

Teaching Across Borders and Expectations: International Teachers' Perspectives and Instructional Adaptations with Overage Students in a U.S. Alternative Education Context

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: international teachers; overage students; alternative education; culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy

This qualitative study examines how internationally trained teachers make meaning of their experiences teaching overage students in a U.S. alternative education setting. Guided by culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy and Bakhtin's concept of authoritative discourse, anonymous qualitative survey responses were analyzed to explore how transnational teacher identity shaped instructional practice. Findings revealed four interrelated themes: reframing assumptions about overage learners, negotiating authority and linguistic legitimacy, adopting relational pedagogical practices, and navigating emotional labor and preparation gaps. The findings suggest that teaching overage students required ongoing cultural, linguistic, and professional adaptation. This study contributes to scholarship on international teacher mobility and highlights implications for supporting internationally trained educators in high-need educational settings.

Introduction

This study builds upon prior research that examined the educational experiences of overage students within alternative schooling contexts, with particular attention to the intersecting challenges of age, identity, and marginalization (Bouray, 2021; Hubbard, 2023; Thomas, 2024). That foundational work highlighted the lived experiences of Black male graduates who lagged two to three years behind their grade-level peers and highlighted the emotional, academic, and social consequences of prolonged educational disruption. Through those narratives, the original study brought attention to the urgent need for instructional approaches that move beyond deficit-based frameworks and instead affirm students' identities, resilience, and capacity for academic success.

While the student-centered findings provided critical insight into the impact of overage status on educational trajectories, they also prompted deeper inquiry into the instructional context surrounding these students. The perspectives of teachers charged with meeting the complex

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needs of overage students are essential to unpacking rhetoric and promoting environments that are conducive to their ongoing success. During the action research phase conducted at the program for overage students, it became evident that a substantial proportion of the teaching staff consisted of international educators. This realization revealed an important and underexplored dimension of the instructional environment: the role of international teachers in educating overage students within U.S. alternative school settings. The district participates in an international teacher recruitment program to address staffing shortages in high-need schools. As a result, internationally trained educators represented a substantial proportion of the teaching staff within the alternative education setting examined in this study

The substantial presence of internationally trained educators within the setting highlighted an underexplored dimension of alternative education research. Although international teachers increasingly serve in high-need schools, little research has examined their experiences teaching overage students in U.S. alternative education contexts. Building on the broader teacher perspectives study, the present research examines how internationally trained educators make sense of teaching overage students in a U.S. alternative education context. Specifically, it explores how teachers interpret student behavior, adapt instruction, and navigate culturally responsive expectations while working with learners who have experienced educational disruption and marginalization. By centering the perspectives of international teachers, this study contributes to a growing body of research seeking to improve outcomes for overage learners while expanding understanding of who teaches them and under what conditions.

Internationally recruited teachers enter U.S. classrooms not only as content experts but also as linguistic and cultural outsiders navigating dominant norms of professional legitimacy. Their accents, communicative styles, and culturally shaped pedagogical assumptions become sites of negotiation within institutional contexts that privilege particular forms of language and authority (Lee, 2015). Understanding these dynamics is critical for examining how transnational teacher identity intersects with instructional practice in high-need educational settings. This study matters because internationally trained teachers are increasingly recruited to stabilize high-need schools, yet little research examines how their transnational professional identities intersect with the unique demands of alternative education settings serving overage youth.

Literature Review

Overage Students and Alternative Education Contexts

The high school dropout crisis continues to challenge the American public education system, disproportionately impacting students from low-income, racially marginalized, and under-resourced communities (Heilig et al., 2008; Welton & Williams, 2015; Edwards & Noguera, 2022). Despite national reform efforts, graduation gaps persist particularly among Black and Latino youth, English language learners, and students with disabilities (Gerlinger & Hipp, 2023; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Students who fail to graduate from high school are more likely to experience chronic unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, and higher rates of incarceration (Belfield & Levin, 2007). The consequences of leaving school early extend beyond the individual; communities with high dropout rates often suffer from diminished economic growth, increased public assistance costs, and diminished civic engagement (Lee-St. John et al., 2018).

Dropout is not simply the result of individual student failure but is often the culmination of systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and missed opportunities for early intervention

(Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Rumberger, 2011). Scholars have increasingly called attention to the ways in which educational policy, structural inequality, and school climate shape the academic trajectories of students long before they formally leave school (Ressa & Andrews, 2022; Doll et al., 2013). The persistence of early warning indicators such as chronic absenteeism, academic failure, and behavioral issues signal a critical need for targeted and responsive support systems. Among these indicators, one particularly troubling and overlooked category is students who are overage for their grade level; a population that is statistically more likely to disengage and drop out. One of the primary structural mechanisms through which students become overage for their grade level is grade retention.

Grade retention is the practice of requiring students to repeat a grade due to insufficient academic performance and has long been employed as an intervention to address underachievement. Over the past two decades, high-stakes accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have increased pressure on schools to meet academic benchmarks, leading to a resurgence in retention practices, particularly in early grades (Ballou & Springer, 2009; Modan, 2019). As of today, approximately 32 U.S. states have laws that require or allow for the retention of third-grade students who do not meet minimum reading proficiency standards. 15 of those states have laws mandating the retention of third-grade students who do not meet minimum reading proficiency standards, with others allowing for discretionary retention at the school or district level (Alvarez, 2017; Education Commission of the States, 2023; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023).

Although retention is often justified as an opportunity for students to "catch up" academically, a comprehensive body of research suggests that the long-term consequences are overwhelmingly negative. Retained students are at increased risk for academic disengagement, grade repetition in later years, and eventual dropout (Jimerson, 2001; Alexander et al., 2003; Xia & Glennie, 2005; Hughes et al., 2010; Winters & Greene, 2012; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). To add to that, retention has been shown to undermine students' self-esteem, heighten their emotional distress, and weaken their sense of belonging in school communities (Hong & Yu, 2007; Peixoto et al., 2016).

