

## Article

# The Lived Experiences of Exchange Cultural Special Education Teachers in The USA

Lucille Echavez  
Cecilia Elena De Los Reyes  
Lilibeth Pinili  
Marjorie Añero

Corresponding Author: echavez707@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** This study explores the experiences of J1 visa teachers working in U.S. schools, particularly those instructing special needs students. Through a phenomenological design, it examines the unique challenges and benefits encountered by these educators, including cultural adaptation, classroom management, and professional development. In-depth interviews revealed that while J1 teachers contribute significant cultural and educational diversity, they face obstacles related to language barriers, differing student behaviors, and limited support from school administrations. The study highlights the resilience and adaptability of J1 educators, who manage these challenges through resourcefulness and strong commitment. Findings suggest that enhanced orientation, mentoring, and ongoing support systems could improve the teaching experiences of J1 educators, enabling them to make more impactful contributions within U.S. classrooms and to bring valuable insights back to their home countries. The research underscores the mutual benefits of cultural exchange programs like the J1 visa, as well as the need for targeted improvements to support international teachers' success.

---

Keywords: J1 visa teachers, cultural exchange, special needs education, classroom management

## Introduction

The J-1 Teacher Program enables international educators to work in U.S. schools as part of a cultural exchange, fostering global understanding and diverse teaching practices. This initiative aligns with broader efforts in intercultural teacher exchanges, emphasizing the mutual benefit of such experiences. Participants engage in unique cultural interactions, gaining insights into different educational practices, which they later implement in their home countries (Paik et al., 2015). Programs like the J-1 are structured to enrich teachers'



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors.  
Submitted for possible open access  
publication under the terms and conditions  
of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY)  
license(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Echavez et al. (2024). The Lived Experiences of Exchange Cultural Special Education Teachers in The USA. Copyright (c) 2024. Author (s). This is an open term of Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). [www.wjehr.com](http://www.wjehr.com)

intercultural competencies and support professional development, as seen in similar exchange efforts that improve cultural awareness and teaching strategies (Hiratsuka, 2013). Through such exchanges, teachers also gain firsthand experience of cultural diversity, an essential factor in today's globalized classrooms, which they can adapt and apply within their native educational frameworks (Thomas-Ruzic & Prudencio, 2015). This program thus not only benefits U.S. students by introducing diverse perspectives but also contributes to the professional growth of international educators.

In recent years, the U.S. has increasingly turned to foreign teachers to fill gaps in critical areas like math, science, and special education, motivated by teacher shortages and the goal of diversifying school staff. Research highlights a persistent demand for qualified teachers in these fields, especially in underserved and rural areas where shortages are acute (Ingersoll, 2010). Foreign teachers play a crucial role, contributing new perspectives and instructional methods. However, they face unique challenges, including adapting to new educational norms and overcoming cultural differences (Swanson & Huff, 2019). Administrators view foreign teachers as a vital part of the education workforce, with both successes in improving academic outcomes and obstacles related to integration and retention (Sutcher et al., 2019).

The Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961, also known as the Fulbright-Hays Act, serves as the foundation of the J-1 Teacher Program. Enacted to promote understanding and communication between U.S. and foreign citizens, the act encourages global cooperation in educational and cultural advancement. Its broader mission is to foster positive, harmonious relationships between the U.S. and other countries by showcasing each other's educational and cultural accomplishments. Through this exchange, international teachers contribute to mutual understanding and goodwill, reflecting the original goals of the act to establish lasting bonds between people worldwide (Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961, 2024).

South Carolina is one of the U.S. states facing significant teacher shortages, with over 1,400 vacancies reported at the beginning of the school year. To address this gap, some school districts, have increased recruitment efforts for foreign teachers. Moreover, school district HR department emphasizes the urgency of the shortage and has successfully hired approximately 100 foreign teachers over the past 15 years. These teachers bring unique cultural perspectives to students, fostering a broader worldview within the classroom environment (Green, 2023). This study focuses specifically on J-1 Special Education (SPED) teachers due to their unique role in advocating for students with special needs. SPED teachers are critical in promoting inclusion within schools, ensuring that all staff understand and support students' individual needs. By examining the experiences of J-1 SPED teachers in South Carolina through a phenomenological research approach, the study offers insights into both the personal and professional challenges they encounter. These findings contribute to the broader discussion on the impact of

teacher exchange programs and highlight the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices within the U.S. education system.

## **Literature Review**

Recent research highlights the growing reliance on foreign teachers in U.S. school districts as a response to teacher shortages, especially in critical fields like special education, math, and science. Studies indicate that the influx of foreign educators not only helps fill immediate staffing needs but also brings diverse perspectives that enhance students' learning experiences and cultural awareness (Carothers et al., 2019). This recruitment strategy addresses the disparity in student-teacher demographics, which has been linked to achievement gaps among minority students. Ingersoll and May (2011) further emphasize that minority teacher shortages negatively impact educational equity, as minority students benefit from role models who share their cultural backgrounds (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Additionally, foreign teachers often face challenges related to adapting to the U.S. educational and cultural landscape. Many report difficulties with classroom management and curriculum adaptation, which can affect their teaching efficacy (Swanson & Huff, 2019). Research also suggests that rural and underserved areas, which struggle the most with teacher shortages, are increasingly recruiting foreign educators as a strategic measure to enhance educational quality (Sutcher et al., 2019). Consequently, while foreign teachers fill essential roles, further support systems are required to aid their adaptation and retention in the U.S. educational system.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of J-1 teachers working with special needs students in South Carolina, USA. The approach focused on capturing the essence of participants' experiences through four key phenomenological features: description, reduction, essence, and intentionality. Data collection was conducted using in-depth interviews, facilitated either in person or through Facebook Messenger video calls, with recordings transcribed for thematic analysis. The interviews were structured in two sections, starting with introductory questions to build rapport, followed by four primary questions to elicit deeper insights. The phenomenological method's three steps intuiting, analyzing, and describing were applied as outlined by Umanilo (2019). During the intuiting phase, researchers avoided judgment to maintain focus on participants' perspectives. In the analysis stage, they identified essential themes by examining data linkages, ensuring a rich, unbiased depiction. The final step involved detailed descriptions of critical elements derived from the data. Ethical considerations adhered to the American Educational Research Association's guidelines and DepEd Order No. 16 for research ethics in the Philippines, ensuring participants' rights, informed consent, and confidentiality.

were upheld. Rigorous measures were taken to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, enhancing the study's reliability and validity. Thematic analysis was conducted by coding and clustering responses, allowing the researcher to identify and interpret recurring themes meaningfully.

