

# The Narratives of J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni

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Publication Date: July 30, 2025

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16611880

## Abstract

This narrative inquiry study explored the experiences of Filipino J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni (J-1 CETA) from Bacolod City, Philippines, who taught in Arizona, USA, and are presently in the Philippines in compliance with 212 (e) Two-Year Home Residency Requirement. The study, which was based on Social Constructivist Theory, sought to comprehend how these teachers dealt with the difficulties of teaching overseas, cultural adjustment, emotional difficulties, and professional development. Using narrative inquiry, data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six participants, followed by rigorous thematic analysis guided by Creswell's framework. Key findings revealed significant professional shifts as teachers adjusted their instructional methods from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to culturally responsive, student-led pedagogies suited to American classrooms. Participants also

experienced emotional difficulties like homesickness, loneliness, and identity reconstruction in addition to cultural dissonance; nevertheless, they also developed resilience via shared Filipino values and community solidarity. The study dispelled misunderstandings about program policies, particularly those related to visas, and underlined the importance of ongoing support and unambiguous orientation. Participants said the J-1 program changed their lives by encouraging personal and professional growth and a sense of cultural ambassadorship. This study recommends greater pre-departure training, emotional support, cultural competency development, and mentorship to help future J-1 teachers be more prepared and sustained. The findings have significant implications for educators, policymakers, and advocates of global education to improve cross-cultural teaching experiences and outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Narrative inquiry, Filipino J-1 teachers, cultural adjustment, professional development, culturally responsive pedagogy*

## Introduction

The severe teacher shortage has been a troubling problem in American classrooms in recent years. According to the Learning Policy Institute, schools are struggling to fill vacancies, and by 2018, the country would need more than 112,000 more teachers to meet demand (Sutcher et al., 2016). The teacher shortage in the United States is not only real but significantly larger and more severe than previously understood,

especially when factoring in indicators of teacher quality such as certification, subject-specific education, professional training, and experience (García & Weiss, 2019).

As hiring teachers worsened, American school districts sourced out for international teachers. Many found this in the Philippines, where teachers left behind financial instability and professional stagnation, where low pay, overwork, and bureaucratic favoritism in promotion systems were common frustrations (Aranda, 2023). The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) continues to campaign for better compensation and working conditions, noting that salary concerns are one of the major reasons Filipino teachers leave and go abroad.

Many view programs like the J-1 Cultural Exchange Teachers Program, which provides three- to five-year teaching opportunities in the United States, as more than jobs; they represent significant opportunities for essential growth and resilience-building (Tatel, 2021). However, entering an American classroom is a journey that involves much more than lesson ideas and paper grades. Many J-1 teachers experience a range of emotions throughout the shift. During the first few weeks, new cultures, expectations, and systems clash. What they once mastered back home, their classroom management, instructional planning, and student engagement, must often be re-learned in a completely different context (Rathinam, 2024).

According to Ospina and Medina (2020), this is a significant personal transition rather than a career change. Typically, the first year is the most challenging. In addition to the subject content, teachers must manage American culture within and outside the classroom. They cope with cultural shock, homesickness, and the stress of navigating a foreign system. Additionally, the lack of cultural competence to varying degrees caused many challenges. These J-1 CETA face challenges that forced them to go beyond what they know and are comfortable with. This process can be daunting initially, but it has been proven to transform teachers to great lengths. This created a great evolution in their personal and professional career by discovering the strengths and traits they did not know they had (Ralph, 2024).

This is agreed by Macapagong et. al. (2023), who emphasized that many J-1 teachers face these challenges with limited emotional or institutional support, which makes the experience feel even more isolating. In *An American Education*, a Washington Post feature by Saslow (2022), the voices of Filipino teachers come alive. They arrive in the U.S. filled with hope and determination, but soon confront the reality of culture shock, classroom discipline struggles, and the weight of self-doubt. Moreover, they still stay. They adapt. They find ways to reach their students, even when it is hard, because they know what they came for.

Their stories are honored through this research, which aimed to understand how J-1 Cultural Exchange Program alumni navigated the emotional and professional complexities of teaching abroad. What they share about their experiences offers valuable insight into the realities of teaching across cultures.

While much of the available literature focuses on the structural side of the J-1 Cultural Exchange Program, not many studies give a louder voice to the realities that come from the perspectives of the alumni themselves. This study sought to fill the gap by reflecting on and interpreting the narratives and revealing the complexities of teaching abroad through the lens of its alumni.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Several studies have looked into the different experiences that Filipino teachers have had while participating in the J-1 Cultural Exchange Program. These studies reveal their professional, emotional, and cultural adaptation journeys.

For instance, Fundal (2025) sought to understand how the Filipino J-1 special education teachers in the United States navigated multiple layers of adaptation. Curriculum, instructional strategies, and classroom management, as well as coping with homesickness, language barriers, and challenges in students' behavior, were among the key areas in the study. Teachers employed culturally responsive methodologies alongside mandated U.S. instructional approaches, demonstrating resilience and growth through significant personal and professional transitions. The narrative inquiry exemplifies the reconstruction of identity as they balanced Filipino pedagogical values with the expectations of American educational institutions.

Similarly, Ospina and Medina (2024) also studied the journey of international teachers in the U.S. Schools. Language barrier, lack of institutional support, and personal struggles of separation and distance from family were among the highlights of the investigations. Their findings, based on the experiences of 40 educators, categorized the challenges into intercultural, professional, and personal domains. While teachers faced numerous difficulties in classroom management and social integration, the study also proved growth in independence, intercultural tolerance, and appreciation for diversity, suggesting that adversity contributed to long-term personal development.

