**Crossing Borders in Education: Cultural Narratives of Filipino Social Studies Pre-Service Teachers in International Exchange Programs in The ASEAN Region**

**ABSTRACT**

International exchange programs offer Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers unique opportunities for professional and personal growth. This study aimed to explore the cultural narratives of Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers in international exchange programs in the ASEAN region, focusing on the benefits and challenges they encountered, their adaptation strategies, and the influence of these programs on their perspectives on Social Studies education. This study utilized qualitative research design and data were collected from structured interviews and were analyzed through thematic analysis. Four social studies pre-service teachers who participated in international exchange programs for a short-term period in Indonesia shared their insights and meaningful experiences. The findings revealed that international exchange programs enhanced pre-service teachers’ intercultural competence and provided new pedagogical approaches such as the adoption of student-centered methods observed abroad. Participants also faced challenges, including communication difficulties due to language barriers and navigating cultural differences. Adaptation strategies included open-mindedness, respect for local customs, and learning about the host country's culture. The program significantly impacted their teaching by fostering a broader understanding of global education and preparing them for diverse classrooms. This study highlights the importance of international exchange programs in developing culturally competent Social Studies educators. The findings can inform the design and implementation of future exchange initiatives by incorporating pre-departure cultural training and strong support systems, ensuring they effectively support pre-service teachers' personal and professional growth and prepare them to foster global awareness in their respective classrooms.

*Keywords: international exchange programs, pre-service teachers, cultural narratives, ASEAN region, social studies education*

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**INTRODUCTION**

In an increasingly globalized world, education plays a vital role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and global citizenship. Many institutions actively promote internationalization as a key strategy, emphasizing that developing a "global citizenry" is an essential part of their educational mission (Perry et al., 2013). International exchange programs serve as a platform for cultural immersion, enabling students to gain meaningful experiences and develop a deeper appreciation of diverse perspectives (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017).

For Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers, participation in international exchange programs in the ASEAN region presents a unique opportunity to enhance their pedagogical skills while navigating cultural diversity. These programs provide valuable insights into the challenges of teaching and learning from an international perspective, as seen through the Philippine experience (Agustin & Montebon, 2018). Additionally, teaching immersion is a key component of ASEAN integration, aimed at producing high-quality and competitive educators (Garcia, 2018).

The ASEAN region, characterized by its rich cultural heritage and diverse socio-political landscapes, offers an avenue for experiential learning. Filipino pre-service teachers who engage in these programs are not only exposed to different educational systems and teaching methodologies but also go through cultural adaptation and personal growth. Knowledge and experience gained from the international exchange program had a positive impact on the personal and professional development of the participants (Mashizume et al., 2020). These experiences contribute to their development as educators who can foster inclusivity in their learning environments (Eden et al.,2024). Furthermore, by aligning with the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and the ASEAN Work Plan on Education allows the Philippines to better equip its citizens for opportunities in the ASEAN labor market (Momo, 2025).

This study aims to explore the cultural narratives of Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers who have participated in international exchange programs in the ASEAN region. By examining their experiences, this research seeks to shed light on how these engagements influence their teaching philosophies, pedagogical practices, and cultural identities. The findings will provide valuable insights for educators to improve the design and implementation of international exchange initiatives, fostering a more culturally competent teaching workforce. This study therefore aims to address the following questions:

1. What challenges and benefits do pre-service Social Studies teachers experience in international exchange programs?
2. How do Social Studies pre-service teachers adapt to different cultural and educational environments during international exchange programs?
3. In what ways do international exchange programs influence Social Studies education in Southeast Asia?

**METHODOLOGY**

The study employed the qualitative research design, an approach to acquire the experiences and cultural narratives of Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers who participated in international exchange programs in the ASEAN region. The study involves four (4) Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers who engaged in exchange programs in Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that participants possess relevant experiences. This sample size allowed for an in-depth understanding of international exchange programs; however, the findings do not provide generalizability, but they offer insights for future international exchange initiatives. Data collection was conducted through structured interviews via an online platform, allowing the researcher to gather descriptive data on the benefits, challenges, and cultural influences encountered by the respondents. Thematic analysis was utilized to systematically organize and analyze the complex data sets following the framework of (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' experiences and cultural insights.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the results and discussions of this study based on thematic analysis. The results are divided into three themes: (1) the benefits and challenges of international exchange programs, (2) adaptation strategies of pre-service teachers, and (3) the impact on teaching social studies. The first theme discusses the benefits and challenges experienced by the pre-service teachers, addressing what and how these factors affected their learning experience and their expectations before the program. The second theme explains the cultural and educational differences encountered, as well as the support systems that aided them in navigating the new environment. The third theme explains how international exchange programs improved their teaching, affected their view of social studies education, and influenced their future careers.

