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Navigating Diversity in American Inclusive Classroom: Lived Experiences of International Filipino Teachers Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how international Filipino special education teachers adapt their instructional practices to implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) in inclusive settings while navigating heavy curriculum modifications, acute behavioral challenges, and intense compliance paperwork. Four interconnected thematic patterns emerged from the analysis. First, Continuous Lesson Modification and Scaffolding describes how teachers autonomously rebuild lesson materials to fit diverse student needs. Second, Data-Driven Progress Tracking and Individualized Exhaustion underscores the burnout caused by continuous student-by-student compliance tracking. Third, teachers utilize "Tender Loving Care" to Manage Behavioral Challenges—a strategy rooted in relational Filipino values and informal peer support that helps de-escalate behavior and foster trust. Finally, Professional Humility and Resiliency Amid Systemic Adaptation illustrates how educators adapt their professional standing, leverage transnational financial networks, and engage in micro-advocacy for vulnerable students. In conclusion, school districts must provide more than surface-level orientations by offering targeted onboarding, structured paperwork time, and sustained institutional support. Future longitudinal and multi-site research will be vital to creating localized retention policies that protect international teachers' well-being.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), Special Needs Education Teachers, Filipino international teachers, inclusive education

1. Introduction

International Filipino special education teachers working abroad and using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) in inclusive classrooms in the United States face many challenges in their daily work. These include adapting lessons to meet students' needs, keeping detailed records to meet school requirements, and managing students' behavior. With these daily workloads, teachers are at serious risk of professional burnout. Jiang et al.(2025) found that an increasing workload is a primary reason teachers choose to quit. In an inclusive setting, the dual demands of individualized data tracking and continuous instructional

customization are known to cause severe emotional exhaustion (Langher et al., 2017). Teachers' mental well-being and job satisfaction are closely related to burnout (El Alaiki et al., 2025). When teachers experience emotional exhaustion, they need proper support to help them feel (Alexaki et al., 2025).

In implementing the foundation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, it is important to consider students' cultural diversity when planning and teaching meaningful lessons (Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025). When this important principle fails to connect cultural content (Panagiotis et al., 2025), teachers face an intersectional gap that general special education tools fail to address culturally diverse learners (Lee et al., 2024). To get past three barriers, Filipino educators need to overcome rigid lesson templates to highly flexible, adaptive teaching methods (Marchan et al., 2025; Minz, 2023). Making this shift takes more than just technical teaching skills requires deep cultural awareness, flexibility, and constant reflection (Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025). Its core, closing these classroom gaps, goes beyond tweaking worksheets. It requires building deep relational trust and pushing for daily practices that help students fully grow (Seidl & Pugach, 2009).

In a global context, implementing culturally responsive pedagogy practices in inclusive classrooms is not that easy. The fourth sustainable development goal of the United Nations (SDG 4) highlights equity and accessibility. However, there is a gap between policy and reality in the classrooms. Research highlights that when educators fail to integrate cultural responsiveness into their inclusive practices, students experience exclusion not only for reasons of disabilities but also for race, ethnicity, language, gender, and sexual orientation (Grier - Reed & Williams-Wengerd, 2018). Similar concerns emerge in the international context. Teachers struggle with the daily implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy among students with behavioral challenges in inclusive settings (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). When looking at the major destinations of international teachers, such as the United States, this problem is even more visible. According to NCES (2024), the number of diverse populations in classrooms is increasing. There are increasingly diverse student populations in American classrooms, requiring teachers to develop flexible strategies that make students' cultures meaningful rather than relying on passive, one-size-fits-all curricula (Putera & Akid, 2022). As a result, teachers need flexible strategies to make a student's culture meaningful, rather than relying on a passive, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Old teaching methods are still widely used and need to be improved to support inclusive education. Teachers may face challenges in making their lessons culturally relevant because of strict curricula and limited support from school leaders (Cruz et al., 2025; Maebana & Molotja, 2023).

Many of these challenges begin in teacher education programs, which focus more on teaching techniques than on understanding different cultures (Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025). Because of this, fewer than one in four teacher education programs provide meaningful training in culturally responsive teaching (Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025). Without lesson adjustments grounded in cultural responsiveness, culturally diverse students in inclusive settings become disconnected from their learning (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2017). In inclusive settings, special education teachers sometimes have to face severe emotional burnout, isolation, and high turnover rates (Okezi and Kennedy, 2025), pressures that worsen when they lack adequate training in culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (Taylor et al., 2015). To ensure that the students' growth and development is addressed, it is important to examine how teachers navigate these challenges (Klingner et al., 2005).