In support of these findings, Ralph (2024) conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study to take into account how J-1 Teacher Exchange Visitors (J-1TEVs) in South Carolina experienced fluctuations in teacher self-efficacy (TSE). Initially, professional challenges such as culture shock, classroom discipline issues, and intercultural communication barriers negatively impacted their confidence. However, the study also proved that with the presence of strong administrative and collegial support, teachers gradually regained and even increased their self-efficacy. The study emphasized that institutional support and cultural competency development are crucial for sustaining teacher effectiveness in international placements.

Further highlighting the role of intercultural conflict, Macapagong et al. (2023) sought to uncover the emotional and professional struggles faced by Filipino educators in adapting to U.S. school environments. The findings showed difficulties in aligning with American norms of student discipline, authority, and technology use, which often contrasted starkly with Philippine teaching traditions. However, educators also experience professional development and enhance their resilience via these challenges.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

This interpretivist study emphasize that people construct from reality. It explored how J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni interpret and make sense of their experiences using the narrative inquiry. Through collaborative storytelling, the researcher worked with participants to understand their perspectives and present their journeys in narrative form (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative theory (Lee et al., 2025) supports this approach by viewing personal stories as key to identity and meaning-making. Combined with interpretivist and narrative inquiry lenses, the study explored how J-1 teachers made sense of their cross-cultural teaching experiences (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

Narrative inquiry fits well with constructivist premise, which views knowledge as actively built through social interaction and experience. Narrative inquiry collects personal stories to understand how individuals interpret experiences over time, seeing these stories as rich sources of identity, culture, and meaning (Creswell, 2018). Constructivism emphasizes that society, connections, and lived experiences expacts understanding (University at Buffalo, 2025). According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, social constructivism promotes learning through collaboration, dialogue, and social contexts. (UC Berkeley, 2015).

### **Objectives of the Study**

This narrative research aimed to look into and understand the real-life experiences of J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni (CETA) from a highly urbanized city in Negros Occidental, the Philippines. The study's main goal was to add to the body of knowledge already available on the J-1 cultural exchange teacher program and enrich this information by highlighting the story from the perspective of the alumni. The main question driving this research is: What stories do former J-1 Cultural Exchange educators tell about their experiences of teaching in a foreign educational system, and how do these narratives reveal their journeys of personal growth and professional transformation? Specifically, four problems emerged: how do J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni find their footing amid the shifting roles and teaching expectations that come with working in a foreign classroom; in what ways do J-1 teachers open themselves to new cultures while holding onto the threads of their Filipino identity; in what ways do J-1 teachers open themselves to new cultures while holding onto the threads of their Filipino identity; how do J-1 teachers weather the emotional storms and emerge transformed through their personal and professional journeys; and how do J-1 teachers perceive and make sense of the structures and ethics that shape their experience, and what insights do they gather for those who follow?

### **Research Methodology**

This section describes the aspects of the study related to research technique, such as the methodological perspective that guides the inquiry, the study's backdrop, which includes the research site and data sources, and the particular procedures for collecting and evaluating data. Along with outlining the ethical policy of the research adhered to throughout the study, it also discusses the steps taken to guarantee the reliability of the qualitative data.

### **Research Design**

This study is grounded in an interpretivist methodological perspective, which posits that reality is socially and individually constructed. Rooted in Social Constructivist Theory, this emphasizes that individuals make meaning through their unique sociocultural contexts, shaped by language, religion, traditions, beliefs, family roles, and living conditions (Tanlaka & Aryal, 2025). From a constructivist standpoint, knowledge and realities are not permanent but are co-created through human cognition and social interaction, rendering reality inherently multifaceted and subjective. Aligned with this interpretivist lens, the study employed narrative inquiry to explore and represent the rich, experiences of J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni. Gilstein (2024) defines narrative inquiry as a qualitative method investigating how people use storytelling to make sense of their experiences. This approach finds deeper meanings ingrained in underrepresented groups' communication and lives while amplifying their voices. By collecting and analyzing personal stories, narrative inquiry facilitates the exploration of how informants interpret their experiences within specific social and situational contexts such as family, work, or community over time, highlighting pivotal moments and emergent themes (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This method enabled us to fully comprehend their experiences based on their narratives by highlighting the diversity and complexity of their journeys as they adjusted to new surroundings.

## Study Respondents

The researcher invited six (6) informants whom the US Department of State identified as alumni. This means they exited the USA and submitted proof of return to their home country to their respective sponsors. They were invited to be part of a network of educators who were previously part of the program (US Embassy in the Philippines, 2025). All informants completed five years as J-1 Cultural Exchange teachers and are currently residing in Negros Occidental, Philippines, to fulfill the 212(e) Home Residency Requirement. The 212(e) requirement is not just a rule but a promise. One that ensures knowledge gained abroad finds its way home. It ensures that the cultural exchange does not end at the airport but continues to influence local educational progress and further the program's goals (Team JX, 2024). Among them, three (3) were male, and three (3) were female. Half of the informants taught at the high school level, while the other half taught elementary students. Additionally, three taught in reservation areas, and three trained in urban school districts. All informants taught in Arizona, known as the Copper State, which has approximately 2,431 public schools, including district-run charter schools and Career and Technical Education schools, managed by 661 public school districts (Arizona Department of Education, 2023). This ensured balanced representations of gender perspectives and added inclusivity to a more comprehensive finding (Pollitzer, 2019)

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information of the Informants*

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Highest Attainment	Educational	Class Level	School Area	District
Martha	58	Widowed	MAEd- AS		High School	Rural	
Samantha	33	Single	MAEd- Math		High School	Urban	
Adonis	31	Single	MAEd-Soc.Studies; MHS- Higher Educ.	MED;	High School	Rural	
Mar	33	Single	MAEd- Soc.Sci		Elementary	Rural	
Johnny	46	Married	Bachelor in Elem English		Elementary	Urban	
Van	42	Married	MAEd- AS		Elementary	Urban	

## Instrument

The study utilized in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews guided by open-ended questions. These interviews were conducted in person and were designed to capture detailed personal experiences and perceptions of their experiences. This open-ended guided interview is a qualitative method using predetermined and spontaneous questions. While it focuses on major areas of interest, it also allows the researcher to dive deeper into ideas that emerge organically throughout the conversation (Vaughn, 2019).



### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

Informed consent letters outlining voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights were sent to all participants (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2024). Guided by narrative inquiry, the study used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to capture the experiences of J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni. This format allowed participants to share rich, first-person accounts while addressing key themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Each 45–60-minute interview was recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and reviewed by participants for accuracy (Hill et al., 2022). The researcher followed Creswell's (2018) qualitative analysis process, beginning with bracketing to set aside bias, and maintaining reflexivity as a co-constructor of meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Immersive reading of transcripts highlighted significant statements, which were coded into themes using Saldaña's (2016) methods. These were grouped into four main narrative threads: professional change (red), cultural immersion (green), emotional transformation (yellow), and systemic reflections (blue). Narrative reconstruction captured individual turning points and broader patterns (Riessman, 2008). Theme revision, frequent comparison, and reflexive journaling, maintained credibility and alignment with narrative inquiry's relational and iterative nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Ethical Consideration**

The study ensured trustworthiness and ethical integrity by allowing informants to confirm interpreted data. Findings were presented through narrative descriptions supported by pseudonymous direct quotes to reflect personal and shared experiences while safeguarding identities (White et al., 2014; Polit & Beck, 2016). Outlined in the informed consent are procedures, risks, and benefits, noting voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without penalty. According to Resnik (2018), competent research ethics maintained anonymity, data integrity and participants welfare throughout the study.

### **Results and Discussion:**

Four major themes emerged due to highlighting significant statements and the iterative process of immersing in the narrative of the informants.

#### **Theme 1: Navigating the Currents of Professional and Instructional Change**

These Filipino educators were stranded in strange waters, where the rapid currents of innovation collided with the tides of tradition, as they crossed countries and oceans. Their previously familiar classrooms became places of challenge and exploration where each session required knowledge and self-reinvention.

#### **The Art of Adapting Curriculum and Evolving Pedagogy**

As teachers increasingly work across borders, they encounter not only geographic relocation but also shifts in pedagogy, classroom norms, and educational philosophies, especially those from developing nations teaching in Western contexts like the U.S. In narrative inquiry, such relocation represents a re-

storying of professional identity, as educators reconstruct their sense of self through lived experiences and new cultural meanings (Kim, 2016).

All six informants expressed difficulty in transitioning to the U.S. educational system, especially matching their methods to the new expectations. Their narratives revealed a shift of mindset from behavior-focused, teacher-centered models to approaches rooted in empathy and inquiry-based learning. For instance, Martha realized her traditional methods were ineffective and had to meaningfully adjust to better engage her students. As she shared: *"When I was in high school I was very strict especially the work. Pag indi ko nagustuhan ang trabaho, I really have to let them repeat the work. Didto day nasup ay gid ko."* (*"When I was a teacher in High school (The Philippines), I was very strict. I really have to let them (students) repeat the work. In the U.S., I got so exhausted."*)

Filipino J-1 teachers in Dumlaog and Mengorio's (2019) study also struggled to adapt their teaching to the U.S. curriculum. Likewise, Samantha admitted difficulty managing her classroom during her first year, showing how professional adjustment demands emotional resilience. As she put it: *"During my first year, I really didn't have any control with that class. It was a struggle all through the year. If not for the loan I had to pay, I wouldn't have stayed. I had to learn how to survive and teach at the same time."*—Samantha.

Southeast Asian teachers in Western classrooms often struggle conduct and must adapt quickly to unfamiliar norms, leading to deep personal and professional shifts. Samantha experienced this firsthand. *"American students need a lot of consistency, even in things like throwing trash or sharpening pencils,"* she said, emphasizing how these small routines, often second nature to Filipino students, had to be taught explicitly in the U.S. Reflecting on her high school teaching, she added, *"You really have to coach them... unlike Filipino students who already know how to behave."* These accounts show how Filipino J-1 teachers balance academic adaptation with behavioral education, reshaping their teaching role.

Macapagong (2020) noted that Filipino teachers struggle with U.S. classroom norms that require explicit instruction, highlighting the need for training in behavior management and cultural responsiveness.

Transnational teachers must navigate new curricula and build culturally responsive communication. Schmidt and Block (2020) note that international teachers often undergo deep pedagogical shifts to meet unfamiliar norms. Adonis shared, *"It was a challenge... I didn't know the subject, but I had to teach advanced U.S. subjects like AP Economics and U.S. Civics—uncommon for Filipino teachers."* This reflects how Filipino J-1 teachers adjust methods, management, and content. Fundal (2025) emphasized their resilience and identity shifts. Van recalled, *"I had to overhaul my teaching, adapting to centers and differentiated tasks was all new to me."*

### **Igniting Innovation Through Instructional Craft**

This study examined how J-1 Cultural Exchange transitioned from teacher-centered methods to student-centered, inquiry-based learning. Jones's (2015) believes that excellent educators become "guides on the side," encouraging active engagement.

Van recalled, "Back home, it's teacher-centered. Here, it's collaborative and hands-on. At first, I was like, 'What's happening?' But my team supported me, sharing resources, co-planning lessons, and encouraging open dialogue."

