

The International Teacher: Challenges And Opportunities in The US School System

SHELTON JERI, ED.D.
Unicaf University

Abstract- J1 teachers in the USA face distinct challenges including cultural adaptation, integration into local educational systems, and systemic barriers related to visa status. This article explores these challenges and proposes targeted solutions and recommendations to enhance the experiences and effectiveness of J1 teachers. Drawing on recent research and best practices, the article offers insights into how educational institutions, policymakers, and J1 teachers themselves can address these issues effectively. International teachers in the USA face a unique set of challenges and opportunities as they navigate the American educational landscape. One major challenge is adapting to diverse classroom environments while integrating into the local culture. International teachers must contend with differing educational standards, curricula, and teaching methods compared to their home countries. Language barriers, both in terms of proficiency and cultural nuances, can further complicate communication with students, parents, and colleagues. Additionally, international teachers often encounter systemic issues such as limited professional support networks, and difficulties in obtaining long-term teaching credentials. Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for international teachers. Their diverse backgrounds offer valuable perspectives that enrich the learning environment and promote global awareness among students. They bring innovative teaching strategies and cross-cultural experiences that can enhance educational outcomes. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on global competencies and multicultural education in U.S. schools provides a supportive context for international educators to contribute meaningfully. Institutions that foster inclusive practices and provide targeted professional development can help international teachers overcome initial hurdles and thrive. By leveraging their unique experiences and perspectives, international teachers can not only

address the immediate needs of their classrooms but also drive broader educational reforms and cultural understanding. Overall, the experiences of international teachers in the USA highlight both the complexities and the profound benefits of a globalized educational framework.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is prepared for use by teachers who wish to teach in the US from abroad or by administrators and sponsors who will work with J1 or exchange teachers. Teaching in the US can be so rewarding in terms of professional growth and development but may also be frustrating. It may even lead to mental health issues if one is faced with difficult students and uncooperative school administration. Teachers who come to the US as exchange non-immigrant visitors work under the J1 visa which is issued by the US consulates around the world. The J-1 Teacher Program is a nonimmigrant cultural exchange, which gives foreign teachers the opportunity to teach in accredited primary and secondary schools in the United States. Teachers may work in a U.S. school for up to 3 years, with the possibility of a 1- or 2-year extension (Teachers Council Inc, 2022). Alliance for International Exchange (n.d) states that the Teacher Exchange Program, like all exchanges, is intended to provide participants with broad exposure to U.S. culture and society, and to foster greater appreciation among Americans of the participants' home countries. Specifically, teacher exchanges prepare educators to shape young people into positive agents of change. Participating teachers bring interactive teaching practices to their students and colleagues, building critical thinking skills, inquiry, and analytical approach that foster good citizenship. Teacher exchange programs bring with them a rare lifetime opportunity to look beyond the stereotyped images that cultures inevitably have on one another (Kaser, 2023).

Background of study

Traveling around the world can be so fulfilling and more so when one travels for both work with professional growth opportunities and leisure. It is for this reason that teachers from across the globe would want to work in other countries, especially in the USA. Teachers come to the US with great expectations and stereotyped imaginations of how life in schools around the US would be. In most cases teachers encounter challenges starting with finding and securing appropriate accommodation, cultural shock and an unwelcoming work environment. For lack of information some teachers sign up for the exchange programs mainly because of the US they watch in the movies. Creating a compilation of information from those who were and are still in the program as well as from those who run the program at various levels would help in disseminating information to those who intend to avail themselves for the teacher exchange program. This will allow prospective foreign teachers to make decisions from an informed position.

Statement of the problem

The integration of foreign or J1 visa teachers into the US public school system presents a multifaceted set of challenges and opportunities that demand scholarly attention. While the inclusion of international educators contributes to the cultural diversity of American classrooms, it is imperative to examine the hurdles they encounter.

