

# Examining the Reasons why South African Educators relocate to the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

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## Abstract

The present era of increased globalization has introduced concerns about the emigration of skilled labour from developing countries. There has been a revitalization of interest amongst legislators and researchers in the probability of a harmful 'brain drain' in South Africa. Professionals from developing countries fill the voids in the labour market in developed countries. This study aimed to answer the question, "Why are so many South African teachers moving to the Gulf countries?" This study examined why South African teachers moved overseas to teach at schools in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait). Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used with 25 educational professionals. Participants revealed that the inability to earn a reasonable salary, employment corruption and lack of professional growth opportunities are some of the main reasons why they left South Africa and moved to the Gulf region, in addition to others. The results highlighted the need for a programme in which South Africa's Department of Education and related parties offer incentives to deter teachers from relocating overseas. They should also incentivize qualified and skilled teachers to return, knowing that a support structure is in place considering their experiences abroad. Education researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders will benefit from this research's understanding of how to effectively meet the needs of South African teachers and halt the brain drain after qualified teachers graduate. These stakeholders will also know how to acknowledge teaching challenges in university curricula and how to encourage recent graduates to stay in South Africa so that the country may take advantage of their skills and education.

**Keywords:** expatriate, migration, globalisation, relocation, education.

## 1. Introduction

Teaching is a means by which people can achieve prosperity and progress in all fields of life. The function of teaching is to build generations and add knowledge, foster values, and pass on concepts and moral and scientific principles to individuals. Migration is a permanent or semi-permanent movement from one place to another, leading to cultural diffusion and social integration (Gutkar, 2019). It has been explicitly explained to teacher migration that educators should leave their home country to work on a contractual basis for a period exceeding one year in another country (Oucho, 2008, p. 12). Many countries are experiencing migration; for example, approximately 3000 Filipinos per day leave their country to work abroad (Lederer, 2011). The Jamaican government is concerned about the loss of skilled labour and the effect on the country's economic development (Manik et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2006). Attendees of the Commonwealth Education meetings were advised that there was large-scale teacher migration from Barbados, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago (Caravatti et al., 2014).

Similarly, skilled migration has also occurred from Korea to Canada (Hong, 2008), South Africa to the U.K. (Manik, 2005), and Nigeria to the U.S. (Okoro, 2014), to mention a few. Teacher migration has become particularly harmful to the progress of developing countries. This is especially true in South Africa, where there have been numerous recruitment drives undertaken by teacher agencies, especially those acting on behalf of schools in the Gulf region (Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait), which offer lucrative packages for teachers, specifically those from developing countries like South Africa where English is an official language.

Information on the global experience of teachers is limited, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This emphasizes the need for research on teacher experiences in the GCC countries. Fundamentally, qualified teachers who move abroad are pawns, subject to global labour-market conditions during recruitment drives, even though South African teachers identify themselves as economically marginalized professionals. The studies available on teachers' psychological and academic experiences in Gulf Arab countries are scant, mainly when focusing on the experiences of South African teachers. This study is also necessary - to expand the current body of literature.

Teacher migration is recognized as a component of the global labour movement that affects both developing and industrialized nations by Brown (2008). This problem is fueled by variations in the availability of teachers around the world (De Villiers, 2007, p. 7). Brown and Schulze (2008:2) contend that although economic push and pull factors are the leading causes of teacher migration, other community and educational variables may influence a teacher's decision to relocate. They mention, among others, the following: the characteristics of schools in the home country and community traits, including the local economy and climate. This study examined the factors that cause South African teachers to relocate. To do this, a literature review specific to South Africa was necessary. Teaching is the largest single occupational group and profession