In the local setting, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE, 2023) reported a high number of enrolled students from diverse backgrounds. The daily realities teachers face when dealing with this number are challenging. Researchers have identified the reasons for teachers to work abroad. However, there is a gap in how to deliver the culturally responsive lessons. Teachers perform their roles while balancing these intense personal and professional struggles every day. These international Filipino Special Needs Education (SNED)

teachers are facing high-intensity operational challenges every day. Almost no descriptive qualitative research investigates the exact operational hurdles—such as the hidden workload of curriculum modification, acute behavioral friction, and the intense emotional labor—required to sustain CRP on the ground.

This study addresses the current institutional needs that cannot be delayed. The district cannot have a teacher retention plan without data from this study. A failure to address this concern will lead to the burnout of international teachers. This will affect the quality of education teachers provide to students in Minnesota.

2. Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the daily experiences of Filipino special education teachers working abroad. It looks at how they handle the challenges of teaching students from different backgrounds in diverse classrooms. Understanding these experiences is important because teachers' well-being greatly affects how they support their students' learning. When these educators are genuinely supported rather than left to figure out the system on their own, they can build safe, inclusive spaces where diverse learners with disabilities truly thrive. Ultimately, these insights offer Minnesota school districts a compassionate roadmap for onboarding programs that prevent burnout while proudly fulfilling the teacher-care missions of the Philippine Development Plan, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and Holy Cross of Davao College.

3. Research Questions

The goal of this study was to examine the daily operational challenges encountered by international Filipino special education teachers and how they navigate the implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) in inclusive settings. Three questions guide this study:

1. What specific instructional, systemic, and cultural challenges do international Filipino Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers encounter when implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) in inclusive classrooms?
2. How do these educators navigate and adapt their teaching practices to address these daily classroom barriers while supporting student growth?
3. What personal, social, and financial coping mechanisms do these teachers employ to navigate professional burnout and sustain their emotional well-being in inclusive special education settings?

4. Theoretical Lens

This was anchored in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) as developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995). The theory rests on three original tenets: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). Academic success is the growth of students, regardless of their backgrounds (Malik, 2025). Cultural competence is the teachers' efforts to help students value their own cultural backgrounds. Lastly, Sociopolitical consciousness is teaching students to advocate for their own rights. Using these ideas in teaching in inclusive classrooms supports students. Eventually, a sense of being accepted and respected will develop, enabling them to stand on their own (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

5. Conceptual Paradigm

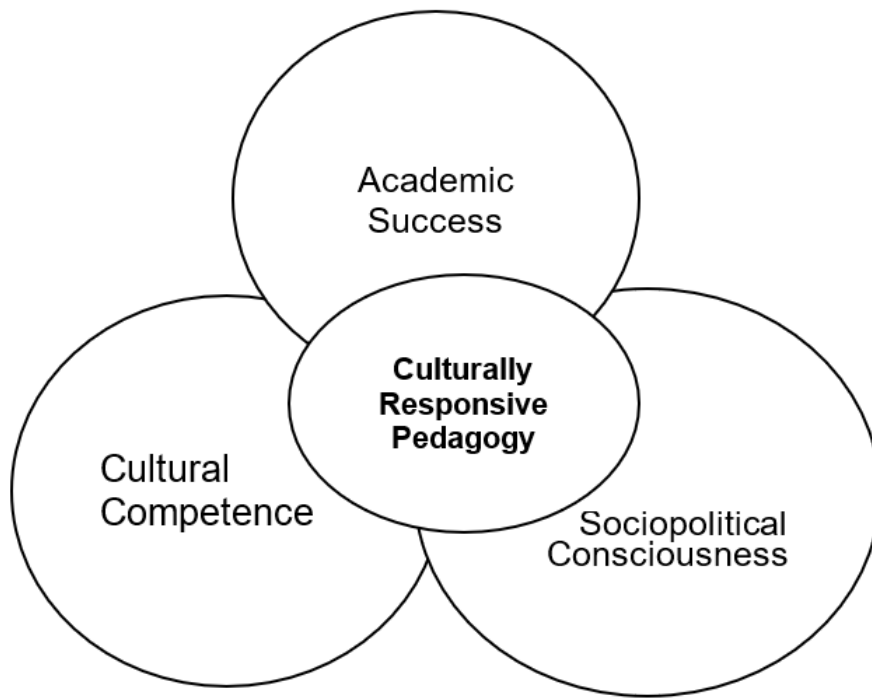


Figure 1. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) Model as developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995)

6. Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized the qualitative descriptive design as the most appropriate methodology for this study, as it is uniquely structured to capture a straightforward, real-world account of the teachers' day-to-day practices and personal perspectives (Hunter et al., 2018). According to Sandelowski (2000), this design is the premier choice when a researcher seeks to gather an unadorned, low-inference summary of an event using the everyday language of those experiencing it firsthand. This descriptive approach focuses on describing real-life situations as they happen to avoid misunderstandings (Doyle et al., 2019; Gale et al., 2013). This approach effectively captures and records the day-to-day experiences and individual difficulties encountered by international educators as they adjust to evolving teaching practices within inclusive learning settings (Tahir et al., 2023).

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in a public school district in Minnesota, USA, known for employing many Filipino educators. The nine participating teachers work in diverse and inclusive classrooms.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves choosing individuals who have direct and relevant experience with the topic being studied (Etikan, 2017; Nyimbili, 2024). Rather than trying to mirror the whole population, qualitative studies use purposive sampling to intentionally select a wide range of viewpoints on a specific topic (Gale et al., 2013). To ensure the data gathered was rich and relevant, participants had to meet three specific criteria: (1) presently teaching in Minnesota, USA; (2) teaching students with special needs, like Down syndrome, autism, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and learning disabilities; and (3) Willing to participate and openly share their professional insights and workplace experiences.

The data situation was reached during the ninth interview. The interviews were stopped because no new information, ideas, or categories emerged, showing that the data collected was enough to answer the research questions (Guest et al., 2020). Data saturation represents a widely accepted methodological principle in qualitative research, indicating that based on data collected and analyzed, further data collection and analysis are unnecessary (Saunders et al., 2017; Fontana et al., 2020). This approach helps ensure that the sample size is enough for the study. It gives researchers confidence that they have collected sufficient information to answer the research questions in a thorough and reliable way (LaDonna et al., 2021). The research shows that studies with similar participants and clearly defined research objectives often reach data saturation after about 9 to 17 interviews (Hennik & Kaiser, 2021). This is consistent with the findings of the present study (Lim, 2025).

Data Gathering Technique

To ensure a rigorous, ethical, and highly reliable data collection process, she personally managed every phase of the research. The process began by securing an institutional clearance certificate from the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Following ethical clearance, I sought formal administrative permission from the school district to conduct the study. This formal request included the interview protocol, the first two chapters of the study, and the participant informed consent forms for administrative review.

After receiving approval from the school district, the researcher sent informed consent forms to the eligible teachers through email. Once they signed and returned the forms, the researcher scheduled individual semi-structured interviews through Google Meet at times that were most convenient for them. This allowed the participants to fit the interviews into their teaching schedules despite being in different locations. Online interviews are an effective way to overcome distance while providing comfort and convenience for participants (Kennedy et al., 2021).

The researcher conducted each interview using a pre-determined interview guide. This approach allowed me to ask consistent questions while remaining flexible enough to probe deeper into the teachers' unique workplace insights (Hardy, 2016). Each online session was audio- and video-recorded with the explicit prior consent of the participants. To maintain the absolute integrity and authenticity of the raw data, all recordings were transcribed verbatim. To ensure strict confidentiality, all personal identifiers were scrubbed from the transcripts, and all digital files were stored securely to protect participants' identities (Saunders et al., 2017). After the interviews were transcribed, the data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012).

Data Analysis

To analyze the verbatim transcripts, the researcher utilized reflexive thematic analysis following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is highly compatible with a qualitative descriptive design because it allows for a structured, recursive process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns across a

dataset without forcing the data into restrictive, abstract philosophical frameworks (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The formal analytical phase began immediately after transcription and involved a systematic, inductive process in which themes were derived directly from participants' accounts rather than pre-existing categories.

First, she carefully reviewed the interview recordings to become familiar with the teachers' experiences and gain a clear understanding of their responses (Step 1). During this initial phase, she generated preliminary notes and documented recurring ideas from the data.

