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Abstract

This study explored the meanings held by Filipino immigrant teachers of their experiences as public school teachers in South Texas. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in interviewing seven Filipino immigrant teachers who taught various subjects and grade levels. This qualitative method was useful in understanding subjective experiences, forming insights about individuals' motivations and actions. The research question asked was: What does it mean to be a Filipino immigrant teacher in a public school in South Texas? After a careful inductive analysis of data collected, it was apparent that they viewed their experiences as an opportunity, challenge, and growth. The participants were selected by snowball sampling. This study contributes to the scant literature about the perceptions of Filipino teachers towards their professional identities and experiences, providing evidence that they have embraced their roles as positive contributors to their school communities. While the findings are not generalizable across the Filipino teacher population working in the United States, the participants' voices were heard, recorded, and analyzed so that their unique identities, often unnoticed in the literature, may be highlighted.

Keywords

Filipino Teachers, Immigrant Teachers, Foreign Born Teachers, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Phenomenology

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This study explored the meanings held by Filipino immigrant teachers of their experiences as public school teachers in South Texas. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in interviewing seven Filipino immigrant teachers who taught various subjects and grade levels. This qualitative method was useful in understanding subjective experiences, forming insights about individuals' motivations and actions. The research question asked was: What does it mean to be a Filipino immigrant teacher in a public school in South Texas? After a careful inductive analysis of data collected, it was apparent that they viewed their experiences as an opportunity, challenge, and growth. The participants were selected by snowball sampling. This study contributes to the scant literature about the perceptions of Filipino teachers towards their professional identities and experiences, providing evidence that they have embraced their roles as positive contributors to their school communities. While the findings are not generalizable across the Filipino teacher population working in the United States, the participants' voices were heard, recorded, and analyzed so that their unique identities, often unnoticed in the literature, may be highlighted. Keywords: Filipino Teachers, Immigrant Teachers, Foreign Born Teachers, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Phenomenology

Background

International teacher recruitment for teaching positions in America's public schools has been well documented. This practice provided public school administrators a stopgap measure that relieved teacher shortage concerns (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2009). Using Labor Certification Application data, which is a requirement to issue working visas for overseas-trained teachers, Bartlett (2014) recorded that Texas is a top employer of immigrant teachers. The southernmost Mexican border is among the top destinations. It is also documented that the Philippines has become a primary source of teachers (Bartlett, 2014; Books & de Villiers, 2014). In fact, it is among the top five sources of foreign-born teachers in non-postsecondary levels of education (Furuya, Nooradini, Wang, & Waslin, 2019). However, no study has been done to document their experiences in South Texas, particularly in the Rio Grande Valley, an area considered as one of the poorest in the United States (U.S.) and where most college students are first-generation graduates. This qualitative study aims to fill this void in the literature and advance knowledge on the phenomenon of Filipinos teaching in the U.S. The results of this study may also be used to contribute to the discourse on immigration in a rapidly diversifying American society.

Review of the Literature

The research on international teacher migration emerged in the early 2000's, as evidenced by the dissertations, research articles, professional teacher association reports, and

books written on this phenomenon. Terms used for teachers who leave their home countries to work abroad are immigrant teachers, migrant teachers, internationally trained educators, overseas-trained teachers, minority immigrant teachers, nonnative teachers, and overseas born teachers (Bense, 2016). Teacher migration is a worldwide phenomenon. Large movements of teachers occurred between countries with strong language, cultural and historical links. Teacher movements occurred usually from developing, or poor countries, to developed countries. In such countries, teachers' pay is often considered inadequate. Thus, teachers from developing countries moved to developed countries mainly to earn more. Not only do teachers from developing countries move to developed countries but also teachers from developed countries move to other developed countries. However, the main reason is to gain new work and life experiences. For example, in Finland, teaching abroad was considered visits rather than temporary migration. In a survey of 1,033 mobile teachers in Finland, it was found that the main motivation for teaching abroad was to learn about another country or culture. All survey respondents shared the feeling that visits abroad will not bolster their careers or paychecks (Riitaoja, 2008).