in South Africa. According to the Department of Basic Education (2018), South Africa's public education system has 410,000 teachers. These teachers are employed in approximately 25,000 schools across the country and are responsible for teaching 12.9 million pupils. Unfortunately, the supply of newly qualified teachers is substantially less than the number of vacant teaching posts yearly (Department of Basic Education, 2018). NealShutte & Fourie (2006) contend that each year, there are estimated to be around 39,000 students studying for B.Ed. and PGCE courses. Only around 6,000 newly qualified teachers graduate each year. With teacher attrition of around 4-5% per annum, Appleton et al. (2006) have calculated that the country's initial teacher institutions graduate 15,000 new teachers annually. This is below the 25,000-mark required to maintain an effective teacher-pupil ratio. Therefore, South Africa must graduate an adequate number of teachers to meet the supply and demand. Moreover, key findings from the study of Bertram et al. (2006) showed that 27.4% of the samples of final-year student teachers were planning to teach outside of South Africa.

In addition to the glaring lack of new graduates, teacher recruitment from the Global South to the North has been going on for almost two decades in South Africa (Manik, 2005). With the ease of access to information in today's digital world, teacher mobility is easier than ever. According to Vester (2018), push factors from S.A., such as the "country's high crime rate, religious intolerance, race-based policies, burgeoning class sizes and workloads and an ineffective curriculum," are the leading causes of teachers choosing to leave S.A. and pursue teaching careers abroad in Abu Dhabi. However, Anganoo's (2020) study found that South African expatriate teachers were more driven by pull factors in their new country than push factors in their home country. Their research found that some educators were worried about the state of discipline in South African schools, the government's temporary teaching contracts that provided them with no job security, the inadequate funding of public schools, and school governing body positions. According to Dirks (2013), ineffective resource allocation and a lack of infrastructure investments have failed to retain competent individuals within the South African education sector. Although the budget for the education sector has expanded dramatically over the past ten years, the average South African teacher has yet to notice any advances in school facilities, initiatives for skill retention or teachers' ongoing professional development (Dirks, 2013). Therefore, while globalization has led to increased skill mobility, socio-economic problems in South Africa have also significantly contributed to the country's departure of highly qualified teachers. While it is true that many South African teachers are leaving the country for better pay in other countries, it is also essential to consider the impact of different elements, such as crowded classrooms and unfavourable working conditions in the educational sector (Khumalo & Mji, 2014).

Despite the widespread interest in teacher migration and its associated impact on teacher shortages in South Africa, the topic remains a contentious issue, generating more questions than answers. This study examined the following research questions:

- What are current South African teachers' teaching experiences in the Gulf Arab States?
- Why do South African teachers choose to work in the Gulf Arab States?

- What are repatriated South African teachers' experiences of teaching in the Gulf Arab States compared to teaching in South Africa?

With more and more teachers migrating away from South Africa, examining how and why this occurs is essential. The necessity for rapid global integration and the swiftly expanding economies of Asia have undoubtedly contributed to many nations hiring foreign teachers, particularly English teachers (Mlambo & Atediba, 2020). These nations frequently sought out teachers from poorer countries, where salaries for educators are frequently low. Teachers often have little choice but to accept financially enticing opportunities abroad. Unfortunately, this has been the situation with South African educators.

## 2. Method

### Design

Choosing an appropriate paradigm is crucial as it encapsulates a worldview that "has beliefs of how people define and understand the world, themselves and how they come to hold these beliefs that they view as significant" (Duffy & Chenail, 2009, p.22). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm is selected as it can draw on the comprehension of the subjective world of human experience (Maree, 2007). This motivated the use of a qualitative approach within this study as it deals with the "direct experience of people in a specific context which allows social scientists to understand, explain and demystify social reality" (Cohen et al., 2000, p.25). As a result, this study associates itself with Yilmaz's (2013, p. 312) view of the qualitative approach as being an "emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world." Such an approach is considered effective in drawing out and understanding participants' thinking within the South African context and how they construct meaning out of their direct experiences in deciding to move abroad to teach (Maree, 2007).

