

Trials and Triumphs of Overseas Filipino Teachers Reintegrating Into the Philippine Public School System through SPIMS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the trials and triumphs of Overseas Filipino Teachers (OFTs) who participated in the *Sa 'Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir* (SPIMS) Program of the Department of Education. The study aimed to understand the challenges and successes experienced by Filipino teachers who worked abroad, their lived experiences in foreign school systems, and their transition process upon returning to the Philippines through SPIMS. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through interviews and survey questionnaires administered via Google Forms and chat messages with SPIMS beneficiaries from countries such as Thailand, Japan, Australia, and China. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: (1) seeking better financial stability to support family while advancing teaching careers; (2) integrated professional and personal transformation through adaptation to culturally diverse, disciplined, and increasingly technology-rich school environments; (3) intertwined professional and personal challenges, particularly language barriers, cultural adjustment, workload, and homesickness; (4) reuniting with family while reinvesting overseas teaching expertise in the Philippine public school system through SPIMS; and (5) organized, patient, and support-seeking strategies anchored in a clear long-term goal of re-entering public service. The findings highlight how overseas teaching experiences shaped participants' professional identity and resilience, and how SPIMS facilitated their reintegration into the Philippine public education system. The study recommends strengthened institutional support for returning OFTs, including orientation programs, mentoring, and utilization of their international expertise to enhance teaching quality in public schools.

Keywords: Overseas Filipino Teachers, SPIMS, Department of Education, lived experiences, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) remain a cornerstone of the Philippine economy and national identity, contributing billions of dollars in remittances each year while often enduring prolonged separation from family, cultural adjustment, and uncertain working conditions abroad. Among them, Filipino teachers represent a distinct group whose migration is shaped not only by economic pressures but also by aspirations for professional growth, recognition, and exposure to different educational systems. In host countries, these educators navigate diverse curricula, discipline norms, linguistic demands, and technology-rich environments and experiences that can simultaneously expand their pedagogical competencies and test their emotional resilience. Their stories reflect both the sacrifices commonly associated with the global OFW experience and the distinctive professional challenges and gains of teaching in foreign classrooms.

In response to teacher migration and domestic shortages, the Philippine government established the *Sa 'Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir* (SPIMS) program, a collaborative reintegration initiative between the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) and the Department of Education (DepEd). SPIMS is designed to attract licensed Filipino teachers who have worked abroad to return and practice their profession in the Philippine public school system, offering them Plantilla (permanent) positions and structured support such as screening, endorsement to DepEd, teaching kits, and, when needed, refresher courses through the Philippine Normal

University. By converting individual return decisions into an organized “brain-gain” pathway, the program seeks to address teacher shortages while harnessing the international expertise, discipline, and specialized skills that returning OFW teachers have acquired. News and policy communications highlight SPIMS as a key mechanism for allowing OFW teachers from J-1 programs and other overseas posts to resume teaching in public schools and contribute their enhanced capabilities to local education

Despite the existence of SPIMS and related policy documents, there remains limited qualitative evidence on how returning OFW teachers actually experience their reintegration into DepEd schools, particularly in terms of their lived challenges, adaptations, and perceived contributions. While the program provides placement and basic support, it does not fully capture the human dimensions of transition: how teachers make sense of their overseas trials and triumphs, how they reintegrate into local classrooms, and what strategies they use to navigate bureaucratic and emotional demands upon return. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the primary motivations of Overseas Filipino Teachers for working abroad, particularly in relation to financial stability and professional advancement? (2) How do Overseas Filipino Teachers describe their lived experiences abroad in terms of professional and personal growth, adaptation to culturally diverse and technology-rich school environments, and development of intercultural competence? (3) What professional and personal challenges did Overseas Filipino Teachers encounter while teaching abroad, particularly with regard to language barriers, cultural adjustment, workload, and homesickness? (4) How did these challenges influence their work performance, emotional well-being, and decision to return to the Philippines and apply through the SPIMS program? (5) What coping strategies did participants employ in navigating the SPIMS application process, and how did these strategies reflect their long-term commitment to re-entering public service in the Philippine education system? This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of SPIMS beneficiaries who worked as teachers in countries such as Thailand, Japan, Australia, and China. Specifically, it aims to document their "trials and triumphs" overseas and examine how these experiences shape their motivations, coping strategies, and intentions to reinvest their expertise in the Philippine public school system through SPIMS. The findings are intended to inform DepEd and DMW policies on teacher retention, reintegration support, and the meaningful utilization of returning OFW teachers' global competencies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Overseas Filipino Teachers (OFTs) who participated in the *Sa 'Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir* (SPIMS) program of the Department of Education. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to capture the depth and complexity of participants' personal narratives, motivations, challenges, and reflections on their overseas teaching experiences and reintegration into the Philippine public school system.

