

Coming Home: A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Returnee Filipino Science Teachers

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of returnee Filipino Science teachers from Pura, Tarlac, who previously taught abroad and have since returned to the Philippines. It aimed to understand the motivations behind migration, the perceived benefits and challenges of teaching in foreign contexts, and the reflective meanings assigned to their return. Employing a descriptive phenomenological research design grounded in Giorgi's (2009) methodology, seven licensed Science teachers who met the inclusion criteria participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A validated interview guide composed of open-ended questions was used to elicit rich reflections. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded manually, and analyzed using Giorgi's phenomenological analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, supported by audit trails, participant validation, and bracketing. The findings revealed key themes including economic and professional motivations for migration, personal and cultural adjustments abroad, unmet expectations, and factors influencing the decision to return. Participants highlighted contrasts between teaching environments abroad and in the Philippines, particularly in workplace dynamics, cultural adaptation, and familial considerations. The study provides important insights into the complexities of Filipino teachers' migration and reintegration experiences. The findings have implications for education stakeholders as they develop policies that support returning teachers and address factors contributing to teacher migration.

Keywords: Teacher migration; returnee teachers; lived experiences; Filipino educators; phenomenology

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Introduction

In the face of rapid globalization and technological advancement, education continues to serve as a vital engine for national development and individual empowerment. With increasing demands for a highly skilled and adaptable workforce, many countries have prioritized investments in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. As global educational standards evolve, so does the demand for qualified educators capable of nurturing future innovators and problem-solvers. Among them, science teachers play a crucial role in equipping learners with the competencies necessary to address complex, real-world challenges such as climate change, technological disruptions, and global health crises.

Against this backdrop, teacher migration has emerged as a significant phenomenon in the global education sector. Skilled educators, particularly in the STEM fields, are increasingly sought after by developed countries grappling with teacher shortages. The Philippines, known for producing competent, English-proficient, and adaptable teachers, has become a key contributor to the international education workforce. Filipino science teachers, in

particular, are recognized for their ability to deliver STEM instruction in English, aligning with the global push toward quality science education.

This trend is especially noticeable in provinces like Tarlac, where a growing number of science teachers are opting to pursue teaching careers abroad. Motivated by aspirations for professional development, financial security, and an improved quality of life, these educators leave their local classrooms to serve at foreign institutions. However, their migration entails both opportunities and sacrifices, ranging from career advancement and cultural exchange to personal struggles such as homesickness, discrimination, and the pressure to adapt to unfamiliar educational settings.

While the migration of Filipino science teachers reflects the global competitiveness fostered by initiatives such as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (RA 10533), it also raises concerns about the sustainability of the local education system, particularly in underserved areas. Understanding the lived experiences of these migrant teachers, including their motivations, challenges, and adaptive strategies, is essential for shaping responsive educational policies and support mechanisms.

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This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Filipino science teachers from Tarlac who are currently working abroad. By delving into their motivations for migration, the professional and personal challenges they encounter, and the impact of their experiences on their identities and connections to their home country, this research aims to contribute to the growing discourse on international teacher mobility, brain drain, and the human dimensions of global education.

Objectives

1. To determine the motivations of Filipino science teachers from Tarlac for pursuing teaching opportunities abroad.
2. To identify the deterring factors influencing or discouraging migration among Filipino science teachers.
3. To analyze the insights derived from the lived experiences of Filipino science teachers to inform policies and support systems related to teacher migration.
4. To develop a conceptual model based on the findings of the study that represents the migration experiences of Filipino science teachers.

Literature Review

Teacher migration has become a growing global concern as countries continue to experience uneven distribution of qualified educators, particularly in STEM-related fields. International education systems, especially in developed countries such as the United States, Canada, and parts of the Middle East, actively recruit foreign-trained teachers to address workforce shortages. This global mobility is commonly explained through the Push-Pull Migration Theory (Lee, 1966), which describes migration as the result of unfavorable conditions in the country of origin and attractive opportunities in destination countries.

