support, workload pressure, and community adjustment that broad studies may not fully capture.

1.4 Interpretative Phenomenological and Theoretical Basis of the Study

The study is anchored in interpretative phenomenology because it seeks to understand lived experience and the meanings participants give to that experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is appropriate because the inquiry does not merely describe what happened to Filipino J-1 exchange teachers; it examines how they make sense of transition, work, coping, thriving, and surviving in a rural American school context (Smith et al., 2022). This approach assumes that knowledge about the phenomenon is best drawn from those who directly lived it and that individual accounts may reveal both shared meanings and important differences across cases. The theoretical grounding combines three related lenses. Differential Adaptation Theory explains why immigrant teachers do not adjust in one fixed, linear, or uniform way, but instead follow varied paths shaped by professional identity, adaptation tension, and sense of belonging (Yip & Saito, 2024). The Ecological Perspective on Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Identity Construction explains how teachers' emotional and professional experiences are shaped across classroom, institutional, and sociocultural contexts (Kamali & Nazariabbasbolaghi, 2023). The Professional Identity Reconstruction Framework explains how immigrant educators revise, retain, and rebuild professional identity through processes such as forced forgetting and conscious remembering (Xu et al., 2025). Together, these frameworks explain adaptation variation, layered emotional context, and identity

reconstruction. They support the study's conceptual flow from transition to a rural American school context, to lived experiences of work and challenge, to coping and adaptation, to meanings of thriving and surviving, to convergences and divergences across accounts, and finally to support recommendations. This framework is consistent with IPA because it allows the study to examine individual meaning before identifying shared and different patterns across participants' experiences (Kamali & Nazariabbasbolaghi, 2023; Xu et al., 2025; Yip & Saito, 2024).

1.5 Research Gap and Rationale for Studying Filipino J-1 Teachers in a Rural South Carolina School District

Although studies on immigrant, expatriate, and overseas teachers have increased, the literature remains incomplete for the present topic. Many studies focus on broad immigrant teacher populations, mixed national groups, international school sectors, non-J-1 groups, or settings outside rural U.S. public school districts (Ferrada Quezada et al., 2024; Harrison & Hou, 2023). Others document migration motives, challenges, coping, or adaptation but give less attention to how Filipino J-1 exchange teachers themselves interpret these experiences within one bounded district context. Phenomenological and related studies have shown that overseas and immigrant teachers often experience transition as a mix of strain, endurance, growth, identity reconstruction, and belonging (Alicamen & Becamon, 2022; Arcillo, 2023; Real & Flordeliz, 2024). However, few studies use interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine how Filipino J-1 teachers in one rural U.S. public school district make sense of daily transition, work demands, coping, and the lived tension between thriving and surviving. The present study addresses this gap by offering a district-specific IPA account that connects teacher mobility, rural teacher support, professional identity reconstruction, and meaning-making. The rationale for the study is therefore both scholarly and practical. Scholarly, it contributes to qualitative research on immigrant teacher identity, cross-cultural adjustment, emotional vulnerability, and professional meaning-making. Practical, it may inform induction, mentoring, well-being support, workload assistance, communication systems, and policy or program inputs for Filipino J-1 teachers in rural school districts. Without such evidence, support systems may remain generic rather than responsive to the actual lived experiences of teachers in the host context.

1.6 Alignment of the Study with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals

The study is most directly aligned with SDG 4, Quality Education, because it focuses on teacher support, professional adjustment, school inclusion, and institutional conditions that may affect the continuity and quality of teaching in rural schools. By examining the lived experiences of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers, the study contributes to understanding how schools can better support international educators who serve learners in rural and high-need contexts. This connection is also consistent with AmBisyon Natin 2040 and EDCOM II priorities on teacher quality, education reform, and stronger education systems. The study also has a reasonable connection to SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, because it addresses work conditions, professional support, emotional strain, retention, and the realities of teachers working across borders. Its link to SDG 17, Partnerships for the Goals, may also be recognized because the J-1 exchange arrangement involves cross-border educational and cultural exchange among teachers, schools, communities, and support institutions. These SDG connections should remain limited to the study's actual focus: quality education, teacher support, professional well-being, and institutional response.