In addition, it was found that in Europe, from the years 2010 to 2014, approximately 30,000 teachers applied for permits to work in another country (Bense, 2016). Also, Australia has a history of teacher immigration. Immigrant teachers in Australia came from the UK, Ireland, United States, Canada, and more recently from Asia and Africa. In London, England's largest and most diverse city, schools turned to South Africa to fill teacher shortages. India has also become a major source for teachers. Today, the destination countries for Indian teachers cover a wide range from developed countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia, and the United States; Gulf countries such as Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Sharjah, and Qatar; to Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Maldives. By 2002, there were approximately 10,000 Indian teachers working abroad (Sharma, 2012).

There are several reasons that explain teacher migration: (a) the common language background, (b) the presence of an immigrant community to which teachers may belong or there are long-standing historical ties, (c) the rising demand for qualified teachers, and (d) the search for safety. Countries that share the same language and have educational similarities have experienced high levels of teacher migration in the past two decades.

Teacher Migration to the United States

Of the estimated 8.1 million teachers in the United States (U.S.), approximately 857,200 are foreign-born (Furuya, Nooradini, Wang, & Waslin, 2019). According to AFT (2009), the trend of teacher migration to the U.S. quietly emerged in the late 1990s, similar to the nurse migration to the U.S. that began in the 1950's. However, it was the year 2002 that marked the start of a significant global teacher labor market in the U.S. as documented in the research literature. Bartlett (2014) reported that there were 91,126 migrant teachers with H1B or work visas. She used the number of Labor Certification Applications (LCA) approved by the Department of Labor to approximate the total number of migrant teachers sought by school districts between 2002 to 2008. Three states: Texas, New York, and California account for nearly two-thirds of all migrant teachers. By 2011, there were estimated 20,000 migrant teachers working in the U.S. (Books & Villiers, 2014). To rank, Texas had the most number of migrant teachers, and Houston leads the nation. New York City stands on equal ground with regards to the number of migrant teachers which applied for 12,374 LCAs from 2002- 2008. Most of the teachers worked in hard to staff, high-poverty, large urban school districts (Bartlett, 2014). While these numbers when compared to the total number of teachers in the U.S. is just a drop in the bucket, it becomes significant when compared to another source of teachers, the

Teach for America Program. In 20 years, 24,000 interns were placed in schools compared to 92,000 migrant teachers that were hired only within six years.

Public school districts sought teachers from the Philippines to fill in teacher shortages that specifically address the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate of subject area specialization. NCLB requires schools to employ highly qualified teachers, which it defines as a teacher with subject matter expertise. Private recruitment agencies aided these districts in hiring Filipino teachers who meet this requirement through the use of H1B or J-1 visas (Bartlett, 2014; Caravatti, 2015). Recruitment agencies presented the Philippines to school districts as fertile recruiting ground. Such agencies pointed out the financial gains for schools because they do not have to pay fees to the agencies. Finally, it is also important to note that teachers have a right to migrate. They migrate as people first, with specific desires and needs. They may migrate to feel safer, have a higher standard of living for themselves and their families, and satisfy the need for self-fulfillment.

Significance of the Study

A common theme emphasized about the phenomenon of Filipino teacher migration to the U.S. found in both the research literature and popular media is that in finding teaching jobs, Filipino teachers earned as much as thirteen times of their salaries in the Philippines. Money was portrayed as the number one reason or what is technically known as the “pull factor” in teacher migration. While the astronomical difference between the salaries as teachers in the Philippines and what they receive in the U.S. is true and certainly undeniable, Filipino teachers are rarely presented in the research literature as teachers who fulfill the conventional role and motivation of teachers which is to attend to the social and emotional development of children. Instead, there is an emphasis on the difficulties migrant teachers faced in handling classroom discipline and adjusting to their new, cultural environment. In addition, Bartlett (2014) characterized migrant teachers as workers who “go where the money is and teach the children of nations and schools that can best afford them” (p. 103). To counter this discourse, there is a need to explore the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the Filipino immigrant teachers themselves. In order to fill this gap in the existing literature, this study explored the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the Filipino immigrant teachers in South Texas.