Research consistently demonstrates that students who become overage for grade level experience academic, social, and emotional challenges, including stigma, diminished self-confidence, disengagement, and increased risk of dropout (Hong & Yu, 2007; Jimerson, 2001; Rumberger, 2011). Thomas (2024) further found that overage graduates frequently described feelings of shame, isolation, and academic disconnection associated with repeated retention experiences.

Culturally Responsive and Relational Approaches to Teaching Overage Learners

Educators frequently find themselves underprepared to teach marginalized and overage youth due to systemic issues in teacher training, resource allocation, and policy neglect. The literature consistently reveals gaps in pedagogical approaches and inclusive curricula (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Jackson & Clayton, 2021). Educators often lack the tools to address the social-emotional, developmental, and academic needs of these learners. This educational unpreparedness reinforces cycles of marginalization and school failure, especially for youth who are overage for grade, or from racially minoritized backgrounds. Lindstrom et al. (2022) further emphasize the power of relational and experiential support for marginalized youth, noting that "educators and students reported that providing a broad array of career-related learning activities, coupled with the presence of trusted adults who serve as mentors and guides, can create capacity for

young people to expand career options” (p. 222). This supports the rationale for using qualitative teacher perspectives to inform equitable practice.

Professional learning experiences can shape educators’ beliefs and practices related to culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and trauma-informed education. The study emphasizes that teacher attitudes are not static; rather, they can be transformed through sustained, equity-centered professional development that acknowledges systemic inequities. González (2025) found that (1) many educators initially lacked a clear understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP); (2) equity-focused reflection increased teacher commitment to addressing trauma and bias; and (3) collaborative learning communities were essential for applying CRP authentically. These findings validate the importance of teacher preparation for supporting students with layered identities and educational trauma, especially in alternative settings.

A similar body of research emphasizes that teachers who succeed with marginalized or traumatized youth often prioritize relationships, empathy, and cultural affirmation over rigid instructional control (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Hammond, 2015). Davidson, Broaddus, Velie, and Harry (2022) investigated culturally sustaining and trauma-informed approaches in Indigenous school improvement efforts across several educational sites. Their findings highlight the critical role of culturally anchored, community-responsive teacher preparation programs, particularly those that engage educators in the histories, languages, and cultural values of the communities they serve (Paris & Alim, 2017; Gay, 2018). The study further emphasized that trauma-informed pedagogies cannot be divorced from cultural context, especially in communities that have experienced historical oppression and systemic marginalization (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These insights directly inform work with overage students, particularly those from racially marginalized communities, by underscoring the ways trauma, systemic inequities, and cultural disconnection shape student engagement and academic persistence (Rumberger, 2011; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Like the teachers in alternative schools serving overage youth, many educators in the Davidson study struggled to translate cultural responsiveness into practice without targeted preparation, mentorship, and institutional support.

While the literature has increasingly emphasized the importance of teacher beliefs, relational practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy when working with overage and marginalized youth (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Hammond, 2015), it has paid far less attention to who teaches in alternative education settings. Alternative schools serving overage students often experience chronic vacancies and high turnover, resulting in reliance on nontraditional staffing pathways to meet instructional demands (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Rumberger, 2011). One such pathway is recruiting and placing internationally trained educators, who are often assigned to high-need or hard-to-staff schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Shah & Cunningham, 2019). Despite their growing presence in U.S. public schools, international teachers’ perspectives, particularly in alternative education contexts, remain largely absent from the literature (Dunn, 2013; Lee, 2015).

International Teachers in U.S. Schools

In response to persistent teacher shortages, particularly in high-need and alternative educational settings, some U.S. school districts have increased reliance on international teacher recruitment programs to staff classrooms (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Dunn, 2013). International teachers are often placed in schools serving historically marginalized student populations where vacancies are chronic and instructional demands are complex. While existing scholarship documents the growing presence of international teachers in U.S. public schools, less attention has been paid to how these educators navigate unfamiliar cultural norms,

curricular expectations, accountability systems, and student behavior frameworks within alternative education contexts (Dunn, 2013; Lee, 2015).

Schools serving overage and previously retained students frequently experience elevated teacher turnover due to the academic complexity, behavioral demands, and emotional intensity associated with marginalized student populations (Bascia & Maton, 2016). National teacher shortages further compound this instability. Recent projections estimate that more than 270,000 educators will leave the profession annually through 2026, disproportionately impacting urban districts, high-poverty schools, and high-demand subject areas such as STEM, bilingual education, and special education (Dillard, 2023).

Alternative routes now produce nearly one-fifth to one-third of new U.S. teachers, serving as a primary bridge for internationally trained professionals entering American classrooms (Adelman, 1986; policy reports). Districts often employ creative strategies, including visa sponsorship and international placement partnerships, to diversify hiring and address hard-to-staff positions. However, research indicates that these pathways frequently provide uneven induction experiences. While logistical supports may be offered, onboarding timelines are often inconsistent and stressful, particularly for internationally recruited educators who must simultaneously adjust to new curricular frameworks, accountability systems, and cultural expectations.

Without cohesive preparation systems grounded in shared governance, internationally recruited teachers may enter classrooms with limited contextual preparation for navigating U.S. student behavior norms, parent engagement expectations, and accountability pressures. These are conditions that are further amplified in alternative education settings serving overage students. This structural context shapes not only recruitment patterns but also the lived instructional experiences explored in this study.

Placement in High-Need and Alternative Educational Contexts

Teacher shortages are not distributed evenly across educational settings. Alternative schools, credit recovery programs, and campuses serving overage students frequently experience elevated turnover and chronic vacancies due to the academic complexity, behavioral demands, and emotional intensity associated with re-engaging marginalized youth (Bascia & Maton, 2016). As a result, internationally recruited educators are often placed in high-need schools that struggle to attract and retain domestically prepared teachers. This structural positioning situates international teachers at the intersection of professional transition and institutional instability. Consequently, international teachers may find themselves navigating not only cross-national adjustment but also the intensified demands of alternative education settings serving overage students.