### Participants

Twenty-five participants were recruited for this study. A lack of a database monitoring teacher migration removed the use of purposive sampling. Thus, the selection technique utilized was snowball sampling (Manik, 2005). Snowball sampling targeted South African teachers who had two types of experiences- South African teachers who had taught in South Africa for at least two years and lived and worked at a school in any of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries for at least two years. This was to ensure that participants could compare their two (or more) teaching experiences. Study participants were initially recruited from announcements posted on South African expatriate Facebook groups based in the Gulf Cooperation Countries. Interested candidates were required to contact the researcher. These candidates were given a questionnaire to assess their suitability for participating in this study according to the needed criteria. Once the questionnaire data was analyzed,

suitable participants were contacted to set up an interview. The pool of participants was selected to be as varied as possible to replicate the diversity of the South African population. Participants were chosen based on age, race, marital status, teaching years, and position. Participants' age range was 25 to 58 years.

### **Instruments**

A questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedule are attached (Appendices 1 and 2). Questionnaires were employed as a primary data collection method for several reasons. Firstly, it was a way of confirming that participants met the criteria for participation in this study. Secondly, it could be gauged from responses to those aspects that needed further explanations and more in-depth details for the interviews. Thirdly, the questionnaire responses from the participants could indicate similarities and differences in experiences, which could be further explored in the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for the second data collection phase with selected participants, as they generally consist of predetermined open-ended questions, and the researcher may decide how to approach them (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Thus, the interview schedule consisted of the following primary research questions: "Why did you choose to work in the Gulf Arab States?" and other follow-up questions.

Teachers with experience teaching in multiple countries were favoured to provide more contrast. Selected participants were interviewed via Zoom as they lived in different Gulf countries. Individual interviews were used as this research focused not only on the experience of expatriate teachers but on the idea of autonomy in choosing or deciding to migrate from South Africa to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Individual interviews offered privacy, which helped participants to share and examine their perspectives, particularly on sensitive subjects like migration requiring adequate elaboration. This took place over six months and was conducted via Zoom.

### **Analysis**

Interviews with participants allowed them to discuss why South African expatriate teachers were enticed to move to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. In this study, narrative analysis was utilized. This method of analysis was used for this research because (1) stories are a human form of meaning-making, and by telling stories, meaning is communicated; (2) stories are told for various purposes, analysis of which can offer fresh understandings for storytellers, and (3) multiple stories form a complex and dynamic system of confirming, contesting and competing stories, analysis of which can offer fresh insight into storytellers' perceptions of and positioning within their worlds. A narrative inquiry was the chosen strategy because of the richness of the data (the stories) generated. The chosen means of interpreting these is dialogical narrative analysis.

Dialogical narrative analysis is described by Frank (2010; 2012) as a 'practice of criticism'. The dialogical analysis of stories investigates relations, connections, and influencing factors within and between stories circulating in networks or communities. As already noted, the narration of stories shapes the people and

communities in which they are told, and narratives evolve in the telling of stories. Meretoja (2014) states, "Life and its narrative interpretation are always intertwined" (p147), and therefore analysis is always dialogic as these reciprocal relations are explored. Data was analyzed in two sections: questionnaire answers and individual interviews with participants who fit the study's criteria.

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

Given that this is a qualitative study, the concept of trustworthiness as an alternative to reliability and validity is offered (Rule & John, 2011). Trustworthiness in qualitative research concerns credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Golafshani, 2003). Credibility refers to the extent to which a case study has recorded the fullness of the case reality, dependability focuses on methodological rigour, and confirmability is concerned with addressing the researcher's influences and biases (Rule & John, 2011). Triangulation was established using three data sources: questionnaires, interviews, and the reflexive field note journal, which created additional confidence in the research findings (Maree, 2007). Addressing research validity includes a reflexive component. Thus, the researcher kept a reflexive journal so others could follow the researcher's rationale, particularly around data collection and analysis concerns (DeCuir & Gunby, 2008).

### **Ethical Issues**

The following topics are discussed in this study: full disclosure, voluntary participation, informed consent, no harm or risk to participants, privacy, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time.