Next, she conducted line-by-line open coding (Step 2) by giving labels to important parts of the interview transcripts that described the teachers' experiences, challenges, and work situations. She used an inductive approach, which meant the codes came from the participants' own words instead of existing theories or preplanned ideas. After the initial coding, she grouped similar codes to identify common themes and patterns in the data (Step 3).

The themes were then reviewed and refined (Step 4) by comparing them with the coded data and the original interview transcripts (Kakar et al., 2023). After that, the themes were clearly defined and given names (Step 5) to describe the main ideas and patterns found in the data.

Finally, the reporting stage (Step 6) involved presenting the findings by connecting the identified themes with selected quotes from the participants to describe the teachers' experiences clearly (Guest et al., 2020). An alphanumeric coding system was used to organize and track the interview data. For example, the code (INB-P9-p1-l6-12) refers to the Interview Notebook (INB), Participant 9 (P9), page 1 of the transcript (p1), and lines 6 to 12 (l6-12), creating a clear record of the source of each excerpt.

7. Results

Continuous Lesson Modification and Scaffolding

This theme shows teachers' practices for making changes to their lessons based on each student's level. These adaptations are one way to support students' cultural needs. One of the participants shared, "What I did for my accommodations was more scaffolding..." (INB-P6, p. 1, line 12). In this way, teachers do not follow only what is written in the guide; instead, they restructure the lesson to be meaningful to each student.

The need to make teaching materials is a common response from participants because the standard tools provided are inadequate or not suited to the needs of each student. As a result, the teachers saw this not only as extra work but also as a requirement to comply. As Participant INB-P9 explained, "I make my own materials. I don't rely on what the district provides because it's what is expected" (INB-P9, p. 2, lines 49–51). By doing this, teachers are not only delivering the lesson but also acting as curriculum developers who spend personal time making lessons suited to every student.

Addressing the Incompatibility of Standardized Curricula. Participants reported that the materials provided by the district fail to meet the baseline needs of the students with special needs. As a result, this incompatibility pushes teachers to move beyond curriculum implementation and take on the role of instructional designer to address the mismatch of standardized curricula. Consequently, teachers must spend substantial personal energy break down complex topics and build alternative instructional materials from scratch to bridge these institutional gaps.

The Burden of Instructional Planning. To ensure student learning, teachers heavily rely on intensive scaffolding strategies. While being highly effective for student learning, these tailored adjustments significantly extend the teacher's daily preparation hours outside of regular contracted time: "... even if it takes me longer to prepare. I don't

mind going home late because this is where my students learn" (INB-P6, p. 1, lines 13–15). In turn, staying late becomes a routine trade-off to ensure students receive the support they need.

Table 1: Emergent themes on International Filipino SNED Teachers' Lived Experiences Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Emergent Theme	Initial Codes (Patterns in Data)	Illustrative Raw Data Snippet (Example)
Theme 1: Continuous Lesson Modification and Scaffolding	• Incompatibility district resources • Custom material creation • High-effort lesson scaffolding	"I make my own materials. I don't rely on what the district provides... It is really very tiring..." (INB-P9)
Theme 2: Data-Driven Progress Tracking and Individualized Exhaustion	• Beyond standardized metrics • Continuous Individualized Education Program (IEP) compliance • Severe clerical/operational fatigue	"...lahilahi jud sila... So gina-isa-isa nako sila.. mao jud na nakakapuy nako [each one is different... and this is exhausting me]" (INB-P4)
Theme 3: Deploying "Tender Loving Care" to Manage Behavioral Challenges	• Initial classroom behavioral shock • Relational empathy (TLC) • Vulnerability handling (Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD)	"That's when my being Filipino really comes out, ma'am—especially with the behavioral and emotionally disturbed children here." (INB-P4)
Theme 4: Professional Humility and Resiliency Amid Systemic Adaptation	• The "Back to Zero" status shift • Transnational financial anchors • Protective micro-advocacy	"What they say is true—no matter who you were in the Philippines, when you come here, you go back to zero." (INB-P2)