Teaching Across Cultural, Curricular, and Accountability Systems

Internationally educated teachers (IETs) often enter U.S. classrooms positioned as cultural bridges, yet research suggests they simultaneously encounter systemic barriers that complicate their professional integration. Lee (2015) provides a phenomenological examination of the sociocultural and linguistic challenges faced by IETs navigating U.S. public schools. Drawing upon Bakhtin's theory of authoritative discourse, Lee conceptualizes schooling as a space in which dominant institutional norms define what counts as legitimate knowledge, language, and professional competence. Within this framework, international teachers must negotiate their identities against established expectations of classroom authority, communication style, and instructional practice.

Lee's findings identify three primary areas of tension: (1) challenges maintaining classroom discipline when U.S. student expectations of teacher authority differ from those in teachers' home countries; (2) interpersonal conflicts with parents stemming from unfamiliar communication norms and advocacy practices; and (3) linguistic discrimination related to accent, which shapes perceptions of credibility and competence. These experiences reveal that professional adjustment extends beyond curriculum alignment to include ongoing identity reconstruction within dominant educational discourses.

These tensions may be amplified in alternative education settings where relationship-building, behavioral interpretation, and student re-engagement are central to instructional practice. This layered adjustment highlights the need for mentoring structures and school cultures that recognize and value globally informed pedagogical perspectives rather than positioning them as deficits to overcome. These findings position accent and communicative style not merely as surface-level differences, but as markers of professional legitimacy within dominant schooling discourses. For internationally trained educators, linguistic identity becomes intertwined with authority, credibility, and relational trust-building in the classroom.

Adjustment to U.S. Student Behavior Norms and School Culture

In addition to navigating curricular expectations and institutional discourse, internationally recruited teachers must interpret and respond to student behaviors that may differ significantly from those in their home countries. Research suggests that U.S. classrooms often privilege student voice and negotiated authority structures, which may contrast with more hierarchical educational systems (Dunn, 2013; Lee, 2015). Consequently, behaviors that reflect frustration, disengagement, or prior educational experiences may be interpreted differently across cultural contexts, creating challenges for classroom management and relationship-building.

For internationally trained educators, adjustment involves more than learning new instructional expectations. It also requires developing culturally informed understandings of student communication, participation, and expressions of authority. Collectively, this literature suggests that internationally trained teachers must negotiate not only instructional and cultural adaptation, but also new forms of relational practice that may differ substantially from those emphasized in their home educational contexts.

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Research Gap

Existing scholarship has examined international teachers' professional transitions within U.S. public schools, highlighting challenges related to identity negotiation, linguistic discrimination, and cultural adjustment (Lee, 2015; Dunn, 2013). Similarly, research on overage students has documented the academic, social, and emotional consequences of grade retention and educational disruption. Studies of culturally responsive and relational pedagogy further emphasize the importance of contextual awareness when working with marginalized youth.

Despite these contributions, these bodies of scholarship remain largely disconnected. While researchers have examined international teachers and overage students as separate populations, little empirical research has explored how internationally trained educators experience teaching overage students in U.S. alternative education settings, where professional transition intersects with intensified instructional, relational, and cultural demands. As districts increasingly rely on international recruitment to staff high-need schools, understanding how these educators

interpret student behavior, adapt instructional practice, and negotiate professional, linguistic, and cultural identities becomes increasingly important. This study addresses that gap by centering the experiences and meaning-making of internationally trained teachers working with overage students in an alternative education context.

Research Question

How do internationally trained teachers negotiate professional, linguistic, and cultural identities while teaching overage students in U.S. alternative education settings?

Methods

This manuscript draws from a broader qualitative study examining teacher perspectives on working with students who were multiple years overage for grade level in an alternative education context. The present study emerged from a larger community-based research project examining teacher perspectives on educating overage students in a U.S. alternative education setting. The original purpose of the broader study was to explore educators' perceptions of the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of overage learners and to identify areas for professional development and instructional support.

At the time of data collection, internationally trained educators represented a significant proportion of the teaching staff, making their perspectives particularly relevant to understanding instructional experiences within the school context. As data collection progressed, it became evident that internationally trained teachers' responses reflected distinctive experiences of cultural adjustment, communication, classroom authority, and instructional adaptation that differed from those of their U.S.-trained colleagues. These patterns were not anticipated as part of the original research design but emerged inductively through the analysis of participant responses.

Given the richness and consistency of these perspectives and instructional adaptations, we conducted a secondary qualitative analysis to examine the experiences of internationally trained teachers working with overage students in an alternative education context. The current study therefore focuses on themes that emerged from the broader investigation of teacher perspectives.

Although international teacher status was not the original focal variable, analytic attention increasingly gravitated toward the ways in which transnational professional identity shaped classroom authority, relational dynamics, and instructional decision-making. Consistent with interpretive qualitative traditions that allow research questions to evolve in response to emergent patterns (Stake, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this manuscript presents a focused secondary analysis of internationally trained teachers' experiences within the broader dataset.

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

Participants included nine internationally trained teachers employed at a public alternative secondary school serving students who were multiple years overage for grade level. At the time of the study, the school employed approximately 25 teachers, 11 of whom were internationally recruited through district-level placement programs. Nine of the eleven internationally trained teachers elected to participate in the anonymous survey, representing approximately 82% of eligible international staff.

Participants represented diverse international backgrounds across multiple global regions and were employed through visa-sponsored recruitment pathways. All participants held full-time

instructional roles within the alternative education setting. To preserve anonymity, demographic characteristics such as country of origin, visa classification, and specific subject assignments are reported in aggregate form.