## Results and Discussion

### ***Theme 1. Descriptions/Definitions of J1 Visa Holders in USA***

Participants in this study offered a variety of viewpoints on J1 visa holders:

Here are the viewpoints of P5 and P8 say about J1 Visa holders,

*"Being a science teacher, no, we are – we are – we are serving our count' country as the ambassador, you know, to the - to the - to the United States so we bring what we have here in the Philippines to you know, to ahh, educate the other culture," (P5).*

Another participant emphasized,

*"Teachers with J1 visas who have completed the program are subject to a two-year regulation and are not Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)" (P8).*

These interpretations are consistent with earlier studies, especially that mentioned by Lockhart (2021) which defines the J-1 visa as a temporary nonimmigrant visa for exchange travelers taking part in exchange programs.

According to Shorelight Team (2023), anyone outside of the US who wants to participate in study- and work-related exchange programs approved by the Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs needs a J-1 visa, often known as an exchange visitor visa or J student visa. Typically, an educational or charitable organization will sponsor a person with a J-1 student visa. Another study showed that cross-cultural encounters cause teacher educators' perspectives on culture, learning, and change to shift. A deeper awareness of various cultures is facilitated by interactions with Americans and educators around the world (Ospina & Medina, 2020). The cultural empathy and sensitivity of teachers with international experience seems to increase (Serin, 2017). Initiatives like the Balik-Turo Program by the Association of Fil-AM Teachers in America, Inc. serve as examples of how this newly acquired knowledge frequently inspires instructors to share their experiences (AFTA, 2021). This researcher is back in the Philippines as per the terms of the contract, which requires instructors from the Philippines and other qualified nations to return home after the program, having finished the five-year J1 Visa program in the USA. Consistent with the views of participants P5 and P8, the researcher recognizes that J1 teachers are required under the restrictions on J1 visas to return home at the end of their contractual period. Remarkably, on June 20, 2023, the researcher returned to the Philippines after finishing the research and started following the two-year home residency requirement specified in the J1 visa program.

### ***Theme 2. Characteristics of J1 Visa Holders in USA***

J1 Visa holders are known for their resilience as a shared quality as highlighted by two participants, P4 & P21.

*P4 stated that “What I realized is that, the patience that we demonstrate – it - this is just my personal view. The patience we demonstrate, it is not oftentimes forthcoming from the ordinary teachers in that, possibly because we have more at stake, we go to greater lengths to ensure that students actually learn and you can see active learning taking place.”*

*P21 went on to elaborate about these traits in more detail.*

*“I believe that teachers who are able to come through here as J1 visa holder are resilient, flexible, smart, adaptable, skillful, people-oriented and strong emotionally, physically and mentally.”*

The researcher in this study agrees with the opinions made by participants P4 and P21, especially relating to their stories of resilience. The researcher, who is living alone, understands the importance of developing mental, physical, and emotional toughness. This common understanding highlights the difficult nature of the researcher's situation and emphasizes the significance of resilience in managing the difficulties of living apart from a spouse physically.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in order to overcome challenges, resilient educators ingrain themselves deeply in their school communities. They do this by using a strong sense of mission to control hindrances and capitalize on favorable circumstances. They welcome change and, by rephrasing painful events as opportunities for growth, they preserve control and strike a balance between limiting and empowering factors. The participants' experiences as J-1 teachers demonstrate this capacity for perseverance in the face of difficulty, highlighting the significance of relationships with coworkers, students, and school administrators (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019).

This adaptability and broad range of skills of J1 visa holders are consistent with the results of related studies. In a study on the resilience of people who participate in foreign exchange programs, Johnson et al. (2019) highlighted how people with J1 visas frequently display outstanding adaptation and coping skills in overcoming cultural barriers. The assumption that people with J1 visas have the interpersonal abilities and emotional fortitude required for successful cultural interchange was furthered by Thurston, T. N., et. al. (2021) investigation into the emotional intelligence and adaptability of people in cross-cultural contexts. In summary, the characteristics attributed to J1 visa holders, particularly their resilience, adaptability, and multifaceted skill set, find support in related studies examining aspects of emotional intelligence, adaptability, and mental well-being in individuals engaged in international exchange programs.

### ***Theme 3. Advantages of J1 Visa Holders in USA***

During the interview, participants expressed some advantages they have felt and observed:

**P8** simply said, *“Yeh this program is good. I should say it’s good. Ah you learn a lot of things when you go back home. You could use this especially in teaching college students and doctorate and I could teach this to my college students for all of us aspiring to become teachers in the US.”.*

**P12** shared: *“Umm, yes, umm, like, umm, I - exchange of culture ahh of – culture with other teacher – ah both the Americans and the expatriate, and it’s a really a very good collaboration when they meet, ah - the different – ah - types of teachers, ah - we have learned so many things and as a J1, ah – holder, I have learned a different, ah - teaching strategy, ah, so that we can easy get the attention of the students and ah teach them the right concepts, ahh - in a smart way and I have learned how to manage the classroom effectively and learned so many umm classroom management strategy so that I can have, ah - effective classroom and teach my kids, ahh - in an awesome way.”*

**P18** had her sharing: *“Umm it is a good program. Mmm, para maka experience sa educational system sa USA.”*

Other participants (**P2, P7, P14, P19**) said it was a worthwhile and enjoyable experience. To elaborate,

**P2** stated: *“Ahh – here as J1, ah it’s - it’s a good experience here because ah you have the international experience with the students.”*

**P7** shared: *“My insights on J1 visa holder in the USA is that you gain a lot of experiences from your workplace.”*

**P14** emphasized: *“Well, it is a very enriching experience, as a cultural exchange teacher you get to share umm your experiences and expertise in your umm subject. And umm also the culture from the Philippines and you get to know as well other students and other school systems culture.”*