1.7 Multidisciplinary Sustainability Relevance of Filipino J-1 Teacher Support and Rural Education

The study contributes to educational sustainability by focusing on how rural schools can support teacher adjustment, retention, instructional continuity, and inclusive school environments. When Filipino J-1 teachers receive stronger induction, mentoring, communication, and well-being support, schools may become better prepared to sustain quality teaching in culturally diverse and workforce-challenged settings. It also contributes to socio-economic and institutional sustainability by examining the work realities of Filipino teachers whose migration is shaped by income, workload, family responsibilities, and professional opportunity. The findings may guide school leaders, program coordinators, human resource personnel, teacher education institutions, and policymakers in designing more responsive support systems for internationally mobile teachers. Finally, the study supports cultural and community sustainability because the J-1 exchange experience involves not only teaching work but also cultural exchange, belonging, identity negotiation, and community adjustment. In this way, the research links education, work, culture, policy, and institutional care within one multidisciplinary sustainability frame.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA. Qualitative research was appropriate because the inquiry aimed to understand how people experience, interpret, and give meaning to a human condition within a specific context rather than measure it through numerical indicators (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2022). IPA was suited to the study because it focuses on lived experience and meaning-making, particularly in relation to identity, transition, and personal sense-making (Smith et al., 2022). The design was appropriate because the study did not seek to determine the frequency of adjustment problems among Filipino J-1 teachers, but to interpret the meaning of their transition, professional work, coping, and experiences of thriving and surviving in the

participating rural School District in South Carolina. IPA was chosen over other qualitative approaches because the study centered on the personal interpretation of lived experience rather than on a bounded institutional case, full life stories, cultural group observation, theory building, or broad description. The research questions required close attention to first-person accounts, reflective interpretation, and context-sensitive analysis rather than variable testing or numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). IPA was also appropriate because it works well with small and fairly homogeneous groups who share a significant experience and because it uses a double interpretive process in which participants make sense of their world while the researcher interprets that meaning-making (Smith et al., 2022). Since the study was qualitative, interpretive, and idiographic, it did not aim to produce statistical generalizations, numerical predictions, or causal claims (Merriam & Tisdell, 2022; Tracy, 2020). The study was grounded in phenomenology, which seeks to understand human experience from the first-person standpoint and treats lived experience as a valid source of knowledge (Zahavi, 2019). It drew mainly from the interpretive line of phenomenology associated with Heidegger while recognizing Husserl's foundational contribution to the tradition (Moran, 2012). Ontologically, the study viewed reality as lived and meaningful experience, consistent with Heidegger's (2010) idea of being-in-the-world. Epistemologically, it assumed that knowledge about the phenomenon was best gained from those who directly lived it, while intentionality helped frame the teachers' experiences as directed toward student needs, school expectations, cultural differences, and daily professional realities (Sokolowski, 2008). The study also sought the essential structure of experience without erasing individual differences, consistent with phenomenological inquiry into meaning structures (Van Manen, 2016; Moran, 2012). The researcher recognized that interpretive phenomenology does not require complete detachment from prior understanding but demands reflexive restraint. The researcher remained attentive to possible assumptions, professional beliefs, and cultural expectations so that the participants' accounts could be interpreted fairly. This stance reflected embodied reflexivity, openness, and disciplined slowing down of premature interpretation (Finlay, 2021; Dahlberg et al., 2008). The study's philosophical foundations therefore guided the selection of participants, use of in-depth interviews, attention to significant statements, and careful synthesis of meanings (Finlay, 2022; van Manen, 2016).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the host School District in South Carolina, United States. The district was described as a rural district in the eastern portion of South Carolina, serving about 1,800 students across six schools, and federal district data also classified the locale as rural and remote. This setting was appropriate because it was the actual site where the Filipino J-1 exchange teachers experienced transition, professional work, coping, and meaning-making. The rural character of the district was also important because the study focused on teachers' lived experiences within a rural American school environment rather than in an urban or international school context.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents, referred to as co-participants, were six Filipino J-1 exchange teachers employed in the host rural School District in South Carolina. They were selected because they had direct lived experience of teaching and living in the district and could provide detailed accounts of their transition, work, challenges, coping, and meaning-making. The group was appropriate for IPA because the design requires a small and fairly homogeneous sample that shares a significant experience while allowing intensive case-by-case interpretation before cross-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2022).

