



Challenges of Filipino Special Education Teachers in the United States

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Filipino special education teachers working in U.S. public schools, focusing on how they navigate the instructional, organizational, and cultural demands of their roles. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the research gathered data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with ten purposively selected participants, and the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic approach to ensure systematic interpretation. Findings revealed five central themes: the need to balance individualized instruction with standards-based curricular expectations; the heavy data, documentation, and coordination requirements that limit instructional time; persistent classroom and behavioral management challenges arising from diverse and intensive student needs; systemic and organizational barriers such as staffing shortages, scheduling conflicts, and limited administrative or general education support; and the cultural and linguistic adjustments required as teachers adapt to new communication norms and school environments. Overall, the study highlights the strong commitment and adaptability of Filipino special educators while underscoring how their effectiveness is shaped by structural conditions and the availability of sustained support. These insights point to the importance of strengthening systemic supports, collaborative structures, and culturally responsive professional development to enhance instructional quality and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Keywords

Filipino special education teachers; United States public schools; instructional challenges; systemic barriers; cultural adaptation; teacher experiences; inclusive education

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

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Introduction

Moving across countries as a teacher tells a deeper story of hope, adaptation, and professional change. In the past few years, more and more Filipino teachers, especially those who specialize in special education, have moved to the United States to meet the growing demand for inclusive education services and the ongoing lack of teachers. When these teachers walk into classrooms they have never been to before, they bring with them not only their professional skills but also traditional values that they learned in the Philippines. However, as they learn to use new communication styles, educational philosophies, and institutional systems, they often face cultural dissonance, changing expectations for how they should be taught, and emotional changes (Ojeda, 2025; Rosales, 2024; Allam & Martin, 2021; Uytico & Abadiano, 2020; Dempsey, 2024). Moving for work is not the only reason people migrate; these stories show that it is also a deeply personal trip shaped by identity, belonging, and adaptation.

Filipino special education teachers in the United States work in areas with a lot of different issues that affect their daily work. In addition to dealing with cultural differences in how to run the classroom and get families involved, they also have to get used to structured individualized education programs, legal compliance requirements, and data-driven instructional methods. Recent research shows that these changes often involve mental stress, language changes, and the difficulty of going from traditional ways of teaching to new, more student-centered ones (Flores & Eludo, 2025; Legayada & Villarente, 2025). Filipino teachers also try to use culturally responsive pedagogies, but they face problems like not enough training, too many students, and structural limitations that make this hard to do (Marquez-Tampus, 2021). Even with these problems, over time, a lot of teachers form intercultural identities that combine Filipino beliefs with American ways of teaching. This shows that they are resilient and have grown professionally (Villaver, 2024).

Studies that have already been done on Filipino SPED teachers give us useful information about their lives, but the literature is still very much broken up. A lot of the study is focused on individual factors like adjusting to a new culture, making changes to the way you teach, or dealing with difficult emotions. This means that we do not fully understand how these problems relate to larger systemic issues. Additionally, there are not many studies that look at how Filipino teachers' jobs are affected by problems with language, culture, organization, and teaching in a variety of U.S. school settings. This hole makes it clear that we need to do a deeper, more complete study that takes into account the complexity of their daily experiences and places them within cultural and institutional frameworks.

This research is important because it aims to shed light on the views and experiences of Filipino special education teachers who are adjusting to new school environments. By looking into the problems they face, the study hopes to learn more about their career paths, show how strong they are, and help create support systems that help teachers be happy and effective. Ultimately, this study helps to make inclusive education stronger by shedding light on the real-life experiences of Filipino teachers and promoting more flexible policies, training systems, and professional growth opportunities that value their skills and their humanity.

Across these studies, the challenges of Filipino SPED teachers in the United States are shown to be deeply interconnected, rooted not only in individual adjustment but also in systemic gaps in preparation, induction, and ongoing support for internationally recruited educators. Strengthening culturally responsive professional development, mentorship structures, and institutional policies is essential for improving teacher well-being, retention, and the quality of services provided to students with disabilities in increasingly diverse U.S. classrooms.