In educational contexts, push factors typically include low salaries, limited instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, and restricted opportunities for professional advancement. In contrast, pull factors include higher compensation, better working conditions, access to modern teaching tools, and structured professional development opportunities abroad. These factors collectively influence the decision-making process of skilled professionals, including science teachers.

In the Philippine context, the implementation of Republic Act No. 10533, also known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, strengthened the K-12 curriculum and enhanced the global competitiveness of Filipino educators. The reform emphasized STEM education, inquiry-based learning,

and English proficiency, producing teachers who are well-prepared for both local and international teaching environments. As a result, Filipino science teachers have become highly sought after in the global labor market due to their pedagogical competence and adaptability. However, despite these strengths, persistent systemic issues such as low compensation and limited career progression continue to contribute to teacher migration and brain drain.

Research further shows that teacher migration is not purely economic in nature but also involves professional growth and personal development. Many migrant teachers report gaining exposure to advanced pedagogical practices, improved financial stability, and expanded career opportunities abroad. However, these benefits are often accompanied by challenges such as cultural adjustment, homesickness, workplace adaptation, and identity negotiation in foreign environments. These experiences highlight the multidimensional nature of migration and the need to understand both structural and personal factors influencing teacher mobility.

Building on these perspectives, the Push-Pull Migration Theory serves as the guiding framework of this study. It provides a lens to understand how local educational constraints and global opportunities interact to shape the migration decisions of Filipino science teachers. It also supports the analysis of their lived experiences, particularly regarding motivations, deterrent factors, and adaptation processes, which are central to this research.

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on Republic Act No. 10533, also known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, which institutionalized the K-12 curriculum in the Philippines. The law aims to produce globally competitive graduates and educators by aligning the Philippine education system with international standards, with a strong emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education as a driver of national development.

The implementation of the K-12 curriculum strengthened science education through inquiry-based and competency-based approaches, equipping learners with critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for global competitiveness. Consequently, it also necessitated the development of highly qualified science teachers capable of delivering enhanced STEM instruction using modern pedagogical approaches and English as a medium of instruction.

In response, the Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented various teacher development initiatives to improve instructional competence, access to learning resources, and

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alignment with global teaching standards. As a result, Filipino science teachers have gained recognition for their pedagogical competence and English proficiency, making them highly competitive in the international labor market.

Despite these advancements, a growing number of Filipino science teachers, particularly from regions such as Tarlac, continue to seek employment opportunities abroad. This migration trend reflects a complex interaction between the strengths of the Philippine education system and persistent systemic limitations. On the one hand, K-12 reform has enhanced the global employability of Filipino educators; on the other hand, issues such as low salaries, limited resources, and restricted career progression continue to drive teacher migration.

Within this context, the experiences of Filipino science teachers working abroad can be understood through two interrelated dimensions: opportunities abroad and challenges and adjustments. Opportunities include global recognition of their competencies, higher compensation, access to advanced instructional tools, and expanded professional growth. Meanwhile, challenges include cultural adjustment, homesickness, workplace adaptation, and reintegration difficulties upon return.

Guided by these interrelated factors, the conceptual framework of this study illustrates how the implementation of RA 10533, combined with local systemic conditions and global labor demand, influences the motivations, migration experiences, and reintegration insights of Filipino science teachers. It further serves as the basis for examining the relationships among motivations, deterring factors, and experiential insights, which ultimately inform the development of a proposed conceptual model.

Methodology

This study used a phenomenological research design, specifically Giorgi's (2009) descriptive method, to explore the lived experiences of seven Science teachers from Pura, Tarlac, who had previously taught abroad and returned to the Philippines. The approach aimed to capture these teachers' motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges, as well as reflective insights into their migration journeys and teaching experiences in foreign environments. The participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, such as being licensed Science teachers from Tarlac with at least one year of teaching experience both locally and abroad. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, guided by open-ended questions to facilitate deep reflection. These interviews were validated, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The research setting was the municipality of Pura, Tarlac,

and the findings aim to inform educational policies and support systems for returning migrant teachers.