Data-Driven Progress Tracking and Individualized Exhaustion

Teachers are exhausted. Not because of the teaching itself, but because of all the tracking they have to do. For each student, they need separate records, separate progress notes, separate compliance paperwork. A teacher told us: *"Each student is different. I individualize for every one of them, and honestly, it's draining.* (INB-P4, p. 2, lines 40–41). This shows that teachers are burnt out due to the extra workloads that they have to deal everyday apart from teaching alone. Teaching itself is not the cause of the stress but the work required for compliance. Teachers need to comply and track individual students' baseline from scratch to check legal boxes which drains their energy and time. **Looking Beyond Standardized Metrics.** In supporting students with special needs, teachers go beyond the test

scores. Students' progress is carefully tracked individually to monitor engagement and progress. When it comes to students' participation, teachers ensure that all students are included. Teachers need to find ways to accommodate students' needs. One of the strategies teachers use is the utilization of culturally familiar tactile tools to gauge and reinforce student comprehension: "I measure growth through engagement in physical activities and math fluency data. I use Damath integers as a reinforcement tool. If they are participating in the games, I see progress" (INB-P6, p. 1, lines 79–81). Teachers are not simply following the standard curriculum and assessing student progress but rather looking for more ways to make learning more engaging and relevant to students' needs. As a result, students' progress is measured based on their capacities, not on the numbers expected in the standard curricula. In this way, teachers ensure that there is real progress in students.

Personal Strains of Meeting Systemic Mandates. To maintain institutional compliance and satisfy Individualized Education Program (IEP) mandates, educators implement rigorous, daily tracking systems. While digital platforms and physical sheet trackers validate student development, the requirement to log customized data points for each child creates severe operational fatigue. As one participant noted: "In every student, ma'am, I used tracking sheets, I collected data. We have this learning management system where we can see the growth. If the student is meeting the goal or not" (INB-P2, p. 1, lines 62–64).

Deploying "Tender Loving Care" to Manage Behavioral Challenges. This theme shows how Filipino international teachers explore behavioral challenges in the classroom. Participants chose to use culturally grounded approaches like relationship-first practices, values, building trust, and giving care to the students instead of imposing rigid discipline. This approach was common to six participants and reported by INB-P4, who said: "That's when my being Filipino really comes out, ma'am—especially with the behavioral and emotionally disturbed children here" (INB-P4, p. 5, lines 187–193). The deliberate invocation of cultural identity as a strategic pedagogical tool distinguishes this finding. This pattern reflects a unique cultural baseline in which educators lean into their national identity—specifically through "Tender Loving Care" (TLC)—as a de-escalation tool. Rather than enforcing detached disciplinary structures, the participants manage classroom friction by building emotional connections with high-impact students.

Navigating Classroom Behavioral Shocks. Participants frequently discussed encountering severe behavioral and emotional disruptions that initially complicated classroom management and challenged their expectations. One teacher recalled the initial shock and the need to adapt to these classroom dynamics: "Initially, it was very hard, because some students sleep in my class, some students throw tantrums, others are not able to get sleep at home, not able to have meals, others are influenced by chemicals. It's really difficult, but I slowly developed a good rapport with the students. I guess there is no best strategy to apply to those kids if you haven't developed a good rapport with them" (INB-P2, pp. 1, lines 18–22).

Leveraging Relational Empathy. Teachers use the culturally rooted "Tender Loving Care" (TLC) in managing daily classroom behavior challenges. According to their reports, building relationships is the priority goal before a teacher can implement rules and deliver lessons in the classroom. This seems effective for most respondents because instead of imposing behavioral protocols, teachers use active empathy as a de-escalation tool. Though it is informal management, it gives the students a feeling of being understood. Misbehavior is a symptom of underlying stress, frustration, or cultural disorientation. By responding with individualized care instead of discipline, teachers created a safe environment where students feel understood. Building trust and giving genuine care to students takes a lot of energy, yet for educators it pays off throughout the teaching-learning process. When students feel respected, classroom expectations are followed smoothly and naturally.

Vulnerability and Coping Mechanisms. When asked directly about the intense friction of handling specific designations like Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), teachers expressed clear vulnerability: “*My God, lisod kaayo mam! Labi na naa kay EBD! Para sa akoo, siya ang pinakalisod! ...behavior diri jud ang lisod struggle kaayo mam*” [My God, it is so hard! Especially if you have EBD! For me, it is the most difficult!... Behavior is the toughest struggle here.] (INB-P4, p. 3, lines 50–55). To process these differences without burning out, teachers relied primarily on informal peer networks and digital self-education: “I cope with my housemates, every day sharing tips, ideas, and viewpoints from colleagues. YouTube with classroom strategies” (INB-P8, p. 1, lines 10–11).