In the inquiry, participants were told what it means to give informed consent, the importance of voluntary participation, their right to anonymity and that no harm would be done to participants. Participants should always be free to decide whether to participate in the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 118). To be able to make that decision, participants were given detailed information on the study and its aims. I explained to participants that they could participate or remove themselves from the research. They were also provided information on their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 118). A crucial aspect of informing participants about research is explaining the concept of informed consent (Morrison & Stomski, 2015).

Participants in the inquiry were given an explanation of the research and the processes involved. They were told how data would be collected and stored and how the results would be disseminated. This was done in conversation and writing. Furthermore, each participant was given an information pack about the research's purpose, aims, process and ethical considerations. Each participant completed and signed a letter of informed consent. Participants knew they could terminate their participation in the study, should they wish to do so, at any time. In this study, anonymity was ensured by referring to participants in a systematic way in the analysis and reporting. Confidentiality is a vital aspect of engaging in ethical research. Participants in the study were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

### 3. Results

Under the headings of the designated content categories and subcategories, it was discovered that the main reasons for migration to the Gulf region have been to earn a higher salary, save more money and develop professionally. An abundance of technology and resources that enhanced curriculum delivery also served as enticing factors, as all participants found these factors needed to be improved in South African public and private schools. This study demonstrated that choosing to relocate is a multidimensional process; it predicted that social, political, and economic factors would be considered. The findings are discussed under themes that emerged during the data analysis process:

Themes	Research Question
Financial Gains	Why do South African teachers choose to work in the Gulf Arab States?
Technological Advancement	Why do South African teachers choose to work in the Gulf Arab States?
Lack of Career Progression	Why do South African teachers choose to work in the Gulf Arab States?
Lack of desirable jobs	Why do South African teachers choose to work in the Gulf Arab States?

### Discussion

Despite claims to the contrary (De Villiers, 2007), teacher recruitment from the Global South to the North has been going on for almost two decades in South Africa (Manik, 2018). The significant findings of this study illustrated that while economic push and pull factors are the primary drivers of teacher migration, a teacher's decision to relocate may also be influenced by community and educational considerations such as the features of the community, such as the local economy and climate, and the working conditions in the nation of origin. As labour migration results from individuals looking for better working conditions, experienced and qualified teachers behave similarly (Martell, 2010, p. 107). With the ease of access to information in today's digital world, teacher mobility is easier than ever. As a result, this study explored teachers' reasons for leaving South African schools and why they chose to teach in schools in the Arab Gulf countries.

#### Financial Gains

According to the data, teachers felt more pulled than pushed to take on new jobs in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. These 'pull' factors included professional growth, higher salaries, and geographical location in the Gulf compared to the rest of the world. This is consistent with the findings of Bertram et al. (2006). They stated that pull factors—such as the advantages of teaching abroad—are significantly more important than so-called "push" factors; in this case- the drawbacks of leaving South Africa, like high unemployment, crime rates, and unfavourable working conditions. This conclusion is consistent with the study's current report, as eight newly qualified teachers expressed a strong desire to increase their pay to travel and save money while

working as educators abroad. On the other hand, these explanations differed for the more seasoned South African teachers because they were more driven to depart when they realized that teacher salaries were not enabling them to save for retirement or make ends meet in their daily lives. Every participant explained how socioeconomics, the region, and professional growth influenced their decision to relocate to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Because of the Gulf's geographic location, they could travel to many other parts of the world more efficiently, and their teaching careers required them to advance professionally. These factors included a far larger compensation package.

### **Lack of desirable jobs**

Nine participants in this study had been employed in South Africa in governing body positions, earning meagre salaries while actively searching for state-paid positions. They all contended that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) database for education jobs could have functioned more effectively for them. They maintained that the job-seeking process in South Africa is inherently unjust because individuals who access the database select friends' children, attendees of the church, and family for vacant positions. The system, therefore, exposes the abuse of public power for private gain. Mbokazi et al. (2023) produced a study demonstrating how hiring qualified educators who are unemployed has yet to be helped by database recruitment policies; on the contrary, it has shortened the unemployment period. Mbokazi et al. (2023) examined the Department of Basic Education database, and their study found many flaws in the implemented system.