Results

Professional and Career Growth. Teachers seek promotion, access to modern curriculum, and opportunities for professional development that are limited locally. Many participants were motivated by the limited opportunities for career advancement and professional development in the Philippines.

Participant 2 highlighted that going abroad is the chance to learn new teaching methods. *“Teaching abroad gave me a chance to be promoted-something I never had here.”* - P4

Table 1. Motivations of Filipino Science Teachers from Tarlac for Pursuing Teaching Opportunities Abroad

Code	Categories	Theme
Financial stability	Economic Needs	Financial Motivation
Better career opportunities	Professional Aspirations	Professional and Career Growth
Global teaching exposure	Global Outlook	Exposure to Global Educational Standards
Encouragement from family abroad	Social Influence	Peer and Family Influence
Escape from poor local teaching conditions	Systemic Discontent	Frustration with Local Opportunities
Cultural exploration New environment	Personal Curiosity and Growth	Personal Aspiration and Self-Fulfillment
Sense of dignity and validation	Psychological Empowerment	Migration as Self-Liberation

Another participant responded, *“I wanted to grow professionally and learn more modern ways of teaching Science.”* - P2

This aligns with Popova (2022), who assert that international mobility opens pathways for continued learning, career progression, and access to better resources. Cahilog & Sarong (2023) also documented that the desire for professional upgrading is a significant pull factor for Southeast Asian educators.

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Exposure to Global Educational Standards. Desire to be exposed to advanced pedagogical techniques, innovative tools, and globally competitive environments.

The opportunity to engage with modern pedagogical practices and globally recognized curricula is a motivating factor. Participant 3 emphasized, *“I wanted to experience how other countries teach Science, to become globally competitive.”* - P3

While participant 2 added, *“Being in a different country opened my eyes to more effective strategies.”* - P2

According to Ham et. al. (2021), global exposure enhances teachers’ adaptability, innovation, and effectiveness. This is further supported by Poole (2023), who found that international teachers gain pedagogical insights and become more reflective and student-centered in their practice.

Peer and Family Influence. Support and inspiration from relatives, colleagues, or friends abroad reinforce the decision to migrate.

Social networks also serve as a strong motivator. P5 noted, *“My cousin was already teaching abroad and encouraged me to try.”* - P5

On the other hand, Participant 3 noted, *“I followed the path of my friends who already migrated.”* - P3

Lomibao (2023) emphasized that social capital and word-of-mouth experiences significantly affect decisions to migrate, especially in collectivist cultures like the Philippines. Likewise, Castles et al. (2013) discussed how migrant networks provide emotional and informational support to aspiring migrant professionals.

Frustration with Local Opportunities. Teachers feel undervalued or unrecognized in the Philippine system, prompting them to explore alternatives.

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with systemic limitations in local schools, such as lack of promotion and recognition. As P4 shared, *“Promotion was very slow and biased where I was teaching.”* - P4

While Participant said, *“I felt undervalued despite working hard for many years.”* - P7

Albert et. al. (2023) underscored that bureaucratic inertia and favoritism within the Philippine public school system demotivate high-

performing teachers. This institutional frustration often leads to a “push factor,” driving educators to seek merit-based systems abroad.

Personal Aspiration and Self-Fulfillment. Migration is a form of self-actualization - a desire to grow personally, take on new challenges, and experience diverse cultures. Beyond material and professional incentives, migration is seen as a path to personal growth. Participant 6 shared, *“I just wanted to challenge myself - to step outside of my comfort zone.”* and *“Exploring different cultures was something I’ve always dreamed of.”*

This supports Maslow’s (1943) theory of self-actualization, which continues to be applied in contemporary migration studies. Real et. al. (2024) observed that many Filipino migrant teachers describe their experiences as transformational and empowering.

Migration as Self-Liberation. Teachers reclaim their self-worth and professional identity through international teaching experience.

For some, migration is deeply psychological - a way to reclaim dignity and self-worth. Participant 3 stated, *“I finally felt respected as a teacher when I went abroad.”* and Participant 1 echoed *“Abroad, my work was appreciated—something I never felt back home.”*

This resonates with Yeh (2024), who described migration as a form of “escape and liberation” from societal constraints. Teachers often report increased self-efficacy and autonomy when working in more structured and appreciative environments.