Purpose of the Study

This is a qualitative research study focused on the participants’ viewpoints on the shared phenomenon of emigrating from the Philippines to the U.S. primarily to be employed as teachers by public school districts in South Texas. As a researcher with a constructivist view, I am interested about the individual realities and professional identities constructed by the participants and the implications of these constructions to their work as teachers. Thus, the purpose of the study was to present rich descriptions and narratives that reflect the constructed meanings of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the participants.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher is that of an informed inquirer because I am also an immigrant Filipino educator. I was unaware of the vast uncharted terrain of immigrant teacher research before doing this study. I arrived in 2002 to teach English in a public secondary school in South Texas, thus, experienced the phenomenon under study. I knew the processes involved in working as a foreign teacher, which enabled me to ask relevant interview questions. However, I was not an expert on other Filipino teacher’s unique experiences and understandings. The

participants' experiences are also different from mine. Before data was obtained, I bracketed or set aside my own immigrant experience. While some of the information and experiences related to me were familiar, I avoided making assumptions regarding the participants' responses to the interview questions and remained curious about the research topic. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, the draft of the manuscript was sent the participants as part of member checking. No participant disagreed or objected with what the researcher wrote and included in the study.

Research Question

The goal of the study was to make the personal meanings held by the participants about their experiences of emigrating from the Philippines to the United States and eventually teaching in South Texas public schools explicit and visible. The overarching question that guided this study was: What does it mean to be a Filipino immigrant teacher in a public school in South Texas?

Research Method

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach for this study was used because of its established guidelines (Earle, 2010; Guignon, 2012; Laverly, 2003) and wide use in education (Hatch, 2002). A hermeneutic phenomenological researcher assumes that people function within the world of language and social relationships (Finlay, 2009). The researcher and participants are co-constructors of meanings, where "inter-subjective understanding" (Standing, 2009, p. 21) about lived experience may be gained. The researcher involves the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. In this process, the researcher is involved in what is termed as the "hermeneutic circle" (Guignon, 2012, p. 98). It begins with what the researcher understands about the phenomenon, uses this understanding to interpret the phenomenon and, on the basis of this interpretation, goes back to his or her original understanding to revise it.

Sample

I selected the subjects through purposeful and snowball sampling. The criteria for selecting participants were Filipinos who emigrated from the Philippines to teach in the U.S., certified teachers currently teaching in any level in a public school in South Texas and have taught for at least three years. The names of qualified, prospective participants were initially given by a Filipino colleague in the university where I am employed. Initial contact was made by phone. Those who could not participate referred other prospective participants. A total of seven participants took part in this study. According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), the usual sample size for phenomenological research is between one to ten persons. Likewise, Field and Morse (1995) proposed that a sample of no more than ten participants is appropriate for descriptive phenomenological studies. An individual can generate hundreds of ideas and thousands of words, so large samples are not needed to produce large amounts of data.

Data Collection and Analysis

Texas A&M University – Kingsville Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted me permission to conduct this study on November 3, 2017 (approval number 12132). No data was collected prior to acquiring the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval was granted for one year and no extension was requested.

Data was collected by interviewing participants at their preferred times and locations. The purpose of interviews is to develop a deep understanding of the phenomenon and to create a dialogue between the participants and me. I used semi-structured interviews to engage participants about the research question. For each interview session, I used an interview guide and took notes while I listened to each participant. Before the recorded interviews started, the participants and I exchanged warm greetings in our native language, Filipino. However, all the interviews were done completely in English. Further, I used a digital voice recorder to record the interview, transcribed the interviews verbatim, and used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. A total of six hours of interview was recorded and transcribed. I read and analyzed 75 pages of interview transcripts. Table 1 shows the interview questions asked.

