

Original Research Article

MIGRATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Abstract

The trend of special education in the Philippines is the migration of special education (SpEd) teachers to find better living in the United States. Currently, there is a shortage of special education teachers in the U.S. Personnel shortages are the result of recruitment and retention challenges which includes poor working conditions (excessive paperwork, unmanageable caseloads, inadequate support, professional isolation) leading to professional leaving special education, insufficient funding, fewer qualified faculty and increasing education costs, and limited supply of qualified personnel. The increasing number of Filipino special education teacher is startling. Using qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher extracted the lived experiences of SpEd teachers to explore their migration narratives.

Introduction

In a broad sense, migration simply refers to moving from one place to another. Human migration is not a new phenomenon. Historically, people have migrated for various reasons.

According to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), teacher migration is a significant new trend for the United States education system emerging over the past decade. Unable to address the root causes of a growing teacher shortage, public schools in the U.S. have begun importing teachers to meet their staffing needs. Foreign teachers are being recruited from different countries and are being placed primarily in the disciplines of math, science, and special education (Weingarten, 2009).

The Philippines offers an essential model for studying international worker migration patterns because labor export is the country's top dollar-earning industry, and the government has developed a sizeable bureaucratic infrastructure to assist Filipinos in securing overseas employment. While the benefits of the flow of money back to the Philippines from OFWs are tremendous, teacher migration causes a high social cost. Teacher shortages in the U.S. are creating shortages in the Philippines also. The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (OWWA) issued a workforce report summarizing teacher migration: "In Philippine education, brain drain is said to be evident in both the public and the private school system, though more felt in the former. The fields most vulnerable

are special education, elementary and secondary science, and mathematics education. Those leaving for teaching jobs abroad are generally with better credentials. Finding a suitable replacement for them is not easy (Weingarten, 2009).

According to the Public Services Labor Independent Confederation (PSLINK), to date, there are two places preferred by Filipino teachers – the United States, which would need two million teachers in the coming decade, and Arab countries, which would need at least 450,000 teachers. As more developed countries face a graying workforce, they resort to recruiting skilled teachers for less developed countries (Enriquez, 2009).

This study will focus on special education teachers. Currently, there is a shortage of special education teachers in the U.S. Personnel shortages are the result of recruitment and retention challenges which includes poor working conditions (excessive paperwork, unmanageable caseloads, inadequate support, professional isolation) leading to professional leaving special education, insufficient funding, fewer qualified faculty and increasing education costs, and limited supply of qualified personnel (www.specialedshortages.org). Due to the continuing demand for special education teachers, especially in the U.S., more Filipino teachers are grabbing the opportunity for a greener future. This uncontrolled migration of Filipino special education teachers might affect the educational system of the Philippines.

The study aims to explore or discover insights about why most special education teachers migrate that is motivated by work. This study seeks an explanation as to what are the reasons why they opt to work overseas. The study will also benefit the educational system, the pre-service special educator, and the future teachers to get them informed about this phenomenal migration of special education teachers.

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological study will describe the migration of special education teachers. Specifically, it will answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors that trigger special education teachers to migrate?
2. Why do special education teachers migrate?
3. How do they adapt to the culture of their new home?
4. What are the difficulties they have encountered in migrating?

Theoretical Framework

According to Johnston et al, 1981:218, migration is a very complex phenomenon. According to Albert Bandura of social learning theory, an individual's perception and behavior is concerned in integrating migration that

there are factors that motivate special education teachers to migrate and choose to work abroad.

Huffman (2008) stated in his article that Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs pivoted his focus to human motivation and self-actualization. Personal and shared experiences drove interest. The conditions and reason of self are the driving force in making decisions, in order to motivate at the next stage, each stage must be satisfied. The special education teachers are highly motivated to grab every opportunity that lands in their hands. Teacher career motivation has been extensively studied in many developed countries (Younger and Brindley, 2004). The incentive value of theories on basis has inspired teacher career motivation.

Special education teachers are valued mostly for their commitment to serve a vast dimensional group of children with special needs, which is one of the most challenging and most complicated jobs in education (Payne, 2005).

Review of Related Literature and Studies

This section presents the literature review and other studies about Migration of SpEd teachers in the United States.