Design of the Study

This study was originally conceptualized as an in-depth qualitative interview project designed to capture the nuanced professional experiences of internationally trained teachers working in alternative education contexts. However, during initial recruitment conversations, participants expressed concerns about professional vulnerability and potential repercussions from public identification. Given the broader sociopolitical climate surrounding immigration policy and visa-based employment in the United States, participants preferred an anonymous format that would let them speak candidly without fear of institutional or immigration-related consequences.

In response to these concerns, the study design was intentionally adapted to an anonymous qualitative survey format. This modification was not merely procedural but ethical. Protecting participant confidentiality was paramount, particularly for educators whose employment status is often tied to visa sponsorship and district-level approval.

Written narrative responses are a valid qualitative data source that captures reflective practitioner perspectives while preserving participant anonymity (Saldaña, 2016). This approach aligns with qualitative traditions that prioritize participant safety and contextual responsiveness in research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Rather than limiting disclosure, anonymity amplified voices that might otherwise remain cautious or constrained within institutional environments.

Data collection & analysis

The survey consisted of eight open-ended questions designed to prompt reflection on instructional practice, professional identity, classroom authority, and relational dynamics. The survey was administered electronically through the Qualtrics platform and distributed via email to eligible participants. Participants were encouraged to provide narrative examples. Response length ranged from 280 to 996 words, with an average of 667 per participant, generating a dataset comparable in volume to interview transcripts.

This study employed a whole–part–whole (WPW) analytic approach to analyze open-ended survey responses from international teachers serving overage students in a U.S. alternative education setting. The WPW approach is grounded in qualitative traditions that emphasize iterative movement between holistic understanding and thematic specificity (Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1994).

In the initial whole phase, all qualitative responses were read collectively across survey items to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' shared experiences and instructional contexts. This holistic reading allowed the researcher to attend to contextual meaning and narrative coherence prior to formal coding, consistent with first-cycle holistic coding practices (Saldaña, 2016).

During the part phase, the researcher examined responses for meaning units that extended across individual survey questions rather than analyzing them item by item. Conceptually similar segments of data were grouped and compared using constant comparison, allowing themes to emerge inductively across prompts. This analytic process resulted in a set of interrelated themes reflecting cultural and pedagogical adjustment, disrupted assumptions about

age and readiness, relational approaches to teaching, emotional labor, preparation gaps, and perceived structural supports.

In the final whole phase, these themes were re-integrated to construct an interpretive narrative that captured the collective experience of international teachers while preserving the broader context in which their instructional practices occurred. This iterative analytic process aligns with interpretive qualitative inquiry that conceptualizes meaning as emergent through repeated engagement with both the parts and the whole of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The interpretive analytic process was further informed by Bakhtin's (1981) conceptualization of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, which served as a theoretical lens for understanding how internationally trained teachers negotiated professional identity, classroom authority, and linguistic positioning within U.S. schooling contexts.

Bakhtin's theory of discourse provides a framework for understanding how individuals encounter and interpret dominant institutional expectations through language and social interaction. Central to this perspective is the distinction between authoritative discourse, which reflects socially sanctioned norms and expectations, and internally persuasive discourse, which represents the ways individuals interpret, adapt, and integrate those expectations into their own professional identities (Bakhtin, 1981). Within educational contexts, these concepts help explain how teachers navigate institutional expectations surrounding authority, communication, and instructional practice. Building on this perspective, Lee (2015) applied Bakhtin's framework to examine the experiences of internationally educated teachers in U.S. schools, demonstrating how linguistic identity, accent, and communicative style can influence perceptions of professional legitimacy and classroom authority. Initial open coding generated 32 first-cycle codes, which were subsequently consolidated through pattern coding into four interrelated themes. These themes represent shared patterns across participants' experiences and form the basis of the findings presented below.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Florida. All procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants, including the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To protect participant confidentiality, responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was included in the analysis or reporting of findings.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was strengthened through reflexive memoing, repeated review of participant responses, maintenance of an analytic audit trail, and alignment between the research questions, coding process, and emergent themes. Because the data were collected anonymously, member checking was not an option; however, analytic decisions were documented throughout the coding process to support transparency and dependability. Credibility was further supported through prolonged engagement with the dataset and iterative movement between holistic interpretation and thematic analysis.

Results/Findings

This study examined how internationally trained teachers negotiate professional, linguistic, and cultural identities while teaching overage students in a U.S. alternative education setting.

Through a whole-part-whole analytic approach, participants' open-ended survey responses were examined holistically, then coded for recurring meaning patterns, and finally re-integrated into an interpretive account of their collective experience. Analysis revealed four interrelated themes: (1) Reframing Overage Identity and Disrupted Assumptions About Age, (2) Negotiating Authority and Linguistic Legitimacy, (3) Relational Pedagogy as Adaptive Practice, and (4) Emotional Labor and Structural Preparation Gaps (see Table 1).

Together, these themes illustrate a process of pedagogical and professional adaptation. Participants entered the alternative education context with structured expectations shaped by prior cultural and educational systems. However, sustained engagement with overage learners, many of whom carried layered academic gaps, emotional vulnerability, and histories of interruption, prompted teachers to reconsider assumptions about age, authority, and readiness. The findings suggest that international teachers' instructional shifts were not merely behavioral adjustments, but deeper negotiations of identity, legitimacy, and relational trust within a new schooling discourse.

Theme 1: Reframing Overage Identity and Disrupted Assumptions About Age

Internationally trained teachers entered the alternative education setting with culturally embedded assumptions about age, maturity, and academic positioning. In many participants' home countries, students who were older than their grade level were often perceived as more mature, responsible, or naturally positioned for leadership. One participant explained, "Growing up and teaching in my country, I was accustomed to overage students being viewed as more mature and naturally taking on leadership roles." Another noted that "overage students do not usually occur" in their home context and described teaching overage learners as "a bit of a cultural shock." Several teachers described initially expecting overage students to demonstrate greater independence and academic drive. However, these assumptions were quickly unsettled.