Hiring, selecting, and recruiting are handled by the DBE. Principals of schools who were waiting months to find a suitable candidate for the position bemoaned the irrationality of the procedure. When a position becomes vacant due to a resignation or death, principals cannot access the database; instead, they must submit the job specification to the district's human resources department, which will then assign a bursary holder that matches. This demonstrates the unfair treatment of other unemployed educators who had to take out loans to pay for their studies instead of receiving government funding, according to Mbokazi et al. (2023). Participants earning governing body salaries attributed their desire to move to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to their inability to obtain a state-paid teaching position. The findings revealed a recurring theme: even after months of looking, finding permanent state-paid teaching employment was difficult without the right contacts or good luck. Educators in South Africa cannot obtain the desired positions through formal or official job search methods. This demanding and demoralizing process stimulated the search for teaching jobs abroad, where they were more plentiful.

### **Lack of Career Progression**

Participants' decision to leave South Africa was also prompted by a lack of opportunities, which prevented them from growing professionally. Although teachers' understanding of working circumstances in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries was limited to the information provided in the employment offer letter

regarding salary, leave policies, and working hours, South African educators knew very little about Gulf schools' class sizes, workloads, and professional development opportunities, they still felt it was worthwhile to take a risk and open themselves up to the potential for growth. South African teachers think they need more prospects for promotion, leaving them dissatisfied with their jobs (Baffour & Achemfuor, 2013). Three participants had applied for management positions to advance. However, despite having substantial training and experience, they needed more time to land a management role. The literature presents a few studies that have pointed to alleged professional corruption within the South African educational system. Manik's (2005) research on South African teachers who moved to the U.K. in which they discovered that one of their participants left because of professional corruption in South Africa. Despite working for a prolonged period, the participant needed more contacts to advance for professional growth.

Participants directly mentioned that a prevalent deficiency in professional prospects emerged as a driving force for them to move to teaching in the Gulf Arab states. Two participants mentioned similar experiences in this study, which led me to explore the association between nepotism and career advancement in the South African educational sector. A few articles support these points of view. "Crooked SADTU officials are selling not only principals' posts, but are manipulating the education system across provinces to control teachers' appointments, retirement packages, and transfers in return for bribes of as little as R 6 500," Gon (2016) wrote in an online article about an expose published by City Press on May 2, 2014, about union corruption influencing a variety of professional aspects. The article elaborated on the matter by mentioning that SADTU office bearers have committed disciplinary and criminal offences. They either "sold " teaching positions or pressured provincial authorities to assign individuals to jobs. Similarly, a report published in 2016 by Gina highlighted the pervasive instances of unlawful and unfair teaching union influence: "Wherever there are gaps in authority and inefficiencies, teacher unions fill them." Several variables, including weak leadership, combative unions, cooperative principals, and teachers wanting to rise and gain union membership, work against attaining high-quality education by undermining professional values (Matla, 2019).

### **Technological Advancement**

South African teachers also expressed dissatisfaction with the technology they had access to in South Africa. Even teachers who had taught at private schools said they felt they were 'behind' what teachers in other countries could do based on what they had seen on the internet or heard about from friends. This is consistent with the literature on this topic. The funding required for South African schools to buy and maintain these kinds of technology equipment is frequently lacking (Torres & Kiddie, 2020). According to a 2017 assessment by the Cape Digital Foundation, only about 28% of government schools employ technology for teaching and learning (e.g., laptops and mobile phones). Due to their limited technological resources, schools frequently assign large groups of students—such as six kids to one computer station—to share one computer (Ramorola, 2013). These findings signify a lack of digital wellness regarding their professional status, thus impacting feelings of competence and

autonomy. One participant mentioned that South African society would not expect a farmer to farm without farming equipment. However, South African teachers are expected to teach without digital tools in the twenty-first century.