Professional Humility and Resilience Amid Systemic Adaptation. The final theme examines how participants adapt and transition their experience from their home country to the broader shift of becoming an international teacher. Teaching in a foreign system requires long-term persistence to stay balanced, focused, and resilient in order to stay in the profession. It takes professional humility and courage for daily advocacy on behalf of the learners. Moreover, participants need to adapt to shifting communication norms, unfamiliar family structures, and their roles as localized student advocates. Rather than passively conforming to a new school system, these educators actively reconstruct their professional identities. Participant INB-P2 described this shift as starting anew: “What they say is true—no matter who you were in the Philippines, when you come here, you go back to zero. My teaching experience here in the USA has taught me to be humble. Learn and adapt to survive in their system” (INB-P2, p. 1, lines 69–71).

The "Back to Zero" Transition. Teaching in the U.S. special education system gives participants a need for a profound shift in professional identity, requiring them to leave behind their years of earned credits, seniority, and title in the Philippines. Entering this new unfamiliar environment and cultural setting means starting over. Whether a veteran teacher, master's teacher, or professor in the Philippines, when teachers arrive here in the USA, they find themselves in novice roles, needing to ask local colleagues for the same basic operational advice they used to hand out back home. Alongside the loss of their previous status, they need to familiarize themselves with mandates like making the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and adjust to classroom behavior expectations. While this new professional status that teachers experience could be discouraging, the teachers positively choose humility. Teachers treated this downgrade in professional standing as an opportunity to learn and master local institutional demands without losing their instructional skills.

Financial Motives and Family Obligations as Anchors. International teachers hold on to the personal grit and financial duty they have for their families in order to endure the overwhelming behavioral challenges they encounter. Participant INB-P3 clearly voiced this reality: “My motivation to go on is number one: my salary, then family... what will happen to my financial support in the Philippines, then I need to move forward, or else you'll end up crying at the corner” (INB-P3, p. 3, lines 114–117). Bound by visa contracts and financial family commitments, quitting is unlikely for them, no matter how hard it is. This is the reason that keeps them grounded and pushing forward.

Navigating Unfamiliar Family Dynamics and Communication Gaps. Building relationships with families required cultural adaptation, particularly when interacting with household structures less common in their home country, such as blended or single-parent families. To bridge communication gaps and build rapport, teachers participated in school-wide cultural activities. As INB-P3 explained, “I always join cultural events in school because this is the opportunity where I can meet the families. Then we talk and share feedback” (INB-P3, p. 2, lines 69–72). These efforts created opportunities for informal dialogue and trust-building.

Micro-Advocacy and Fostering Student Self-Advocacy. When encountering student discrimination or social isolation, participants took an active role in shifting peer perceptions toward children with disabilities. Describing a specific instance of peer bias, Participant INB-P1 noted, “...I have one student being discriminated against... As a

foreigner, I feel pity because of the disability... sometimes you have to address the catalyst about the situation and highlight what's good" (INB-P1, p. 2, lines 89–93). Teachers extended this micro-advocacy by equipping students with self-advocacy skills. For example, Participant INB-P7 explained, "I really teach them how to self-advocate if somebody is bullying them. I teach them how to use words to trusted adults" (INB-P7, p. 4, lines 168–171). Through these direct interventions, educators fostered safer classroom environments while empowering students to assert their own boundaries.

8. Discussion

The researcher explores the deeper meaning of the data by linking the main themes to my research questions. Using Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) framework, I look at how the experiences of these international teachers match, challenge, or add to what is already known in the literature.

The Operational Strain of Academic Success. The theme of Continuous Lesson Modification and Scaffolding shows the extra preparation international teachers do to help students succeed. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), academic success means more than just test scores. To support their students, participants adjust lessons and resources to fit the needs of diverse learners, but this might result in burnout (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Prihartanto et al., 2025). Being resourceful helps students, but it also takes more time for teachers to meet all the demands (Van De Pol, 2012). Teachers use these modifications to bridge the gap between what students need (Alex et al., 2026; Ali et al., 2026) and the limited resources available.

In addition to the challenges of lesson planning, the second theme, Data-Driven Progress Tracking and Individualized Exhaustion, reveals another important issue. Teachers must follow legal rules for tracking each student's progress, but participants like INB-P4 said these demands cause physical and emotional stress. This burnout affects how well teachers can do their jobs and threatens the long-term success of inclusive education, which aims to give all students equal opportunities.

