

# From Green to Purple Pastures: Filipino International Teachers' Journeys Through the Philippines

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**Abstract** - Filipino expatriate teachers rarely return to the Philippines to re-enter the education industry. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of transnationalism and return migration; however, existing research primarily focuses on Filipino teachers who migrate abroad for employment purposes. Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers conducted Zoom interviews and focus group discussions, applying thematic analysis to examine participants' responses. Three major themes emerged: professional and personal motivations, changes in physical lifestyle, and financial adjustments. These findings reveal the challenges and considerations that influence Filipino teachers' decisions to return to teaching.

**Keywords:** Filipino teachers, teacher mobility, migration, qualitative research, phenomenology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Philippine teacher brain drain has been a concern since the 1970s (Vega-Muñoz, González-Gómez-del-Miño, & Espinosa-Cristia, 2021). Data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) indicate that between 2013 and 2017, an average of 1,500 teachers emigrated annually in search of employment opportunities abroad (Santos, 2023; Real & Flordeliz, 2024).

Filipino teachers have gained a global reputation for their competence and commitment, making them highly sought after in international classrooms (Cortez, 2023; Pacala, 2024). Primary motivations for Filipino teachers pursuing opportunities overseas include better financial prospects, career advancement, improved working conditions, personal & professional growth, and a new environment and opportunities (Brazas, 2023; Pacala, 2024; Real and Flordeliz, 2024).

As educators leave for "greener pastures" abroad, the Philippine education sector faces a shortage of skilled educators, which in turn lowers the quality of education. The 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics revealed that fewer than 10% of Filipino children met the reading standard, and only 17% met the arithmetic standard. The Philippines' learning poverty ranks among the highest in Asia (Mendoza, 2024; EDCOM II, 2025). s

Not all Filipino teachers who emigrate stay abroad. Some want to return to the Philippines. A survey by Robert Walters found that 62% of Filipino expats intend to return (Liao and Asis, 2020; Talavera, 2023). Walters identified the main reasons for return as: familial issues (56%), emotional, social, and cultural attachment (44%), economic stability and growth prospects (46%), and entrepreneurial opportunities (46%). Thirty percent didn't specify their reason (Talavera, 2023).

This study examines the lived experiences of former Filipino international teachers and their reasons for returning to the Philippines. It focuses on their transition back to the local education system, challenges, and personal and professional meanings derived from their experiences. The research explores the daily realities, challenges, and rewards of teaching in the Philippines after living abroad, including their interpretations of their journeys, motivations for returning to their "purple pastures".

This study, *From Green to Purple Pastures: Filipino International Teachers' Journey Through the Philippines*, aims to investigate two questions:

1. What is the experience of a former expatriate teacher currently teaching in the Philippines?
2. What significance do these educators attribute to their lived experiences upon their return?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study reviewed literature on international teacher mobility, Filipino teacher migration, transnationalism, phenomenology, and circular migration.

International teacher mobility, including transfers and career shifts, has a significant impact on the education workforce, leading to rising turnover and attrition rates worldwide (Aranda, 2023; Santos, 2023; Real & Flordeliz, 2024; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). This high attrition destabilizes schools, disrupts instruction, and exacerbates educational inequality, especially in under-resourced areas (Palma et al, 2022; Santos, 2023; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

Filipino teachers migrate due to push factors such as uncompetitive wages, heavy workloads, and limited professional growth opportunities in their home country, and pull factors like higher salaries, better working conditions, and opportunities for professional development abroad (Aranda, 2023; Santos, 2023). The Philippines, a major labor-exporting nation since 1974, sees billions in annual remittances from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), including educators (Opiniano et al, 2024).

The lived experiences of Filipino migrant teachers reveal a profound personal and professional journey. Phenomenological studies highlight motivations like economic improvement, personal growth, and cultural exchange, alongside adaptation challenges like culture shock and limited well-being support (Brazas, 2023, Modesto, 2020, Pacala, 2024). These educators maintain ties with their homeland through remittances and communication (Liao and Asis, 2020).