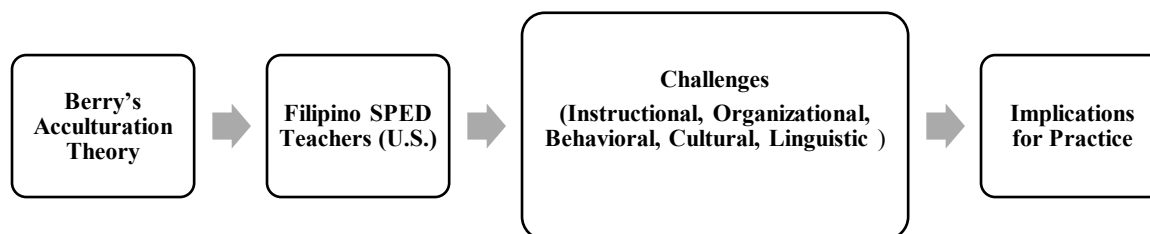


Figure 1

Framework of the study

A meaningful way to understand the challenges experienced by Filipino special education teachers in the United States is through Berry's Acculturation Theory, which explains how migrants adapt to a new cultural environment while negotiating the preservation of their heritage identity (Berry, 1997). Filipino SPED teachers often enter U.S. schools with strong cultural values rooted in respect, relational warmth, and collectivism, yet they must quickly adjust to new expectations in communication, instructional delivery, and professional interactions. This dual process reflects Berry's concept of integration, where individuals adopt aspects of the host culture while maintaining their cultural roots, a pattern commonly observed among Filipino educators working abroad (Diokno et al., 2020). Within this process, the challenges they encounter across instructional, organizational, behavioral, cultural, and linguistic domains become expressions of the broader acculturation experience.

Within special education settings, these challenges often appear as forms of acculturative stress, a central component of Berry’s framework. Instructionally, Filipino SPED teachers must adapt to individualized, data-driven, and legally mandated practices that differ from the more collective and teacher-directed approaches common in the Philippines. Organizationally, they must navigate the procedural and legal demands of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including extensive documentation, compliance timelines, and multidisciplinary collaboration—systems that may be unfamiliar or more rigid than those in their home country (Ojeda, 2025). Behaviorally, they encounter student conduct patterns and intervention models that may contrast with Filipino norms of discipline and relational authority, requiring them to recalibrate their expectations and strategies. Culturally, mismatches in communication styles, assertiveness norms, and professional hierarchies can create moments of cultural dissonance and emotional strain (Bassett, 2018). Linguistically, they must adjust to specialized academic English, disability terminology, and nuanced parent–teacher communication, all of which demand high levels of linguistic flexibility. By applying Berry’s Acculturation Theory, this study frames the challenges of Filipino SPED teachers as culturally shaped and interconnected, rather than isolated instructional or technical difficulties. Their struggles with documentation, behavior management, and professional communication are better understood as outcomes of navigating a complex acculturation process while fulfilling demanding special education roles. This theoretical grounding aligns with recent research showing that migrant teachers’ professional challenges are deeply intertwined with identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and systemic expectations in host countries (Gamez-Catiis, 2024). Berry’s framework therefore strengthens the interpretation of participants’ lived experiences and underscores the need for culturally responsive support systems that acknowledge the acculturation journeys of Filipino SPED teachers in U.S. schools.

Methodology

Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the best teaching practices in special education in the United States, as perceived by Filipino special education teachers. A qualitative descriptive design is appropriate for studies aiming to provide a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those involved (Ayton, 2023). This approach allows for a detailed and straightforward account of participants’ experiences without the need for complex interpretations or theoretical frameworks. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus group discussions, were employed to gather in-depth insights and perspectives from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Specifically, this study employed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six processes of data analysis.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select Filipino special education teachers who had direct experience teaching in U.S. public schools. This approach is widely recommended in qualitative research because it ensures the inclusion of individuals who can provide rich, experience-based insights relevant to the phenomenon being examined (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Each participant had at least one year of teaching experience in the United States, allowing them to speak from authentic engagement with the instructional, procedural, and cultural demands of special education settings.

