

‘Back to My Roots’: Family as a Pull Factor for the Return of Migrant Teachers to South Africa

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SUMMARY

Highly skilled migration in the South African context remains underexplored. In particular, there exists a significant gap in the literature concerning the exit of teachers to destinations abroad and the subsequent return and reintegration of South Africans upon their return. This study contributes to filling this scholarly gap by examining the primary motivation for the return of South African teachers, namely, family considerations. Drawing on a qualitative case study involving thirty return-migrant teachers, the study is theoretically informed by Cassarino’s (2004) framework on return-migration motivations and Wright’s (2012) typology of migrant well-being. Data collection methods included open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Although participants specialised in a range of subjects, STEM (Science and Mathematics) and English emerged as particularly high-demand fields both domestically and internationally, presenting teaching opportunities locally and abroad. The findings highlight transnational linkages and the complex interplay of both anticipated and unexpected return migration drivers. A primary family motivator for return, was the desire to provide a conducive home environment for children. Additionally, unforeseen factors such as the declining health or death of a family member prompted return. The study revealed SA teachers’ international migration for functional well-being however psychosocial well-being was significant in propelling their return migration.

KEYWORDS: South Africa, return-migrant teachers, teacher migration, return-migration, family

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Teacher migration is a global phenomenon that has been widely debated since the early 2000s, when Commonwealth countries in the global south such as South Africa and the Caribbean, raised concerns about teachers being ‘poached’ to the north. However, international migration scholarship remains under-researched and under-theorized, with key caveats neglected (de Haas, 2021). Gmelch (1980), a foundational scholar in return migration studies, noted that migration was traditionally understood as a one-way trajectory influenced by limited global connectivity, but this was before advancements in communication and transportation, facilitated greater mobility. The scarcity of research on return migration further perpetuates the perception of a linear economy. King (2015, p. 1) argued that the lack of reliable data led to the assumption that “no returns ever took place,” further resulting in return migration being marginalised in migration scholarship. Additionally, Manik (2005) and Bilecen (2022) highlighted that some countries, such as South Africa, do not systematically record return migration. Despite Manik’s (2005) calls for improved data collection on migrant teachers, South Africa still lacks mechanisms to track both emigrant and return-migrant teachers.

Terminology Ambiguity and Research Gap

A contributing factor to the difficulty in migration data collection could also be the lack of conceptual clarity about the term “migration.” In some contexts, it denotes a permanent move aimed at acquiring citizenship in a host country, while in others, it overlaps with the concept of diaspora, which refers to the sustained connections migrants maintain with their country of origin—connections that can facilitate an eventual return (Dlamini, 2022; Matimba, 2016). Return migration, whether actual or imagined, continues to nevertheless shape migrant identities, with some individuals returning home while others maintain an ongoing desire or expectation to do so at some point (Carling et al., 2015; Wahba, 2021). This study being reported here, derives from a masters’s thesis and it specifically examines the return migration of South African teachers after teaching abroad.

Patterns of Teacher Migration from South Africa

Highly skilled South Africans, including teachers, migrate to multiple industrialised countries in the Global north such as the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, the United States of America, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Portugal (Manik, 2005; Vester, 2018; Fraser, 2024). Manik (2005) identified significant teacher recruitment to the UK until Commonwealth pressure (Manik, 2023) in the early 2000's resulted in a decrease, noting that the British were filling labour shortages in their schools especially in neighbourhoods (for example inner city London) where they were struggling to recruit local teachers. South African teachers have since been recruited to the Middle East from 2008 onwards (predominantly to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) and the Far East (especially Vietnam, China, and South Korea). Some studies have explored this trend (Vester, 2018; Stow, 2019; Anganoo, 2020), but none have examined return migration from these destinations.

RETURN MIGRATION TRENDS

According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2023), these migrations have not always been permanent moves. Between 2011 and 2022, South Africa experienced a notable decrease in the number of returnees in general and not specific to highly skilled migrants or teachers specifically—from 45,866 (primarily women) in 2011 to 27,983 in 2022. Initially, female return migrants outnumbered their male counterparts; however, in recent years, return migration has reflected a more gender-balanced pattern (StatsSA, 2023). Despite these trends, large-scale empirical studies focusing specifically on international teacher migration—particularly involving South African teachers—remain absent. While earlier studies, such as those by Appleton, Morgan, and Sives (2006) and Manik (2005), offered insights, return migration was not a central focus, although it was featured as a component of broader investigations. Manik's (2005) doctoral research, for instance, explored teachers' motivations for emigration, their overseas experiences, and the return of some teachers.