Rather than increased maturity, participants often observed low self-confidence, emotional vulnerability, and significant academic skill gaps. As one teacher reflected, "I anticipated that older students would naturally be more mature and independent, but many needed stronger academic support, emotional guidance, and consistent structure." Another participant observed that "many of them carry a deep sense of embarrassment or frustration about being behind." One teacher reflected that the "maturity of the overage students did not match the expected maturity a scholar at their age should display," noting that many required substantial emotional reassurance. Others described being surprised by how deeply embarrassed students felt about being behind, with several noting that students often masked academic struggles through humor, avoidance, or disengagement.

Participants also emphasized that overage status did not reflect ability, but rather accumulated structural and personal disruptions. Participants frequently cited interrupted schooling, family mobility, language barriers, and prior academic failure as underlying contributors. As one teacher explained, students were "not behind because of lack of ability, but because they had faced significant challenges." This realization prompted a shift from deficit-oriented expectations toward more empathetic and individualized approaches. One teacher summarized this shift by explaining that students were "not behind because of a lack of ability or motivation, but because they had faced significant challenges such as interrupted schooling, frequent moves, language barriers, or personal hardships." While daily classroom interactions disrupted teachers' assumptions about age and readiness, tensions around authority, respect, and communicative norms further complicated these realizations.

Theme 2: Negotiating Authority, Respect, and Linguistic Legitimacy

Internationally trained teachers described unexpected tensions around classroom authority, student respect, and communicative norms when they entered the U.S. alternative education context. Many participants came from educational systems in which teacher authority was formal, hierarchical, and rarely questioned. One participant shared, "Coming from Jamaica, I was accustomed to a very structured school environment where students are expected to show a high level of respect, follow directions immediately, and rarely question a teacher's expectations." Another explained, "The way they behaved and responded would not be tolerated at all back in my home culture." Students were expected to comply immediately, offer limited verbal challenge, and show visible deference to adult authority. These expectations shaped teachers' initial interpretations of student behavior.

However, participants reported that overage students in the U.S. context expressed respect and disagreement differently than anticipated. Several teachers described students as more outspoken, more willing to question instructions, or more openly expressive about frustration. What initially felt like disrespect was later reframed as culturally situated communication styles or adolescent identity expression. As one teacher explained, "At first, I interpreted this as disrespect," before recognizing that students were often "expressing themselves or advocating for their needs." One participant described students mimicking her speech and explained, "At first, I felt disrespected, but I later realized that the behavior often came from curiosity, nervousness, or a lack of understanding about cultural boundaries, not intentional harm." This reframing required teachers to shift from interpreting behavior through their home-country lens toward developing a more culturally responsive understanding of classroom interaction.

Beyond differences in behavioral norms, some participants described accent-based tension and communicative challenges. One teacher recounted students mimicking her speech, an experience that initially felt undermining. Over time, she reinterpreted this behavior not solely as mockery, but as a manifestation of curiosity, boundary testing, or unfamiliarity with linguistic diversity. These moments positioned accent and communicative style not merely as surface-level differences, but as markers of professional legitimacy within dominant schooling discourses. For internationally trained educators, linguistic identity became intertwined with authority, credibility, and relational trust-building in the classroom.

Across responses, teachers described an adaptive process: maintaining high expectations while softening rigid interpretations of authority. Rather than relinquishing classroom control, they learned to anchor authority in relational consistency, clarity of expectations, and mutual respect. This negotiation of authority reflects not simply behavioral adjustment, but discursive repositioning within a new educational culture; one in which legitimacy is co-constructed through language, interaction, and trust. As participants reconsidered authority and legitimacy, many described shifting toward relational strategies that re-centered trust and emotional safety as prerequisites for academic engagement.

Theme 3: Relational Pedagogy as Adaptive Practice

As internationally trained teachers recalibrated their assumptions about overage identity and renegotiated classroom authority, many described an intentional shift toward relationship-centered instructional practice. Across responses, participants emphasized that academic progress was contingent upon emotional safety and relational trust. One participant stated, "Many overage students need to feel seen and respected before they are willing to engage academically." Another noted that students "need consistent encouragement, structured support, and strong relationships before they feel ready to take academic risks." Rather than

positioning content mastery as the entry point to learning, teachers increasingly framed relationship-building as the prerequisite for engagement.

Participants repeatedly described “leading with relationship before academics,” highlighting strategies such as greeting students daily, engaging in one-on-one conversations, and hosting small-group check-ins. One participant shared, “I have breakfast with some of the kids which help to build rapport.” Another explained that “greeting them warmly every day, acknowledging their efforts, and giving them voice and choice in classroom activities” helped students feel valued and respected. These practices were not described as supplementary, but as foundational. Teachers noted that overage students often carried embarrassment, frustration, or fear of judgment tied to past academic struggles. In response, participants worked to create judgment-free classroom environments where mistakes were normalized and small successes were celebrated. As one teacher explained, students “need to feel seen and respected before they are willing to engage academically.”

Relational adaptation also functioned as a response to stigma. Several teachers described deliberately avoiding language that emphasized students’ overage status, instead focusing on affirming strengths and future goals. Others described giving students voice and choice within the classroom to counter feelings of powerlessness. These strategies suggest a pedagogical shift from authority-centered instruction toward practices aligned with culturally responsive and trauma-informed frameworks. Rather than abandoning high expectations, participants reframed rigor through relational accountability, maintaining structure while signaling care.

Relational pedagogy emerged not as a departure from participants’ prior training, but as a contextual adaptation. Teachers described learning that consistency, patience, and empathy were as critical as content expertise in supporting overage learners. As one participant explained, “When students realize that I am not judging them for being behind and that I am genuinely invested in their progress, they begin to open up, take risks academically, and engage more confidently in class.” This shift reflects an evolving professional identity in which instructional authority is sustained through trust-building rather than positional hierarchy. Within the alternative education context, relational practice became both a survival strategy and an instructional necessity. Although relational practices strengthened classroom connection, teachers also described the emotional and structural strain associated with sustaining these approaches within high-need settings.