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive, criterion-based sampling to select co-participants who could provide information-rich accounts of the phenomenon. A co-participant had to be a Filipino teacher working under J-1 exchange status in the host rural School District at the time of the study, had to have direct lived experience of teaching and living in the district, had to have completed at least one academic year of teaching experience in the rural host School District, and had to be willing to participate in an in-depth interview. Teachers who did not meet these criteria, were no longer employed in the district, had not completed at least one academic year, or did not provide informed consent were excluded. The sample size of six was considered appropriate because IPA is idiographic and emphasizes depth, close reading, and careful interpretation rather than broad numerical coverage. Recruitment was guided by experiential depth and thematic sufficiency, meaning the researcher assessed whether the interviews produced enough rich and recurring meanings to answer the research questions without reducing the process to a mechanical count of participants.

2.5 Research Instrument

The main research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide used during one-on-one, in-depth interviews. The guide helped direct the discussion toward the co-participants' transition, professional work, challenges, coping, adaptation, and meanings of thriving and surviving, but it was not used rigidly. Follow-up questions, prompts, and gentle probing were used when needed to allow the co-participants to explain their experiences more fully. This was appropriate because IPA requires rich first-person accounts rather than short survey responses or highly structured answers (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher also served as the primary research instrument. The researcher recruited the co-participants, conducted the interviews, listened closely to their narratives, prepared the transcripts, and carried out the interpretive analysis. This role

required disciplined attention to language, tone, pauses, emphases, and emerging meanings. Reflexivity was necessary because qualitative inquiry recognizes that the researcher's presence shapes the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). The researcher therefore kept reflexive notes before, during, and after interviews to record assumptions, emotional reactions, and possible interpretive biases. This practice supported openness to participants' lived realities while helping prevent premature conclusions (Finlay, 2022).

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through one-on-one, in-depth interviews and sustained reflexive practice. Before data collection, the researcher secured the required institutional permissions and ethical clearance, identified eligible co-participants based on the inclusion criteria, and invited them individually to participate. Each participant received a clear explanation of the study's purpose, the nature of participation, the use of audio recording, and the voluntary nature of involvement. Interviews began only after informed consent had been secured. Rapport building was observed through respectful communication, clear explanation of the study, comfortable pacing, and nonjudgmental listening. The co-participants were given time to answer, pause, clarify, or add details when needed. After consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled at safe and convenient times that respected the participants' work responsibilities. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission and lasted about 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the depth of responses and comfort level of each participant. Clarifications were made through brief follow-up messages or short follow-up conversations when needed, and data collection was completed within one week. After each interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim. The researcher listened again to the recording while reviewing the transcript to check accuracy, completeness, tone, and meaning. Identifying details were removed and replaced with codes or pseudonyms. Member checking was conducted when needed by allowing participants to review selected transcript portions or summarized meanings to avoid misinterpretation. This process was appropriate because IPA depends on careful and close engagement with each account before moving to cross-case interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). Data transcription and management were handled carefully to protect confidentiality and support analytic rigor. Audio files, transcripts, reflexive notes, analytic memos, consent forms, and document versions were organized using consistent file names and secure storage. Transcripts were verified line by line against the original recordings, and sensitive details that could identify a participant, school assignment, colleague, student, family member, or specific incident were removed. If software-assisted transcription was used, it served only as an initial draft and did not replace the researcher's manual checking or interpretation. No raw audio file or identifiable transcript was uploaded to an unsecured platform. The researcher also maintained an audit trail documenting interviews, transcript verification, clarifications, interpretive notes, and theme development to strengthen dependability and transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2022; Tracy, 2020).

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the formal data analysis method. IPA was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine how Filipino J-1 exchange teachers made sense of their transition, professional work, challenges, coping, and meanings of thriving and surviving in the rural School District in South Carolina. The method is phenomenological because it focuses on lived experience, and it is interpretive because it recognizes the double sense-making process in which participants interpret their experiences while the researcher interprets that sense-making (Smith et al., 2022). The analysis began with reading and re-reading each transcript to achieve immersion in the case. The researcher listened to the audio while reviewing the transcript, then returned to the text several times before formal interpretation. The next step was initial noting, where the researcher wrote exploratory comments on the content, language, and possible conceptual meanings of each account. Descriptive comments focused on what the participant discussed, linguistic comments focused on how the participant expressed the experience, and conceptual comments considered deeper meanings emerging from the account (Smith et al., 2022). From these notes, the researcher developed experiential statements that captured meaningful aspects of each participant's account while remaining grounded in the transcript. These statements were then examined for connections, patterns, contrasts, and tensions. Personal experiential themes were developed within each case by clustering related statements into higher-order meanings. Each theme had to be supported by the transcript and related to the study's focus on transition, work, challenges, coping, belonging, and meaning-making. After completing one case, the researcher moved to the next case with reflective restraint to avoid forcing later accounts into earlier patterns (Smith et al., 2022). After all cases were analyzed individually, the researcher identified patterns across cases. This cross-case analysis examined convergence and divergence among the personal experiential themes. Some themes reflected shared structures of experience, while others revealed meaningful differences in how participants understood the same district context. The final stage involved writing an integrated interpretive account that presented major themes, supported them with selected verbatim excerpts, and interpreted them in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework, and study context (Smith et al., 2022). Trustworthiness was strengthened through methodological coherence, careful data handling, reflexive awareness, and disciplined interpretation. Credibility was supported through in-depth interviews, verbatim transcription, repeated transcript engagement, and grounded interpretation. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail of recruitment, interviews, transcript verification, reflexive notes, analytic memos, and theme development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive notes that helped the researcher monitor assumptions, emotional responses, and possible blind spots (Finlay, 2021). Transferability was addressed through thick, context-sensitive