One primary challenge is the potential cultural dissonance between foreign teachers and their American colleagues. This dissonance may impact effective collaboration and hinder the exchange of pedagogical practices (Smith, 2019). Additionally, foreign teachers may encounter linguistic challenges, affecting their ability to effectively communicate with students, parents, and fellow educators (Brown & Smith, 2017). J1 visa teachers are also faced with a similar dilemma when dealing with students.

Furthermore, J1 visa teachers often face unfamiliarity with the US education system's intricacies, including state-specific regulations and standardized testing procedures. This lack of familiarity may hinder their ability to navigate the educational landscape effectively (Jones et al., 2020).

Despite these challenges, the presence of foreign teachers offers unique opportunities. They bring diverse perspectives that can enrich the educational experience for both students and colleagues. Research suggests that exposure to diverse teaching styles positively impacts student learning outcomes (Lee & Bowen, 2018).

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by foreign or J1 visa teachers in the US public school system, examining the cultural, linguistic, and systemic obstacles they encounter. Additionally, it seeks to identify opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for these educators, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of global perspectives within American classrooms.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research is to comprehensively investigate the challenges and opportunities encountered by exchange teachers in the United States, with a focus on understanding the complex dynamics of cultural, linguistic, pedagogic and systemic factors that influence their experiences. The study aims to contribute valuable insights into the integration of international educators into the American educational landscape.

Exchange teachers, often entering the U.S. under J1 visa programs, bring diverse perspectives that have the potential to enrich the educational environment. However, the challenges they face can impede their effectiveness and satisfaction in their teaching roles. Understanding these challenges is crucial for creating supportive frameworks that facilitate successful cross-cultural exchanges within American schools. Such frameworks could be utilized by prospective J1 candidates so as to avoid the pitfalls of those who came before them.

One key objective of this study is to explore the cultural dissonance experienced by exchange teachers. Research suggests that differences in teaching practices, communication styles, and expectations between international educators and their American counterparts plus students can pose significant challenges (Smith, 2019). By examining these cultural dynamics, the study seeks to provide actionable

recommendations for fostering positive intercultural relationships within educational institutions.

Linguistic challenges represent another dimension to be investigated. The accent and American English proficiency of exchange teachers may impact their ability to effectively communicate with students, parents, and colleagues (Brown & Smith, 2017). This study aims to assess the extent of linguistic barriers and propose strategies for enhancing language support systems for these educators.

Systemic challenges, including navigating unfamiliar educational regulations and standardized testing procedures, constitute a crucial aspect of this research. Exchange teachers may encounter bureaucratic hurdles that affect their ability to adapt to the U.S. education system (Jones et al., 2020).

Nature and significance of study

This study delves into the intricate dynamics surrounding foreign teachers in U.S. public schools, examining the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within this context. By employing a nuanced and comprehensive approach, this study aims to unravel the complexities that foreign educators encounter, from cultural assimilation hurdles to navigating the intricacies of the U.S. education system. Through an advanced exploration of these challenges, this research seeks to not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge but also offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions. By understanding the unique experiences of foreign teachers, this study aims to inform strategies that enhance their integration, foster cross-cultural collaboration, and ultimately contribute to the enrichment of the U.S. public education system. Simultaneously, the study will explore the untapped potential and opportunities within this realm, shedding light on how these educators can contribute meaningfully to the U.S. public education system. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policies, shape policies and practices, creating and fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for educators from diverse cultural backgrounds and ultimately enhance their effectiveness.

Research questions

1. What unique challenges do foreign teachers face in effectively working with students, parents, and fellow educators in the U.S. public school context, and how do these challenges influence their teaching experiences?
2. To what extent do systemic factors, such as unfamiliarity with U.S. educational regulations and standardized testing procedures, pose challenges for foreign teachers in adapting to and navigating the U.S. public school system?