Figure 1. Motivations of Science Teachers

The motivations for Filipino Science teachers in Tarlac to teach abroad are multifaceted -grounded not only in economic imperatives but also in aspirations for growth, respect, and purpose. These findings reflect and reinforce a growing body of migration literature that emphasizes how both “push” and “pull” factors operate in tandem. Recognizing

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these motivations is essential in designing relevant support systems and policy frameworks to better prepare, guide, and sustain the well-being of migrant Filipino educators.

Discussion

The phenomenological approach allowed for a deep, human-centered understanding of teacher migration and return. Through the voices of returnee teachers, the study revealed complex motivations such as economic opportunity, professional growth, and familial responsibility. However, the narratives also exposed deterring factors that prompted their return ranging from cultural and workplace challenges abroad to unmet personal or professional expectations.

Key insights included: Migration as a strategy for improving financial stability, but one that came with emotional and cultural costs. Workplace dynamics abroad that either empowered or discouraged teachers, depending on their experiences with school leadership, support systems, and teaching conditions. Homecoming reflections that often involved a comparison between local and foreign teaching contexts, shedding light on issues of professional recognition, support, and identity. The study's rich contextual focus on Pura, Tarlac helped localize the broader phenomenon of teacher migration, offering implications not just for global labor discussions, but also for local educational policy, particularly in providing reintegration support and motivation for retention.

Moreover, the systematic use of Giorgi's DPA ensured that the resulting themes were authentic and grounded in the participants' own words, adding validity and depth to the study's conclusions. The themes that emerged, such as motivations for migration, challenges abroad, and reasons for return, could inform future policies by the Department of Education (DepEd) and labor-related agencies to better support overseas Filipino teachers before, during, and after their international deployments.

Conclusion

This study contributes valuable insights into the personal and professional transformations of Filipino Science teachers who experienced international migration. The phenomenological lens helped capture not just the facts of migration, but the emotional and reflective meanings behind each decision. The findings have the potential to inform teacher retention strategies, migrant support systems, and education policy reforms aimed at valuing the global experiences of Filipino educators.

Recommendations

1. Formulate and implement comprehensive migration and retention policies that explicitly recognize the complex, multidimensional motivations of Filipino science teachers, including financial security, professional advancement, global exposure, and psychological empowerment. These policies should not only address migration as an outcome but also address the structural conditions within the Philippine education system that continually drive skilled educators to seek opportunities abroad.
2. Strengthen and standardize pre-departure preparation programs by integrating psychological readiness training, legal rights education, and structured cultural adaptation modules. These enhancements are necessary in response to the study's findings that migrant teachers experience significant emotional, cultural, and professional adjustment challenges that are often unaddressed before deployment.
3. Establish formalized transnational support mechanisms, including mentorship programs, peer networks, and institutional partnerships between Philippine education agencies and host-country institutions. These systems should ensure continuous professional and psychosocial support for Filipino science teachers abroad, particularly to address the isolation, workplace adaptation, and professional integration challenges identified in the study.
4. Institutionalize a structured reintegration framework for returning Filipino science teachers that includes career re-entry pathways, formal recognition of international teaching experience, and psychosocial support services. This is essential in addressing the study's findings that returnees often experience undervaluation, lack of recognition, and limited reintegration support despite their enhanced global competencies.
5. Adopt and operationalize the "L.O.O.K. Beyond Borders" model as a comprehensive policy and practice framework that captures the full migration cycle- pre-departure motivations, overseas experiences, adaptive strategies, and reintegration processes. This model should serve as a guiding tool for evidence-based decision-making in teacher migration governance and support system design.
6. Conduct longitudinal and comparative studies on the long-term impact of international teaching experience on pedagogical practices, professional identity formation, and career trajectories of returning Filipino science teachers. Such studies are necessary to extend the findings of this research beyond retrospective accounts and to better understand the sustained effects of global

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mobility on teacher development and education systems.

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