Some return after achieving financial goals, while others seek long-term employment abroad (Santos, 2023). Successful reintegration depends on recognizing overseas experience and aligning post-return roles with acquired skills, though role mismatches persist despite gaining global expertise (Roberts et al, 2024).

### III. METHODS

**Research Design:** This study employed a descriptive, qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore how Filipino former expatriate teachers describe their lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences. Anchored in the principles of Husserlian phenomenology, the study followed a structured data gathering framework that included bracketing (epoché) to reduce researcher bias, purposive participant selection, and the use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to capture the richness and depth of the participants' narratives. The methodology emphasized understanding the phenomenon from the participants' own perspectives, consistent with phenomenological research traditions (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

**Participants:** Using a purposive sampling method, the study involved six Filipino teachers who had worked as expatriate educators and had since returned to the Philippines. All participants were married and had extensive teaching experience abroad, having served as preschool teachers in Singapore for 10 to 12 years and as primary school teachers in Thailand for 6 to 14 years. At the time of the study, three participants were working as classroom teachers, two were serving as school principals, and one was working as a private tutor for elementary school students. These individuals were selected based on their direct and prolonged experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

**Tools and Instruments:** Data were collected using Zoom for both individual interviews and the focus group discussion (see Table 1). Google Forms was used to gather participants' demographic information and to secure their informed consent. All interviews and discussions were recorded, with explicit permission from participants, and transcribed using the Claude AI transcription tool. Field notes and reflections were also documented to supplement and contextualize the interview data.

**Procedures:** Participants were invited via email, which included a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, research questions, confidentiality assurances, and a list of the interview and focus group questions. Upon receiving their consent, each participant took part in a 35–45 minute one-on-one Zoom interview, designed to allow open-ended, reflective responses. These interviews were followed by a focus group discussion, also conducted via Zoom, to further explore emerging themes. Both the interviews and the focus group session were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Throughout the data-gathering process, the researchers practiced bracketing to minimize personal bias and maintain focus on the participants' lived realities.

**Analysis Techniques:** The study employed thematic analysis to interpret the data, aligned with phenomenological reduction techniques. The analysis followed three key stages: (1) transcribing the interview and focus group data using Claude AI; (2) identifying significant

statements and grouping them into meaning units; and (3) synthesizing these into emergent themes that reflect the essential structures of the participants' experiences. This process allowed the researchers to describe both the textural ("what" was experienced) and structural ("how" it was experienced) components of the phenomenon. Finally, these descriptions were integrated into a composite depiction that captured the essence of the participants' experiences as former expatriate teachers.

Table 1. Interview Questions

Number	Questions
1	What dimensions or aspects of your life intimately connected to being an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines stand out for you?
2	What incidents intimately connected to being an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines stand out for you?
3	Who were the people intimately connected to you as an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines, who stand out? I established a positive connection with my Supervisor and became good friends with him.
4	How does being an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines affect you? What changes do you associate with being an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines?
5	How does being an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines affect significant others in your life?
6	How were feelings generated as an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines?
7	What thoughts stood out for you?
8	What bodily changes or states are you aware of being an expat teacher who is now teaching back here in the Philippines?

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. *Emerging Themes*

The three major themes identified were: (1) professional and personal reasons; (2) changes in lifestyle; and (3) financial changes.

Transnational connections with one's country of origin are not consistent. They fluctuate and evolve. Migrants may not remain transnational forever, as seen in the six participants of this research.

Professional educators return due to a sense of duty to their contributions to the education system, especially being called back to teach in their previous schools. A supportive environment and improved employment prospects motivate Indonesian migrant workers to return home (Setijaningrum et al, 2023). Employees who return home with fresh skills and insights contribute to their organizations and enhance overall satisfaction when their contributions are recognized (Liao and Asis, 2020).

Personal reasons, including family, childbirth, childcare, emotional needs of children, transitions of daughters into marriage, and boredom and lack of inspiration abroad, also led to the participants' return to the Philippines (Santos, 2023).