Aims

This paper aims to:

- establish how teachers from outside the US adapt to the new work environments.
 - assess the impact of cultural shock for the international teachers
 - analyze how international teachers view and address student behaviors in their classrooms

High needs schools: Title I

Most J1 teachers are required for high needs schools where there is high staff turnover. J-1 teachers help address the chronic teacher shortages in Title I schools, particularly in high-demand subjects like math, science, and special education (Johnson & Martinez, 2021). Their presence can reduce class sizes and provide more personalized instruction. These teachers may struggle with adapting to the U.S. curriculum and classroom management styles, which can impact their effectiveness. The temporary nature of their stay also limits their ability to form long-term relationships with students and the community (Brown, 2021).

Title I schools in the U.S., which receive federal funding to support students from low-income families, face several challenges. These challenges impact student outcomes and the overall school environment. Despite additional federal funding, Title I schools often struggle with limited resources, including outdated textbooks, insufficient technology, and inadequate facilities (Smith, 2022). These limitations can hinder the quality of education provided.

To address this, school administrations have sought additional grants, partnered with nonprofits, and advocated for state-level funding increases to

supplement federal resources (Johnson & Martinez, 2021). However, disparities in funding still persist, often leaving these schools under-resourced compared to their more affluent counterparts.

High turnover rates and difficulty attracting highly qualified teachers are common in Title I schools, exacerbated by challenging working conditions and lower salaries compared to wealthier districts (Garcia, 2023). Districts have responded by offering incentives such as higher pay, signing bonuses, and professional development opportunities. Additionally, mentorship programs have been implemented to support new teachers and reduce turnover (Brown, 2021). Despite these incentives some teachers are reluctant to take up employment in these schools as the challenges tend to outweigh the incentives.

Students in Title I schools often exhibit significant achievement gaps due to factors like poverty, limited access to early childhood education, high staff turnover, and fewer extracurricular opportunities (Davis & Moore, 2023). Williams & Lee (2022) contend that schools have implemented targeted interventions, such as after-school tutoring, summer learning programs, and individualized education plans (IEPs) to help close these gaps. Federal and state initiatives have also focused on improving literacy and math skills among these students. This was even more prevalent shortly after the Covid-19 lockdown.

Engaging parents in their children's education can be difficult due to language barriers, time constraints, and socioeconomic factors (Lopez, 2022). Schools have introduced flexible meeting times, translation services, and family resource centers to increase parental involvement. Some schools also engage in home visits and establish partnerships with local organizations to strengthen family engagement (Hernandez, 2023). Nguyen (2022) pointed out that students in Title I schools often experience higher levels of stress, trauma, and other social-emotional issues due to economic instability and other external factors. This could be due to their home environment as most students come from areas with high crime rates. Schools have responded by integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) programs into their curricula and providing access to mental health services,

including counseling and support groups (Taylor & White, 2023).

II. RESULTS

From the results collected from 280 foreign teachers only 3.6% of the respondents stated that they did not face any challenges in their transition into the US classrooms with the majority of the foreign teachers stating that they had faced a plethora of challenges. These challenges were grouped into four main themes which had the following statistics,

Category of challenges	% affected
Administrative	46.4
Social	49.2
Accommodation	35.7
Other	42.9

It should be noted that the percentages presented above were not cumulative but independent of each other. The highest percentage was on the social side of life due to cultural differences. Foreign teachers who migrate to the US come from countries that have different cultures. The majority of the teachers I interviewed revealed that the lifestyles in the US were not very social as people are always busy with their schedules. Little time is available for social gatherings. Some teachers mentioned that unlike in their native countries or in other foreign countries where they had worked before, where they knew or spoke to their neighbors, in the US it was difficult to start a conversation with neighbors. Some felt that it made them feel isolated as they always keep to themselves. There were cases of some teachers feeling that their school administration and sponsoring agencies were not offering enough support to be able to execute their duties effectively.

249 out of the 280 respondents had faced challenges with students' behaviors since they started teaching in the US. This was a very high percentage compared to what most teachers faced in their previous schools from outside the States.