description of the rural district, the Filipino J-1 teacher group, and the meanings that emerged, allowing readers to judge the relevance of the findings to similar settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2022; Smith et al., 2022; Tracy, 2020).

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed recognized ethical principles for research involving human participants. Before data generation, the researcher secured approval from the relevant academic ethics or research review body and obtained permission from the proper authorities in the participating rural School District in South Carolina. No interview was conducted until these permissions were in place. Participation did not affect the co-participants' employment status, school standing, professional relationships, or access to support within the district. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, interview process, use of audio recording, expected time commitment, and voluntary nature of participation. They were also told that they could decline to answer questions, pause the interview, skip uncomfortable questions, or end participation at any time without penalty. If a participant chose to withdraw, the researcher asked whether previously shared data could still be used or should be removed, subject to the stage of analysis and institutional policy. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected through coding and pseudonyms. Names and direct identifiers were removed from transcripts, notes, and the final report. Audio files, transcripts, consent forms, and related materials were stored securely in password-protected or similarly protected storage, with access limited to the researcher and authorized academic personnel when required. The study also followed the Data Privacy Act of 2012, or Republic Act No. 10173, which requires lawful and secure handling of personal information and recognizes informed consent as a key condition in data processing. Research data will be retained for five years after completion of the study, or for the period required by the institution if longer, and identifiable data will be permanently deleted or securely destroyed after the retention period. The study also minimized possible psychological and professional harm. Participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, reschedule, or end the interview if they felt uncomfortable. If emotional distress occurred, the researcher slowed, paused, redirected, or ended the interview based on the participant's preference and, when needed and with consent, referred the participant to appropriate support channels through approved institutional procedures. If artificial intelligence tools were used for limited tasks such as language editing, transcription support, or file organization, such use was disclosed transparently, and no AI output replaced the researcher's ethical judgment, interpretive analysis, or responsibility for accuracy.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile and Context of Filipino J-1 Exchange Teachers

3.1.1 Teaching Assignment, Length of Service, and J-1 Status

The study involved six Filipino J-1 exchange teachers currently connected with the host rural School District. Their length of service ranged from about one school year to two years. P1 was an English Language Arts teacher at the high school level with about one year of service. P2 had completed one school year, but the specific teaching assignment was not stated. P3 had also completed one school year and discussed laboratory-related teaching activities. P4 had two years of service and was assigned as a sixth grade teacher. P5 was a high school teacher who had completed one school year, while P6 had two years of service in the district. All participants were current Filipino J-1 exchange teachers. These participant profiles provide the necessary context for interpreting their lived experiences. Although the participants had different teaching assignments and lengths of service, all shared the experience of teaching under the J-1 exchange arrangement in a rural American school district. This common context allowed the study to examine how Filipino teachers experienced transition, work, adjustment, and meaning-making while still recognizing the differences in their individual teaching backgrounds and school experiences.