Van's plain tale shows adapting to instructional changes, redefining self- concept, and finding support through teamwork. Keiler (2018) notes that teachers confronts many obstacles, transformations, and initial disorientation often eased by a supportive environment. She also emphasized restructuring her

teaching style: *"Differentiation was another big one... I had to shift from a teacher-driven approach... to a more student-driven model... encouraging meaningful conversation, student exploration, and shared accountability."*

Keiler (2018) likewise found that teachers redefined their professional identities during such transitions. While some adapted easily, others struggled or resisted; success often depended on ongoing professional development and administrative support.

Meanwhile, Mar recognized deeper student issues tied to their personal lives: "...students... are having those kinds of problems because they don't have anyone... at home to really take care of them."

Meanwhile, Mar recognized deeper student issues tied to their personal lives: "...students... are having those kinds of problems because they don't have anyone... at home to really take care of them." This agrees with Markowitz and Bouffard (2025), who found that socio-emotional learning (SEL) and trust lead to meaningful educational transformation.

Johnny shared that creating a structured, inclusive classroom with clear expectations and positive reinforcement: *"I had to teach my students to really love learning... I had to start with my structure. That's the step to becoming a Teacher of the Year."* – Johnny

He favors Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which Sugai and Horner's (2020) found boost student involvement. Johnny's reward system encouraged excellent behavior: *"All students are on task... I have three mystery boxes: candy, school supplies, and toys."* This technique promoted responsibility of student choice in the classroom.

### **Expanding Horizons in the Journey of Professional Becoming**

Filipino J-1 teachers often stepped into leadership roles beyond teaching. Adonis, known for his vocal and assertive personality, stood out: *"If I know it's right, I need to fight for my right. ... So I know how to stand up. I know how to learn to fight. Doesn't mean that you're all American and Filipino at work."*

His story shows how Filipino teachers not only adapt but lead—redefining their roles as mentors and culturally responsive educators (Oris & Caballes, 2023).

Filipino teachers entering U.S. schools experience intolerance and microaggressions, forcing them to establish their worth, according to Chua (2021). Even with pursuing U.S. master's degree, Adonis felt skepticism. Adonis, pursuing a U.S. master's, still faced doubt and resentment. He recalled, *"I've been bullied... They questioned my credentials. They said, 'Why are Filipinos dominating?' I had no words. My boss had already explained it to them."*

Adonis didn't just teach, he defended his qualifications, led others, and stood firm in his identity, showing how leadership can emerge from resistance.

Johnny's responsibilities went beyond teaching to include classroom management. His planned routine and good behavior tactics impressed mentors, academic coaches and even state visitors. He was nominated for West Side Teacher of the Year. *"They would always choose my class," Johnny recalled. "I don't know why. The principal would always bring them in."* His story reflects how leadership can grow informally through innovation and peer influence. Del Valle (2024) also emphasized that school support, quality resources, and administrative encouragement strengthen successful teacher integration. These teachers didn't just instruct, they mentored, supported, and became vital parts of their school communities through adaptability and leadership.



**Theme 2: Immersion in Culture and the Exchange of Identity**

To cross into a new culture is to step into a world painted with unfamiliar colors and rhythms. For these teachers, immersion was more than adapting; it was a delicate dance of holding onto their own stories while weaving new threads into their identity.

**Embracing New Cultural Landscapes and Navigating Adjustment.**

This theme captures our respondents' journey from the well-known cultural setting of the Philippines to the radically different educational and social milieu of the United States. Cultural Adjustment and Learning is at the heart of this experience, as it involves adapting, learning new cultural norms, and transforming teaching practices to reflect these changes.

Martha pointed out that one of the first things to bear in mind when aiming to understand students is the importance of learning the culture and immersing oneself in the local context.

*"Okay, first thing first, you really need to learn the culture. ... Befriend other Navajo people... try to know the students... the attitude of the children reflects... their panimalay (home)... That way... you'll better understand the student... I used to wonder, 'Why is this child acting like this?' Then I realized, it's because their home life is very complicated."*

In contrasts with what teachers traditionally do in Philippine classrooms, where it is customary to begin classes with a prayer. Filipino teachers initially continued this practice automatically during the first few days of teaching in the U.S. However, leading a prayer in American public schools is regarded as a violation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which forbids the endorsement of religion by the government. As the U.S. Department of Education clarified, teachers and school officials "must not lead their classes in prayer, devotional readings from the Bible, or other religious activities" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This is consistent with research on cultural adaptation, which argues that unlearning one's cultural context is often overlooked, but is a crucial part of effective cultural integration (Macapagong et.al, 2023). Teachers transitioning to new environments face a dual challenge: adapting to the new culture while rethinking and unlearning the habits and assumptions they have held about teaching and authority in their home countries.

Adonis experience illustrated tension. Despite his extensive knowledge of social science, he was not aware of the social norms in the US setting. Despite the initial predicament, the experience became a teachable moment in sharing the Filipino culture with his students.

*"Oh, why? Is there anything wrong with prayer? Yes, I'm not aware that in the United States, this part of their constitutional rights that you can impose religions with this."- Adonis. He revealed, "And then he asked me, do you believe in God?... But then because out of his curiosity, he was able to learn my culture too."*

Adonis found himself in a situation where he unknowingly went against this constitutional principle. This narrative emphasizes the necessity of a cross-cultural perspective, especially concerning American public education and religious policies. Low levels of cultural intelligence may cause this cultural divide, which can affect self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Almessabi, 2021). The narratives highlight that unlearning one's culture can be deemed necessary to adjust to new surroundings (Reyes et al., 2020).