Some common challenges that teachers have experienced in their US classrooms included but were not limited to;

- Disengaged and unmotivated students.
- Disrespectful students who will intentionally disregard instructions and willfully undermine teachers' authority in the classroom.
- Classroom disruption.
- Unreceptive to correction and aggression.
- Use of foul language,
- Fighting among students.
- Lack of student motivation
- Lack of accountability and no respect for school property.

Almost 80% of the teachers involved in the survey reported that they seriously considered quitting packing their bags to return to their countries within their first two months of teaching.

Preparedness to teach in the US classrooms

Most J1 teachers are highly qualified and successful teachers in their native countries and in the foreign countries they have taught before coming to the USA. However, most of the teachers (68%) revealed that they were not really prepared for the unique challenges in the US schools. The encouraging trend among the respondents was that they felt that their sponsors had prepared them enough to avoid a complete cultural shock upon welcoming their new students. The pie chart below shows the percentages of teachers who had some orientation before schools opened in blue and those that did not have that opportunity.

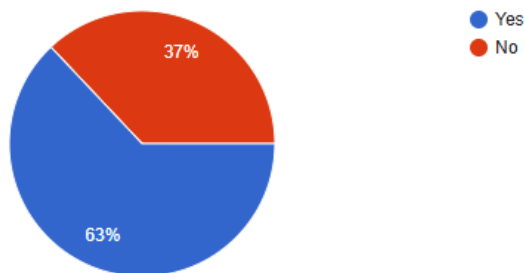


Figure 1: Percentage of J1 teachers who had orientation before schools opened

Those who missed orientation had more difficulties in dealing with student discipline compared to those who had the opportunity.

Technology use and its effectiveness

The current student generation lacked enough human contact as toddlers due to the effect of technology and smartphones. They are a generation that was introduced to smartphones as a replacement of a human factor. Haidt (2024) terms them the anxious generation, one that lacks empathy for others as they have grown in different ways than their teachers. This was also shown by 96.4% of the respondents who reported that the use of technology in their classrooms was effective in facilitating effective teaching. Students were said to have been better engaged when they received instruction and interactive activities on their computers.

Some teachers bemoaned the lack of adequate teacher training on the use of technology in schools with 18.5% reporting that they had not received any form of technology use training in their school districts.

Envisioned drivers of students' behavioral challenges

The responses from the teachers' perceptions showed some commonalities across the States. Most teachers perceived that the main reasons were to do with students' family structures as the majority of deviant students came from homes where there were broken families and from areas where there were high crime rates. Teachers felt the cultural shock as students in their school had no respect for adults. As some teachers had this to say *'They lack basic skills as well as coming from broken families. They also think that everything revolves around the USA, they don't have or have limited knowledge about other countries.'*

Cultural diversity is also a driving factor as teachers' expectations are not aligned with the prevailing students' and societal cultural values and expectations. Most students do not feel the need to write anything unless there is a grade attached to it. The grading system of the US ensures that no student is left behind hence most school districts do not allow students to get grades below 50%, this brings in challenges for foreign teachers who come from countries where students could fail with grade as low as 0%.

However, there was also the challenge of different accents and communication barriers which could lead to some challenges in the delivery of lessons. A greater percentage of teachers pointed out that linguistic and

accent barriers can significantly impact communication in a classroom setup, influencing both teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences. The extent of these barriers varies depending on several factors, including the severity of the accent, the level of linguistic proficiency, and the classroom context.

Teacher accent can impact on efficient student-teacher interactions often leading to ripple effects that include classroom disruptions. A strong accent or limited language proficiency can make it difficult for students to understand instructions, explanations, and feedback. This can hinder students' ability to follow lessons and complete assignments effectively (Kumar & Singh, 2022). Some students are likely to resort to deviant behaviors as they are already frustrated with their performance. If students struggle to understand their teacher, they may become disengaged or frustrated, which can negatively affect their motivation and participation. A teacher's accent or language proficiency may affect their perceived authority in the classroom. Students might not take instructions seriously or may misinterpret rules and expectations, leading to classroom management issues (Chen & Turner, 2023).