**P19** posited: *“Umm, nindot kayo ang experience as a J1 teacher. Kay maka impart ka sa students sa knowledge nimo at the same time maka impart ka sa imong culture sa Philippines and very good opportunity for the Filipino teachers nga makateach diri sa US.” (Umm, had a nice experience as a J1 teacher. You can impart to the students the knowledge gained at same time you can share Philippine culture and very good opportunity to teach in the US”.)*

This program was also helpful as what **P3** and **P10** claimed:

**P3** shared: *“Umm. It’s very helpful for us because we are immersed with American culture and then you know after 2 years, we can go back home and maybe share what we know from here to our country.”*

**P10** had a similar experience when she shared: *“Helpful – yes of course for experiences (OK) yes – and I got a lot of – a lot of knowledge from my coaches and other American teachers of course.”*

One participant (**P6**) shared about financial aspect. She said: *“It’s a good opportunity, to save money and to pay the kuan mga debts in the Philippines.”*

The researcher concurs with **P6** because she helped her family successfully settle their debts in their home country.

According to Gul and Gokce's (2020) research, educators who work abroad enjoy a number of benefits that include social, professional, financial, and personal. The findings of this study are consistent with the participants' first-hand accounts.

In addition, J1 visa holders receive large pay, frequently up to ten times what they would make in their home nation (Modesto, 2020). Teachers are motivated to work overseas by the financial incentive because it allows them to settle debt, indulge in hobbies, and even invest in businesses. According to Bassett (2018), one of the main incentives for Filipino instructors working in the United States is the allure of financial rewards.

Three other participants (**P1**, **P9**, **P22**) had the same opinion of the J1 program, referring to it as a worthwhile "opportunity." To elaborate,

**P1** shared: *“Teaching in the USA as a J1 visa holder has been an absolute blast! I’ve been able to share my knowledge and passion for education with students from diverse backgrounds. It’s been incredible to see their growth and development throughout the year. One of the highlights has been exploring different cities during my travels. New York City, California, Virginia, were a personal favorite with its stunning landscapes and friendly people. And let’s not forget the joy of trying out delicious foods from around the world! It’s been a great way to unwind after a long day of teaching. Speaking of culture, I’ve had the opportunity to learn so much about American traditions and customs. It’s been a beautiful exchange of ideas and experiences, and I’ve loved sharing my own cultural background with my students. This cultural exchange has truly enriched my teaching experience and broadened my perspective. I’m grateful for the friendships I’ve formed and the lifelong connections I’ve made through this incredible journey. As an active member of the Filipino American Association, ai get share my great Filipino culture to the Americans. Being a J1 visa teacher has allowed me to embrace diversity, foster understanding, and make a positive impact on the lives of my students. I wish there is a chance for this J1 to be converted to an immigration path. This is the downside of this visa but the rest are great.”*

**P9** said that: *“Umm, J1 visa holders, is a big stepping stone for Filipino teachers to acquire new knowledge and experiences they can an take with them when they go back home to share in their respective schools or umm yes schools that they will be teaching in the Philippines umm after their program.”*

*P22 had her sharing: "Ahh - my insights are like a good opportunity for us to be Here in the US, umm, we're able to use some technology for teaching."*

Modesto (2020) also discussed the idea of "opportunity" in respect to the specific interview questions she asked her participants, including: (a) What are your initial impressions of teaching in the United States? (a) What elements contributed to your decision to work as a teacher in America? (c) What are your feelings and thoughts when you consider your position as a teacher in a South Texas district? and (d) Describe any advantages, if any, you have had as a Filipino teacher in South Texas.

J1 teachers also participate in the exchange by sharing their own cultural experiences, which improves the learning environment as a whole. As *P22* shared:

*"Ahh, my insights are like a good opportunity for us to be here in the US, umm - we're able to use some technology for teaching. We are advance also in some differentiated activities for students, and then we were able also to apply our learning and strategies way back from the Philippines and also, we learned from here what ah strategies, umm, they also used here in the school system."*

With particular emphasis on the fact that the researcher has successfully finished the entire 5-year J1 program, the researcher in this study concurs with the experiences expressed by all participants mentioned above.

According to Bu's (2020) study, which examined the cross-border lived experiences of Western faculty members, the participants regarded the meetings to be important and described them as fascinating, informative, extending their viewpoints, and ultimately gratifying. These encounters aided their personal and professional development. As a result, as was said in Chapter 2, this study is important when considering the experiences of the participants, suggesting that teaching can serve as a vehicle for people who choose this professional path to learn about different cultures, travel, and develop intercultural competency.

The participants' views were shaped by their encounters with the English language, impacting their assimilation into American society, according to a study examining the viewpoints of Soviet Union instructors working in American classrooms. Their viewpoints were also greatly shaped by their experiences with authoritarian teachers, their families, and the political environment of teacher education (Stikhin & Rynkänen (2017)). This is consistent with what the participants have experienced.

In addition, teachers gain financial, social, professional, and personal advantages from working abroad. They improve communication skills and linguistic ability. Opportunities to travel comfortably and be exposed to a variety of cultures arise. They might also contrast teacher performance, school systems, and educational approaches in their native nation—Turkey, for example—with the foreign place. Additionally, this experience helps them refine their teaching techniques (Gül, H., & Gökçe, A. T. (2020)). These results substantially resemble

those of studies by Shiveley and Misco (2015), Cook (2009), Frederiksen (2014), and Gündoğdu (2014). Additionally, the current study aligns with the individuals' first-hand accounts. Overall, having a J1 visa offers benefits that go beyond education and include personal, financial, and cultural enrichment, making it a positive and fulfilling experience.

#### *Theme 4. Disadvantages/Downsides of J1 Visa Holders in USA*

Even though the J1 or Exchange Cultural Program has many benefits, certain drawbacks have been mentioned by J1 teachers based on their own experiences.

One participant (P7) specifically cited, "You gain a lot of experiences from your work place however you are not privileged to certain - you can't access certain facilities as a J1."