Setting and Participants

The study focused on SPIMS beneficiaries who previously worked as teachers in various countries, including Thailand, Japan, Australia, and China. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, selecting OFT/OFW teachers who had completed or were in the process of completing the SPIMS application and deployment process. A total of 10 SPIMS beneficiaries participated in the study. Key demographic characteristics includes countries of overseas employment: Thailand, Japan, Australia, China, and United Arab Emirates, having 4 to years of overseas teaching experience deployed or in the process of deployment to DepEd public schools in the Philippines through SPIMS. Participants were identified through online networks, SPIMS-related social media groups, and referrals from fellow teachers who had undergone the program.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires administered online. The researcher developed an interview/survey guide aligned with the study's research questions, focusing on participants' motivations for working abroad, lived experiences in foreign school systems, challenges

encountered, reasons for returning to the Philippines, and experiences with the SPIMS application and reintegration process. The instruments were distributed via Google Forms and chat messaging platforms (e.g., Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp). Participants were given a link to the Google Form containing both closed-ended demographic items and open-ended questions that invited narrative responses. For those who preferred, follow-up clarifications and additional probing questions were conducted through asynchronous chat messages. Data collection procedures included sending initial messages to potential participants explaining the study's purpose and inviting them to participate, providing a digital consent statement at the beginning of the Google Form which participants had to affirm before proceeding, allowing participants one to two weeks to complete the survey and submit their responses, and conducting optional chat-based follow-ups to clarify or deepen responses, with participants' permission.

Despite having returned to the Philippines, the 10 SPIMS teachers were assigned or residing in geographically distant provinces. Conducting face-to-face or synchronous video interviews would have involved considerable logistical challenges, including travel distance, conflicting work schedules, and varying internet connectivity. Thus, Google Forms was selected as the primary data collection platform because it enabled participants to respond at their convenience while maintaining consistency across responses. Follow-up questions were subsequently conducted through asynchronous chat messaging to clarify and expand participants' narratives when necessary.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher first read and re-read all responses to become familiar with the content. Significant statements related to participants' motivations, experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and reintegration decisions were coded. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories and further refined into overarching themes. Themes were reviewed against the raw data to ensure they accurately represented participants' accounts. The final thematic structure formed the basis of the results section.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical standards were strictly observed to protect participants' rights, dignity, and confidentiality. Prior to data collection, all participants reviewed and affirmed a digital consent statement (via an "I agree to participate" box in Google Forms, or verbal/written confirmation for chat interactions) that explained the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, the types of data collected (written survey/interview responses and chat messages), how data would be used (academic research and potential publication), and the measures ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. No real names, specific school names, or exact locations were collected or reported; participants were assigned codes (P1–P10), potentially identifying details were omitted or generalized, and all data files were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no incentives or coercion, and participants could skip any question or withdraw before submission without negative consequences. All data were used solely for this research, will be retained only as required by institutional guidelines, and then permanently deleted; findings are reported in aggregate, with quotations anonymized and attributed only to participant codes. Although formal ethics review board clearance was not obtained, the study followed established ethical principles for online qualitative research, prioritizing participants' welfare, privacy, and autonomy throughout.

RESULTS

Data from interviews and surveys with SPIMS beneficiaries yielded five major themes that capture the trials and triumphs of Overseas Filipino Teachers: (1) seeking better financial stability to support family while advancing teaching careers; (2) integrated professional and personal transformation through adaptation to culturally diverse, disciplined, and increasingly technology-rich school environments; (3) intertwined professional and personal challenges—particularly language barriers, cultural adjustment, workload, and homesickness; (4) reuniting with family while reinvesting overseas teaching expertise in the Philippine public school system through SPIMS; and (5) organized, patient, and support-seeking strategies anchored in a clear

long-term goal of re-entering public service. Each theme is presented below with illustrative participant statements.