Theme 4: Emotional Labor and Structural Preparation Gaps

While participants demonstrated adaptive resilience in their instructional practices, they also described significant emotional and professional strain associated with teaching overage students in a new national context. Across responses, teachers emphasized that supporting students who carried repeated academic failure, low confidence, and behavioral frustration required sustained emotional investment. Several participants described the emotional weight of watching capable students “shut down” due to embarrassment or discouragement, noting that these moments demanded patience, reassurance, and relational endurance. One participant reflected, “It can be difficult to watch students who are capable shut down because they feel embarrassed, compare themselves to younger peers, or believe they are ‘too far behind’ to succeed.” Another explained that supporting students through these moments requires “patience, empathy, and a lot of reassurance.” Teaching overage learners was described as both rewarding and emotionally demanding.

In addition to emotional strain, participants reported structural preparation gaps upon entering the U.S. alternative education environment. Although many felt academically prepared in terms

of content knowledge, they felt underprepared for the intensity of social-emotional needs, behavior-management expectations, and the breadth of academic remediation required. One teacher captured this sentiment by stating, "I was ready academically or content wise, but almost every other area I was unprepared." Another similarly reported, "When I first arrived, I did not feel fully prepared to teach overage students in a U.S. school environment." One teacher noted being ready "content wise, but almost every other area... unprepared." Others cited needing more training in trauma-informed practices, differentiation for wide skill gaps, and culturally responsive classroom management strategies. Several emphasized that navigating unfamiliar digital platforms, district pacing expectations, and intervention protocols compounded this adjustment.

Participants consistently identified mentorship and collaborative structures as critical supports. They described professional learning communities (PLCs), instructional coaching, walkthrough feedback, and restorative practice training as helpful in strengthening confidence and effectiveness. However, teachers also advocated for more targeted induction models for internationally trained educators, particularly those entering high-need alternative settings. Recommendations included smaller class sizes, team teaching, clearer intervention tools, and extended adjustment periods for international hires adapting to U.S. schooling norms. Participants also emphasized the challenges associated with international relocation. One teacher explained that "international teachers for the most time need an adjustment period to settle in, adapt and make changes," while noting that "some have left their entire family behind and it weighs on them daily."

Reconstructing Transnational Teacher Identity

Viewed collectively, the four themes reveal a process of identity reconstruction rather than isolated instructional adaptation. Internationally trained teachers entered the alternative education context with pedagogical frameworks rooted in structured authority, high expectations, and culturally embedded assumptions about age and maturity. However, sustained engagement with overage learners whose academic trajectories were shaped by interruption, stigma, and emotional vulnerability destabilized these initial frameworks. As participants described, students were often "not behind because of a lack of ability" but because of accumulated educational and life disruptions, requiring teachers to reconsider previously held assumptions about readiness, motivation, and success.

In navigating disrupted assumptions about maturity, negotiating classroom authority within unfamiliar communicative norms, and shifting toward relationally anchored pedagogy, participants were not merely adjusting techniques. They were reconstituting professional identity within a new schooling discourse. Authority became relational rather than hierarchical. Rigor became scaffolded rather than assumed. Legitimacy became negotiated rather than granted. For many participants, this process meant shifting from interpreting student behaviors as disrespect or disengagement to seeing them as expressions of frustration, vulnerability, or prior educational experiences.

At the same time, this adaptive process unfolded alongside emotional labor and structural under-preparation. Teachers' resilience emerged not as evidence of adequate systems, but as a response to gaps in induction and targeted preparation for both overage learners and internationally trained educators. Participants frequently described feeling academically prepared yet underprepared for the social-emotional, behavioral, and cultural dimensions of teaching within a U.S. alternative education setting. While some of these challenges may be characteristic of alternative education environments more broadly, the findings suggest that

internationally trained educators encounter additional layers of adaptation related to language, cultural expectations, and professional identity.

The findings position international teachers not simply as staffing solutions within high-need contexts, but as professionals navigating layered institutional, cultural, and discursive transitions. Together, these findings suggest that supporting internationally trained teachers in alternative education settings requires attention not only to instructional strategies, but also to identity negotiation, linguistic legitimacy, culturally responsive induction, and structured mentorship models that recognize the complexity of transnational professional adaptation.

Table 1

Themes of Internationally Trained Teachers' Experiences in an Alternative Education Context

Theme	Description	Illustrative focus
Reframing Overage Identity and Disrupted Assumptions About Age	Teachers navigated differences between prior educational norms and U.S. classroom expectations, particularly around student-centered instruction and behavior management	Shifts in expectations about authority, participation, and instructional delivery
Negotiating Authority, Respect, and Linguistic Legitimacy	Teachers experienced tensions in establishing credibility and authority while adapting to new cultural and institutional norms	Balancing prior professional identity with new expectations in U.S. schools
Relational Pedagogy as Adaptive Practice	Teachers modified instructional practices to meet the academic and behavioral needs of overage learners	Differentiation, flexibility, and responsiveness to student needs
Emotional Labor and Structural Preparation Gaps	Teachers engaged in significant emotional and relational efforts to support students navigating trauma, disengagement, and academic gaps	Building trust, managing frustration, and sustaining student engagement

Themes were generated through qualitative analysis of survey data

Discussion

This study examined how internationally trained teachers perceive and make meaning of their experiences teaching overage students in a U.S. alternative education setting. Learners in the school have academic trajectories shaped by retention, interrupted schooling, mobility, or other systemic disruptions. Of the 25 teachers employed at the school, 11 were internationally trained, and 9 participated in the anonymous qualitative survey that forms the basis of this analysis.