Changes in physical lifestyle impact educators' return to the Philippines. This study reveals two conflicting situations. Workers face adverse conditions upon returning home, including hectic schedules, limited healthcare access, altered eating habits, prolonged sitting at work, and insufficient time for exercise. Hectic schedules involve busy agendas, meetings, and overtime work, leading to stress and burnout. Participants also reported reduced access to high-quality healthcare. Returning to the home country after years abroad can cause psychological stress, despite other stressors.

Teachers who work abroad and return to the Philippines often face significant financial adjustments due to differences in earning potential and cost of living. This aligns with the study by Roberts, Muralidharan, & Cave (2024), which found that repatriated workers often expect their skills, experience, and knowledge to be beneficial to their local institutions, but their wages are not perceived as equivalent. Migrant workers must be literate in managing their income while working abroad (Dewi et al., 2022).

#### *B. Dimensions or Aspects of Life that Stood Out*

Participants identified professional, cultural, and financial dimensions (Brazas, 2023; Pacala, 2024; Real and Flordeliz, 2024). They compared teaching conditions, applied knowledge abroad to their careers, and influenced other educators. Teaching students from different nationalities was an experience, with Thai students described as polite, courteous, honest, and well-behaved. Unlike in the Philippines, fear-inducing discipline strategies are unacceptable in Thailand. Financial aspects included health service costs in the Philippines and higher salaries abroad (Santos, 2023).

#### *C. Incidents that Stood Out as Expat Teachers*

Personal milestones, such as giving birth, a daughter's marriage, or dissatisfaction with work overseas, and family-related reasons, like caring for elderly parents or assisting with the family business, often lead to return migration (Liao and Asis, 2020). Participants mentioned being offered a teaching position in the Philippines, attending training abroad, and building a positive relationship with a school district supervisor, which led to a meaningful friendship. They also identified key differences between foreign countries and the Philippines, as well as spiritual experiences.

#### *D. People Intimately Affected by the Expat Teachers who Stand Out*

Key individuals who stood out included family members (such as spouses, children, and siblings), colleagues, supervisors, and friends (Talavera, 2023).

#### *E. Affect and Changes on Becoming Expat Teachers*

Exposure to higher education standards abroad enhanced our participants' appreciation for quality. Some teachers also reported renewed faith and a stronger belief in God's career plan, empowering them to lead their families. Returning teachers often experience financial difficulties due to lower salaries in the Philippines compared to their earnings abroad. Some

have even reported taking out loans to cover their expenses. The need for financial literacy among migrant workers and their families is well-documented (Dewi et al., 2022). A structured and consistent approach to financial training and seminars is essential to help migrant workers reintegrate and live sustainably when they return (Dewi et al., 2022). Abroad, teachers had fewer responsibilities outside work hours, while in the Philippines, they may need to manage family obligations or spend more time at school, making it difficult to hold part-time jobs. Returning teachers noted the difference in lifestyle between their home country and their workplaces abroad, including modern communication methods, transportation systems, and technology, as well as cultural differences in workplace behavior, such as less gossip.

#### *F. Affect on Significant Others of Teaching Back in the Philippines*

Returning to the Philippines to teach brings both positive and challenging changes for expat teachers and their families. On the positive side, participants noted increased family support and understanding, especially regarding finances. Their families back home acknowledged the income differences between domestic and international teaching (Real & Flordeliz, 2024). Additionally, stories of expat teachers' experiences abroad have served as inspiration for other educators and parents in the community. Adjusting to life back home can be challenging. One participant felt bored, as their vibrant, city-based lifestyle overseas contrasted with their current life in the Philippines. After three months, 48% of returnees wanted to re-emigrate, while only 2% considered migrating internally (Kang & Latoja, 2022).