Theme 1: Seeking Better Financial Stability to Support Family While Advancing Teaching Careers

Participants consistently described their decision to work abroad as driven by two tightly linked motives: securing better income for their families and pursuing professional growth as educators. Many explicitly connected financial goals with career development, indicating that these were not separate considerations but part of a single strategy.

P1 stated, “I wanted to improve my family's financial situation while gaining international teaching experience,” directly linking family welfare with international professional exposure. P3 explained, “I sought better financial stability and opportunities to teach in a well-equipped educational environment,” highlighting how economic motives co-existed with the desire to work in better-resourced schools. P4 similarly noted applying abroad “to gain financial security and international teaching experience” and to “challenge myself professionally,” underscoring the intersection of economic security and self-development.

This pattern was echoed across participants. P6 aimed “to provide a better future for my family while pursuing professional development,” while P7 described their goal as “to support my family's needs and achieve financial stability” alongside broadening professional experience. P8 wanted “to expand my expertise in educational technology while earning a better income,” and P9 sought “to gain specialized experience in inclusive education while supporting my family financially.” P10 added that they wanted “to enhance my teaching career while providing better opportunities for my family.” Collectively, these statements show that participants framed overseas teaching as a dual pathway: addressing family financial needs and advancing their teaching careers simultaneously.

Theme 2: Integrated Professional and Personal Transformation Through Adaptation

Working in foreign school systems fostered integrated growth in both professional competencies and personal attributes. Participants reported gains in pedagogy, classroom management, ICT integration, and differentiated instruction, alongside increases in patience, resilience, independence, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural competence.

P1 noted that “students were respectful and disciplined,” yet “communication was challenging because of language differences,” and explained that “teaching abroad helped me become more patient and culturally sensitive,” particularly through experiences like “celebrating school events with students from different cultural backgrounds.” P2 described a journey “filled with continuous learning and cultural exchange,” emphasizing that teaching abroad “strengthened my instructional strategies and digital teaching skills” and taught them “how to adapt lessons for students with different language abilities.”

P3 highlighted that managing “students from different cultural backgrounds” and meeting “high performance expectations” was challenging but ultimately “helped me become more disciplined” and enhanced “leadership, communication, and technology integration skills,” as well as proficiency in “designing inquiry-based science lessons.” P4 stated that their experience abroad “strengthened my confidence as an educator,” with a memorable moment being when “struggling students improve after using new instructional strategies,” leading to stronger “analytical teaching methods” and better “problem-solving skills.”

P5 was “impressed by the students’ discipline and respect for teachers,” describing “highly organized and efficient” routines that “inspired me to improve my own professional habits” and led to improved “organizational skills, classroom discipline, and intercultural competence.” P6 described “significant professional and personal growth” over ten years, noting that schools which “valued creativity and child-centered learning” strengthened their “classroom management, creativity, and child-centered teaching approaches.” P7 shared that their journey “taught me resilience and independence,” and that appreciation from students and parents “despite cultural differences” highlighted “the importance of cultural sensitivity,” leading to stronger “interpersonal skills and greater cultural competence.”

P8 emphasized that exposure to “various educational technologies and digital platforms” and leading “ICT workshops for teachers” developed “advanced ICT integration skills, leadership abilities, and digital instructional competencies.” P9 described their journey as “both challenging and rewarding,” with “small but meaningful progress” among learners as a key memory, connecting this to becoming “more patient, resourceful, and skilled in differentiated instruction” and gaining a deeper understanding of “inclusive education.” P10 recalled that students were “respectful and open to interactive learning” and that schools “emphasized collaboration and continuous improvement,” yet they struggled with “balancing teaching responsibilities with being away from family,” experiences that “strengthened my resilience.” Taken together, these accounts indicate that participants’ professional competencies and personal qualities evolved simultaneously in response to their overseas contexts.