**The Benefits and Challenges of International Exchange Programs**. International exchange programs offer an opportunity to fully develop pre-service teachers in a diverse world of teaching and to foster international competitiveness. Participation in these programs provided both benefits and challenges to pre-service teachers (Diem et al., 2023). The respondents stated that international programs enhanced their intercultural competence, facilitated cultural immersion, enabled them to meet new people, and provided them with new teaching methodologies. This aligns with existing research indicating that education abroad is a crucial pathway for developing intercultural competence (Deardorff & Jones, 2023). Furthermore, the findings suggest that international exchange programs not only improved participants' communication skills and cultural awareness but also forged lasting cross-border friendships, underscoring the value of intercultural competence in building meaningful global connections (Tran & Hoang, 2025).

During an interview, respondent A stated:

During my international exchange program in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, I experienced numerous benefits and challenges. One of the most rewarding aspects was the opportunity to immerse myself in a different culture, allowing me to develop a deeper appreciation for diversity. I gained firsthand experience of Indonesia’s education system, which broadened my perspective on teaching methodologies. Additionally, I built lasting friendships with my student buddies and fellow educators, fostering a strong sense of camaraderie and cross-cultural understanding.

This account aligns with findings that highlight the various outcomes of students' interactions with diverse individuals. These outcomes range from the reduction of stereotypes to profound experiences of care, social support, and inclusion from unfamiliar individuals. (Heppner & Wang, 2014).

While offering significant benefits, international exchange programs also present several challenges. The most prominent challenge identified was communication, stemming from language barriers between the pre-service teachers and the students in the host country. Language is perceived as a barrier in studying abroad it may limit students' opportunities to interact with the local culture (Mancini-Cross et al., 2009). Furthermore, cultural differences, particularly concerning religious practices and dietary habits, posed additional challenges. Logistical challenges such as technological issues and time constraints were also noted. Respondent B shared the following experience:

The varying level of English fluency also hindered effective communication. For example, in a Zoom meeting with my group mates I remembered that there were misunderstandings due to differing interpretations of a key term. However, we were able to resolve this by clarifying our meanings and using visual aids.

A respondent also noted:

I have only encountered one problem there [Indonesia], miscommunication due to language barrier. But we were still able to communicate because most of the teachers in the boarding school and our student buddies can understand and speak English. And besides, there is Google Translate that is only one click away. In terms of the internet, I did not experience any problems because the signal was good, whether I’m in Jakarta or in Bogor.

In addition, the pre-service teachers' reflections on their expectations before the program revealed anticipated benefits and challenges in the host country. These reflections showed that some respondents found that the benefits, particularly the depth of cultural exchange and nuanced understanding gained surpassed their initial expectations, especially in online programs. While challenges like language barriers and technical difficulties were anticipated, their intensity was sometimes underestimated, though these also fostered valuable skill development. Other respondents stated that their expectations of both benefits and challenges generally aligned with their experiences, as they had conducted thorough research of the program.

**Adaptation Strategies of Pre-Service Teachers.** It is essential for pre-service teachers to learn to adjust to the cultural and educational differences of the host country. The respondents employed various strategies to bridge cultural gaps, including open-mindedness, showing respect for local customs and beliefs, and making conscious efforts to learn about the host country's culture. Participants are encouraged to modify specific behaviors so that they are appropriate for the culture in which they find themselves and so that they will have a greater chance of achieving their goals (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

One respondent shared:

I adapted to Indonesian customs and traditions by being observant and respectful. For instance, since many Indonesians do not eat pork, I made a conscious effort not to ask for it when dining with my Indonesian student buddies. I wanted to show respect for their dietary practices and ensure inclusivity in our shared experiences. Another adjustment was understanding the significance of prayer in their daily routine. One memorable experience was when a student buddy needed to pray inside my apartment. Initially, I assumed that prayers were always conducted in mosques, but I later learned that prayers can be done anywhere. To give her the space and peace she needed, I temporarily stayed in the bathroom, demonstrating my respect for her religious practice.

Educational differences are also evident. The pre-service teachers observed variations in teaching methodologies, curriculum focus, and classroom dynamics. For instance, there were differences in the emphasis on character development versus cognitive skills, the use of the local language as the medium of instruction, and the integration of technology in the classroom. Respondents incorporated new teaching methods, adjusted their communication styles, and integrated different learning activities. Adaptation is needed to better meet the needs of diverse students and manage cross-cultural classroom dynamics (Thinh, 2025).