While these early studies began to draw attention to the experiences of returning teachers, broader debates in the migration literature have also framed return as a potentially developmental process rather than merely a personal or familial decision. Gaillard and Gaillard (2015) propose that

return migration, particularly among skilled professionals, should be viewed through the lens of 'brain circulation' rather than 'brain drain'. They argue that returning migrants are potential agents of development who transfer skills, networks, and knowledge accumulated abroad back to their home countries. However, they acknowledge that the success of this process depends heavily on conducive structural and institutional conditions that enable the reintegration of returnees. When such environments are lacking, anticipated developmental gains are often undermined, and returnees may face professional stagnation or remigration. In the context of South African teacher migration, therefore, the notion of brain circulation provides an important theoretical counterpoint: it underscores how the absence of enabling conditions at home redirects the logic of return from professional reinvestment to deeply personal, family-centred motivations.

CONDITIONS IN THE LOCAL TEACHING PROFESSION AND RETURN MIGRATION

Recent studies have pointed to a decline in the status and appeal of the teaching profession in South Africa. Hofmeyr et al. (2024) found that approximately half of SA teachers were considering leaving the profession within the next decade due to overwhelming workloads, administrative burdens, student violence, burnout, and lack of adequate mental health support. This concern over teacher well-being aligns with the findings of the OECD's (2020) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), which reported that SA teachers—particularly those in rural areas—felt that their profession was more highly valued than their urban counterparts. Earlier research by Manik (2005) and Appleton et al. (2006) also indicated that teachers emigrated from urban rather than rural schools.

In respect of return, despite the paucity of current data on returning teachers, Manik (2005) highlighted a range of factors influencing return, with family relationships emerging as a significant driver. In cases where teachers emigrated without their spouses or children, the emotional toll of being separated from close family often led to feelings of discontent with disconnection from family roles and responsibilities which passed to other members. The deterioration of a family member's health frequently serves as a critical decision-making point, prompting return migration.

FOCUS AND CONTRIBUTION OF STUDY

The focus of this study was return teacher migration, and this paper contributes to the scholarship on international teacher migration broadly and provides a more nuanced contribution to migrant teachers' well-being and return migration. This study explored the motivations for return migration and the status of return of South African migrant teachers after teaching internationally. This paper argues that, although financial incentives initially attract South African teachers to work abroad, the decision to return is chiefly shaped by familial pull factors in the home country. The study participants comprised primary and secondary school teachers specialising in STEM subjects and English. Mlambo and Adetiba (2020) note an ongoing shortage of mathematics and science teachers in South Africa, exacerbated by declining graduation rates in these disciplines from local higher education institutions thus accessing the reasons for return and the status of return can provide insights into discussions on teacher retention especially regarding teachers with critical skills who are in need in the home country.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Return migration is driven by a complex interplay of factors, with some exerting stronger influence than others—particularly interpersonal relationships, which often highlight the centrality of family in migrants' lives (Fleischer, 2008; Weldemariam, Ayanlade, Borderon, & Möslinger, 2023). As noted by Weldemariam et al. (2023), return decisions are shaped not only by rational considerations but also by emotional and social dimensions. The phenomenon of return migration has largely been explored within sociological and political science frameworks. For instance, social network theory provides an explanation for why migrants choose to return to their countries of origin (Cassarino, 2004). The theoretical foundations underpinning return migration are commonly categorised into four interrelated dimensions: decision-making levels, family-related motivations, transnational dynamics and social ties, each offering insight into the complex factors influencing return-migrant behaviour.

Decision-making in return migration

It is suggested in the literature that there is a thought flow process among migrants in deciding to return to their home country. In neoclassical theory, return migration is a failed migration, with the migrant not meeting the anticipated higher earning expectation in the host country (Cassarino, 2004). However, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) theory argues the opposite. NELM theory, pioneered by Stark (1991), posits that migration is not solely an individual decision based on wage differentials but a household strategy to manage risks and access resources. This means that the migrant consults with family and does not just make an individual decision when considering whether to return (Bircan, Purkayastha, Ahmad-Yar, Lotter, Iakono, Göler, Stanek, Yilmaz, Solano, & Ünver, 2020; Pirvu & Axinte, 2012). Here, return is welcomed positively, acknowledging the migrant's intention to return after success in the host country.