Table 1:
Interview Questions

1. Could you please tell me the name of the school district and the name of the school where you are currently teaching?
2. What grade level(s) and subject(s) are you teaching?
3. How did you find out about teaching in the United States?
4. What were your initial thoughts about teaching in the United States?
5. What made you decide to teach in the United States?
6. Could you tell me what processes were involved in your moving to the United States to become a teacher?
7. What personal and professional preparations, if any, did you make in moving from your home country to the United States to teach?
8. How were you placed in the school district and campus where you are working?
9. Now that you are a teacher in a South Texas school district, what are your thoughts and feelings about it?
10. What adjustments, if any, did you have to make in your teaching style, methodology and strategies in working at a South Texas classroom?
11. Describe the challenges, if any, that you faced as a Filipino teacher in South Texas.
12. Describe the rewards, if any, that you have received as a Filipino teacher in South Texas.
13. If you were to describe to someone what it is like to be a Filipino teacher in a South Texas school district, what would you say?
14. How has becoming a teacher in the United States affected your view of yourself and your profession as a teacher?
15. What does being a Filipino teacher in South Texas mean to you?
16. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences as a Filipino teacher teaching in South Texas?

Data analysis commenced by reading the complete transcripts to get a holistic understanding of the participants. I reread the transcriptions and noted texts that are relevant to the research question: What does it mean to be a Filipino immigrant teacher in a public school in South Texas? To see the commonalities and differences among the participants' descriptions of their experiences, I created a table of the interview questions and the relevant statements in response to these questions. Then I highlighted key words and phrases that represented their responses and reflected on the emergence of themes.

I subscribed to Van Manen's (1990) steps in phenomenological data analysis. He listed reflection as a specific research activity and as a critical element in data analysis. I wrote

insights or memos to document the analytic process. Memoing enabled me to describe the data. Moreover, Earle (2010) stated, “it is through the writing and rewriting of themes that the structure and, hence, meaning of the lived experience can be discovered” (p. 290). This is congruent to Van Manen’s (1997) idea of a research activity leading to data analysis: describing the phenomenon by writing and rewriting. This process led to the product of hermeneutic phenomenological research: a description of the phenomenon.

Findings

This section of the paper presents the findings, interpretations, and discussion as well as links to the literature. A table is presented to provide a quick view of participant information. The interpretations are written in the form of themes, accompanied by extracts from the interview transcripts as supporting evidence.

The Participants

All of the seven participants, consisting of six females and one male, signed the consent form for this study and willingly answered all the interview questions. Based on the interview, six of them started working in the U.S. in 2002, and one in 2009. Six taught high school subjects (English, math, science and special education) and one middle school math. Out of the seven teachers, three completed their bachelor’s, three completed their master’s degrees, and one teacher completed a doctorate degree. I used the following pseudonyms for the participants: Riza, Francis, Raquel, Carla, Gloria, Alice and Cathy.

Most of the participants knew about the availability of U.S. teaching positions for Filipino teachers through friends, co-workers, and family members. All of the participants, except one, spoke of undergoing the process of paying a recruitment agency in order to be hired by a school district in South Texas. The participants characterized this process as “expensive,” and the fees were a “huge amount.” Those who lived outside of Manila, the capital, needed to make several trips by air in order to attend meetings and submit required documents. This situation added to the logistical and financial burden participants had to bear in order to find a position in a U.S. school. According to Bartlett (2014), “Filipino teachers who migrated to the U.S. from 2002 onward reported paying between \$8,000 and \$10,000” to for-profit recruitment agencies (p. 60). The fee covered several types of placement fees and assorted expenses.

Participants reported that their academic transcripts were evaluated and met U.S. standards. The Filipino teachers also had to take a qualifying test required by the recruitment agency, be interviewed by school district administrators, and video-record a self-introduction. These recordings were then sent to principals. After being chosen, they had to undergo and pass a medical examination prior to Philippine departure. They had no choice as to which school they would work: some knew their campus name prior to departure while others were placed only after their arrival, even when classes had already started.