In addition, support systems are important in navigating the new environment. The pre-service teachers adjusted well because of the support from the program advisers, cooperating teachers, peers, and student buddies. This idea aligns with findings from Onuso's (2020) study on cultural immersion, which emphasized that a strong support network is crucial in managing the various challenges associated with new cultural immersion experiences contributing to a more successful and enriching experience for the participants.

A respondent highlighted the importance of support system. Thus, shared the following:

Our program adviser and instructors were instrumental in helping me navigate this “uncertainty.” Social studies students before us were not given opportunities like this. So, our experience paved the way for the succeeding social studies students to enjoy these opportunities—not just virtually but joining exchange programs abroad, as well.

**Impact on Teaching Social Studies.** International exchange programs had a profound impact on the teaching of social studies by pre-service teachers. Research indicates teachers with international experience, often gained through exchange programs, are better equipped to foster global competence and address key citizenship themes compared to those without (Rapoport, 2013). One respondent highlighted the importance of cross-border collaboration in education, as sharing best practices among ASEAN nations can lead to more innovative and effective teaching approaches. Participation in these programs led to the adoption of new teaching methods, a broader understanding of global education, and enhanced preparedness for diverse classrooms.

One respondent also noted:

I realized that there is no single best approach, but there is a range of effective teaching methods shaped by cultural contexts and societal needs. That experience has made me more open to diverse pedagogical approaches and more critical in evaluating the effectiveness of different methods within their specific contexts.

Furthermore, pre-service teachers affect their view of Social Studies education in a global scope. Social studies education plays a crucial role in promoting global awareness, global citizenship, and cultural understanding.

A respondent highlighted:

I realized that Social Studies education is a vital component in our education system, especially as the world, our region to be specific, is becoming more interconnected than ever. Social studies education enables learners to become global learners who are culturally aware and responsible because at the core of it, social studies education teaches and promotes responsible citizenship. Therefore, as students become cosmopolitan, the values and concepts taught through social studies will become useful in navigating a multicultural setting.

Moreover, international exchange programs prepare pre-service teachers in their future careers as Social Studies educators. These programs equipped them with valuable skills in cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and culturally responsive teaching. Another respondent expressed:

Being part of this international exchange program has given me a competitive edge in my career as a Social Studies educator. It has strengthened my adaptability, resilience, and cross-cultural communication skills—traits that are essential for teaching in diverse settings. The experience also deepened my passion for global education, reinforcing my belief that learning should extend beyond borders.

This underscores the crucial role that international exchange programs play in developing globally relevant skills among students. Indeed, these programs transcend mere academic experiences; they are essential in equipping students with competencies highly valued by employers in a globalized economy (Poels, 2024).

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study highlights the significant role of international exchange programs in the holistic development of Filipino Social Studies pre-service teachers. The findings underscore that participation in these programs significantly fosters cultural understanding and sensitivity and promotes participants' personal and professional growth.

This research explains the various benefits derived from these programs, the challenges encountered by participants, the adaptation strategies employed to navigate these challenges, and the programs' impact on Social Studies education.

The challenges arising from cultural and educational differences are instrumental in fostering pre-service teachers' resilience and adaptability, necessitating the development and implementation of effective adaptation strategies. Notably, language barriers were identified as a significant challenge. Therefore, it is recommended that future programs incorporate basic language training to better prepare participants and facilitate smoother communication.

The study also emphasizes the critical importance of support systems, including program advisors, cooperating teachers, peers, and student buddies, in enabling pre-service teachers to effectively overcome challenges and maximize the benefits of their international experience.

Furthermore, findings suggest that institutions should provide pre-departure training to enhance participants' knowledge of potential cultural and educational differences in the host country. Additionally, mentorship programs pairing past exchange participants with current participants could facilitate the sharing of best practices and coping mechanisms.

In summary, international exchange programs serve as a transformative experience, shaping pre-service teachers into more culturally competent, globally aware, and pedagogically flexible educators.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To enhance the international exchange program experience for pre-service teachers, it is recommended that future programs incorporate basic language training to mitigate communication challenges and that institutions offer a more in-depth pre-departure training to better prepare participants for cultural and educational differences in the host country. Additionally, the establishment of mentorship programs pairing past exchange pre-service teachers with the current participants could provide valuable guidance and support, fostering a smoother and more enriching international experience.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Author(s) confirm that while no generative AI technologies were used for the intellectual content, research, or analysis of this manuscript, tools powered by Large Language Models (e.g., for grammar checks, sentence structure suggestions) may have been employed during the writing and editing phase to improve readability and linguistic accuracy.

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