#### *G. Feelings Generated as Expat Teachers Now Teaching Back in the Philippines*

Returning to the Philippines stirred mixed emotions among expat teachers. Some felt disappointed, comparing their host country's education system to the Philippines. Others were frustrated with parents' resistance to new teaching strategies, prioritizing academic results over student well-being. Differences in educational practices sometimes hinder students' care and support. A participant felt bored, as their family lived far from the city, a stark contrast to their cosmopolitan lifestyle abroad. Despite these challenges, returning home brought positive emotions. Two expat teachers found it fulfilling to reunite with their families after years away (Talavera, 2023). One participant expressed accomplishment in supporting their children's education in schools of their choice (Santos, 2023). Another shared the joy of growing closer to family and witnessing them experience opportunities abroad.

#### *H. Thoughts that Stood Out*

Participants shared a positive overall experience, gaining professional and personal insights. They wanted to apply their knowledge gained in Singapore, despite challenges in full implementation. They viewed it as a "gift" and emphasized its importance. Effective communication of innovative teaching methods to parents and fostering their openness was a key concern. Some parents were impatient about academic progress, so participants stressed the value of developmental learning stages. On the personal level, participants felt accomplished in supporting their families and achieving personal growth while recognizing the rare opportunity to work abroad. This aligns with economic transnationalism, where migrants invest economically in their home country, gaining satisfaction and prestige (Tedeschi et al., 2022, p. 609). Participants emphasized resourcefulness, resilience, humility, and assertive communication skills in overcoming challenges.

### *I. Bodily Changes or States*

Participants have noticed physical and mental changes since returning to the Philippines after teaching abroad. They've adopted a sedentary lifestyle, replacing exercise with passive activities like watching TV and snacking, leading to weight gain. Financial constraints limit their food choices, impacting their health. Healthcare access is challenging, with clinics and private options less readily available. Participants' energy levels and sense of urgency have shifted. Abroad, they felt motivated and driven, possibly due to the pressure of being in a foreign country. In contrast, they now experience a more relaxed pace but increased stress. Stress was present abroad but balanced by job satisfaction and rewards. In the Philippines, participants feel heightened stress due to unpaid overtime and mandatory meetings, lacking the same fulfillment. Managing staff and students also contributes to anxiety and depression for one participant. Two participants also noted changes in their spiritual well-being. While abroad, they looked forward to Sabbath, enjoying fellowship and well-prepared vegetarian meals. Now, with a heavier workload, Sabbath feels like an additional task, requiring all preparations, making it harder to find rest and spiritual renewal.

## V. CONCLUSION

Filipino expat teachers' decision to return to the Philippines involves complex experiences. While they often return due to a strong desire to contribute to Philippine education and meet personal commitments, they face challenges like physical lifestyle changes and financial considerations.

Their reason to return to their country might bring joy because they can be with their families while supporting them. Their professional reasons can also contribute to nation-building in terms of developing knowledge based on the skills they gained from the host country. However, the study demonstrates that the participants realize that the comforts and conveniences experienced abroad may not be available in the Philippines, such as cultural differences, healthcare access, and overall quality of life. Moreover, from a financial perspective, the advantages can also differ. While living expenses may be more affordable in the Philippines, the potential for earnings might be less than in their former jobs overseas. Ultimately, the decision to return necessitates a thoughtful evaluation of these elements, alongside consideration of individual priorities and long-term goals. These aspects illustrate that life after international work can be intricate and varied.

Future studies should consider local factors influencing participants' responses to ensure fair assessments and improve the return of migrant workers. Research on the government's role in supporting migrant workers before and after their return could enhance reintegration efforts and provide stronger institutional support specific to teachers. Effective return migration systems must be dynamic and outcome-oriented, making meaningful contributions to the Philippine economy (Kang & Latoja, 2022). A sustainable reintegration strategy should accommodate the diverse needs, interests, capabilities, and aspirations of returning migrants. Reintegration initiatives should prioritize health and social security through awareness campaigns, health status data collection, and public healthcare and social security system registration assistance (Kang & Latoja, 2022). Promoting financial literacy through education on savings, investment, insurance, retirement funds, and asset accumulation could empower

return migrants to make informed financial decisions (Kang & Latoja, 2022). Filipino communities must equip physical, institutional, health, and knowledge infrastructures to support successful reintegration (Kang & Latoja, 2022).

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