This researcher can relate with Participant 7's experience of being refused access to particular facilities. The head custodian's denial prevented the researcher from using the Science lab room for the whole of her four-year stay in the Middle School. The administration was informed, yet the problem persisted. It is interesting that the researcher was permitted to utilize the laboratory area as her classroom while instructing high school students during her first year of teaching in the USA.

The J1 program's 2-year rule has been cited by participants as another important disadvantage. One participant (P8) claims:

"Sus, kani gyud nga program para nako, honestly lang gyud, kani nga program nindot kung ang nakabati lang - mamauli tag pinas, wa tay trabahong padulngan, nga gipa-resign ta. Maoy naka-chaka. Which is mao gyud akong Nakita nga murag something nga dapat tan-awn pud sa – unsa na – sa Pilipinas – maong gusto gyud mamauli ang mga maestra like – tagaan nila ug like – kung exchange teacher ta, dapat naa tay padulngan inig uli kay exchange teacher man kaha ta, di ba, mao may pangan sa program." (For me, for those who just heard about the program, this is good for them, but for those already in the US would have the feelings of regrets by saying "nobody told us to resign from our work in the Philippines. For me, this is something to ponder upon that when we go back home, there is something that we can do, coz we know we are on exchange program".)

The researcher in this study can attest to the Participant 8's experiences. The researcher is presently living in her own country, respecting the two-year rule, and is currently unemployed.

Additionally, research by Park et al. (2020) examined the experiences of participants in cultural exchange programs, indicating potential difficulties they might encounter both during and after their programs. The survey found

problems with reintegration into their home countries, which is in line with J1 teachers' worries about going home and getting a job there.

Many Filipinos continue to spend large sums of money to pursue teaching opportunities in the US, even though they are aware of the difficulties Filipino teachers encounter there, which include documented struggles and the possibility of being trafficked (Perea, 2018; Piccio, 2019 as cited by Chua, 2021). Many researchers refer to this strong desire to work in the US as colonial mentality, or the conviction that American culture is superior. It is frequently attributed to the good impact that American colonialism and lifestyle have left (David & Okazaki, 2010, p. 850 as quoted by Chua, 2021). The participants in this study may not have had exactly the same experiences as the others, but they all came to the United States in search of the "American Dream."

In summary, participants have legitimate worries about the drawbacks of the J1 visa program, such as the restrictions placed on privileges and difficulties posed by the 2-year rule. Related studies highlight the psychological and professional difficulties that participants in international exchange programs confront, offering insightful information about the varied experiences of J1 visa holders.

### ***Problems Encountered During The 5-Year Duration of The Exchange Program***

#### ***Theme 1. Cultural Differences***

During the J1 program, six participants cited cultural differences as a major obstacle. The following were their shared experiences:

*P3 said: "Umm, the basic problem is really the management – how to manage the class. So that's the general ed...in the general education setting, you really have a problem managing the class because, well, because of the differences in the culture. We are from the Philippines – we are really highly respected as teachers but in here, well, students are – they don't talk back – I mean they talked back but they are also opinionated. Whatever you say they have opinion and all those and they just freely share it, and which is you know, for us, it's disrespectful but - yeh."*

*P8 shared: "Challenge gyud kayo to maam, ang, ang, ang preparation nimo sa imong klase kay imong mga estudyante diri gawas nga lahi lahi mog culture, lahi sad ka sa ilang panan-aw unya ang pag-earn sa ilang trust ug respect us apud na, kanang kung magteach diri, mag bitbit gyud kag ubay ubay nga pasensya, unya kinahanglan gyud ka ug ubay ubay nga pagresearch ug ubay ubay nga paghunahuna una sa imong klase, di pwede nga – pareha sa ato ba nga kanang sweto na kayo ka ba noh? Kanang bisag bisag magpiyong pa tas mga bata mam bisag usa pa lang na ka kilay, mahadlok na gyud na – karon di na gyud mada oi." (I was so challenged Ma'am because of the preparation in the class*

due to the different culture of the students. Getting their trust and respect in teaching here in the US needs a lot of patience, then you do research and do a lot of thinking. Not like in our place that we feel we know what to do with our children, just a raise of our eyebrows, students are afraid and listen to the teachers, but this time here, we cannot do it.').

**P9** said: *"The – umm - challenges (problems) ah - problems that I've encountered, actually it's in the system because it's very different the way we do it in the Philippines. Since I am a - umm Special Ed teacher here and the way we do our umm documents especially like the IEP is very different so that is one of the problems that I have encountered. It's very - very different. In here the IEPs are legal documents. In the Philippines, it's not umm, say, we – we - we don't treat IEPs the same as how they treat it here so I have a hard time umm learning how to do their IEPs in here."*

**P10** had her sharing: *"Hmmm – behavioral problems, the culture of the American students. Ahh, I think that's it because I always have the struggles in managing the behaviors of students because a – as if they are all sped - I'm sorry about this but yes, I'm – I'm just telling what – what they thought about American students – so – it's -about the behavior – yes."*

**P11** said: *"Behavior and attitude and time management. I mean due to cultural differences, of course we expect our students to be courteous, to be respectful and of course ahh with regards to safety, I think we've encountered some concerns here compared to the Philippines."*

**P20** also had her sharing: *"Well, actually – umm – cultural differences, and the different classroom management that we had, it's totally different from I had from the Philippines."*

According to participants **P5**, **P7**, and **P16**, the program had a profound impact on them that included suffering culture shock.

**P5** stated: *"Oh basically you know, because of the culture shock, I was not – I was able to ahh – because of the culture shock, my first three months you know, it was suc' – it was really a hard time for me but you know, day after day, we got to use ah the food, you know, the ahh it's like we - were - we were dealing a - a student everyday ah from - from - from the different countries."*

*P7 had her sharing: "I have encountered problems such as students' behavior at the most. That was the hardest to deal with cultural shock – cultural differences – differences in the food."*

*P16 also shared: "I have encountered some problems all those I can call them challenges and I was able to overcome some of those challenges – ah the problems that ahh I can talk about our culture – the cultures are different – there's a culture shock, ahh the children -the students are different from the children that we have in our country. Ahh The behaviors in the classrooms although we something that we learned because children are children and then you just trick them and you overcome your culture – ah the culture shock, you overcome everything, that you faced, day by day, you take it every day at a time, and also what was really my challenge."*

**Living Conditions:** As people from all backgrounds come to the United States to work as J1 teachers, their various living situations become crucial to comprehending the complex web of cultural nuances. This investigation aims to provide insight on the particular difficulties, compromises, and daily experiences that both shape and are shaped by the intrinsic cultural variety in the J1 teacher community.