Table 1

Participant Distribution by School Level and Years of Experience and Summary Percentages

| Participant | School Code | School Level | Years of Experience |
|--------------------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 1 | School A | High School | 3 |
| 2 | School B | Elementary | 1 |
| 3 | School C | Middle School | 2 |
| 4 | School D | High School | 3 |
| 5 | School E | High School | 2 |
| 6 | School F | High School | 4 |
| 7 | School G | High School | 2 |
| 8 | School H | Elementary | 2 |
| 9 | School I | Elementary | 1 |
| 10 | School J | Middle School | 3 |
| Summary by School Level | | | |
| | | | Elementary 30% |
| | | | Middle School 20% |
| | | | High School 50% |
| Summary by Years of Experience | | | |

| Participant | School Code | School Level | Years of Experience |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|---------------------|
| | | 1 year | 20% |
| | | 2 years | 40% |
| | | 3 years | 30% |
| | | 4 years | 10% |

The final sample consisted of ten Filipino SPED teachers assigned across elementary (30%), middle school (20%), and high school (50%) settings. Their years of experience ranged from one to four years, with the largest proportion having two years of experience (40%), followed by three years (30%), one year (20%), and four years (10%). This distribution, summarized in Table 1, reflects a participant group that is diverse in grade-level placement yet relatively similar in early-career status. The combination of varied school levels and clustered years of experience strengthens the study by capturing differences in instructional contexts while highlighting the shared challenges typical of teachers in their early years of U.S. SPED practice.

Instrumentation

This study utilized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as the primary instruments for data collection. The semi-structured interview guide supported an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences related to best teaching practices in special education (Tisdell et al., 2025). One of the central interview prompts asked participants to describe the challenges they face as special education teachers in the United States, allowing the researcher to probe further while giving participants the flexibility to share detailed, experience-based insights. The focus group discussion guide complemented the interviews by facilitating collective dialogue and encouraging participants to exchange perspectives on effective instructional strategies and shared challenges (Kornbluh, 2023). Because participants were located in different states across the United States, both interviews and focus group discussions were conducted virtually. This approach ensured accessibility, reduced logistical barriers, and allowed teachers from diverse school contexts to participate meaningfully in the study.

Data Analysis

After data collection, all audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. The study employed Thematic Analysis to interpret and organize the qualitative data. Thematic Analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, providing a systematic yet flexible approach for making sense of rich qualitative information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative results were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, beginning with data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the participants' narratives. This was followed by generating initial codes by identifying meaningful units of data, which were then clustered during the theme-searching phase to form potential thematic categories. The themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, merged, or separated to ensure coherence and accurate representation of the data. Each theme was then clearly defined and named to capture its central meaning. The final phase involved producing the report, where the themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative aligned with the study's objectives. This structured process ensured that the analysis was rigorous, transparent, and grounded in participants' authentic experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards guided every stage of the study to ensure the protection, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Teachers were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, allowing them to give fully informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were reminded that they could withdraw at any point without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by removing all identifying information from transcripts and reports, and participants were assigned numerical codes to protect their identities. In line with established ethical guidelines for qualitative research, actual school names and any contextual details that could reveal personal or institutional identity were replaced with coded labels (Pascale et al., 2022). All data were anonymized during transcription and analysis, ensuring that participant characteristics could be presented accurately while safeguarding privacy. These measures collectively upheld participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and safety throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Filipino special education teachers working in the United States encounter a range of instructional, organizational, and cultural challenges shaped by the demands of diverse learners and complex school systems. Their experiences reveal recurring patterns related to workload, coordination, classroom management, and cultural adjustment, all of which influence the quality and consistency of service delivery. Table 2 presents the themes generated from these challenges, along with the specific issues identified by participants and their corresponding implications for practice.