The preparations participants made involved attending the orientation provided by the recruitment agency, focused on learning about certification requirements, immigration, and expectations of school districts. As for the professional preparation they felt they had to do, participants felt confident that their degrees and work experiences prepared them for teaching content. More emphasis was given by the participants about the preparation required that involves the “emotional” aspect of leaving their home country and the “culture change” they faced. For some, “leaving” meant family members staying behind in the Philippines and following after a period of time.

Discussion

The results of my analysis indicated that in varied ways, the participants' experiences within their school communities did influence the meanings they held of the teaching profession and their identities as Filipino immigrant teachers. Specifically, I identified three themes that are at the core of the participants' experiences. I presented these themes and provided quotes below.

Theme one: Opportunity. All of the participants considered their work as Filipino immigrant teachers an opportunity. This theme emerged in response to the following interview questions: (a) What were your initial thoughts about teaching in the United States? (b) What made you decide to teach in the United States? (c) Now that you are a teacher in a South Texas district, what are your thoughts and feelings about it? and (d) Describe the rewards, if any, that you have received as a Filipino teacher in South Texas.

While the teachers had varied, initial feelings towards working in the U.S., stating that they were "nervous," "scared," "excited," "curious," "intrigued," and "challenged," they were unanimous in their view that landing a job as teachers provided them with opportunities for economic and professional advancement. For example, Riza, whose initial thoughts of working in the U.S. said that it was a "great opportunity for growth" considered that teaching in the U.S. would make herself "more marketable" if she ever decides to return to the Philippines.

Moreover, Cathy's statement reflected the typical notion of pursuing the American dream in stating, "I think anybody outside United States want to come to America for opportunity. America is the land of opportunity... earning dollars is better." This is echoed by Gloria in emphasizing the monetary benefits of working in the U.S. and said, "getting out of the Philippines is one of the biggest opportunities that you can have... I was teaching in a private school, and then I was trying to look at how much I was paid, and then I converted the money, I was only paid \$150 per month. That was my compensation. When I came to the U.S., I got ten times more or times 20 even. So that is kind of rewarding. I was able to get my family over."

Alice also expressed satisfaction in saying that a tangible reward of working as a teacher in the U.S is its financial aspect and said, "I was able to help my father and my mother way back home." Francis, who was the breadwinner of his family, remarked that going to the U.S. came from "a family need, an economical need... to give (his) family a better chance" and revealed towards the end of the interview that "the biggest reward that (he) had was, of course, (he) got (his) family to come here."

In terms of professional advancement, Cathy, Carla, and Alice completed masters' degrees while teaching full-time, with some of them completing it through programs provided by their districts. Carla recounted, "I was able to get my master's for free because of loan forgiveness. It's a master's in curriculum and instruction, with emphasis on literacy studies, so I could be a master reading teacher or reading specialist. We were exposed to different trainings, like technology, and other professional trainings in education, which I don't see in the Philippines."

Cathy who completed two master's degrees "paid by the district" remarked, "I'll be forever grateful they've given me so much opportunities that I wouldn't have been able to do so on my own. Yeah, I am very, very grateful with where I'm working. They really took care of me and still taking care of me." Furthermore, Carla, Alice, and Francis at the time of the interview, were actively involved in writing curriculum and providing in-service training in their school districts. Alice emphasized, "I became a teacher mentor. I was able to share the information that I've learned. I learned a lot from my professional development that I attended, and I'm willing to present it to my colleagues."

Finally, Riza's remarks eloquently encapsulated an immigrant's perspective regarding the theme, opportunity:

I have an admiration for the ideals of this country specifically social justice and/or equality and diversity. You know, in the Philippines, there is evident disparity between the rich and the poor. Social mobility is so slow, and there is limited prospects for even the most hard working people. My limited knowledge about the United States from college classes then, gave me the impression that it is a desirable, welcoming country to those who seek to better themselves.