Living conditions, which included a variety of difficulties experienced by participants, appeared as a subtheme.

*P1 shared: "The weather, umm the time, umm especially the weat' inter, especially when it comes to mag – mag-spring nag ani, mura bag daghang allergies, umm also, driving, my first time to drive, you know, what else, financially because umm, I have to, make sure that I have this budget." (Especially during winter, and during spring, as if there are so many allergies".)*

*P18 had her sharing: "Umm problems at first, ahh, nahinumdom na diay ko...ang very first problem was getting a driver's license. Kay umm, it's so different – ang requirements nila is different and then since international visa holder ka, there are some DMVs nga dili mo process. You have to go to certain kanang DMVs nga mo-process. 'nya kinahanglan ka nga mokuha ug driver's license. And then ang next nga challenge is – pag-ari nako, umm, I'm by myself. So Kinahanglan ko mangitag lugar ug asa ko makastay. Nga kuan kanang nga manginahang - mangitag lugar nga makastay nga duol sa among school. Unya naga – towards the end of my stay sad kay di na ko ka focus sa akoang teaching kay nagsige na kog hunahuna asa ko mangaply kay para di ko makauli'g Philippines ug maka-continue ko (ahah) sa akoang pagteach nganhi." ('My first problem, I remember, was getting a driver's license.*

Requirements are different especially that you are international visa holder, there are some DMVs who will not process. So, you need to go to other DMVs who will accept the processing since you need to get license. The second challenge was the need to look for a place to stay near the school where I have to teach. And then towards the end of the stay, I have to think to apply in another school so I will not be able to go back to the Philippines and continue to teach here in the U.S.”)

One participant (P21) described: *“The hardest and the most challenging is the first year. During my first year these were the challenges: (1) Driver’s license. I don’t drive in the Philippines. I just went to a driving school and then I need to drive here in the US. Getting a driver’s license in the US is the real deal. There’s no short cut and you have to go through the process. (2) Adjusting to the curriculum. I was teaching college when I was in the Philippines and when I got here, I was assigned in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. It was like the both ends of the spectrum. It took me months to adjust. I had headaches and was very stressed trying to cope up fast and studying the curriculum. The only good thing is that when I came, that’s when they had a new curriculum, so all of the teachers are on the same page of trying to learn and teach it. (3) Adjusting to the students. I was working in college so handling little kids was like new waters to me. I have to change my perspective and expectations. I really have to go down low with where the students are to meet their needs. The only blessing is that I have 12 students at that time and most of them were immigrants. (4) Adjusting to the weather. You have to dress for 4 seasons here. And winter is cold but with the right clothing you will be fine. (5) Adjusting to co-workers. I had a struggle in this area because apparently there were some kinds of issues before I came here and me coming in ruffled some feathers. But I’m glad that before the year ends it was sorted out and I’m friends with them now. (6) Adjusting to the time. The daylight here depends on the season. During winter, the daylight is really short. Sometimes it gets depressing and sad. (7) Class schedule. Lunch and recess here mean teacher will eat with the kids and watch them during recess. “*

This researcher concurs with the participants' common experiences about their living circumstances. The researcher initially tried a carpool arrangement for one month, but her carpool buddy had issues with timeliness. Due to time constraints, the researcher had to practically sprint in order to get to the classroom on time and avoid being late. The researcher was a licensed driver in her native country, but getting a driver's license proved difficult as well; she failed the test twice. This challenge was exacerbated by the differences in driving examiner expectations in the United States. In addition, the researcher noticed that seasonal variations in the weather made her allergies worse.

The acculturation of Spanish visiting teachers at an urban dual language immersion elementary school in the United States was investigated in a study. The findings indicated that the visiting teachers had difficulties adjusting during their first year, mostly because of a weak acculturation from the host school. In order to close pedagogical and cultural gaps for visiting teachers, the study makes recommendations for how U.S. host schools might improve their acculturation processes (Goodwin, 2018). Another study, which focused on the experiences of four Filipino teachers who used narrative inquiry to land teaching jobs in Arizona, identified initial obstacles such as unfavorable living circumstances, culture shock, and unanticipated classroom realities. The Filipino teachers indicated unwavering delight and no regrets about their chosen route despite these challenges (Berg, 2019). The findings of this study align with the participants' experiences.

**Language Barrier:** The subtheme of "language barrier" emerges as a crucial element of their particular experiences within the larger theme of living situations for J1 teachers in America. Language barriers provide both possibilities and challenges for educators from a variety of linguistic origins navigating American classrooms and communities. comprehending these issues is essential to comprehending educators' daily life. This investigation explores the subtleties of communication obstacles in and out of the classroom, providing insight on how language constraints impact J1 teachers' interactions with the American cultural milieu and mold their lived experiences.