Theme 3: Intertwined Professional and Personal Challenges—Language Barriers, Cultural Adjustment, Workload, and Homesickness

Participants navigated intertwined professional and personal challenges that shaped both their work and their decision to return home. Professionally, they faced language barriers, new standards, demanding workloads, and adapting to unfamiliar policies. Personally, they coped with homesickness, emotional strain, cultural restrictions, and separation from family.

P1 shared that “language barriers and homesickness were my biggest challenges,” noting that adapting to “language and communication differences” sometimes affected their confidence and initially forced them to “simplify my lessons to ensure students understood them.” Over time, P1 “learned basic Thai expressions” and became “more flexible in designing lessons for diverse learners” and “more confident in working with multicultural students.” P3 identified “adjusting to a multicultural classroom with varying learning styles” as “the most difficult challenge,” requiring “constant preparation and flexibility.” P4 emphasized difficulties with “language barriers with parents,” “adapting to local educational policies,” and a “demanding workload,” which demanded “patience and perseverance.” P5 described “balancing work demands with personal well-being” and high expectations for “punctuality and professionalism” as crucial challenges, prompting the development of “effective time management” and greater self-discipline. P8 struggled with “keeping pace with rapidly changing technology and managing workload,” and felt pressure “to continuously upgrade my skills.”

On the personal side, P1 stated that “being away from my family made me emotionally stronger and more independent.” P2 noted that adapting to “new teaching standards and balancing work responsibilities” coincided with “moments when I missed important family occasions back home,” experiences that “tested my resilience and commitment.” P6 described being separated from family for long periods as “emotionally difficult,” with “homesickness” as the “most difficult challenge.” P7 explained that “cultural restrictions and homesickness affected both my personal and professional life,” and that “adapting to different cultural norms” required changes in “daily habits and communication styles.” P10 identified the “most difficult challenge” as “maintaining emotional well-being while living far from loved ones,” especially when “missing family celebrations,” and described coping by relying on “faith and support from fellow Filipino teachers.” These accounts show that challenges abroad affected both work and personal life, often blurring the boundary between professional stress and emotional adjustment.

These challenges were closely linked to participants’ decisions to return to the Philippines and join SPIMS. Nearly all participants cited family as a primary reason for going back. P1 explained that “after four years abroad, I wanted to be closer to my family and raise my children in the Philippines,” while also feeling it was time “to apply the knowledge and teaching strategies I had gained overseas,” with SPIMS providing “an opportunity to return to public service.” P2 returned to “spend more time with my aging parents” and “contribute to the country’s education system,” believing that “my years abroad gave me valuable experience” that could benefit Filipino students. P3, after eight years in the UAE, wanted to “return home and share the innovative teaching practices I had learned overseas,” while prioritizing being “closer to my family,” viewing SPIMS as “a pathway for experienced overseas teachers to rejoin the Philippine education system.” P4 emphasized reunion with family and a desire to “contribute to improving mathematics education.” P5–P10 similarly cited the need “to be closer to my family” and to “apply the discipline and teaching practices” or specialized skills “in service of Filipino learners through SPIMS.” These statements show that the same

challenges that shaped their resilience and skills abroad also influenced their decision to prioritize family proximity and structured reintegration at home.

Theme 4: Reuniting with Family While Reinvesting Overseas Teaching Expertise Through SPIMS

Participants chose to return to the Philippines and apply through SPIMS in order to reunite with their families while deliberately reinvesting the teaching expertise, discipline, and specialized skills they acquired abroad into the Philippine public school system. This dual motivation was evident in how they consistently paired family-related reasons with professional intentions.

P1 shared that “after four years abroad, I wanted to be closer to my family and raise my children in the Philippines,” while also feeling “it was time to apply the knowledge and teaching strategies I had gained overseas,” using SPIMS as a way “to return to public service.” P2 similarly emphasized wanting “to spend more time with my aging parents and contribute to the country's education system,” believing that overseas experience could “benefit Filipino students,” with SPIMS enabling continuity in public school teaching. P3 and P4 highlighted that after many years abroad, “being closer to my family” and being “reunited with my family” became priorities, yet they also aimed to “share the innovative teaching practices” and “introduce effective teaching strategies” in mathematics education, viewing SPIMS as “a pathway” to rejoin or continue serving in the Philippine education system.