According to Otara (2016) "perception is our tangible experience of our surroundings and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli Perception does not only create our experience of the world around us; it allows us to act within our environment. The perceptions we pick about the environment provide information i.e., essential to our survival. According to Turner (2012), —social identity is a part of our self-concept based on knowledge of our membership of one or more social groups..., which is based on several interrelated concepts: social categorization, social identity, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness. Quillian states that the perception by members of the majority group in an outside group threatens their prerogative group, which is positively associated with prejudice against the out-group. According to Quillian (2011), discrimination and inter-group hostility largely respond to subordinate groups' perceived threats. The more noteworthy the feeling of danger to the prevailing group's rights, the more probable individuals from the predominant group express preference or bias against the threat of those outcasts. These two theories have great implications for understanding how the general public in the US perceives internationally trained SPED teachers.

There can be cases, when the impression of a circumstance is influenced by different issues, —such as cultural bias or prejudice. In simplest term diversity, for an ordinary person could be the variety of unique individuals. Diversity is the —state of having people of different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization. As regards to this study, Workforce Diversity (WD) is the existence of multicultural internationally trained SPED teachers, as a workforce, in the US convergent setting. Internationally-trained SPED Teachers are professionally licensed special education teachers in the US, who have graduated, trained, and received education in any manner from the Philippines or other countries other than the US.

According to E.T. Camata, et.al (2016); Different cultures tend to have different perceptions addressing the social dynamics of diversity, which can be classified as permissible and impermissible. The permissible societies allow diversity to permeate freely at all levels of society. The impermissible societies adhere to intolerable social norms. It should be noted however, that people evolve to progress; the concept of diversity starts to make waves to equality and equity. While some continue to argue that diversity is impossible; the rest accept it as real. The dichotomy to accept or reject diversity may result to far ranging conflicts of interest, which necessitates a primary attention to promote harmony and peace. According to Maj. Shane Pair (2011) states, "In today's culture we hear a lot about diversity, yet a lot of us *don't know what that word means. The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences*".

Research Design

A specific type of research problem calls for a particular and appropriate research design. This research is qualitative research by nature, thus it is exploratory and is handy if the research problem is relatively new in the field of research. An exhaustive study is necessary for the research problem since the researcher aims to gather insights about the migration of SPED teachers to interpret the results in breadth and in-depth. Thus, a phenomenological method of research was used in this study. A phenomenological study examines the human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved. According to Wa-mbleka (2015), phenomenological studies aim to describe the meaning that experiences hold for each subject. The said approach was used since the rationale of the study was to figure out that migration is a phenomenon experienced by the SPED teachers. From the participants' lived experiences, the researcher gave meaning to those with the end-goal of resonating the affairs of the migration of SPED teachers and its implications. In gathering the data, the researchers made use of a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The researcher uses this kind of research design to gain deeper insights on a phenomenon and validate earlier findings or gather more deep-seated data in some gray areas. This study will be conducted virtually since all of the participants of this study are residing abroad. The researcher will utilize online conferencing applications as a platform for the data-gathering procedure.

Participants of the Study

Certain factors should be considered in data gathering, such as the weather, social environment, atmosphere, and participants themselves. To provide a profound and a safe study, the researcher secured a letter of consent signed by the research adviser for the approval of being a research participant of the study. Because of its broadness and complexity, the researcher delimited its study to SPED teachers who are a graduate of Bachelor of Elementary

Education major in Special Education and has at least two years of experience since it is a part of the job requirements. Specifically, the participants of this study have all migrated to the United States of America. Also, the participant's selection was thru referral or snowball wherein the participant will refer a person who also has migrated to the USA. The number of the participant of the study will be based on the number of referred persons.

Research Instrument

After delimiting the study, the researcher decided as to what sampling technique to be used. Since phenomenological research is a design in qualitative research, a non-probability sampling was used in this research. Explicitly, a purposive sampling was utilized in selecting the participant of the study. Purposive sampling is the primary factor in qualitative research data collection which can be done while collecting the data or while doing the data interpretation or data analysis (Prieto et al., 2017). Using the criteria, the researcher purposively selected a participant in the study. Purposive sampling is an appropriate sampling technique since the researcher used it to choose unique cases that are exceptionally informative and investigate the study in-depth (Neuman, 2007). Aside from the sampling technique, the sample size of the case should also be considered. Usually, in a phenomenological study one to seven participant is enough as long as it can provide exhaustive information about the study up to the point of saturation of data will be attained (Wa-imbaleka, 2016). Therefore, with this notion the researcher selected only one or more participants up to the point where the necessary information and the saturation point were already reached.

The phenomenological study was conducted virtually using a video conferencing application as the virtual research locale platform. Both the participants and researcher should have a reliable and robust internet connection for the whole duration of the interview. Based on the set criteria, the participants will be selected and validated by asking for their licenses and job documents.