Table 2
Challenges Faced by Filipino Special Education Teachers

| Theme | Sub-Challenges (Codes) | Analytic Interpretation / Implications for Practice |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Instructional and Curricular Demands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing individualized instruction with standards-based curriculum • Overload of differentiation strategies • Lack of immediate application of PD | <p>Conflicting demands reduce teachers' ability to deliver targeted instruction, leading to inconsistent implementation of strategies and widening learning gaps. Limited transfer of professional development further restricts instructional improvement.</p> |
| 2. Data, Documentation, and Coordination Load | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time constraints due to volume and complexity of data • Overload of information and coordination • Time and scheduling problems | <p>Heavy documentation and coordination requirements limit meaningful data analysis, hinder timely service delivery, and increase the risk of miscommunication among service providers.</p> |
| 3. Classroom and Behavioral Management Challenges | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom management difficulty • Overwhelming service demands | <p>Behavioral disruptions and high service loads reduce instructional time, delay interventions, and compromise the quality of individualized support.</p> |
| 4. Systemic and Organizational Barriers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient training for general education teachers • Administrative support limitations | <p>Uneven application of accommodations and limited administrative guidance weaken implementation fidelity, reduce teacher morale, and restrict access to needed resources.</p> |
| 5. Cultural and Linguistic Adjustment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and language barriers | <p>Misinterpretation of student behavior or performance may occur, reducing instructional access for multilingual learners and complicating communication with families.</p> |

Theme 1: Instructional and Curricular Demands

The first theme, Instructional and Curricular Demands, captures the persistent tension teachers face when navigating individualized instruction alongside standards-based expectations. Participants described the pressure of meeting mandated benchmarks while simultaneously addressing diverse learner needs, often leading to an overload of differentiation strategies and limited transfer of professional development into classroom practice. These competing instructional priorities can dilute teaching effectiveness and contribute to inconsistent implementation of strategies across classrooms. This theme encompasses three subthemes: balancing individualized instruction with standards-based curriculum, overload of differentiation strategies, and lack of immediate application of professional development.

1.1. Balancing individualized instruction with standards-based curriculum

Balancing individualized instruction with a standards-based curriculum emerged as a significant challenge for Filipino special education teachers in the United States. Teachers described the difficulty of meeting diverse learner needs while remaining accountable to state and district expectations, particularly when managing large caseloads. As one participant explained:

“Isa din sa nakita kong difficulty ko ay ang pagbibigay ng tailored instruction without sacrificing the standardized curriculum goals... Finding the right balance took time and planning.” (P5)

Another teacher emphasized the challenge of preparing students with disabilities for standardized assessments while addressing their unique learning profiles:

“Each disability comes with its own unique needs... At the same time, I am required to implement the standard curriculum, as these students are expected to take state assessments.” (P10)

These accounts highlight the ongoing tension between individualized learning needs and the demands of a uniform curriculum. Research similarly notes that standardized curricula can constrain specially designed instruction (Rendoth et al., 2022), while effective differentiation requires intentional planning, ongoing assessment, and curricular flexibility, conditions that are difficult to sustain amid caseload demands and accountability pressures (Hockett & Doubet, 2021; Kenney et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that without adequate structural support and protected planning time, teachers may continue to struggle to deliver instruction that is both standards-aligned and responsive to the individualized needs of students with disabilities.