This pattern was reinforced by the remaining participants. P5 and P6 both stressed the desire “to be closer to my family” while continuing their careers “in my home country” and “in the public sector,” hoping to apply “the discipline and teaching practices I learned in Japan” and early childhood education skills “to benefit Filipino children.” P7 and P8 expressed that they wanted “to be with my family after many years overseas” and to “contribute my ICT expertise to Philippine schools,” sharing modern educational technologies with local teachers and students. P9 underscored continuing to serve “learners with special needs” while being near family, and P10 noted returning to “share the knowledge and teaching practices I gained overseas with Filipino students” and to be “closer to my family after several years abroad,” with SPIMS enabling them to remain in the Philippine public school system. These statements collectively show that SPIMS is experienced not only as a deployment mechanism but as an institutional bridge that allows teachers to align family reunification with sustained professional service in basic education.

Theme 5: Organized, Patient, and Support-Seeking Strategies Anchored in a Clear Long-Term Goal of Re-entering Public Service

Participants coped with the SPIMS application process through organized, patient, and support-seeking strategies anchored in a clear long-term goal of re-entering public service. They described the process as lengthy, document-intensive, and prone to delays, yet they consistently emphasized staying organized, breaking tasks into manageable steps, and seeking guidance from offices and peers.

P1 highlighted that the process “required patience because of the numerous documents and waiting periods,” and coped by “preparing my requirements early and seeking guidance from previous SPIMS applicants,” while remaining optimistic that their overseas experience would be recognized. P2 noted that the process was “lengthy” and that “gathering the required documents from abroad was challenging,” managing these by “planning ahead and communicating regularly with the appropriate offices,” with “support from my family and fellow teachers” helping them stay motivated. P3 described how “securing employment records and verifying documents from another country required extra effort,” and stayed focused by “completing one requirement at a time and seeking clarification whenever needed,” relying on “patience and perseverance” to overcome delays.

Other participants articulated similar coping patterns. P4 found “processing documents and meeting deadlines” challenging, especially during transition, and coped by creating “a checklist to monitor my progress” and seeking advice from former SPIMS applicants, noting that “staying organized made the process more manageable.” P5 managed uncertainty by “staying informed about the application requirements and maintaining constant communication with the concerned offices,” remaining patient, and drawing

encouragement from family support. P6 framed the transition as requiring “patience and careful preparation,” completing requirements “step by step,” seeking assistance when needed, and staying motivated by the “long-term goal of returning to public service.” P7, P8, and P9 all referenced delays and difficulties in obtaining and validating documents, yet coped by remaining patient, organizing documents carefully, staying updated with procedures, contacting appropriate offices for clarification, and completing tasks “one requirement at a time” with guidance when necessary. P10 summarized this approach by “staying organized, preparing all documents early, and keeping myself updated,” viewing delays “as part of the journey” and maintaining “a positive outlook” to remain focused on the goal.

This theme indicates that successful navigation of the SPIMS application was less about avoiding difficulties and more about sustaining structured, patient, and socially supported action over time. Participants relied on practical strategies such as early preparation, checklists, step-by-step completion, and proactive communication with agencies, alongside emotional resources like patience, optimism, family encouragement, and peer advice. The consistent reference to a “long-term goal of returning to public service” and the framing of delays as “part of the journey” suggest that their sense of purpose and professional identity helped them tolerate uncertainty and bureaucratic friction.

DICUSSIONS

This study explored the trials and triumphs of Overseas Filipino Teachers (OFTs) reintegrating into the Philippine public school system through the *Sa 'Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir* (SPIMS) program. Five major themes emerged from the data: (1) seeking better financial stability to support family while advancing teaching careers; (2) integrated professional and personal transformation through adaptation to culturally diverse, disciplined, and increasingly technology-rich school environments; (3) intertwined professional and personal challenges particularly language barriers, cultural adjustment, workload, and homesickness; (4) reuniting with family while reinvesting overseas teaching expertise in the Philippine public school system through SPIMS; and (5) organized, patient, and support-seeking strategies anchored in a clear long-term goal of re-entering public service. Together, these findings answer the research questions by showing that overseas teaching is experienced not merely as temporary labor migration but as a strategic, identity-shaping journey that culminates in deliberate reintegration into the Philippine public education system. The results highlight how financial, professional, and familial motivations intersect with personal growth, systemic challenges, and bureaucratic processes to shape teachers' decisions to return and serve through SPIMS.