*P1 shared: "Daghan kog challenges nga naagian, especially if you are from a foreign – from a – from the Philippines to the US, as a foreigner here, there's language barrier, di ba? Ahh the kind of English that we have is different from the kind of Engl', the hip-hop language of – I have, considering that I teach in a black community, so the kind of English that we have, sometimes, there's a misinterpretation, sometimes we don't connect because, you know, the language barrier, the accent, the heavy accent that we have." ("I have encountered so many challenges especially that I am from a foreign land, from the Philippines to the US there's a language barrier.")*

*P8 said: "Problem...when it comes to student, language – number one. 'nya, Very southern ang accent unya umm, two-way pud cya – nagproblem akong – nagproblema akong mga bata nako, ako nag problema pud nila. Kay knowing (nag-igham) Asian – Asian ka, we're very formal when it comes to speak English, unya kabaw ka mga southern diri, slang – 'nya shortened ang mga words, 'nya, paspas moestorya. unya, it turned out paspas pud diay ko mo-estorya (both were laughing) ka'baw ka, challenge gyud kayo, hinuon ing-ana man gyud na, ahh adjustments both sides, 'nya di kay teacher lang, ang students ga-adjust pud, ahh tagaan man gyud nimo ug, I should say, tagaan gyud nimo ug chance*

*imong kaugalingon nga mag-adjust as well as ang students. Dili ka mag – ma-disappoint dayon nga “ay, di ko kasabot sa mga bata” – mga bata di kasabot nimo, moingon sila “we cannot understand you” - of course, kay di gud ka taga dira (uhuh), give chance mo sa usag usa nga maka-adjust ug Kung kung naay mangutana nako unsay problema – ug una ka na gyung language. Kay to be honest man gud mam dili behavior akong unang problema ha, kay pag-abot nako diri, kuan man gud to nag-A Day B Day naman ba ga covid.” (“...problem when it comes to student language-number one. Accent is very southern, but it’s a two-way process, my students have problem on me, at same time I also have problem on them when it comes to language. As Asian, we are so formal in speaking, and the children are slang-words are shortened. They talked very fast, and it turned out, I am also speaking fast. It really needs adjustment to both teacher and students. No room to be disappointed immediately when you don’t understand the children; for the children, they will tell you outright “we cannot understand you”. Of course, its obvious, we are not from the place. Hence, we give chance to each other to be able to adjust. If someone will ask me about my problem, it is really language, to be honest, not behavior of the students.”)*

*P16 had her sharing: “What was really my challenge was umm, umm, I can talk about accent – is so different when you come from like I come from Africa and the accent is different from the way they speak here. And eventually the children start to understand you and it makes your life much easy.”*

This researcher concurs with the three participants' points of view. Over her five years in the American educational system, she consistently struggled to understand Black Americans' communication style. The researcher spoke quickly, which previous students noticed echoed her own difficulties understanding their words—as if they were enunciating while being consumed.

According to Bense (2016), foreign instructors who participate in cross-national mobility are exposed to novel and unfamiliar circumstances, which helps them develop new social and intellectual abilities. This result is consistent with the experiences of the participants.

Kombe (2016) expounded, citing Lave and Wenger, on how cross-cultural obstacles influencing relationships between teachers, students, schools, and colleagues can make it more difficult to comprehend other cultures in a foreign environment. Investigating these relationships can be made easier by using a situational learning approach. The social practice theories of Lave and Wenger focus on how people comprehend relationships and negotiate meaning in socially

and culturally constrained environments. According to this viewpoint, which is consistent with the participants' experiences, participation and knowledge are acts performed by individuals within a particular sociocultural group.

### *Theme 2. Professional Impact*

Below are the descriptions of the participants' encounter on this theme:

P2 shared: "Umm, I think the - the help – the help of the - the I mean – what else – I think that's it, mam, the - the - my experience is just only the classroom management and there is – ah I think there is a help from the principals but – umm, I mean there is no what do you call that mam there is no - umm - support. Yeh that's it, support as an international teacher."

P22 had her sharing: "I've encountered umm one of the major one of the basic problems usually from J1 teachers here, it's like no support from the mentors, or no support from department heads or support from school district like trainings, workshops teachers especially international teachers."

The experiences of P2 and P22 are contradicted by the researcher in this investigation. The administration offered the researcher their full support, stressing that all that was needed to gain help was to voice one's wants and concerns.

According to Gül & Gökçe's study (2020), administrators overseas left the teachers to work independently. Moreover, they did not treat every teacher equally and engaged in unjust administrative practices. The administration did not help teachers use school supplies and connect with possible students. These results are consistent with the accounts provided by the participants.

As per Chapter 2 and corroborated by studies by Miller, Ochs, and Mulvaney (2008), Brown, Dashwood, Lawrence, and Burton (2010), and Fee (2010), cross-national mobility introduces foreign educators to new and different circumstances, which leads to the acquisition of new social and cognitive skills. The experiences of the individuals are consistent with this occurrence.

The results of the pilot study on the experiences of first-year elementary and early childhood teachers in the classroom showed that these educators encountered day-to-day teaching obstacles that were different from what they had anticipated. These difficulties included things like daily schedules, the organization of the school, and the perception of a divide between administrators and instructors (Hughes, et al., 2019). The study's findings are consistent with the individuals' experiences.

### *Theme 3. Students' Behaviors*

The behaviors of the students pose a substantial problem for J1 teachers, as seen by the participants' struggles with managing various behavioral concerns in the classroom.

As participants noted:

**P3:** *"We are from the Philippines – we are really highly respected as teachers but in here, well, students are – they don't talk back – I mean they talked back but they are also opinionated. Whatever you say they have opinion and all those and they just freely share it, and which is you know, for us, it's disrespectful but - yeah."*

**P4:** *"Umm – my major problem has been the – the attention to education. In my home country, you find the students valued education more. (mmm) In addition, based on the fact that there is also a – exit – a high school exit exam, students paid careful attention to learning. Here, I find that they care more about the grades and oftentimes they don't care anything at all about learning."*

**P6:** *"Their - kuan, kanang mga sipat ba. Nga di sila maminaw - Ingon ana ba." (Those naughty ones, who do not listen.)"*

**P7:** *"I have encountered problems such as students' behavior at the most. That was the hardest to deal with cultural shock – cultural differences – differences in the food."*

**P10:** *"Hmmm – behavioral problems, the culture of the American students. Ahh, I think that's it, because I always have the struggles in managing the behaviors of students because a – as if they are all SPED - I'm sorry about this but yes, I'm – I'm just telling what – what they thought about American students – so – it's -about the behavior – yes."*

**P11:** *"Behavior and attitude and time management. I mean - due to cultural differences, of course we expect our students to be courteous, to be respectful and of course, ahh, with regards to safety, I think we've encountered some concerns here compared to Philippines."*

**P12:** *"Yah, I have encountered - ahh - many problems, but, ah - ah still I am, ahh - working it out, ahh - the first one is the about, ahh, the mainly - about the classroom management, ah, the discipline issues, ahh, the students, they do not follow the rules...not all the students but some of them, they distract the class, and some of the students they are – umm - talkative and also very few are disrespectful, they talked back to the teacher and umm because they have - ahh – different, ahh, level of student, and ah very few we have, specialty, ah student, sometimes they go around the class coz I am handling the general style, the special ed students will also come to me, ahh, without any assistance so I have to manage, ahh, by myself so some students they just moved around the class and the very few - ahh - I have*

to deal with their ahh anger issues. All these are, ahh, the issues I have and the, ahh - day to day classroom and I'm still working on it, ahh, how to fix it so that my class, ahh, will be a super class."