Almost all informants acknowledged in their narratives that Americans are quite different from what they used to teach. As Van shared: *"The kids there are built differently from where I come from... They speak their minds very openly and are not afraid to be brutally honest... I had to learn how to stay calm in the face of talk-backs... focus on the behavior and help students regulate their emotions instead of reacting emotionally myself."* – Van

Exchange teachers often face the challenge of language barriers. For example, Ospina and Medina (2020) confirmed an educator's struggle with the language, English. According to them, teaching has less to do with classroom management or institution support but communicating in English for years. Much like Samantha, she remarked on the difficulty of interpreting student behavior. Similarly, Samantha expressed the same challenges in recognizing language and cultural cues: *"One thing I did was ask... what the student actually means... maybe they are... being disrespectful... but I don't understand... so I verify it with my colleague."*

Although confronted with varying realities, all teachers found ways to promote a positive classroom culture. Johnny, for example, supported his students by explicitly teaching values through their conversations. He provided them with goal cards and encouraged them to use intentional, kind language when collaborating with peers. He referred to this as "accountable talk", a practice of modeling respectful and constructive dialogue in the classroom. *"Yeah, there were times... it was kind of new to them... at home they're kind of yelled at... they said bad things to each other... So when I introduced accountable talk... that's a twist... because inside the classroom you have to be polite."* - Johnny

American students were often defiant and resistant to authority, which required a dramatic shift in teaching practices, classroom management strategies, and personal expectations.

As these teachers navigated their new roles, they encountered stark differences in student behavior, classroom dynamics, and cultural norms, demanding professional adaptability and emotional resilience (Ralph, 2024).

Mar echoed a similar sentiment: "There were a lot of students... struggling with behavior... we have to extend our patience more." This aligns with Rathinam's (2024) findings that international teachers faced an overwhelming cultural transition and had to adjust both mindset and practice. To understand her students better, Van recognized that fully adapting to the culture was her responsibility. *"I knew it was my responsibility to understand the local culture, including classroom norms and student behavior dynamics, so I could truly connect with my students,"* she explained.

### **Weaving Stories as the Expression of Filipino Identity**

The J-1 Cultural Exchange experience placed participants as active cultural ambassadors, consistent with the program's intent under the 212(e) home residency requirement. This mandate ensures that the cultural learning gained in the U.S. is reintegrated into the home country. As Global Educational Concepts (2018) affirms, cultural exchange remains the program's core, with structured monitoring to capture participants' engagement. Despite initial gaps in integration readiness, informants demonstrated a clear commitment to cultural diplomacy—sharing Filipino culture through food, media, travel, and community involvement.

Martha sought to motivate her U.S. students to appreciate their access to education by contrasting it with the determination of rural Filipino children. She recalled, *"You know what class, I would like to share with you the Filipino children how hard they go to school from the rural areas. Ginbutangan ko na sila daun video day (I showed them videos). Ang mga bata bala the hard way to go to school bala day (About*

*the children who are having the hard time in going to school). Nga iban gataklas pa sa pangpang. Ay huo! (Other children had to climb up mountain slopes, Yes!). Just to motivate them that you know what you are so lucky because from your home you ride in a bus going to school and then when you go back you have to ride in a bus and then they were going to bring it to your home but some of the Filipino children are like this, they are trying their best to be in school but they are willing to go to school so amo na ang ginashare ko sa ila (that is what I share with them)."*

Through this emotional comparison, Martha fostered empathy and cultural awareness, reinforcing her role as a cultural ambassador in the classroom.

Martha used storytelling as an effective pedagogical tool. This aligns with Will and Najarro (2022), who emphasize the role of Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) in creating meaningful connections that engage students, promote understanding, and inspire them to take responsibility for their learning.

On the other hand, Samantha is bolder and more detailed in sharing her Filipino roots. She struggled during her initial year because she had to share her culture with the school and community. However, as Samantha grew closer to her students and coworkers, cultural sharing in her lessons became more organic and meaningful. She even facilitated student communication between the U.S. and the Philippines to enhance cultural exchange.

*"Well, every year, we are required to share our culture to the students in the school community. So on my first year it was really a struggle except that I was able to like pinpoint one or two students that are willing to communicate with another student at my previous school. So they were able to communicate through exchange of emails and chat. So that's what they did.... We were able to gather in the church and we were able to share our culture even our food to them. And that was really a good experience."*

Many participants used food, festivals, symbols, and storytelling as meaningful tools for connection. Adonis emphasized how Filipino dishes helped bridge cultural gaps with his American colleagues. He shared food like pancit, lumpia, and Valenciana, which were both new and familiar to his audience, facilitating cross-cultural curiosity and dialogue:

*"I introduced like the pancit, the lumpia, the egg roll... every potluck with my colleagues, I bring them... the first menu that I brought to the table was the Valenciana. For them it was a Paella."* This strategy worked well because many of the ingredients and dishes, such as noodles in pancit and egg rolls in lumpia, were familiar to American palates, allowing for a sense of shared understanding and cultural exchange. This gives Filipinos a chance to define and share their cultural stories, just like the ongoing efforts in the Philippines to challenge and change colonial legacies (Perez, 2023).

Johnny's approach to cultural exchange involved sharing the stories behind cultural symbols,

*"I explained to them the meaning of our flag.... Why do we have this kind of festival, the Mascara... I set a time for them to explain my culture, and they ask questions sometimes."*

Meanwhile, Van and Mar incorporated Filipino culture directly into their lessons. Van linked science topics with Philippine examples, while Mar highlighted school-wide cultural days:

*"I weave Filipino culture into my lessons like reading texts about Masskara and Sinulog..."* – Van;

*"There are different showcases of culture like dances, food, and all that."* – Mar

These forms of cultural integration reflect Lockhart (2021) and Tatel (2021), who found that J-1 teachers experienced growth in cross-cultural communication, empathy, and resilience, while also enriching their students' global awareness.