Theme two: Challenges. This theme emerged in response to the following interview questions: (a) What adjustments, if any, did you have to make in your teaching style, methodology and strategies in working at a South Texas classroom? and (b) Describe the challenges, if any, that you faced as a Filipino teacher in South Texas. Challenges mentioned by the participants were adjusting to the poor motivation, performance and behavior of students, meeting the demands of high stakes testing administered to students, adjusting to new ways of teaching, passing teacher certification exams, acquiring a permanent legal status to continue their work and eventually gain residence, being criticized of their accents, and working with an administrator who was unsupportive.

In describing the challenges they faced about students, the participants tended to compare Filipino and American students:

They don't value education as much as we did back home...in the Philippines when a teacher stares at us, or when the teachers is quiet and stops talking, that already gives us a cue to be quiet and listen. But here, if you look at them they'll just look back at you and they'll tell you, "Yes, Miss, what do you need? Why are you staring at me?" They won't get the cue... it feels like just because that they know you are a Filipino, they could just talk in Spanish, they could talk about you and laugh. They're missing the respect that we have so much for teachers. They don't have that at all. That was the challenge." (Cathy)

I was exposed to a culture of compliance and obedience among students. In the Philippines, there is this universal mindset that education is a way to liberate oneself from the shackles of poverty, so teachers do not worry about discipline. Students automatically behave without being told. I once had a class of 63 students in the high school where I taught, but every time I get in the class, I could hear a pin drop. Students are ready with their pen and paper and are eagerly waiting for the days' activity. Lessons go smoothly because there isn't this constant interruption of "May I go to the restroom?" or "May I go to the nurse?" or "This is boring." (Riza)

It was a cultural shock for me, honestly...in the Philippines, teachers are their second moms. They respect teachers, they bow down to teachers, you may say that. Here, oh my God, the first year I can say that it was a cultural shock because the kids were rude. (Gloria)

Dealing with classroom management and behavioral issues were related by every participant. This challenge, because of the comparisons made between U.S and Philippine students, was particularly heightened. However, the challenge of helping students to pass the high stakes state exams and motivating them to be serious and be intentionally engaged with

academic work are challenges that any teacher will face according to Raquel who said, “Ask any teacher here. It’s not easy. All teachers will have the same challenges here, no matter what race you are.”

Participants also reported learning to adopt new ways of teaching to match the needs and attitudes of their students, as Gloria recounted:

I am used to direct teaching, like you talk and talk and talk in front of them, and they listen to you and do their work. Here, we go through a lot of trainings. They show us a lot of methods and techniques on how we can improve ourselves as teachers. I have to embrace other methods just like group work or collaborative learning... Another is I am old school. Like when we were in the Philippines, we don't even use computers and lacked technology to teach. Here, you have to really embrace the use of technology. That was another adjustment for me.

The issue of getting their “papers” or obtaining legal resident status, which is characterized as involving “a lot of money, waiting time, and uncertainties” is unique to Filipino immigrant teachers. They were issued H1-B or work visas that allowed them to work legally for three years. This visa was renewable, but once expired, they would be unable to continue working. Thus, there was a need to request employers to petition them to become permanent residents. This is the only way the teachers could continue working. Alice mentioned that being able to settle, find an apartment or buy a house, and situate one’s self is in this culture is a part of this process. Eventually, all obtained either permanent residency or citizenship.

Participants also mentioned language becoming an issue. Gloria mentioned experiencing criticism at the start of her career because of her accent and stated, “English is our second language, but when I got to the U.S., I have a different diction and have different ways of pronouncing the words, and the kids laughed at me. I can say it was a barrier because they will say, “Miss, we don't understand what you are talking about’.” Not only was language an issue stemming from the teachers’ language but also from the students’. Some participants recounted how some students “do not want to learn English.”