**P13:** "I'm special education teacher here mainly for middle school and high school and I have experienced umm varied problems. I encountered different problems for example, number one, umm the learners – the learners are different because they do not respond posi' – positively to you right away – umm we still need to you know umm understand them, learn from them, or learn what type of learning that um that pave want and so - so that we can better help them. And Yeh that's - number one. It takes time for us to build that rapport for them to be able to learn."

**P14:** "Mainly behavioral problems of the students."

**P16:** "Ahh the children -the students are different from the children that we have in our country. Ahh The behaviors in the classrooms although we something that we learned because children are children and then you just trick them and you overcome your culture."

**P17:** "Ahh, the problems – umm – is the – in terms of managing the learners here of course the classroom management because their behavior is different from our students in the Philippines."

The researcher in this study concurs with the accounts of the eleven participants. Throughout her entire five years, she mostly saw similar behaviors in students ranging from 6th to 9th grade. The most difficult situations seemed to occur in the middle school, especially with 6th graders. The study discovered that, in contrast to their middle school peers, 11th grade pupils demonstrated more mature and good behaviors

#### **Theme 4. Classroom Management**

Six participants (**P2, P3, P10, P12, P17, P20**) emphasized that one of the biggest challenges they had while teaching was classroom management.

These are the accounts of their experiences:

**P2** shared: "Umm, I think the - the help – the help of the - the I mean – what else – I think that's it mam, the - the - my experience is just only the classroom management."

**P3** said: "Umm, the basic problem is really the management – how to manage the class. So that's the general ed...in the general education setting, you really have a problem managing the class because, well, because of the differences in the culture."

**P10** had her sharing: *“Ahh, I think that’s it, because I always have the struggles in managing the behaviors of students because a – as if they are all SPED.”*

**P12** shared: *“Yah I have encountered – ah - many problems but ah, ah, still I am, ah, working it out, ahh, the first one is the about, ahh, the mainly about the classroom management, ah, the discipline issues, ahh, the students, they do not follow the rules...not all the students but some of them, they distract the class, and some of the students they are – umm, talkative and also very few are disrespectful, they talked back to the teacher and umm because they have ahh different ahh level of student, and ah very few we have specialty ah student, sometimes they go around the class coz I am handling the general style, the special ed students will also come to me ahh without any assistance so I have to manage ahh by myself so some students they just moved around the class and the very few ahh I have to deal with their ahh anger issues. All these are ahh the issues I have and the ahh day to day classroom and I’m still working on it ah how to fix it so that my class ahh will be a super class.”*

**P17** said: *“Ahh the problems – umm – is the – in terms of managing the learners here of course the classroom management because their behavior is different from our students in the Philippines.”*

**P20** shared: *“Well, actually – umm – cultural differences, and the different classroom management that we had, it’s totally different from I had from the Philippines.”*

Regarding classroom management, the researcher in this study concurs with the experiences that each participant has provided. The researcher acknowledges the special difficulties brought about by students' non-conformist behaviors in the American classroom, but she also freely admits that during her five years of teaching in the US, she struggled with what she saw as a "failure" in classroom management because it deviated from the standards in her native country.

Kombe (2016) conducted an investigation on the pedagogical adaptation of foreign teachers to the United States. The participants' experiences with Secondary Mathematics Classes are relevant to the challenges faced by foreign educators as they adjust to their new educational environments. Consequently, there is a need to address intercultural awareness, classroom culture, and the norms that influence and shape interactions and discourse in mathematics classrooms.

The experiences of the participants are consistent with Samuel and Tsapayi (2023) study who cited Nicholson (1984), especially with regard to its identification of different stages of expatriate adjustment. This study highlights the identity modifications made by individuals going through an absorption shift by active participation in the new group and the acquisition of necessary social behaviors, skills, and frames of reference. Lave and Wenger's suggestion, which Kombe

(2016) referenced, that joining communities of practice helps the development of understanding, actions, and identification highlights the importance of active engagement and identity formation in successfully navigating new environments, even though they do not specifically address the transferability of expertise for international teachers.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study align with previous research, which highlights both the advantages and challenges encountered by J1 visa holders in U.S. classrooms. J1 teachers, as participants in international cultural exchange programs, gain significant professional development and intercultural competencies that contribute to their teaching efficacy and global awareness. Studies show that teachers in these programs, such as those in Arizona, face complex cultural adjustments yet also experience substantial personal and professional growth through adaptation to new educational contexts and the collaborative learning that international teaching entails (Macapagong et al., 2023). These experiences not only enhance their ability to manage diverse classrooms but also enable them to share unique cultural perspectives that enrich the learning environment for students in the U.S. (Ospina & Medina, 2020).

However, the study also highlights significant obstacles that J1 teachers face, including language barriers, classroom management issues, and cultural differences in student behavior, which can create challenges in maintaining classroom discipline and establishing rapport. Similar studies reveal that such cultural and linguistic barriers can be particularly strenuous for international educators, often impacting their adjustment and interaction with students and peers (Lee, 2015). Moreover, limited support systems, such as insufficient mentorship from school administration, further exacerbate these challenges, reinforcing the need for tailored support structures to help J1 teachers navigate the unique demands of U.S. classrooms (Halicioglu, 2015). Addressing these issues through targeted training and robust support networks can improve the overall experience and effectiveness of J1 teachers in U.S. schools.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of J1 visa teachers in U.S. schools demonstrate both enriching opportunities and notable challenges in navigating cultural and professional adaptation. These educators contribute invaluable global perspectives to American classrooms, enhancing cultural understanding and diversity in educational practices. However, they often encounter difficulties with language, classroom management, and varying levels of institutional support, underscoring the importance of structured orientation, ongoing mentorship, and tailored support systems. Strengthening these resources can facilitate smoother transitions and optimize the contributions of J1 teachers, benefiting both the educators and

the students they serve. Enhanced support for J1 teachers could therefore ensure a more positive, impactful exchange, fostering growth in both American educational settings and the teachers' home countries upon their return.