3.2 Lived Experiences of Transition, Work, and Life in the Host District

3.2.1 Transition and Professional Relearning in the Rural School Context

The findings showed that the Filipino J-1 exchange teachers experienced transition as both demanding and meaningful. The participants described the host district as a setting where they had to relearn classroom routines, adjust to student behavior, understand new communication styles, and rebuild confidence in their teaching roles. Several participants felt like beginning teachers again despite years of prior teaching experience. P1 described the experience as life-changing, P2 experienced early fear and self-doubt, P3 valued the resources but struggled with student behavior, P4 experienced a difficult first year before gaining comfort in the second year, P5 described gradual adjustment, and P6 felt professionally new despite long teaching experience. These findings suggest that transition was not limited to relocation or employment in a new district. It involved daily meaning-making around classroom culture, student behavior, language, family distance, and professional identity. This aligns with Del Valle's (2024), which reported that Filipino teachers in the United States experienced both opportunities and challenges while teaching abroad. It also reflects Abayan et al. (2024), Avelino's (2026), Lanoy and Idul's (2025), and Leach and Bradbury (2024), which similarly emphasized language adjustment, classroom culture, student behavior, teaching expectations, rural preparedness, and support as major parts of international teacher adjustment.

3.2.2 Rural Life, Belonging, and Supportive Relationships

The participants also described rural life as an important part of their experience. Some found the rural setting familiar, peaceful, and close-knit because of similarities with rural life in the Philippines. Others experienced it as limiting because of transportation concerns, distance from familiar places, and limited access to services. Supportive school leaders, colleagues, administrators, Filipino peers, and the wider community helped several participants feel more connected and less isolated. Family distance remained emotionally difficult for many, while one participant felt more settled because family was already present in the United States. The results show that rural life shaped both professional and personal adjustment. The host district was not only a workplace but also a living environment where teachers negotiated belonging, mobility, emotional support, and identity. Through the IPA lens, rural life carried mixed meanings: it could be peaceful and supportive, but it could also create practical barriers. This supports Leach and Bradbury (2024), which emphasized that rural teaching success depends on classroom readiness, community connection, professional support, and personal preparedness.

3.3 Personal and Professional Challenges in the Host Context

3.3.1 Classroom, Cultural, and Communication Challenges

The participants encountered classroom, cultural, and communication challenges in the host district. Student behavior was one of the most common professional concerns. The participants described differences in student respect, directness, vocal expression, classroom authority, and behavior management compared with their teaching experiences in the Philippines. Communication was also a challenge, especially in relation to accents, language barriers, difficulty understanding students, and uncertainty in responding to classroom situations. P3 identified student behavior as the major classroom challenge, while P6 described language and classroom management as continuing areas of adjustment. These findings indicate that classroom adjustment was cultural, communicative, and emotional. The teachers did not only need to deliver lessons; they also had to understand student behavior, local speech patterns, and expected professional responses. This is consistent with Dannhauser and Seyama-Mokhaneli (2025), Rathinam's (2024), Karasova and Nehyba's (2023), Golis's (2025), and Poulou et al. (2024), which emphasized culture shock, communication barriers, learner behavior, classroom management, support-related challenges, and the importance of feedback in helping teachers respond to classroom demands.

3.3.2 Emotional, Family, Rural-Living, and Support Challenges

The participants also experienced emotional, family-related, rural-living, and support-related challenges. P1 described time-zone separation from family, P2 experienced the pain of being away from children, P3 reported safety-related fear and financial pressure, P4 described anxiety and parent-related concerns, P5 experienced family distance and uncertainty about school expectations, and P6 identified lack of public transportation and short-notice communication as concerns. Some participants also expressed the need for fuller orientation, international teacher training, clearer guidance, transportation support, and mental health support. These findings show that the participants' challenges were layered and not limited to teaching tasks. Their professional work was closely connected to family distance, emotional strain, rural living, financial concerns, and institutional support. Through IPA, these challenges were interpreted as lived experiences that affected both teacher identity and well-being. This aligns with Agyapong et al. (2022), which linked teacher stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression to work-related and organizational factors.

3.4 Coping and Adaptation Patterns of Filipino J-1 Exchange Teachers

3.4.1 Personal Coping and Professional Adjustment

The findings showed that the participants coped through openness, patience, self-control, humility, emotional boundaries, persistence, and willingness to learn again. P1 used patience and cultural understanding, P2 practiced self-acceptance and professionalism, P3 relied on humility and openness to advice, P4 used planned adjustment and daily trial and error, P5 used reflection and emotional reframing, and P6 accepted the need for continuous learning despite long teaching experience. Coping developed gradually as the participants became more familiar with classroom routines, student behavior, and school expectations. These findings suggest that coping was not a single response but a continuing process of professional and personal adjustment. The participants did not simply endure challenges; they reinterpreted them and adjusted their teaching practices, classroom responses, and self-understanding. This supports Nwoko et al. (2024), Obenza et al. (2026), Valero and Paglinawan (2026), Amzat et al. (2021), Cea's (2026), and Salvo-Garrido et al. (2025), which emphasized support, open-mindedness, self-care, coping systems, peer support, family connection, communication support, classroom management assistance, and resilience as important in teacher adjustment.