The dual financial–professional motivation documented in this study reframes our understanding of why Filipino teachers migrate and why they choose to return. Participants did not describe overseas work solely as an economic escape from low domestic salaries; rather, they framed it as an integrated strategy to secure both family welfare and career advancement. This aligns with literature on Filipino teacher migration, which identifies low compensation, limited career pathways, and heavy workloads in the Philippines as push factors, and higher income, better working conditions, and clearer professional recognition abroad as pull factors. However, this study extends that literature by showing that upon return, teachers explicitly seek to reinvest their overseas-acquired expertise into the Philippine system through SPIMS, rather than exiting the profession or shifting to non-teaching roles. This suggests that SPIMS functions not only as a re-employment mechanism but as a meaningful bridge that allows teachers to align their long-term professional identity with their family obligations and public service aspirations. The implication is that policies focusing exclusively on salary incentives or one-time reintegration benefits may miss the deeper professional dimension of teachers' motivations; instead, structured career pathways, recognition of international experience, and purposeful deployment are equally critical.

The integrated professional and personal transformation reported by participants underscores the developmental value of overseas teaching experiences. Adapting to culturally diverse, disciplined, and technology-rich school environments fostered growth in pedagogy (e.g., differentiated instruction, inquiry-based teaching, ICT integration) and in personal attributes such as resilience, patience, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural competence. These gains correspond closely to current reform priorities in Philippine basic education, including learner-centered instruction, technology-enhanced learning, and inclusive classrooms. Interpreted in this light, returning SPIMS teachers represent a strategic human resource for school

improvement, not merely additional teaching positions to fill. Their overseas experiences position them to lead innovation in areas where the local system faces persistent gaps such as digital literacy, inclusive education for learners with special needs, and mentorship for early-career teachers. This finding adds nuance to existing studies on Filipino teachers abroad, which often emphasize challenges and adaptation without fully articulating how these experiences can be systematically leveraged upon return to strengthen the domestic education system.

The intertwined professional and personal challenges identified in this study, language barriers, cultural adjustment, workload pressures, and homesickness—help explain both the resilience that teachers develop and their eventual decision to return home. Participants described how these challenges blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, testing their emotional well-being while simultaneously pushing them to develop advanced competencies in classroom management, intercultural communication, and time management. These experiences are consistent with prior research documenting that Filipino teachers abroad encounter communicative predicaments, cultural misunderstandings, and psychological strain, which require them to develop coping strategies and intercultural sensitivity. Importantly, this study shows that these same challenges become part of the rationale for return: teachers choose to prioritize family proximity and structured reintegration through SPIMS after years of separation and emotional strain. These findings complement literature on DepEd teacher migration, which notes that family separation, emotional exhaustion, and a renewed desire to serve in Philippine schools contribute to return intentions, especially when reintegration pathways are visible. It also highlights that the “trials” abroad are not merely obstacles to be overcome but formative experiences that shape teachers’ professional identity and commitment to public service.

The organized, patient, and support-seeking strategies participants used to navigate the SPIMS application process reveal an additional layer of trial in the reintegration journey. Teachers described the process as lengthy, document-intensive, and prone to delays, yet they coped through checklists, step-by-step completion, proactive communication with agencies, and peer/family support, all anchored in a clear long-term goal of returning to public service. This finding extends existing descriptions of SPIMS as a joint DMW-DepEd initiative by showing how, in practice, teachers experience the program’s bureaucratic dimensions and what enables them to persist despite friction. Interpreted together with the other themes, this suggests that successful reintegration depends not only on formal policy design but also on the informal support networks and personal resources that teachers mobilize. Strengthening these supports through clear applicant toolkits, responsive communication channels, and peer-mentor systems can reduce emotional burden and attrition during the application process, thereby enhancing the program’s overall effectiveness in converting “brain drain” into “brain gain.”