Theme three: Growth, pride and corresponding sense of satisfaction. This theme is characterized by stories of triumph and transformation. The teachers’ stories demonstrated how they now see themselves as “appreciated,” “experts,” “very respected,” “happy,” “contented,” “lucky,” and “proven.” In fact, two of the teachers in this study, Cathy and Alice received the Teacher of the Year award in their school districts. Riza, Francis, Cathy, Gloria and Alice’s words illustrated this theme:

I have committed a lot of mistakes at the beginning of my teaching career, but I felt that I was given wide margins of errors until I learned and understood the ropes better. I feel that no matter how challenging the job is, if administrators believe in you, you will thrive. This is my 16th year of teaching in the same school I was assigned since I arrived to the United States, and I am intent on continuing to serve in this school. I have survived this long because I felt supported. (Riza)

I saw myself several times that I just wanted to find a different job because of (the) challenges. From my legal papers, to my certification, and my everyday dealings with the students, it made me a little bit tougher. I saw that I could push myself as much as I can. It made me a better person as a professional because

of those experiences... I'm looking forward to another part of my career (when) I finish my master's. Maybe do some trainings because I also got certified as a Master Technology Teacher in Texas. (Francis)

In the beginning, it felt like Filipino teachers needed assistance, but now it has changed. They are considered as top-notch teachers in the district that even the kids, they know that if my coach, my teacher is a Filipino teacher, we're there to succeed, you know to be competitive, be challenged. There's too much respect for Filipino culture." (Cathy)

Things have gotten better. My classes are such that they want to go to my class. They want to go because they understand me better. Nobody complains about my diction and my accent now. Not anymore. I am open to correction. They critique me, you know, I am open to that. I tell them that you can correct me any time. That way, I am learning. I learn from my students every day. (Gloria)

Being here is a destiny. It is no longer something I am afraid of. I, throughout the years, became the person I wanted to be. I was molded through the vision and mission of the school where I am. (Alice)

All participants expressed that they performed their work beyond its monetary rewards and received fulfillment that paralleled the same. In fact, three participants, Francis, Cathy and Gloria had been questioned by students why they chose to teach in their schools because "(they) are so good," as if the students "do not deserve" them, to which Gloria responded, "Because you need me here." Her words show her own brand of caring:

I go to work an hour before the bell rings, and then I get out of work like hours after. I don't consider it as just an eight to five job. It is because we deal with kids... When I started opening up to kids, you know, trusting them, let them know that you can be trusted, and you establish that relationship with them, it helped a lot. And I did that by doing simple things. Kids here have issues, but it's your way of talking to them like a simple "Hi, how have you have been? What's up? Simple things like those, and it will build on. If you are sincere in what you do, they will see it.

Carla's statement also served as a representative sentiment: "We are not just here for the money. We are here for fulfillment, too." Moreover, Raquel considered a student's gratitude for her teaching as the best reward one could receive saying that, "Touching the lives of kids...that's more important than the money you receive." Similarly, Riza's view came with a religious undertone: "A Filipino's bedrock is his faith in God--no matter what religious affiliation he belongs. I guess, when a Filipino goes out of the Philippines, he carries with him that common denominator of serving not only his interest, but God's."

The participants described teaching in South Texas as teaching in a poverty-stricken area, where some students experience poor living conditions, such as not having air-conditioning, living in rundown houses, and not having clean clothes to wear. They also recognized that their students would come to school bringing with them personal issues to which the teachers felt responsible to address as well, going beyond teaching academics:

My experience with students facing real-life, adult problems such as getting into drugs or in jail, getting pregnant, or constant moving by their families, having

to work to help their families, made me think that the classroom is where you put to practice the mission to care, to encourage, to be the example, to be the adviser, and sometimes to be the parent to some kids. (Riza)

Every year we would look for kids who didn't show up to register. We'd go on Saturdays and find out where they lived. We would go in these colonias and at a certain point, it broke my heart because I would see their houses. They would live in one half trailer houses, and then we would find out that they would have seven kids and two adults. They live in this little trailer home, and you could see they barely have this air-conditioning. It's a very heartbreaking sight... seeing them in those experiences has just made me think of ways to help these kids on a personal level. Not just math, but in the personal experiences they have. (Francis)

The above-mentioned theme, growth, pride and corresponding sense of satisfaction, emerged as participants responded to the following interview questions: (a) If you were to describe to someone what it is like to be a Filipino teacher in a South Texas school district, what would you say? (b) How has becoming a teacher in the United States affected your view of yourself and your profession as a teacher? and (c) What does being a Filipino teacher in South Texas mean to you?