1.2. Overload of differentiation strategies

Managing large volumes of information and coordinating across multiple responsibilities emerged as a significant challenge for Filipino special education teachers in the United States. Participants described how progress monitoring, documentation, parent communication, and collaboration with service providers often accumulate into an overwhelming workload. As one teacher noted:

“Sometimes, if you are not very systematic with all the things you do as a SPED teacher, you can get overwhelmed with so many things you have to do.” (P2)

Another participant emphasized the difficulty of keeping track of numerous tasks simultaneously, especially when each responsibility carries legal and instructional implications:

“I have to keep track of many responsibilities... scheduling meetings, calling parents, gathering data, monitoring students’ progress, and more. This can sometimes lead to confusion, and I occasionally overlook certain aspects of a student’s IEP.” (P9)

These accounts illustrate how the volume of information, combined with the need for precise documentation and continuous coordination, can create cognitive strain and increase the risk of unintentional oversight. Research supports these concerns, noting that excessive administrative demands can reduce instructional focus and lead to fragmented service delivery (Feldman, 2023). Phillips (2025) further argues that inadequate coordination among IEP team members can result in gaps in intervention planning and delays in service provision. These findings signal that without streamlined systems and structured communication processes, teachers may struggle to manage information effectively, potentially compromising the consistency and quality of support provided to students with disabilities.

1.3. Lack of immediate application of PD

Professional development (PD) is intended to strengthen teacher capacity, yet participants noted that many trainings do not translate into immediate or practical classroom application. Teachers shared that PD sessions often present valuable concepts but lack real-world modeling, follow-through, or alignment with their current instructional challenges. One participant described this disconnect:

“I’ve encountered challenges, such as not being able to immediately apply what I’ve learned in the classroom... the concepts seemed clear during the training, but I became frustrated when I tried to apply them in my classroom.” (P4)

Another teacher emphasized the need for systems that support implementation rather than assuming teachers will apply strategies independently:

“I believe that systems have to be put in place to make sure that what was learned in PDs will be put into action.” (P7)

These accounts highlight a common issue: PD may increase teachers’ theoretical understanding, but without coaching, modeling, or structured follow-up, new strategies often remain unused. Research reinforces this, noting that PD must be a job-embedded, relevant, and supported by ongoing opportunities for practice to produce meaningful instructional change (Fairman et al., 2022; Lucas, 2021). Collectively, these findings suggest that without sustained implementation support, the impact of professional development remains limited, reducing teachers’ ability to integrate new learning into daily instruction and hindering long-term improvement in student outcomes.

Theme 2: Data, Documentation, and Coordination Load

The second theme, *Data, Documentation, and Coordination Load*, reflects the significant administrative burden placed on special education teachers. Participants described how the volume and complexity of required data, coupled with the ongoing coordination needed across multiple service providers, limited their ability to analyze information meaningfully and deliver timely interventions. These pressures were intensified by persistent time and scheduling challenges, illustrating how procedural demands can overshadow instructional responsibilities and disrupt opportunities for collaborative planning. This theme encompasses teachers’ experiences with time constraints due to the volume and complexity of data, overload of information and coordination, and recurring time and scheduling problems.

2.1. Time constraints due to volume and complexity of data

Special education teachers consistently reported that the volume and complexity of student data create significant time constraints that affect their instructional effectiveness. Teachers are responsible for managing multiple forms of data, state and district assessments, classroom performance, general education progress, and individualized needs, which collectively become overwhelming. One participant described how demanding this process becomes when supporting students with multiple eligibility areas:

“Managing a large amount of data was really a challenge... Every student in my caseload may need not only I skill but most of them have more than one special education eligibility... Marami talagang data ang kailangang makuha for progress monitoring and it is really challenging to compile and interpret all these data.” (P5)

Another teacher emphasized that while data is essential for accountability and intervention planning, the pace and volume of required data collection often exceed the time available for meaningful analysis:

“Schools here are really into data... We know how important they are, but I believe everyone really needs more time and space to digest, to analyze these data, so that they can be used for feedback and intervention.” (P4)

These accounts reflect broader findings in the literature: extensive data demands can reduce instructional time, contribute to burnout, and limit teachers’ ability to interpret information effectively (Gaftandzhieva et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2021; Zakaria, 2020). Meaningful data-driven decision-making requires structured time for reflection and collaborative interpretation, conditions that are often absent in high-demand special education settings (Ruhter & Karvonen, 2024; Sharratt & Fullan, 2022; Wayman, 2024). These findings uncover that without adequate time and support for data analysis, teachers may be forced to rely on surface-level decisions rather than targeted, evidence-based interventions, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of instruction for students with disabilities.