### *Insights*

To improve the experiences of J1 SPED teachers in the USA, several initiatives are recommended, including comprehensive pre-departure orientation covering American culture, housing, and classroom management. Programs that emphasize cultural sensitivity and living conditions across diverse U.S. regions can aid adjustment, while strong support systems, including mentoring, counseling, and healthcare access, are essential to manage job pressures. Enhanced English language programs and structured professional development in collaborative teaching and behavior interventions are advised, along with peer-to-peer learning opportunities and constructive feedback after classroom observations. Facilitating parent involvement, providing financial planning assistance, and offering regional solutions for transportation and certification expenses are also important. Emphasizing diversity, inclusion, and wellness resources will further support J1 teachers' mental health, resilience, and work-life balance, ultimately fostering a more supportive environment for both educators and students.

### *References*

- AFTA. (2021). Balik-Turo Program by the Association of Fil-AM Teachers in America, Inc. Retrieved from <https://afta.org>
- Bu, X., McCaw, B., & Kero, P. (2020). Western Faculty Members' Cross-Border Lived Experiences. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 10(1), 20-36.
- Bense, J. (2016). Cross-national mobility and teacher adaptation: New social and cognitive skills acquisition. *International Journal of Educational Studies*.
- Berg, C. (2019). Filipino teachers' experiences in Arizona through narrative inquiry. *Journal of Educational Research and Narrative Studies*.
- Carothers, C., Frye, A., & Bennett, M. (2019). Cultural exchange and diversity in the classroom: Effects of foreign educators on U.S. students' learning outcomes. *Journal of International Education Research*.
- Chua, S. (2021). Colonial mentality and motivations among Filipino teachers in the U.S.. *Philippine Cultural Studies*.
- David, E. & Okazaki, S. (2010). Colonial mentality in Filipino Americans. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 1(2), 82-101.
- Drew, H., & Sosnowski, T. (2019). Resilience and adaptation in the teaching profession. *Journal of Education and Society*.
- Fulbright-Hays Act. (1961). The Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961. Retrieved from <https://fulbright.hays.gov>

Goodwin, A. (2018). Acculturation challenges for visiting teachers at urban dual language immersion schools. *Journal of International Education*.

Green, R. (2023). Teacher shortage solutions: Recruitment of international teachers in South Carolina. *South Carolina Educational Review*.

Gül, H., & Gökçe, A. T. (2020). Experiences of Turkish teachers in foreign educational systems. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Educational Research*.

Halicioglu, M. (2015). Support systems for J1 visa teachers: A review of mentorship practices. *International Journal of Educational Development*.

Hiratsuka, Y. (2013). Cultural exchange programs and professional growth of foreign teachers. *International Journal of Educational Exchange*, 3(1), 45-63.

Hughes, A., et al. (2019). Challenges for first-year elementary teachers: Expectations vs. reality. *Early Childhood Education Journal*.

Ingersoll, R., & May, H. (2011). The minority teacher shortage: Educational equity implications. *Educational Researcher*, 39(2), 88-99.

Johnson, L., et al. (2019). Resilience and adaptability of J1 visa holders in cross-cultural contexts. *Journal of Cultural Exchange and Development*.

Kombe, D. (2016). Pedagogical adaptation of foreign teachers in U.S. classrooms: Situational learning perspectives. *Journal of Educational Practice*, 4(3), 115-130.

Lee, Y. (2015). Cultural and linguistic barriers for international educators. *Journal of International Education and Cultural Exchange*.

Lockhart, C. (2021). Understanding the J-1 visa program. *U.S. Cultural Exchange Program Review*.

Macapagong, R., Reyes, J., & Tan, M. (2023). Cultural adjustment and growth among Filipino J1 teachers in the U.S.. *Philippine Journal of Educational Research*.

Modesto, L. (2020). Financial motivations and experiences of Filipino teachers in the U.S.. *Journal of International Teacher Migration*.

Ospina, R., & Medina, A. (2020). Cross-cultural interactions and impact on teachers' perspectives. *International Journal of Intercultural Education*.

Park, J., et al. (2020). Challenges for cultural exchange participants in reintegration. *International Journal of Educational Studies*.

Paik, K., Kim, E., & Hernandez, L. (2015). The J-1 Teacher Program: Fostering intercultural competencies in U.S. classrooms. *Journal of Intercultural Teacher Exchange*.

Perea, M. (2018). Challenges and risks faced by Filipino teachers in the U.S.. *Philippine Overseas Journal*.

Piccio, L. (2019). Cultural exchange experiences of Filipino teachers in America. *Philippine Overseas Journal*.

Serin, O. (2017). The development of cultural empathy in international teachers. *Journal of International Teacher Education*.

Shiveley, J. & Misco, T. (2015). Comparing educational strategies between American and Turkish teachers. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Education*.

Shorelight Team. (2023). Understanding the J1 Visa: An overview. Retrieved from <https://shorelight.com>

Stikhin, A., & Rynkänen, K. (2017). Challenges faced by Soviet teachers in American classrooms. *Journal of International Education*.

Swanson, T., & Huff, B. (2019). Adapting to new educational norms: Challenges for J1 teachers. *Journal of International Teaching*.

Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Teacher shortages in critical fields: The role of international recruitment. *Journal of Educational Policy and Practice*.

Thomas-Ruzic, J., & Prudencio, L. (2015). The role of cultural exchange in enhancing global teaching practices. *International Journal of Teacher Education*.

Thurston, T. N., et al. (2021). Emotional intelligence and adaptability in cross-cultural contexts. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.