3.4.2 Relational, Family, and Institutional Support

The participants adapted through support from school leaders, administrators, district personnel, grade-level teams, instructional coaches, Filipino peers, family members, and the rural community. P1 gained confidence through school and community support, P2 relied on Filipino colleagues and family communication, P3 drew strength from family presence and conversations with peers, P4 sought help from the sixth grade team and administrators, P5 found comfort in shared housing and Filipino community, and P6 benefited from district guidance, principal reassurance, and improved instructional coaching during the second year. The findings show that adaptation was both personal and social. The

participants' own openness and persistence mattered, but support systems made adjustment more manageable. Through IPA, support was interpreted not only as assistance but also as a source of belonging, emotional safety, and professional confidence. This means that support for Filipino J-1 teachers should not be limited to technical orientation but should also include relational, emotional, and cultural forms of assistance.

3.5 Meanings of Thriving and Surviving in the Host District

3.5.1 Survival as Endurance Amid Professional and Personal Strain

The participants attached survival to endurance, emotional control, classroom management, family distance, cultural adjustment, communication barriers, and continuing to teach despite difficulty. P1 associated survival with completing the first year while protecting mental and emotional stability. P2 connected survival with overcoming self-doubt and maintaining professionalism. P3 linked survival with student behavior, emotional pressure, and language limits. P4 associated survival with anxiety, sudden changes, and student and parent concerns. P5 understood survival as showing up despite personal and professional struggles. P6 connected survival with feeling like a beginning teacher despite long experience. These findings show that survival was not passive endurance. It required emotional regulation, professional restraint, family support, and daily persistence. The participants often survived while still trying to grow. This supports OECD (2025), Villahermosa et al. (2025), Nguyen et al. (2026), Salvo-Garrido et al. (2025), and Laxamana's (2026), which connected teacher thriving, resilience, support, well-being, cultural adaptation, and professional growth with the capacity to continue under demanding conditions.

3.5.2 Thriving as Growth, Belonging, and Teacher Identity Reconstruction

The participants attached thriving to professional growth, confidence, support systems, belonging, resilience, cultural responsibility, and continued learning. P1 linked thriving with stronger classroom structure and learner understanding. P2 connected thriving with confidence, independence, and support. P3 associated thriving with resources, creativity, family presence, and rural peace. P4 linked thriving with strategic adaptation, student appreciation, and greater comfort in the second year. P5 connected thriving with learning, Filipino community, and responsible cultural representation. P6 associated thriving with continuous learning, gratitude for support, resilience, and willingness to continue teaching. The findings show that thriving and surviving were not separate or opposite experiences. The participants often experienced growth while still managing stress, uncertainty, family distance, and classroom challenges. Through IPA, thriving was interpreted as a developing meaning formed through support, reflection, and identity reconstruction. This supports Suarez and McGrath (2022), which emphasized the importance of teacher professional identity for empowerment, professional work, and policy development during times of change.

3.6 Cross-Case Convergences and Divergences

3.6.1 Shared Patterns Across Participants

Across the six participants, the common patterns included beginning again in a new teaching context, managing student behavior, adjusting to cultural differences in teacher-student relations, dealing with communication and language concerns, receiving support from school leaders and district personnel, relying on Filipino peers, drawing strength from family, gradually settling over time, practicing open-mindedness, and negotiating rural life. These findings showed that the host district was experienced as a place of professional relearning, even for teachers with long experience in the Philippines. The convergences suggest that Filipino J-1 teachers shared a common structure of experience while still interpreting it personally. Through IPA, these shared meanings did not erase individual differences but showed recurring patterns across separate accounts. This is supported by Harrison-Reid's (2025), which found that international teachers in the United States often faced unfamiliar classroom expectations, communication demands, changes in professional confidence, and the need for relational support.