2.2. Overload of information and coordination

Special education teachers frequently manage a wide range of responsibilities, progress monitoring, behavior documentation, parent communication, and coordination with service providers and IEP team members. Participants described how these overlapping tasks often lead to information overload and organizational strain. One teacher explained how easily the workload becomes overwhelming without a structured system:

“Sometimes, if you are not very systematic with all the things you do as a SPED teacher, you can get overwhelmed with so many things you have to do.” (P2)

Another participant emphasized the challenge of managing multiple responsibilities simultaneously, noting how this can lead to confusion and unintentional oversight:

“I have to keep track of many responsibilities... scheduling meetings, calling parents, gathering data, monitoring students’ progress, and more. This can sometimes lead to confusion, and I occasionally overlook certain aspects of a student’s IEP.” (P9)

These accounts demonstrate how the sheer volume of information, coupled with the demands of precise documentation and ongoing coordination, can create substantial cognitive and emotional strain for special education teachers. Research supports this concern, showing that heavy administrative workloads can diminish instructional focus and lead to fragmented service delivery (Feldman, 2023). Additionally, Phillips (2025) argues that insufficient coordination among IEP team members can result in gaps in intervention planning and delays in the provision of essential services. Taken together, these findings show that without streamlined systems and structured communication processes, teachers may struggle to manage information effectively, increasing the risk of miscommunication and inconsistent implementation of student supports.

2.3. Time and scheduling problems

Time and scheduling challenges emerged as a significant concern for Filipino special education teachers in the United States, particularly in schools with large caseloads and limited staffing. Teachers described the difficulty of creating schedules that accommodate students’ diverse needs while aligning with general education timetables. One participant explained how scheduling conflicts often resulted in missed or delayed services:

“Coordinating schedules for special interventions while managing regular class time was a challenge... There were often conflicts, and finding time for everything was a constant struggle.” (P5)

Another teacher emphasized how insufficient staffing further intensified these scheduling difficulties:

“A challenge in our school now is the limited number of special education teachers... So, scheduling is difficult.” (P8)

These accounts highlight how high student numbers, limited personnel, and rigid school schedules complicate the delivery of IEP-mandated services. Research supports these concerns, noting that effective scheduling for students with disabilities requires comprehensive planning, open communication, and adequate staffing to prevent fragmented or inconsistent service delivery (Lemons et al., 2022; Kose, 2025). These findings indicate that without strategic scheduling systems and sufficient staffing, teachers may struggle to provide timely, consistent, and individualized support, ultimately affecting students’ access to essential services.

Theme 3: Classroom and Behavioral Management Challenges

The third theme, *Classroom and Behavioral Management Challenges*, centers on the daily realities teachers face in managing diverse behavioral needs while meeting service requirements. Participants described how frequent disruptions and overwhelming service demands reduced instructional time and compromised the quality of individualized support. This theme illustrates how behavioral pressures and caseload expectations intersect to affect classroom flow and the consistency of specialized interventions. It encompasses two subthemes: classroom management difficulty and overwhelming service demands.

3.1. Classroom management difficulty

Classroom management emerged as a significant challenge for Filipino special education teachers in the United States, particularly when working with students who present diverse behavioral needs and varying levels of emotional regulation. Teachers described how maintaining engagement, ensuring safety, and supporting individualized behavior plans required constant vigilance, patience, and adaptability. One participant emphasized the intensity of behavioral challenges encountered in U.S. classrooms:

“The biggest challenge for me is managing students’ behavior, especially when working with those who have behavioral or emotional disabilities.” (P3)

Another teacher highlighted how frequent behavioral incidents can disrupt instruction and demand immediate attention:

“Managing a classroom with diverse needs and behaviors was difficult. Isa sa mahirap sa mga batang may special needs ay ang kanilang behavior aside sa kanilang academic achievements. Keeping students engaged while addressing individual needs took a lot of effort and patience.” (P5)

These accounts illustrate the emotional and cognitive demands placed on teachers as they navigate complex behavioral dynamics while ensuring academic progress. Research supports these experiences, noting that effective classroom management in special education requires clear expectations, consistent routines, and proactive strategies tailored to students’ diverse needs (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Urbani et al., 2024). These findings imply that without sustained behavioral supports, ongoing training, and adequate staffing, teachers may struggle to maintain structured, inclusive learning environments that promote both academic and behavioral growth.

3.2. Overwhelming service demands

Overwhelming service demands emerged as a major challenge for Filipino special education teachers in the United States, particularly in schools with large caseloads and limited staffing. Teachers described how the volume of required services, direct instruction, progress monitoring, documentation, collaboration, and professional development, often exceeded what could realistically be accomplished within the school day. One participant emphasized how heavy workloads left little time for essential professional learning:

“Although there are many opportunities to learn about differentiation and other professional development needs, I often feel I don’t have time for them... With the many demands of my role, I find it challenging to make time for professional development.” (P10)

For others, the challenge was intensified by being the only special educator on campus, leaving them solely responsible for all service delivery:

“In my school, I am the only SPED teacher, so I can only do as much as one person can. The things that need to be accomplished are very overwhelming.” (P6)

These accounts illustrate how high caseloads, limited staffing, and insufficient time create a cycle of overwhelming service demands that restrict teachers’ ability to provide comprehensive, individualized support. Research supports these concerns, noting that excessive workloads diminish service quality and disproportionately affect students with higher needs (Bettini & Gilmour, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that without improved staffing ratios, protected planning time, and systemic support structures, teachers may struggle to deliver timely, equitable, and high-quality services aligned with students’ IEP goals.

Theme 4: Systemic and Organizational Barriers

The fourth theme, *Systemic and Organizational Barriers*, highlights the broader structural conditions that shape teachers’ capacity to implement effective practices. Participants pointed to insufficient training among general education teachers and limited administrative support as key obstacles that weakened implementation fidelity and diminished morale. These systemic gaps contributed to inconsistent application of accommodations and restricted access to essential resources, ultimately affecting the quality and consistency of support provided to students with disabilities. This theme encompasses two subthemes: insufficient training for general education teachers and administrative support limitations.

4.1. Insufficient training for general education teachers

Insufficient training for general education teachers emerged as a persistent challenge affecting the quality of support provided to students with disabilities. Although many general educators are familiar with special education concepts, participants noted that they often lack the specialized skills needed to implement accommodations and modifications effectively. One teacher described this gap clearly:

“In many cases, although GenEd teachers in general are all familiar with SPED, but some of them can only do so much when it comes to catering to the needs of sped students. They are given the IEP, but as to how to really execute the accommodations, that’s where the issue is.” (P2)

Another participant emphasized the need for more targeted and practical training to help general educators address diverse learning needs:

“Although most teachers, if not all, are familiar with what special education is all about, I think there’s really a need for more training for the GenEd teachers when it comes to dealing with students with special needs.” (P7)

These accounts highlight a clear gap between general educators’ awareness of special education and their ability to implement inclusive practices with fidelity. Research reinforces this concern, noting that effective inclusive education requires all teachers, not only special educators, to possess the skills needed to differentiate instruction and apply accommodations consistently (Evans, 2020; McLeskey et al., 2019). Overall, these findings imply that without sustained, job-embedded professional development, general education teachers may struggle to provide equitable and consistent support, placing additional strain on special educators and limiting students’ access to meaningful inclusive learning experiences.