Teacher-teacher communications and faculty relationships are also likely to be affected by different accents. Some teachers felt that they had challenges with adjusting to different accents. This was also supported by some scholars who also stated that accents and language barriers can complicate communication with colleagues, impacting collaboration and the sharing of best practices. This can lead to misunderstandings and reduced effectiveness in team teaching scenarios (Smith & Nguyen, 2024). Garcia & Patel (2024) mentioned that difficulty in communication can limit opportunities for professional development, as teachers may find it challenging to fully participate in workshops or collaborative planning sessions.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the challenges faced by J1 teachers requires a multifaceted approach involving enhanced support systems, professional development, and policy advocacy. By implementing these

recommendations, educational institutions can better support J1 teachers, ultimately benefiting the educational environment as a whole.

Some of the following could be considered as way of improving on what is currently obtaining Enhanced Orientation Programs may help in ensuring improved J1 teacher effectiveness. Develop comprehensive pre-arrival and ongoing orientation programs focusing on cultural adaptation and educational practices (Lee & Thomas, 2023).

Professional Development may be required in most cases. Implement targeted professional development and mentorship programs tailored to the needs of J1 teachers (Smith & Jones, 2022). These could include some form of accent reduction training. Providing teachers with access to accent reduction or communication clarity training can help mitigate some of the difficulties (Smith & Nguyen, 2024). This would go a long way in improving student learning and comprehension. Students may struggle to grasp complex concepts if explanations are unclear due to linguistic or accent barriers. This can impact their overall academic performance and learning outcomes (Jones & Allen, 2023).

Teachers can use visual aids, slow down their speech, and check for understanding to improve clarity thus improving students' perceptions towards learning. Encouraging feedback from students may also result in improved classroom relations. Students require positive feedback and when they feel that their teacher has their interest at heart, they are more open to accepting their teacher and even adjust to the different accent. This could explain why most teachers found it easier in their second year than in their first year.

Policy Advocacy may help in ensuring a more palatable and inclusive environment. Incorporating cultural sensitivity training for both teachers and students can foster a more inclusive environment and reduce misunderstandings. There is need to advocate for policy reforms to simplify visa procedures and provide greater support for J1 teachers, this could also include easier transition to immigrant visas (Garcia & Patel, 2024).

CONCLUSION

International teachers in the USA face a unique set of challenges and opportunities as they navigate the American educational landscape. One major challenge is adapting to diverse classroom environments while integrating into the local culture. International teachers must contend with differing educational standards, curricula, and teaching methods compared to their home countries. Language barriers, both in terms of proficiency and cultural nuances, can further complicate communication with students, parents, and colleagues. Additionally, international teachers often encounter systemic issues such as limited professional support networks, and difficulties in obtaining long-term teaching credentials.

Foreign teachers in the United States encounter various challenges, ranging from cultural adaptation to professional accreditation hurdles. These challenges can impact their effectiveness in the classroom and overall job satisfaction.

Social life is different and teachers who plan to migrate to the US need to be prepared for this. Accommodation challenges are more prevalent for those teachers coming from countries where schools offer accommodation. Without a social security number most property managers will not offer you any assistance. As such it is advisable for those intending to migrate with their families to settle first as an individual and then prepare an appropriate place for family accommodation. Neighborhoods with elevated crime rates usually offer relatively lower rentals and as such be very wary of those offering low rates for rentals. The area you settle in will also affect the schools your children will attend. Most teachers will be deployed to regions that have high demand for teachers and such regions are usually shunned by local teachers due to lack of other opportunities. It is necessary for school districts to ensure that the new teachers have technology use support to bridge the gap between them and their students,

Seek first to understand then to be understood, administrators are also human and at times due to cultural differences one may come to a conclusion that some are not supportive. Get to understand and

research about the culture of the specific schools and school districts you will be deployed to.