3.6.2 Case-Specific Meanings and Differences

The participants differed in how they experienced family, rural life, support, safety, finances, professional identity, and future direction. Some experienced family separation as a major emotional burden, while one felt more stable because family was present in the United States. Some viewed rural life as familiar or peaceful, while others emphasized transportation and access concerns. Support also differed, with some participants describing strong support and others identifying gaps in orientation, transportation, mental health seminars, international teacher training, and timely guidance. P3 uniquely expressed safety-related fear, while P5 gave special meaning to representing the Philippines carefully in front of American students. These divergences show that the J-1 experience had shared features but was lived differently depending on personal background, family situation, teaching assignment, emotional response, support needs, and future plans. IPA treats these differences as important because they reveal how one phenomenon can hold multiple meanings. This interpretation is consistent with Nigar et al. (2025), which reported that immigrant English teachers may face barriers linked to language, culture, recognition, confidence, and professional identity while reconstructing identity through reflection, agency, and community resources.

3.7 Core Essence of the Lived Experience

3.7.1 Beginning Again, Surviving Demands, and Growing Through Support

The core essence of the participants' lived experience was the process of beginning again, surviving daily professional and cultural demands, and gradually finding growth through support, reflection, and continued adjustment. The participants entered the host district with prior teaching experience, yet the new context required them to relearn classroom management, student communication, parent relationships, school routines, language patterns, and rural living. Support from school leaders, district personnel, colleagues, Filipino peers, family, and the community helped them manage fear, homesickness, uncertainty, and professional adjustment. The essence of the experience was not simple adjustment to a new workplace. It was the continuing effort to remain competent, emotionally steady, culturally responsive, and professionally grounded while teaching and living in a rural American school district. Thriving and surviving occurred together as the participants continued teaching while learning, adjusting, and rebuilding confidence. This may be read alongside Li, Li et al. (2024), which emphasized the importance of professional identity, occupational well-being, and retention intention in rural teaching.

3.8 Support Recommendations and Program Inputs

3.8.1 Year-Long Context-Based Support Program

The findings led to a proposed year-long, context-based support program for Filipino J-1 exchange teachers. The support inputs included structured induction, classroom management coaching, cultural adjustment sessions, language and communication support, leadership check-ins, Filipino peer support, family and well-being support, rural living guidance, mentoring, parent communication assistance, mental health support, professional identity reflection, and financial orientation. These recommendations were based on the participants' experiences of professional relearning, student behavior concerns, language barriers, rural transportation, family distance, anxiety, parent communication, incomplete orientation, and cost-of-living pressure. The recommendations show that Filipino J-1 teachers need sustained support rather than a brief arrival orientation. Support should address the teacher as a whole person, including professional practice, emotional life, cultural adjustment, rural living, family concerns, and developing teacher identity. This is consistent with Kwok and Ogden Macfarlane's (2025), which identified individualized coaching, targeted professional development, structured peer collaboration, administrative support, and workload adjustments as key components of effective teacher induction programs, especially in high-need schools.

3.8.2 Integrated Rural J-1 Teacher Support Continuum

The proposed support continuum begins with Filipino J-1 exchange teachers entering a rural school district and recognizes that they bring prior teaching experience while still needing adjustment to a different school system, student culture, language environment, and rural community. The major support domains include professional entry and instructional adjustment, cultural and communication adjustment, emotional and social identity support, and rural and practical stability. These domains respond to the participants' needs for induction, classroom management coaching, mentoring, communication strategies, parent communication support, leadership check-ins, Filipino peer support, mental health and well-being support, rural living orientation, transportation assistance, budgeting guidance, community connections, and emergency contacts. The integrated support response suggests that professional, emotional, cultural, and practical supports should work together because the participants' experiences were also interconnected. Classroom stress affected emotional well-being, while transportation and family distance affected daily readiness for school. The expected outcomes include clearer transition, stronger classroom readiness, reduced isolation, improved communication, emotional steadiness, rural adjustment, professional confidence, and stronger teacher identity. The support system should remain responsive through continuous feedback so that teacher needs can guide revisions to induction, coaching, mentoring, and well-being support.

3.9 Implications and Alignment with Education Priorities

3.9.1 Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

The findings have theoretical implications because they show the value of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in studying international teacher experiences. Transition was not merely a movement from one school system to another, but a lived process involving identity, emotion, classroom authority, language, family, rural life, and belonging. Practically, the findings imply the need for structured induction, classroom management support, mentoring, communication training, peer support, rural living guidance, and emotional support. Policy-wise, the study points to the need for year-long support rather than short arrival-based orientation, differentiated support for international teachers, well-being policies, and coordinated settlement support. These implications show that Filipino J-1 teachers should be supported as international professionals whose classroom work is connected to personal life, cultural adjustment, and rural living. The findings suggest that strong support systems should be continuous, context-based, and responsive to actual teacher experiences. When professional, emotional, cultural, and practical support are integrated, Filipino J-1 teachers may be better able to manage the demands of the host context and continue developing as educators in a rural American school setting.