4.2. Administrative support limitations

Administrative support plays a critical role in helping special education teachers navigate complex instructional, behavioral, and compliance responsibilities. However, participants noted that support from school leaders is often limited due to competing priorities, heavy workloads, and gaps in specialized expertise. One teacher described feeling unsupported at times because administrators were overwhelmed with multiple concerns:

“There are also times that I feel not so supported because there are several concerns that need to be attended to by our administrators. I can’t demand for help when everyone is busy.” (P1)

Another participant emphasized that administrators’ capacity to assist is constrained not by unwillingness, but by structural limitations and limited knowledge of specialized instructional needs:

“While administrators provide guidance and support, there are limitations to what they can offer. These challenges often stem from their own workload or a lack of expertise in certain areas of special education.” (P3)

These accounts highlight systemic constraints that limit administrators’ ability to provide sustained, specialized, and responsive support. Research reinforces this, noting that strong administrative leadership is essential for teacher growth, instructional quality, and effective collaboration (Patrick, 2022; Masnawati & Darmawan, 2022). These findings show that without strengthened administrative capacity and structures for ongoing support, teachers may struggle to translate professional learning into consistent, high-quality practice, ultimately limiting long-term instructional improvement for students with disabilities.

Theme 5: Cultural and Linguistic Adjustment

The final theme, Cultural and Linguistic Adjustment, reflects the unique challenges Filipino teachers face when navigating cultural differences and language nuances in U.S. schools. Participants shared that misunderstandings related to communication, student behavior, and family interactions sometimes led to misinterpretations of student needs. This theme underscores the importance of culturally responsive support systems to ensure equitable instructional access for multilingual learners and to strengthen collaboration among educators.

5.1. Cultural and language barriers

Cultural and language barriers emerged as a significant challenge for Filipino special education teachers in the United States, particularly as they navigated classrooms marked by diverse cultural backgrounds, communication styles, and behavioral norms. Teachers described the difficulty of adjusting to unfamiliar linguistic patterns and cultural expectations while striving to build rapport and deliver effective instruction. One participant emphasized the initial challenge of understanding students’ and colleagues’ speech:

“The first challenge that I immediately encounter is understanding fully with the way my students and co-teachers speak... at first I was really challenged.” (P7)

Another teacher highlighted how cultural differences influence interactions during IEP meetings and collaborative decision-making:

“Some power dynamics in our IEP meetings... especially if a team includes people with different cultural backgrounds... As a Filipino SPED teacher, there are things we believe in, but we could not just force it on them. So, adjust-adjust lang ta diri, pailob sad.” (P4)

These accounts illustrate the dual challenge of cultural unfamiliarity and linguistic adjustment. Teachers must interpret student behaviors, communication styles, and family dynamics through cultural lenses different from their own, requiring flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing adaptation. Research supports these experiences, noting that culturally and linguistically responsive practices are essential for fostering student engagement, comprehension, and positive learning outcomes (Gay, 2018; Kim, 2024). Overall, these findings suggest that without systemic support and targeted professional development in cultural and linguistic responsiveness, teachers may struggle to deliver instruction that is fully accessible, affirming, and aligned with the diverse lived experiences of their students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Across all themes, the findings reveal that Filipino special education teachers in the United States navigate a complex instructional landscape shaped by competing curricular demands, overwhelming service responsibilities, coordination challenges, behavioral management needs, and cultural and linguistic adjustments. These experiences are further influenced by inconsistent support from general educators and administrators, creating barriers to delivering individualized, high-quality instruction. However, these challenges also highlight opportunities for strengthening existing systems through improved staffing, targeted training, and more cohesive organizational supports that can better equip teachers to meet diverse student needs.

These findings suggest the importance of developing collaborative structures, expanding culturally responsive and job-embedded professional development, improving staffing ratios, and ensuring sustained administrative and instructional support. Strengthening these systems can foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments, enhance the academic success of students with disabilities, and promote the professional well-being of Filipino special education teachers. Through constructive and coordinated efforts, schools can build sustainable support systems that empower teachers and improve educational outcomes for all learners.

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