The researcher utilized an in-depth interview since it is ideal for experience type of research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Specifically, the research instrument used in gathering the data was a semi-structured interview. The researcher used the semi-structured interview to obtain complex information that could not be accepted by structured written surveys. This is preferably used when the researchers cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them (Merriam, 2009). Also, it requires the researcher to use a follow-up question for elaboration and clarification. This type of interview is commonly used if the participant is more informant than a simple respondent (Wa-imbaleka, 2016). In terms of the instrument's validity, the researcher used face validity to measure the acceptability and appropriateness of the questions to the participant.

Data Gathering Procedure

After all, had been set, the data-gathering procedure commenced. The researcher handed the letter of consent to the participant. If the participant refuses to become a research participant, the researcher will again scout for another participant who qualifies based on the said criteria. If otherwise, then the in-depth interview will proceed. The researcher will initially establish rapport to the participant. Next, the researcher will introduce the participant to the research study, telling the importance of their answers, and there are no correct and wrong answers. Then, the formal interview will begin with the contextual background information. The researcher will use the guide questionnaire to ask the participant about the research problem. After the interview, the researcher will inform the participant how the information will be treated and kept. Lastly, the researcher will thank the participant for the time and effort that he/she exerted. Once the data has been collected, it will be analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The researcher will analyze interview transcripts using thematic analysis, allowing the responses to be grouped to highlight the key categories. Thematic analysis is defined as identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in detail. Each transcript will be systematically analyzed to uncover words and concepts mentioned by each participant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using categorical aggregation, the researcher will seek a collection of themes from the data, hoping that relevant meaning about lessons to be learned about the case will emerge (Stake, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview transcripts were analyzed by the researchers using thematic analysis, allowing the responses to be grouped together to highlight the key categories. Each transcript was systematically analyzed to uncover words and concepts which were mentioned by each participant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All interview questions were listed, and the answers provided by participants were recorded, tallied and grouped. To give a simple interpretation and concise description of themes and patterns in the data set. This allowed for the emergence of the dominant categories or themes within which the data were organized. Each category was examined alongside the next to delete repetition and ensure that all salient aspects of the discussions had been captured. Quotes from the respondents were included as illustrative examples of each category extracted.

Findings

The following outlines the insights about SPED teacher's migration identified from the interview relative to the insights of the participants.

Greener Pasture

- ***Better salary pay***
- ***Valuable teaching experience***
- ***Professional Advancement***

When asked about the main reason why they would like to migrate and find jobs, most participants mentioned greener pastures. The extreme factor in shifting to different working space is the low compensation for SPED teachers despite its exhaustive workload. Based on R.A. 5168, otherwise known as the Public School Teachers Salary Standardization Act, authorizes the standardization of teacher's salary based on the cost of living. Although teachers are supported by DepEd's allowances specifically for the preparation of instructional materials, classroom renovations, and other academic-related activities, it still cannot suffice teachers' daily expenses and does not equate their workload.

Participants also mentioned that valuable teaching experience is one reason they migrated to the US. According to Podolsky (2016), there is an impact of a distinctive teaching experience on the teacher's classroom pedagogy effectiveness. Podolsky (2016) mentioned that teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher's career. As teachers gain experience, their students are more likely to do better on other success measures beyond test scores, such as school attendance, performances, and outputs. Teachers also make more significant gains in their effectiveness when they teach in a supportive and collegial working environment or accumulate experience in the same grade level, subject, or district. This is supported by Avvisati (2016), which depicts that classroom experience is essential to develop the teacher's skills for effective teaching. Therefore, SPED teachers have no second thoughts to shift for better jobs if they would like to become more effective in the classroom setting.

Most of the participants also mentioned professional advancement as a factor in migrating to the US. The increasing number of SPED teachers in the US is due to its lack of teachers trained in handling learners with special needs Camata et. Al. (2016). The lack of professional development intended for Special Education Teachers had been reviewed by Ebo (1998), where she mentioned that there are inadequate special education services and training for teachers to handle learners with special needs. Even though the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons had been institutionalized, where it provides provisions in providing competent, inclusive, and transformative teaching for learners with special needs. Still, there is a calling for public and private school leaders to conduct and implement training and seminar workshops for special education teachers.