While researchers highlight the legal necessity of meticulous progress monitoring to maintain educational standards, the testimonies of participants like INB-P4 show that individualizing every tracking matrix leads directly to severe physical and emotional fatigue (Langher et al., 2017). The exact tracking actions required to establish classroom equity and satisfy IEP data mandates simultaneously act as a primary driver of professional burnout (Amalia & Ansyah, 2025). The legal necessity of meticulous progress monitoring—including collecting and tracking data on individualized education program (IEP) goals (Poch et al., 2026)—places substantial demands on special education teachers, whose testimonies reveal that individualizing every tracking matrix leads directly to severe physical and emotional fatigue that creates substantial demands on special education teachers, whose testimonies reveal that individualizing every single tracking matrix leads directly to severe physical and emotional fatigue. To establish classroom equity and maintain legal compliance under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), tracking for students is required (Damyanov, 2024). This act is the primary reason for professional burnout, according to research (Ruble et al., 2024). This is also affirmed by Brunsting et al. (2025), who found that the specific burden of tracking extensive individualized metrics from scratch consistently causes teachers' burnout. While these acts support the implementation of culturally relevant practices, they also affect teachers' sustainability.

Cultural Adaptation, Humility, and the Relational Bridge. Within the Cultural Competence framework, international educators entering the U.S. to teach diverse learners need to adapt and maintain balance between professional humility and cultural changes (Chavez & Archivido, 2026). Adjusting to these new environments depends on an educator's readiness to unlearn entrenched habits and conform to unfamiliar institutional expectations (Lumacang, 2026). Extending this concept, the present study stresses how Filipino special educators consciously

navigate going "back to zero" a vulnerable phase defined by acculturative stress and a transient loss of professional prestige common to migrant teachers adapting to Western policies. However, these teachers are fulfilling their duties beyond what is expected of them. In fact, teachers use core cultural values to manage behavior in the classroom (Chavez & Archivido, 2026). When acute student resistance or emotional distress occurs, participants use the "Tender Loving Care" (TLC) as a de-escalating strategy. This type of approach allows them to build encouraging classroom settings and spontaneous student cooperation (Lumacang, 2026). One teacher said, "That's when my being Filipino really comes out especially with the kids who have emotional and behavior problems here." These weren't problems the teacher expected. For someone new to the system, watching a student have a meltdown or not cooperate can feel shocking and overwhelming. The teacher developed a relationship with the students, and that changed everything. When students feel genuinely cared for, they calm down.

However, this level of emotional investment takes a heavy personal strain, particularly when school districts fail to provide structured mental health or onboarding support. Exposed by extreme student behaviors (INB-P6) and unfamiliar family dynamics (INB-P1), teachers are left relying almost entirely on informal, peer-to-peer support networks to process their daily stress (Amalia & Ansyah, 2025; INB-P8). This absence of formal institutional backing helps explain why financial obligations to families back home often become the sole anchor keeping these educators grounded in their roles (INB-P3). Ultimately, these findings highlight a critical gap in district oversight: without targeted cultural onboarding and dedicated mental health resources, international teachers are forced to absorb severe behavioral stress on their own, drastically increasing the risk of early burnout.

Micro-Advocacy as a Sustainable Approach to Sociopolitical Consciousness. The last set of behaviors, Protective Micro-Advocacy and Student Agency, show how participants take action through Ladson-Billings' idea of socio-political consciousness. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally responsive teachers should address more than just academics and work to challenge unfair systems in education. For these international teachers, advocacy means taking clear steps to fight discrimination (INB-P1) and promote real inclusion in their classrooms (INB-P9). The findings highlight that these teachers use protective micro-advocacy. Instead of trying to change district-wide policies, they focus on making immediate changes for individual students, like helping them access general education (INB-P8). By focusing on these smaller, local actions, teachers avoid the burnout described by Hagaman et al. (2018), who found that special educators often feel exhausted when their broader advocacy is ignored by strict school systems. These teachers also teach self-advocacy skills to students who need extra support (INB-P7), following critical pedagogy approaches that help students handle challenges beyond school (Paris & Alim, 2014). For this important advocacy to last, school districts should officially support these efforts. They can do this by creating clear administrative processes that encourage inclusion and recognize the special role international special education teachers have in supporting marginalized students.