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for international teachers. Their diverse backgrounds offer valuable perspectives that enrich the learning environment and promote global awareness among students. They bring innovative teaching strategies and cross-cultural experiences that can enhance educational outcomes. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on global competencies and multicultural education in U.S. schools provides a supportive context for international educators to contribute meaningfully. Institutions that foster inclusive practices and provide targeted professional development can help international teachers overcome initial hurdles and thrive. By leveraging their unique experiences and perspectives, international teachers can not only address the immediate needs of their classrooms but also drive broader educational reforms and cultural understanding. Overall, the experiences of international teachers in the USA highlight both the complexities and the profound benefits of a globalized educational framework.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, C., & Smith, A. (2017). *Language challenges faced by international teachers working in the United States*. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 38(5), 438-451.
- [2] Chen, L., & Turner, R. (2023). Navigating cultural and linguistic challenges: The experiences of J1 teachers in the U.S. *Journal of International Education Research*, 19(2), 45-58.
- [3] Davis, R., & Moore, S. (2023). *Bridging the Achievement Gap: Best Practices in Title I Schools*. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 78-94.
- [4] Garcia, L. (2023). *Challenges Faced by Teachers in Title I Schools: A Comparative Study*. *American Journal of Education*, 129(3), 22-38.
- [5] Garcia, M., & Patel, S. (2024). Streamlining visa processes for international educators: A policy analysis. *International Education Policy Review*, 12(1), 23-37.

- [6] Hernandez, M. (2023). *Engaging Parents in Title I Schools: Strategies for Success*. *Journal of School Communication*, 18(1), 65-80.
- [7] Jackson, T. (2022). *Infrastructure Challenges in Title I Schools: An Overview*. *Urban Education Review*, 30(3), 41-57.
- [8] Johnson, P., & Martinez, E. (2021). *Addressing Teacher Shortages in High-Need Areas: The Role of Incentives*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 29(8), 102-118.
- [9] Jones, M., Smith, S.B., and Taylor, V. (2020). *Navigating the U.S. Education System: A Guide for International Teachers*. Routledge.
- [10] Lee, S., & Bowen, N. K. (2018). *The impact of teacher diversity on student outcomes: A systematic review of the empirical evidence*. *Educational Research Review*, 23, 1-22.
- [11] Lee, J., & Thomas, A. (2023). Enhancing orientation and professional development for J1 teachers. *Education and Training Journal*, 29(3), 112-127.
- [12] Lopez, S. (2022). *Parental Involvement in Low-Income Schools: Overcoming Barriers*. *Journal of Family Engagement*, 14(2), 90-105.
- [13] Miller, K. (2023). *Funding Inequities in Title I Schools: A Policy Perspective*. *Public Education Review*, 47(5), 54-70.
- [14] Nguyen, H. (2022). *Social-Emotional Learning in Title I Schools: An Essential Component*. *Journal of School Psychology*, 33(7), 121-136.
- [15] Smith, J. (2019). *Cultural dissonance in cross-cultural teaching contexts*. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 86, 102883.
- [16] Smith, L. (2022). *Resource Allocation in Title I Schools: Challenges and Solutions*. *American School Board Journal*, 33(6), 30-44.
- [17] Smith, J., & Thompson, A. (2022). *The Impact of International Teachers on U.S. Education: A Focus on Title I Schools*. *Global Education Review*, 9(4), 14-29.
- [18] Smith, R., & Jones, P. (2022). Integration challenges for international teachers in U.S. schools: A critical review. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Education*, 15(4), 78-93.
- [19] Smith, R., & Nguyen, A. (2024). Addressing communication barriers in multicultural classrooms: Best practices for teachers. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 17(1), 45-60.
- [20] Taylor, R., & White, D. (2023). *Mental Health Support in Low-Income Schools: A Critical Need*. *Journal of School Health*, 45(2), 23-38.
- [21] Williams, T., & Lee, C. (2022). *Effective Intervention Programs in Title I Schools: A Review of Literature*. *Journal of Educational Intervention*, 16(3), 99-115.