### Theme 3: Inner Transformation and the Emotional Odyssey

A deeper, invisible journey, a journey of the heart and soul lies under the surface of classrooms and curricula. Along with their expertise, these educators brought with them brittle hopes and unsaid anxieties as they traveled across continents and cultures. Moments of loneliness and hopelessness were interspersed with quiet bravery and profound self-discovery throughout the emotional journey that transpired. Through storms of homesickness and the solitude of unfamiliar lands, they emerged transformed wiser, stronger, and intimately changed by the tides of their inner worlds.

#### Weathering Emotional Storms and Psychological Trials

Emotional and psychological challenges were significant results in the narratives. Teachers shared homesickness, loneliness, and self-doubt during the initial phase in the integration were common to all. Many faced post-J1 anxiety, interpersonal conflicts, and the stress of family separation. Despite these challenges, they gradually built emotional resilience and adapted. These findings echo prior studies noting the physical and emotional toll of cultural transition on J-1 teachers (Ralph, 2024; Ospina & Medina, 2022).

Sam shared: *"I was thinking like, do I really want to do this.... I even told my parents, what if I can't handle this?"* Her parents' response, *"Just pay up the loan and then you can go home the next year."* This aligns with Tatel (2021), who noted that J-1 teachers initially face cultural adjustment, language barriers, and limited support.

Adonis, who talked about how hard it was for him to acclimate to a new place in the first few months. As narrated: *"Three months I got this depression. ... I feel like I'm alone. I feel like I'm weak, and then the comfort was not there, but you have to strive because you want it."* Similarly, Del Valle (2024) reported that Filipino teachers in Florida struggled with cultural adjustment and homesickness, but staying connected with family helped them cope and succeed in the program.

Separation from loved ones also was revealed as a significant emotional challenge among participants, highlighting the personal cost of pursuing the American Dream. Johnny reflected, *"I was struggling when I got there.... It was like depression.... It took me six months to really handle it."* Mar reiterate this, noting that the hardest part was *"being away from your comfort zones, from your home, from your family."* Van described mixed emotions, combining excitement with *"a feeling of loneliness"* and *"emptiness"* from being away from her children and parents. These accounts reflect what Ospina and Medina (2020) described as the psychological toll of being apart from extended family. Homesickness and the absence of familiar support systems impacted teachers' emotional resiliency and underscored the need for strong support networks.

Additionally, one of the most significant challenges of the informants in the study was the language barrier. Specifically, three J-1 CETs reported difficulty in communicating with the students which resulted in self doubt as Van shared: *"As a non-native English speaker, I was always a little conscious. I'd wonder, were my words clearly delivered? or did I really understand what they were trying to say?"* Samantha reflected, *"There are language barriers because we are used to like talking in straight English and formal English. But in the United States, students are more of like the colloquial type where they have different words and it means like different than what you know about."* Language barriers remain a major challenge for J-1 CETs, often causing misunderstandings (Safipour et al., 2017). For instance, a teacher was reprimanded for violating personal space while only trying to explain a lesson (Ospina & Medina, 2020).



Contrary to most respondents, Adonis experienced rejection, saying, “They don't like us... They even said that we don't like outsiders to teach our kids.” This reflects the challenges noted by Ralph (2024), who found that lack of administrative support hindered teacher integration, though mentoring improved outcomes. Similarly, Rathinam (2024) reported that international teachers face major transitional challenges in adapting to U.S. schools and curriculum.

### **The Rising Strength of Independence and Resilience**

Relocating to the U.S. challenged J-1 teachers both personally and professionally. Many shifted from a sheltered life to one requiring full independence like managing homes, adapting to a new educational system, and navigating unfamiliar cultures alone.

Samantha shared, *“It was the first time I was able to handle a raw fish... wash dishes... I was able to prove myself... without the consistent guidance of my parents.”* Her story illustrates how separation from family fostered self-reliance and emotional growth.

Cultural resilience also played a role. Adonis said, *“We Filipinos... we were made together... we work without complaint.”* In the same vein, Johnny, recalled how others recognized his perseverance: *“He’s a teacher who doesn’t complain... everybody’s looking at me.”*

This collective mindset aligns with findings by Modesto (2020) and Arcillo (2022), whose similar findings revealed that Filipino educators often cope with adversity through shared values, camaraderie, and a positive mindset. Support systems also proved vital. Van said, *“Learning how to do everyday things... was a struggle... but eventually I started to feel a sense of self-worth.”* Teachers found strength through friendships, community ties, and church involvement. Samantha shared, *“I even have a mom and dad there that I go out with every Sunday.”* Mar stressed, *“It’s more of the friendships... we still get in touch... they message me on Facebook.”*

These earned friendships provided stability and psychological support, reinforcing studies by Wangliu et al. (2025) and Naz et al. (2024), who found that social bonds across borders help sustain emotional well-being. Despite being away from loved ones, many teachers not only adjusted but thrived. As Samantha affirmed, *“I feel I can take on any kind of work... even face the president.”* These reflections show how independence, cultural resilience, and meaningful relationships empower J-1 teachers to adapt, endure, and grow.

### **The Quest for Meaning and the Pathway of Growth**

Many J-1 Cultural Exchange Teachers initially joined the program to earn more and grow professionally. As Jhonny said, *“I’m just here to save money and all that, pay my loan.”* However, the experience led to deeper personal and professional transformation. Teachers reported becoming more confident, emotionally resilient, and self-aware through what Nardon and Hari (2022) call *“reflective sensemaking.”*

Samantha shared how she developed confidence and meaningful relationships: *“Now I feel more confident that I can take on any challenge... we still exchange life updates.”* Johnny emphasized growth through U.S. training, saying it helped him *“figure out how to help my students”* and understand *“what is so important in my skills.”* These reflections align with Creswell and Poth’s (2018) concept of a *“transcendental shift,”* a turning point in self-perception. Van echoed this: *“It’s the daily encounters... that transform you,”* while Mar described cultural adjustment as a broadening of horizons.