The Arab Gulf's emphasis on technology in education is one of its most significant advantages. Participants were drawn to what resources and technology they could use if they worked there, which informed their decision to accept job offers in the region. Even without knowing exactly what technology they would have access to, they still considered the prospect of resources and technology far superior to what they had encountered in South Africa. According to Manik's (2005) study, insufficient public school resources were another reason South African teachers migrated to the United Kingdom. There, computer literacy is taught to students, and educational institutions adopt a progressive stance regarding utilizing technology in the classroom. "How teachers' workplaces are imagined, represented, and conceived is directly related to the construction of teachers' professional identities," according to Kostogriz and Peeler (2007, p. 4). These findings were consistent with the experiences of South African teachers in this study, fourteen of whom were amazed by the abundance of readily available resources when they arrived in their chosen Gulf Arab country. They felt better prepared to instruct when they saw what they could access. It improved their professional spirits and gave their lessons greater purpose and excitement so local students could enjoy learning various subjects. In particular, three science teachers were pleased with their laboratory facilities and scientific equipment.

With little prospects for career growth, low salaries and challenging working conditions, South African teachers were enticed by the prospect of an abundance of employment opportunities, career advancement, technological progress and a higher salary package. South Africa must retain its education professionals. For this to occur, society must be conscious of the challenges South African teachers face, hence the importance of this study. These challenges propel qualified and experienced educators to move and settle into a new society. It is envisaged that this research will help education researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the field of education understand how to effectively meet the needs of South African teachers to prevent a further brain drain once qualified teachers graduate. These stakeholders will also understand how to acknowledge teaching challenges in university curricula and encourage recent graduates to stay in South Africa so that the country may take advantage of their new skills, outlooks and knowledge. This study advocates for policy changes to build a foundation on which a specific programme can be constructed: firstly, to retain qualified and skilled teachers within the South African educational field by examining their needs and providing incentives to meet them.

### **Limitations**

No study is without flaws, according to Van Tonder (2012), who asserts that a study is honest if it acknowledges these flaws and attempts to remedy them. Because this study used a small sample, the wider sample population is not represented in qualitative research, which reduces the study's representativeness and generalizability (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Many qualitative researchers oppose

subjectivity and objectivity. Since objectivity reduces the observer to a passive, agency-free consumer of external information, subjectivity is said to be negated. Furthermore, it is said that the researcher's subjectivity makes it impossible to know the social psychology world objectively. It is said that the Reality in most studies is defined by the researcher's beliefs (Ratner, 2012). Keeping these concepts in mind while employing reflexivity was a dynamic struggle throughout the data collection and analysis.

#### 4. Conclusions

The South African educational system is losing qualified, experienced and knowledgeable teachers at an alarming rate each year. With teaching being a sought-after profession in many parts of the world, South African teachers are supplying the demand for teachers in the GCC countries. However, this is only a short-term plan. Compared to other developed nations, the GCC countries only offer citizenship for expatriates if they stay and work for a short time. Using qualitative methodology, this study aimed to explore why South African teachers would leave the security of the educational system in South Africa to pursue short-term contracts elsewhere. It examined the factors encouraging them to move and the concepts of migration, teacher mobility and teacher satisfaction. The findings demonstrated that when South African teachers were choosing to relocate, they were primarily considering the draw factors of the destination—what the Arab Gulf countries had to offer them as international teachers. Although participants were frustrated by low salaries and limited opportunities for professional growth, what drew them to teaching in the Gulf Arab States were the benefits offered by international schools. This differed from previous studies' findings where participants were motivated by push factors from S.A., such as the "country's high crime rate, religious intolerance, race-based policies, burgeoning class sizes and workloads and an ineffective curriculum" (Vester, 2018). These findings can be used to explore ways the South African educational system can address and resolve the present crisis of teachers leaving to teach in the Gulf Arab states and potentially in other countries.

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