Summary of Key Findings

Analysis revealed four interrelated themes that illuminate how internationally trained teachers navigated the layered demands of teaching overage students in a U.S. alternative education context. First, participants described a disruption of prior assumptions about age, maturity, and academic readiness. Entering with structured, authority-centered pedagogical expectations, teachers initially anticipated that older students would demonstrate heightened independence and responsibility. Instead, they encountered learners whose overage status reflected complex academic gaps and emotional vulnerability, prompting a reframing of deficit-oriented assumptions.

Second, teachers reported negotiating classroom authority and linguistic legitimacy within unfamiliar communicative norms. Differences in expectations of respect, student expressiveness, and accent-related interactions led participants to reconsider how authority is constructed and sustained in U.S. schooling contexts. Authority became less hierarchical and more relationally negotiated.

Third, relational pedagogy emerged as a central adaptive strategy. Participants consistently emphasized that trust-building, emotional validation, and scaffolded support were prerequisites for academic engagement. Relationship-centered practice functioned not as an add-on to instruction, but as its foundation.

Finally, teachers described significant emotional labor and structural preparation gaps. While demonstrating resilience and adaptability, participants reported feeling underprepared for the social-emotional intensity, behavior management complexity, and remediation demands of overage learners. Their adaptive success unfolded alongside calls for more intentional induction and mentorship models for internationally trained educators in high-need settings.

Reframing Assumptions About Overage Learners

Consistent with prior research on overage learners, participants described students as carrying significant academic, social, and emotional burdens associated with educational disruption and retention (Hong & Yu, 2007; Thomas, 2024). However, unlike much of the existing literature, which centers student experiences, the present study highlights how internationally trained educators entered the classroom with culturally embedded assumptions about age and maturity that were subsequently challenged through daily interactions with overage learners. Participants' evolving understandings suggest that effective instruction required a shift from age-based expectations toward more individualized and contextually responsive interpretations of student readiness and potential.

Negotiating Authority, Legitimacy, and Professional Identity

Findings related to authority, respect, and linguistic legitimacy closely align with Lee's (2015) work on internationally educated teachers navigating U.S. schools. Similar to Lee's participants, teachers in this study described tensions surrounding classroom authority, communication norms, and accent-based perceptions of credibility. Viewed through Bakhtin's concept of authoritative discourse, these experiences suggest that professional legitimacy is not automatically conferred but negotiated within dominant institutional norms. Participants' experiences demonstrate how authority became increasingly relational and interactional rather than exclusively positional.

Relational Pedagogy as Professional Adaptation

The prominence of relationship-building in participants' responses reinforces scholarship emphasizing culturally responsive and relational approaches to teaching marginalized youth (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers consistently described trust, consistency, and emotional safety as prerequisites for academic engagement. These findings suggest that relational pedagogy functioned not merely as an instructional strategy but as a professional adaptation that enabled teachers to bridge cultural differences while supporting students who had experienced educational disruption and stigma.

Emotional Labor, Preparation, and Institutional Support

Participants' descriptions of emotional labor and professional under-preparation suggest that successful adaptation in alternative education settings requires more than content expertise. While many participants reported feeling academically prepared to teach, they frequently

described feeling underprepared for the relational, behavioral, and cultural complexities of working with overage students in a U.S. alternative education context. These findings align with research indicating that internationally trained educators often face challenges related to cultural adjustment, professional identity, and unfamiliar school norms as they transition into U.S. schools (Dunn, 2013; Lee, 2015).

The findings further suggest that resilience should not be interpreted as evidence that adequate support systems are in place. Rather, participants often adapted through personal effort and experience despite limited preparation for the social-emotional demands of their roles. This highlights the importance of induction models that extend beyond procedural onboarding to include mentoring, opportunities for reflection, and preparation focused on student engagement, relationship-building, and culturally responsive practice. Such supports may be particularly important in alternative education settings where educators frequently work with students who have experienced educational disruption, stigma, and disengagement. Taken together, these findings reveal a process of professional reconstitution in which internationally trained teachers recalibrated instructional identity, authority, and relational practice while navigating structural constraints within alternative education environments.

Some challenges participants described, including addressing academic gaps, supporting students' social-emotional needs, and building relationships with learners who have experienced educational disruption, are common in alternative education settings and may not be unique to internationally trained teachers. However, the findings suggest that international teachers experienced these challenges through an additional layer of cultural and professional adaptation. Participants frequently described recalibrating assumptions about authority, communication, student behavior, and classroom expectations while simultaneously learning to support overage learners. Thus, the findings' significance lies not solely in the challenges themselves, but in how participants interpreted, navigated, and negotiated them within a transnational teaching experience.

Interpretation and Connection to the Conceptual Framework

The findings of this study can be understood through the lens of culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy and Bakhtin's concept of authoritative discourse. Collectively, the themes suggest that internationally trained teachers were not merely adjusting instructional techniques; they were negotiating identity within a dominant schooling discourse that defines authority, legitimacy, and professionalism in culturally specific ways.

Bakhtin's notion of authoritative discourse helps illuminate how participants encountered established norms regarding classroom authority, communicative style, and teacher-student interaction. Teachers entered with pedagogical frameworks shaped by prior national and cultural contexts that carried their own authoritative assumptions about age, maturity, and respect. Within the U.S. alternative education setting, these assumptions were destabilized. Authority was not automatically conferred through positional hierarchy but was instead co-constructed through relational trust, communicative fluency, and alignment with local behavioral norms. Accent and linguistic style emerged as salient markers of professional legitimacy, emphasizing how language operates not simply as a communicative tool but as a site of power and identity negotiation.

Simultaneously, participants' adaptive shifts toward relational pedagogy align with principles of culturally responsive and sustaining practice. Teachers described centering emotional safety, affirming student dignity, and scaffolding instruction in response to layered academic and social-emotional needs. These practices reflect movement toward sustaining student identity

rather than reinforcing deficit narratives tied to overage status. Importantly, this adaptation did not abandon high expectations, but recalibrated rigor through relational accountability and differentiated support.