Alicamen and Becamon (2022) and Ó Gallchóir et al. (2018) shared similar findings confirming that international teaching often results in profound growth, shaped by everyday interactions, cultural immersion, and the development of a stronger teaching identity.

#### **Theme 4: Reflections on Systems and Ethics within the J-1 Experience**

Beneath the individual accounts of development and adversity is a more expansive environment influenced by norms, regulations, and moral dilemmas. The J-1 experience takes place amid intricate networks of rules, expectations, and ethical quandaries in addition to academics.

#### **Unveiling the Structures of Programs and Policy**

All J-1 teacher alumni expressed concerns about visa rules and misunderstandings around the J-1 Cultural Exchange Program, particularly the two-year home residency requirement. Datta-Roy and Lavery (2017) similarly found that immigrant teachers in Australia often lacked post-arrival information, which affected their transitions.

Martha shared her belief that she could stay in the U.S. indefinitely: *"I don't know lang ha. Kay ako ya galing, I have the choice to stay mo. Ako may choice man ko to stay. Kay te ginahulat ko lang divorce paper ni Harry nga magwa dasun amo na, but then because of the law nga hambal sa akon ni Harry. 'Dear and tanan ibutang ta sa lugar.'" ("I just don't know, but I myself have a choice to stay. I also have a choice to stay, but I was only waiting for the divorce paper of Harry to come out, and then because of the law, Harry told me, Dear, we should put things right.")* Adonis emphasized following program rules: *"Don't feel bad to go back... my God, there's a lot of possibility when you return to the Philippines with your experience... you're really equipped."* Johnny admitted his initial assumptions led to disappointment: *"I thought I could stay longer... I was disappointed... you can't change your status... you have to go back home."* Ospina and Medina (2020) note that misconceptions about the J-1 visa and the 212(e) rule often cause emotional stress. Failure to comply may hurt a teacher's future opportunities. Still, participants like Adonis found strength in compliance, seeing reentry as a step toward growth.

Mar acknowledged the emotional toll of returning: *"Some teachers enjoy the U.S. experience too much... they feel anxious going back home."* He added: *"During my last month... I had anxiety... but once I was with my family again, it was worth it."*

Macapagong (2023) and Hauerwas et al. (2017) investigations proved how teachers often confronted the anxiety, homesickness, and a shift in identity when reintegrating into their home countries after international teaching.

On the otherhand, Van reflected on deeper growth: *"People assume that J-1 teachers come to the U.S. just to teach and earn more money. But once they step into the classroom, it hits them, it's not just about instruction. It's about adapting to a new education system, managing classrooms, and meeting district expectations while promoting your culture. It's not a vacation. It's a full professional and personal growth journey."* Lockhart (2020) further emphasizes that the J-1 program is a long-term policy instrument, not just a staffing fix but shaping intercultural collaboration and teacher development while requiring emotional resilience through adjustment and reentry.

### **Illuminating the Path for Future Educators**

The informants offered insightful commentary and counsel for aspiring J-1 teachers, stressing the value of planning, introspection, and comprehending the reality of living and working overseas. The J-1 CETA highlighted that the J-1 experience entails more than just teaching abroad; it also entails adjusting to entirely different educational systems, classroom management strategies, and cultural standards than those they were used to back home.

Stressing the need of readiness and reasonable expectations, Samantha emphasized how important it is for aspiring J-1 teachers to learn about the schools and thoroughly research the program before embarking on the journey. *"So I would advise the future J1 educators to do research first, find the best school for them."* Samantha's advice emphasizes the importance of intentional reflection and clarity of purpose for those considering the J-1 Teacher Exchange Program. *"Joining the J-1 Program isn't something you decide on overnight. You really need to reflect and ask yourself, 'Why am I doing this?' When your purpose is clear, you'll be more resilient in facing the bumps...."*

Shirshikov (2025) emphasized the importance of thorough preparation and understanding of the J-1 program, warning that unaddressed structural issues can lead to early program exit. Furthermore, Lau (2023) found that self-awareness and clear motivations help buffer emotional strain, supporting sustained growth in transnational teaching.

Johnny emphasized the need for preparation before teaching in the U.S., especially regarding cultural adjustment and classroom management: *"Be ready for the cultural adjustment... the classroom setting is different in the Philippines... some teachers stay half of the year and go back because they couldn't handle the students."*

Johnny's advice emphasizes how crucial it is to comprehend curricular standards and classroom dynamics before teaching in the United States. He highlights how challenging it can be to run diverse classrooms without enough planning. Foreign teachers adapting the US curriculum struggle with cultural adjustments, classroom dynamics and behavior management (Rathinam, 2024). Overwhelming struggles can lead to stress and early departure echoing the reports of teachers leaving midyear due to adjustments issues.

It is important to note that Adonis' statement may seem misleading in the context of a "cultural exchange" program, as he advised: *"Don't bring it in the United States. No matter what kind of culture you have, don't bring it... Because their culture is different... Time is really important. Work is work. Be professional... And another thing, never dare to have a romantic relationship."* Reading between the lines, Adonis emphasized the need for professionalism and cultural adaptation, drawing from firsthand experience. He cautioned against bringing personal habits like "Filipino time," stressed time management, and addressed ethical risks, particularly inappropriate relationships with students. He stated:

*"Students are very flirty... So don't put yourself in trouble... Protect your license, protect yourself because you're supporting your family."* He also reflected on past incidents involving fellow J-1 teachers being arrested due to such misconduct, highlighting how these situations have real and devastating consequences.