9. Implication to Theory and Practice

The research affirms Ladson-Billings' ideas on culturally responsive teaching. It shows the behind-the-scenes toll on teachers to execute the CRP practices - the underexamined dimension. It leaves no doubt that these diverse and marginalized learners thrive when international teachers show true empathy and connections, true care, extend familial care, and protect their rights. However, this study reveals the gap in traditional culturally responsive literature by bringing to light the unrecognized exhaustion of the teachers in delivering culturally responsive care. In inclusive settings like those in the U.S., which has higher numbers of diverse learners, constant lesson adaptations and rigorous individualized student tracking contribute to teachers' burnout (Amalia & Ansyah, 2025).

In practical settings, districts must set aside time during the teaching period for teachers to complete clerical work such as IEP documentation, progress monitoring, data collection, and compliance tasks without compromising teachers' personal time (Ruble et al., 2023). Expecting international teachers to complete all tasks on top of making customized lesson plans is unsustainable and can be a root cause of burnout (Jiang et al., 2025). School districts can

reduce this burnout by setting up online resource banks that are accessible to all teachers, so they do not need to start from scratch when planning lessons (Maebana et al., 2026). Finally, the onboarding program should cover more than orientation to paperwork, curriculum, and expectations. The district must offer mentorship, check-ins, training, and other support for teachers, preparing them for real-world scenarios, including behavioral management, family relationships, and working with real students.

10. Limitations

The findings reflect the real experiences of international teachers using culturally responsive practices within diverse classrooms. Still, this study has some limitations.

Virtual Interview–Only Data Collection. All data for this study came from online interviews, with no classroom observations. For example, when teacher INB-P2 talked about using “Tender Loving Care” (TLC) and building empathy with diverse students, we relied on their personal stories without seeing these actions in the classroom. Because of this, we cannot be sure if what teachers described matches what actually happens. Future research ought to include classroom observations to confirm how these practices work in real settings.

The culturally responsive practices of the teachers may introduce biases, as they may tend to overstate their success, highlight dramatic moments in everyday struggles, or present a much-expected picture of a classroom setting. Therefore, future studies are suggested to include classroom observation, student feedback, and parents' perspectives. These will give a clearer picture than interviews alone.

Translation and Cultural Interpretation Contingency. The teachers in this study spoke Cebuano, so we had to translate both their language and culture. Some words do not translate exactly. We included the original set phrases to help readers see the nuance, but others might interpret them differently. Subsequent studies should include bilingual researchers from the same culture to review the work. Participants used Cebuano expressions—“*lahilahi jud sila... gina-isa-isa nako... mao jud na nakakapuy nako*” (each one is different; I individualize them; this is exhausting me) and “*lisod kaayo... behavior diri jud ang lisud struggle kaayo*” (so difficult; behavior here is the toughest struggle) that bear cultural meaning and emotion not completely captured by the translations. The Cebuano language is being interpreted by the researcher who spoke the Cebuano language; however, the interpretation may affect how readers understand the findings. For example, a word like “lisod” (difficult) can mean struggles, distress, or conflict.

Although the Cebuano phrases were included with translations in the study, the findings are still based on the researcher's language and cultural understanding. With these translated words, they might have different meanings in another region. It is therefore suggested in the future research to have a co-investigator who shares the same language and cultural background to protect the meaning and emotions of the participants. This would give another level of credibility to the analysis from the start until the end.

11. Future Direction of the Study

To build on these findings, future research should examine how the support for the international teachers is put into practice. Accordingly, a longitudinal study should follow the teachers to see whether motivation, such as supporting their families or achieving professional success in the classroom, can overcome burnout. This will help the district prepare a more culturally informed onboarding plan for international teachers and be proactive against burnout among the teachers. Furthermore, since the study is conducted in a single setting, future study may explore if the same theme persists across diverse urban, suburban, and rural contexts with varied resource levels. By knowing these, future studies will determine how factors like admin support and resource aggregation exacerbate the challenges.

Future research should also examine the effectiveness of the intervention plan in the workplace, such as the digital lesson banks, digital tools in tracking students, the specified work time for IEP documentation, and the peer-mentorship program (Theme 2, as voiced by INB-P2 and INB-P4). Evaluating these district-approved peer mentorship programs and special education planning teams could determine if structured support can successfully turn informal coping strategies (INB-P8) and isolated curriculum planning (INB-P9) into reliable systems for managing daily instructional demands.

Lastly, bringing the students' feedback and parents' perspective into the conversation will bridge the gap in the biases of the teachers' own self-report about using the “tender Loving Care “. Seeing how students and parents experience these approaches—and whether they actually build long-term trust—offers a far more complete picture of how international educators bridge cultural and behavioral divides in their classrooms.

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