Embracing Diversity

- ***Adopting new culture thru my past culture...***
- ***Open for new opportunities***
- ***Adjustment with the help of the Filipino community***

The term culture shock was evident in the participants' experiences before and during their stay in their new jobs. The feeling of uneasiness, lack direction, the sense of not knowing what to do or how to do things in the new environment, and not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate (Macionis, 2013), was their assumption and the something that they have experienced even until now. Some of the participants have their own coping mechanisms to adapt the existing

culture they are in. One participant event mentioned that “Filipinos are flexible and hospitable. Surely, we can adapt easily to any country’s culture that we are in. We just have to embrace it. There are also a lot of Filipino communities that will help to adapt in the culture.” Henslin (2013) claims that assimilation happens when individuals from different cultures adopt the new culture by practicing it daily as part of their social pattern. Some cultural practices have in common with the old and new culture, and the old culture sometimes becomes the foundation or basis of the new one. As one participant mentioned that “My culture helped me adjust easily here because we have similar or common practices since we are influenced by it in the past.”

The participants depicted that they are open for new opportunities and experiences with their new job and workplace, which is a step forward in assimilation. As one participant mentioned, “I can experience new things that my home country couldn’t offer: meeting new people from across the world, advanced technologies in teaching, quality educational system, the four seasons”. According to Peterson (n.d.), the importance of new opportunities for teachers to experience is invaluable and imperative for the school community. Better opportunities for teachers to venture means quality school services and an increase in student’s success.

The diaspora of Filipino’s in the United States has a long history, but certain cultures and values that make us Filipino’s remain the same. Most of the participants mentioned that they always seek help, guidance, and refuge from the benevolent and strong Filipino community in their location during their trying times. One participant said that “Actually, I did not find it difficult at all since we are influenced by American culture. Filipino communities also play big part in helping adapt to the new culture I’m in. Getting along with American colleagues and neighbors also helped me better understand the culture.” Panopio et al. (2001) depicted that Filipinos in the country and around the globe can be expected to extend a warm welcome to their guest regardless of where they come from, how well they know their host, and why they’re visiting someone’s home. The Filipino community had been extending help, especially to other Filipinos struggling with their stay in the said country. Being hospitable makes someone feel that they are not alone in the battles that they are facing. One participant even mentioned that “Filipinos are naturally hospitable.”

Personal and Work Problems

- ***Anxiety and fear***
- ***Homesickness***
- ***Adjustment to the new culture, weather, workplace***

There are indistinguishable advantages that an individual might experience in labor migration, but there are also some drawbacks. Among the adverse effects of migration for countries of origin is that a significant part of the highly skilled workforce is lost (Portan, 2018). By allowing Filipino SPED teachers to migrate

for new jobs, the origin country will also suffer a loss of qualified and competent teachers in the field that will hone students who need special attention. All of the participants are aware of such disadvantages. One even said, "Currently, there is a trend on SpEd teachers' shortages in the US. Many schools have resorted to hire Filipino teachers as we are qualified due to our comparable educational system. Surely, Filipino teachers will fill these shortages in the US and negatively impact our education system. These could also lead to shortages in SpEd teachers in the future." But as long as the government cannot provide competitive, equitable, and just compensation, we will expect more teachers to resort to job migration.

According to Virupaksha, Kuma, and Nirmala (2014), there is a correlation between migration and mental health of the migrants and those who are left. Schizophrenia, eating disorders, and anxiety are several mental health disorders that are evident, especially for those migrant individuals from developing nations, in which the Philippines belong to. They have concluded that this migration pattern may negatively affect the health of the migrants, especially those who are adolescents. Homesickness is a feeling of stress or anxiety caused by separation from people and places that you know (Santrock, 2012). This is the most evident type of feeling encountered by migrants, especially SpEd teachers. One participant even mentioned, "The main disadvantage [of working in the US] would be being separated from family.

The participants also mentioned adopting the new culture, weather, and workplace as a disadvantage in job migration. But some participants stated that "It took me a while to adjust but with the help of some Filipino communities, that plays a big role for me to adjust."

Conclusion

Due to an uncompetitive salary, lack of government positions, and an absence of professional development, SpEd teachers are motivated to migrate in the US. Adopting the new culture is stress-free since there is a Filipino community where you can rely and the resilient attitude of Filipinos always manifest. Teachers must also be open to opportunities and valuable experiences. In terms of problems encountered, anxiety, homesickness, and financial burden before and during job migration was the most common problem that SpEd teachers encountered.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the researcher has the following recommendations:

1. The Philippine government must uplift and provide just compensation equal to the workload of the SpEd teachers. Open new job opportunities in

the government and provide professional development intended for SpEd teachers.

2. SpEd teachers must have a robust coping mechanism to address their personal and work problems.
3. SpEd teachers and their loved ones must have solid communication to provide affection, care, and exchange of thoughts for each other.

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