3.9.2 National and Global Research Priorities

The study aligns with national and global education priorities because it focuses on teacher support, teacher well-being, inclusive school contexts, quality teaching, and the professional needs of internationally mobile educators. At the national

level, it connects with the Philippine basic education direction reflected in the MATATAG Agenda (Department of Education, 2023) and the Basic Education Development Plan 2030 (Department of Education, 2022), particularly in relation to teacher support, learner well-being, inclusive education, and improved delivery of basic education services. At the global level, the study aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, especially the focus on inclusive and equitable quality education, lifelong learning, and increasing the supply of qualified teachers through international cooperation for teacher training. The findings show that quality education depends not only on curriculum, facilities, and policy but also on the lived conditions of teachers who carry out classroom work. The study contributes to global concerns on teacher shortages, teacher well-being, and support for internationally mobile educators by showing how Filipino J-1 exchange teachers may be better supported in rural school contexts. This connection is important because transportation, community adjustment, school culture, communication, and emotional support may strongly affect teaching, retention, and professional growth.

3.10 Researcher's Critical Reflection on the Findings

3.10.1 Interpreting Transition, Support, and Meaning-Making

The researcher's reflection emphasized that the participants' experiences could not be reduced to simple labels such as success, hardship, or adjustment. Transition was deeper than moving from the Philippines to the United States because it involved learning new classroom routines, adjusting to student behavior, understanding accents and local speech, dealing with family distance, and learning rural living. Prior teaching experience remained important, but it was not automatically transferable without adjustment. Student behavior, classroom management, and direct communication were interpreted carefully as participant perceptions of difference and challenge, not as general claims about all students in the host district. The reflection also highlighted the importance of balanced interpretation. The participants valued support from school leaders, district personnel, colleagues, Filipino peers, and family, but they also identified support gaps such as fuller orientation, clearer guidance, classroom feedback, transportation assistance, mental health support, and international teacher training. Thriving and surviving were closely connected because some participants experienced fear, family distance, and uncertainty while also describing growth, confidence, resilience, belonging, and professional purpose. Thus, the findings show that Filipino J-1 exchange teachers bring professional skill, personal sacrifice, and cultural knowledge to rural American schools, but they also need organized and responsive support to survive, grow, and make meaning in the host context.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that Filipino J-1 exchange teachers in a rural school district in South Carolina experienced transition as a gradual process of professional relearning, cultural adjustment, emotional endurance, and identity reconstruction. Their challenges involved classroom management, student behavior, language and accent differences, parent communication, family distance, rural transportation, financial concerns, and emotional strain. Despite these difficulties, they coped through openness, patience, self-reflection, family contact, Filipino peer support, school leadership support, mentoring, district assistance, daily routines, and continued professional learning. Their experiences showed that thriving and surviving were connected, as the teachers continued to grow in confidence, resilience, belonging, and professional identity while still managing uncertainty and pressure.

It is recommended that schools, districts, program coordinators, teacher preparation institutions, and professional development providers strengthen sustained support for Filipino J-1 exchange teachers through a year-long, context-based support framework. This may include induction, classroom management coaching, communication support, mentoring, Filipino peer support, well-being assistance, rural living guidance, parent communication support, financial orientation, transportation guidance, and practical settlement support. School leaders and instructional coaches may provide immediate training on student behavior, grading expectations, documentation practices, and parent communication, while districts may adopt continuing support policies beyond arrival orientation. Teacher preparation institutions and professional development providers may also include global teaching readiness topics such as intercultural communication, diverse classroom management, teacher well-being, and adjustment to international school systems.

The study was limited to the lived experiences of Filipino J-1 exchange teachers in one rural school district in South Carolina; therefore, the findings should be understood within this specific context. Future research may examine Filipino J-1 exchange teachers in other rural districts, urban districts, or different states to compare how location, school culture, and district support shape teacher adjustment. Further studies may also include school administrators, instructional coaches, mentor teachers, district personnel, and students, or use a longitudinal design to examine changes in coping, confidence, support needs, and professional identity across the first, second, and third years of teaching.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study observed recognized ethical principles for research involving human participants. Ethical approval and permission from the appropriate authorities were secured before data generation, and no interview was conducted until these permissions were in place. The study protected participants' voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and welfare throughout the research process.

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