Moreover, the warning about credit card use underscores the financial pressure many J-1 teachers face, especially with the need to prepare for their two-year home residency. Adonis advised: *"...stop getting a lot of credit cards... save, save, and save because at the end of the five-year road, you have to go back to the Philippines... If you wanted to go back [to the U.S.], then you can..."* According to Mucci et al. (2020), financial strain negatively affects the mental health of migrant workers, highlighting the need for strong pre-departure training and support systems.

The narrations, self-reflections, and advice shared by the informants suggest that, despite their challenges, the J-1 Cultural Exchange Program was ultimately a professional and personal transformative experience for them. Their willingness to rejoin the program if given another chance indicates that, for many, the positive outcomes far outweighed the challenges encountered. As expressed by Martha, the experience was "great." As quoted, "Great experience, traveling," provided valuable opportunities for cultural exchange, traveling, and finding love with somebody from a different background.

All of the respondents shared that, despite early challenges, they would gladly repeat the experience. Samantha pondered: "If I had to, then yes, I would go through the J1 experience all over again... it's not gonna be a lot of adjustment compared to the first few years." Johnny highlighted the impact of U.S. training on his professional growth: "I see there's a huge difference now.... the training they have in the States really helped me grow as a professional." Adonis offered practical counsel for future teachers: "Prepare emotionally, physically, and mentally.... the money is there, but you have to sustain the expenses."

Van described the journey as a powerful life lesson: "At the center of it all are the students. They're the heartbeat of this journey."

These narratives show how J-1 Cultural Exchange Teacher Alumni improved cultural knowledge, professional and psychological advancement. This aligns with Ralph's (2024) findings that J-1 teachers gain intercultural skills and help fill U.S. staffing gaps, especially in rural districts.

### **Summary of Findings and Implications**

Through rich narrative accounts, the study interpreted how these teachers made sense of their journey professionally, emotionally, and ethically while engaging in cross-cultural teaching in the United States.

#### ***Question 1 on Navigating the Currents of Professional and Instructional Change***

Filipino J-1 Cultural Exchange Teachers initially struggled to adjust their lesson plans and teaching methods to the U.S. educational system. They had to shift from traditional teacher-centered strategies common in the Philippines to more student-centered, inquiry-based approaches, especially as rigid discipline and rote methods proved ineffective.

Teachers adopted structured behavior models and empathy-driven classroom management while learning to teach routines that are often instinctive to Filipino students explicitly. This transition demanded both pedagogical adjustment and cultural sensitivity.

Teachers' role changed as they adjusted to new demands and adopted more teaching methods such as student-led learning in structured, relationship-focused environments. These adaptations not only improved classroom engagement but also fostered professional growth.

While some faced resistance when stepping into leadership roles, most experienced increased responsibilities, with many serving as cultural ambassadors and mentors. Though familiar with multitasking from their work in the Philippines, the U.S. context pushed them to rethink their professional identity and deepen their impact in diverse classrooms.

### ***Question 2 on Immersion in Culture and the Exchange of Identity***

Cultural changes, especially in student conduct and classroom standards affected the J-1 Cultural Exchange Teachers (J-1 CET). Filipino students are generally polite and helpful while American students are more direct, therefore teachers have to adjust their classroom management strategies.

Behaviors initially seen as disrespectful were later understood as culturally embedded rather than intentionally defiant. Teachers also had to unlearn familiar practices, such as starting classes with a prayer, which conflicted with U.S. public school regulations.

Teachers shared Filipino customs, holidays, and stories with their American counterparts and students as cultural ambassadors. This reciprocal exchange improved classroom learning and cultural understanding.

### ***Question 3 on Inner Transformation and the Emotional Odyssey***

The the J-1 Cultural Exchange Teachers emotional journey included inner turmoil, personal growth, and eventual resilience. In their early months abroad, many experienced intense homesickness, loneliness, emotional exhaustion, and culture shock often amplified by unfamiliar work settings and separation from family. Professional problems including communication barriers and student misconduct, which occasionally caused self-doubt. For some, domestic responsibilities like cooking and managing finances added to the stress, especially in the absence of strong support networks. One teacher even reported rejection within their school community, heightening feelings of isolation.

However, teacher grew confident and independent by coping and adjusting. Housemates and multicultural places taxed their patience but grew their emotional maturity. Filipino values such as family commitment, collective resilience and community support fueled their perseverance. Many formed surrogate families and friendships, helping turn isolation into belonging.

Initially, a practical move to earn and gain experience became, for most, a deeply reflective and transformative period. Emotional hardships evolved into self-awareness, inner strength, and renewed professional purpose. The experience enhanced not just their teaching skills and classroom management but also their worldview and personal identity. Ultimately, the program shaped more confident, capable, and grounded individuals prepared for future challenges.

### ***Question 4 on Reflections on Systems and Ethics within the J-1 Experience***

Most of the informants expressed disappointments and confusion of the Teacher Exchange Program visa and regulations, expecting to extend their stay or adjust status with ease. Over time, however, most came to appreciate the program's structure as a framework for growth and reintegration.

Returning home was a legal need but as well as an opportunity for reflection, reconnection, and the application of gained skills. Though some faced anxiety about reentry and feared losing momentum, most ultimately found the return meaningful and grounding. Informants dismissed the idea that participants joined purely for financial reasons, emphasizing instead the program's demands for emotional resilience, cultural agility, and professional ethics.

They offered advise to potential J-1 Cutural Exchange Participants to examine schools and places, and prepare intellectually and emotionally, and enter with clear intents. Teachers highlighted that classroom dynamics, professionalism, financial management, and seeing problems as growth opportunities.

Although difficult, most found their experience to be transformative, increasing their confidence, cultural knowledge and teaching skills.

All wanted to return, proving that the program provides a path for self-discovery, cross-cultural engagement, and lasting personal and professional growth.

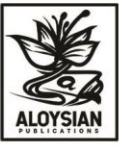
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