The intersection of transnational teacher identity and alternative education context further complicates this interpretive frame. Internationally trained educators were navigating two overlapping transitions: integration into U.S. schooling norms and engagement with a student population marked by interrupted educational trajectories. This dual negotiation magnified both the emotional labor and the structural preparation gaps described in the findings. Thus, the study suggests that teacher identity development in high-need settings is not static but discursively shaped through ongoing encounters with institutional norms, linguistic positioning, and student complexity.

They highlight the need to conceptualize induction and mentorship not solely as skill development, but as identity-supporting structures that recognize the discursive, cultural, and emotional dimensions of transnational teaching practice.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that districts relying on internationally trained educators to staff high-need alternative education settings should pair recruitment with intentional induction and support structures. Participants' experiences indicate that successful adaptation requires more than content expertise; it also involves navigating unfamiliar behavioral norms, communication expectations, and the complex academic and social-emotional needs of overage learners. Induction programs should therefore provide contextualized preparation that addresses both cultural transition and the realities of alternative education settings.

The findings further highlight the importance of mentoring and instructional support. Participants frequently described negotiating issues of authority, legitimacy, and relationship-building while adapting to a new educational system. As a result, coaching and professional learning opportunities should create space for reflection, collaborative problem-solving, and culturally responsive support. Mentorship structures that recognize international teachers' existing expertise while supporting their adaptation to local school contexts may strengthen both professional confidence and instructional effectiveness.

Finally, international teacher recruitment and preparation programs should move beyond procedural onboarding and include preparation on overage learners, relational pedagogy, linguistic identity, and the emotional demands of teaching in high-need settings. Sustainable partnerships among recruitment programs, districts, and schools may help ensure that internationally trained educators receive the support they need to thrive in alternative education environments, rather than serving solely as short-term staffing solutions.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, using an anonymous qualitative survey limited opportunities for follow-up probing and clarification possible in face-to-face or semi-structured interviews. Although anonymity enabled fuller disclosure given participants' professional and immigration-related vulnerabilities, it constrained the depth of dialogic engagement typically associated with qualitative interviewing.

The data relied on self-reported written responses. Participants' comfort with written expression in English may have influenced the length, tone, or detail of their responses. While the open-ended format generated substantive narrative data, variability in response depth may reflect

writing comfort rather than experiential difference. The study was conducted within a single alternative education setting serving overage students. Because participants were recruited from a single site, findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than representative of all internationally trained teachers. The specificity of this context limits transferability. The structural features, leadership practices, and student demographics of this school may not reflect all alternative or high-need settings.

The commitment to anonymity constrained the reporting of detailed demographic information, including specific countries of origin, visa categories, or years of teaching experience. While this decision was ethically necessary, it limits the ability to examine potential variation across national or professional backgrounds. These limitations inform future research directions and underscore the need to continue examining the intersection of international teacher identity and alternative education contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research utilizing confidential semi-structured interviews may provide deeper insight into identity negotiation, linguistic positioning, and authority dynamics. Comparative studies examining internationally trained and domestically trained teachers within the same alternative education setting would further illuminate whether and how adaptive processes differ across professional backgrounds. Such research could clarify which challenges are context-specific and which are uniquely transnational.

Longitudinal designs tracking international teachers over one to two academic years would show how identity negotiation and relational pedagogy evolve over time. Observational studies, artifact analysis (e.g., lesson plans, coaching feedback, PLC documentation), and classroom-based data collection could also triangulate self-reported narratives with enacted practice.

Finally, future research should examine the impact of structured induction models tailored to internationally trained educators. Studies assessing how mentorship design, reduced course loads, trauma-informed training, or culturally responsive coaching influence teacher retention, instructional efficacy, and student outcomes would offer critical guidance for districts relying on international recruitment pathways.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of internationally trained teachers working with overage students in a U.S. alternative education setting. Findings revealed a process of professional adaptation characterized by four interconnected themes: (a) reframing assumptions about overage learners, (b) negotiating authority, legitimacy, and professional identity, (c) adopting relational pedagogical practices, and (d) navigating emotional labor and preparation gaps. Collectively, these findings suggest that teaching overage students required participants to move beyond familiar instructional frameworks and engage in ongoing cultural, linguistic, and professional adaptation.

The findings contribute to the literature by extending research on internationally trained educators beyond traditional discussions of cultural adjustment and classroom management. While prior studies have documented challenges related to authority, communication, and professional integration (Lee, 2015; Dunn, 2013), this study highlights how these experiences are shaped within alternative education contexts serving overage learners. The findings further reinforce the importance of relational, culturally responsive approaches to teaching students who have experienced educational disruption, stigma, and academic disengagement.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Data were collected through anonymous qualitative surveys from a small group of participants within a single alternative education setting. While anonymity likely encouraged candid responses, the survey format limited opportunities for follow-up questioning, clarification, and member checking. As a result, the findings should be viewed as context-specific and are intended to support transferability rather than statistical generalization to other settings or populations.

Future research should examine the experiences of internationally trained educators across multiple alternative education contexts and geographic regions. Additional studies utilizing interviews, observations, and longitudinal designs may provide deeper insight into how professional identities evolve over time and how schools can better support internationally trained teachers serving overage learners. Research comparing the experiences of internationally trained and U.S.-trained educators in similar settings may also help distinguish challenges associated with alternative education contexts from those specific to international teacher status.

As districts increasingly rely on international teacher recruitment to address staffing shortages in high-need schools, understanding these educators' experiences becomes increasingly important. Supporting internationally trained teachers requires more than procedural onboarding; it demands intentional attention to cultural adaptation, linguistic legitimacy, relational practice, and sustained professional support. Such efforts may ultimately strengthen both teacher retention and educational opportunities for overage students in alternative education settings.

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Biodata

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