The data from this study, while not generalizable to the larger population of Filipino immigrant teachers, provide evidence that the participants of this study have found their niche in South Texas public schools to do the traditional work of native or local teachers, i.e., the work of caring and nurturing the country's citizens to become its productive members (Bartlett, 2014). Moreover, the experiences of the participants are not surprising in the light of previous findings in immigrant teacher research (AFT, 2009; Bartlett, 2014; Broutian, 2016; Dumlao & Mengorio, 2019; Dunn, 2011; Sharma, 2012). It was found that professional development, better-living standard, family migration, and salary differentials were cited as reasons for migration by teachers (Sharma, 2012). Previous studies have also documented that immigrant teachers' top challenge is effectively dealing with student behavior and apathy. In a qualitative study by Dunn (2011), she found that challenges immigrant teachers from India faced were "student behavior, culture shock, communication difficulties, new instructional strategies and curricula, and students' lack of cultural awareness" (p. 17). In addition, it has been documented that foreign born teachers' accents have become a cause of concern for students and parents because of the tendency to distract and confuse students. While it is not an indication of poor performance, it was suggested by the AFT (2009) that assistance should be made available to migrant teachers who face communication challenges.

Immigrant teachers achieve varying degrees of professional success (AFT, 2009). The above-mentioned findings about the participants' sense of triumph is supported by Bartlett (2014), reporting that teachers who are supported by their administrators and colleagues thrive. The type of framing school communities make of the overseas teachers have consequences for how they engage with students and with the profession in general. Teachers who succeed are framed as "transplants" rather than "transients" (Bartlett, 2014, p. 118). Schools that frame immigrant teachers as transients are at greater risk of low student achievement because of their high turnover rates. These are teachers who do not feel a sense of belonging in their school communities and commitment to the profession, but rather have chosen to migrate primarily because of teaching's monetary rewards. On the other hand, teachers who are treated as transplants, "resulting from induction efforts that support (them) in their introduction into American classrooms, involvement with the local community, and adjustment to American urban students" contribute to high student achievement (Bartlett, 2014, p. 119). Further

research is recommended that explores the perceptions of the members of school communities where Filipino teachers teach to provide another perspective on this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Three major players made the phenomenon of Filipino teacher migration possible. These are the school districts who hired them, the private recruitment agencies who facilitated the process, and the Filipino teacher themselves who chose to migrate. U.S. schools hired foreign teachers to respond to the mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act of content area specialization; the recruitment agencies became a mediating entity and the teachers chose to work in a foreign country to raise their economic and professional status.

It is important for the public to look outside commonly held views that immigrant teachers merely filled the shortage of teachers in hard-to-staff schools. This study gave them opportunities to tell the participants' stories, offering a richer and deeper understanding of how they navigated their way from the Philippines into situating themselves in their current school communities. Using the words of the participants to describe their perceptions about teaching in South Texas as immigrant teachers add to the existing literature by making explicit their points of view. The findings give insights on their perceived opportunities, challenges, and triumphs. The immigrant teachers in this study have chosen to stay, do the job of teaching, and remained committed to it.

Personal Reflection

By bracketing my own Filipino immigrant teacher experience, I was able to see the phenomenon with a new lense, as if I was an outsider, through the experiences shared by the participants. The literature I reviewed helped me to see the broader context in which Filipino teacher migration occurred. In hearing the participants' stories, I felt a deep sense of respect for their tenacity and hard work. Their stories also brought memories of my own beginnings as a migrant teacher, bringing a fresh feeling of appreciation for my own journey.

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