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. First, it provides rich, first-hand narratives from SPIMS beneficiaries who worked in diverse countries (Thailand, Japan, Australia, China, UAE), offering a nuanced view of overseas experiences and reintegration motivations. Second, it focuses on an under-researched population returning OFW teachers specifically deployed through SPIMS thereby contributing empirical evidence to policy discussions on teacher migration and reintegration. Third, the findings have direct implications for DepEd, DMW, and school leaders seeking to optimize the impact of SPIMS on teacher quality and retention.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size was small (10 participants) and purposively selected, which limits the generalizability of findings to all SPIMS beneficiaries or OFW teachers. Data were collected via online surveys and chat messages, which, while practical, may have constrained the depth of responses compared to face-to-face, in-depth interviews. There is also potential self-selection bias, as participants who had relatively coherent or positive narratives about their experiences may have been more willing to respond. Finally, although ethical guidelines for online qualitative research were followed, formal institutional review board (IRB) clearance was not obtained, which may be noted as a limitation in some contexts. Future studies could address these gaps through larger, more diverse samples; longitudinal designs tracking returnees’ career trajectories; and mixed-methods approaches that combine narrative data with outcome measures (e.g., teacher performance, student achievement).

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

The findings of this study carry several implications for policy and practice. For DepEd, DMW, and NRCO, the results underscore the importance of strengthening SPIMS as a structured “brain-gain” pathway that recognizes both the financial and professional dimensions of teachers’ motivations. Concrete actions include clarifying career pathways and promotion criteria that value international experience, streamlining document verification and inter-agency communication, and institutionalizing peer-mentor systems where successfully deployed SPIMS teachers guide new applicants. Co-developing a “SPIMS Applicant Toolkit” with step-by-step guides, sample documents, contact points, and timeline trackers can formalize the informal support networks that participants relied on, reducing uncertainty and emotional burden during the application process.

For school heads and division leaders, the study suggests that intentional deployment and support can maximize the impact of returning teachers. Schools should be briefed on SPIMS teachers’ overseas backgrounds and encouraged to co-create individualized plans for how these teachers can lead at least one school-wide improvement project (e.g., digital literacy campaign, inclusive education pilot, inquiry-based science initiative) within their first year. Orientation programs, peer networks, and psychosocial support mechanisms can help returnees manage reverse culture shock and translate their overseas-honed competencies into school-based leadership. By positioning SPIMS teachers as lead teachers for technology integration, inclusive education coordinators, or mentors for early-career teachers, divisions can convert individual growth into collective capacity building, directly aligning with DepEd’s reform agenda on learner-centered, technology-enhanced, and inclusive education.

For future research, several directions emerge. Studies with larger, more diverse samples across multiple regions can test the transferability of these themes. Longitudinal designs tracking SPIMS returnees over several years can illuminate how their overseas experiences influence career progression, retention, and leadership trajectories. Comparative studies between SPIMS and non-SPIMS returnees, or between teachers who return versus those who remain abroad, can clarify the specific contribution of the SPIMS program to reintegration outcomes. Additionally, school-level impact studies examining how SPIMS teachers affect student outcomes, teacher collaboration, and innovation adoption can provide quantitative and qualitative evidence to further justify investment in and refinement of the program

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides evidence on how overseas experiences shape Filipino teachers’ motivations, competencies, and reintegration decisions through SPIMS. The trials and triumphs documented here reveal that overseas teaching is a strategic, identity-shaping journey that culminates in deliberate efforts to reunite with family and reinvest professional expertise in the Philippine public school system. By recognizing and supporting both the financial and professional dimensions of teachers’ motivations, and by intentionally leveraging returnees’ enhanced competencies, DepEd, DMW, and school leaders can transform brain drain into sustained brain gain. The path forward requires coordinated action: policy reforms that clarify career pathways and streamline processes, school-level practices that intentionally deploy and support returnees, and ongoing research that monitors and evaluates the impact of reintegration efforts. When these elements align, the trials and triumphs of overseas Filipino teachers can translate into lasting improvements in the quality, resilience, and innovation capacity of Philippine basic education, ultimately benefiting learners, schools, and the nation as a whole.

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This research is dedicated to all Overseas Filipino Workers, especially teachers, whose sacrifices and contributions continue to shape the future of their families, communities, and the nation. May their stories be heard, their expertise be valued, and their reintegration be supported with dignity and purpose.

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