Family-related motivations

The typology of migrant well-being (Wright, 2012) provides a critical link to family as a reason for return migration. Wright's (2012) typology of well-being draws a distinction between the functional and psychosocial well-being of migrants, significant for the return migration of teachers to SA. Erdal and Oeppen (2017) stated that the way people react to stressors influences their functioning and thinking abilities. They added that emotional distress is believed to be connected to existing anxieties and insecurity about the future. Emigration is therefore an option when individuals feel that their lives in their home country are stagnant or their general well-being is declining, and thus migration is viewed as a step towards improving their quality of life (Castelli, 2018; Dean and Edge, 2024). Although migration can improve the earning potential (material well-being) and contribute to life fulfilment of migrants, studies show that it can decrease happiness with feelings of homesickness, affecting the migrant's emotional well-being (Farrugia & Muscat, 2023; Hamid, 2022; Nikolova & Graham, 2014; Hack-Polay, 2012). Migrants who are transnationals (transmigrants), take comfort in regular communication with family and friends in the home country and are thus associated with positive emotional well-being (Kim, Urquia, Villadsen & Merry, 2021). Thus, emigration and return migration have been flagged in the migration literature as encompassing the pursuit of well-being.

Wright (2012) segmented the term 'well-being' into 'functional' and 'psychosocial' with both segments being interrelated and interdependent. A person's revenue, lodging, and occupation are factors that define functional well-being and may influence a person's standard of living. Psychosocial well-being is influenced by factors which include a person's ethics, views and mental health as well as relationships with family and friends (Erdal & Oeppen, 2017). Failed chain migration, particularly with family being unable to join the migrant abroad, is closely associated with return migration with the migrant seeking to reunite with family. Here, the migrant's psychosocial well-being can lead to an eventual return to the home country. Studies indicate that migrants whose residence status restricts family reunification are often inclined to return for family-related reasons (OECD, 2024; Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2014). Hendriks and Bartram (2018, p. 1) highlighted an interesting caveat that well-being is dependent on "how people feel about and evaluate their lives (i.e., their subjective well-being), which is assessed via their self-reported happiness and/or life satisfaction." Erdal and Oeppen's (2017) study of returnees to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Poland, revealed that the success of the return migration is dependent on the return-migrant's well-being in the home country.

Structuralism

Structuralist perspectives emphasise that return migration is shaped not only by individual choices but also by broader socio-economic and political conditions. Cassarino (2004) notes that returnees' success depends on structural factors in the home country, while Achenbach (2015) highlights how factors at the meso or micro level, such as career, family, and lifestyle decisions, are influenced by these broader contexts. Both perspectives illustrate that return migration outcomes result from the interplay between personal agency and structural conditions, underscoring the need to situate individual decisions within a wider social, economic, and political landscape. In a manner akin to NELM, structuralism underscores the importance of financial and material resources that migrants accumulate abroad and subsequently repatriate, which significantly shapes their return decisions and reintegration trajectories (de Haas, 2021; Carling & Erdal, 2014).

Whilst Cerase's (1974, as cited by Szilasi, Fülöp & Luu, 2025) typology distinguishing between four types of return: return of failure, return of conservatism, return of retirement, and return of innovation—each based on

migrants' intentions, expectations, and needs. However, it was particular to migration in one country, emphasising that the success or failure of return was contingent upon the structural conditions present in the home country. Valuable in the return migration discourse are the concepts of return preparedness and voluntary return, which influence migrants' expectations upon re-entry, as many returnees anticipate specific economic or social opportunities based on their experiences in the host country (Dziekońska, 2023). However, Gmelch (1980) cautioned early on, that despite pre-return planning, many of the social, economic, and political realities in the home country can only be understood once directly experienced, complicating the process of reintegration upon migrants' return.

Unlike neoclassical and NELM frameworks, which focus on individual rational decision-making and household strategies respectively, the structural approach places emphasis on the return-migrant's ability and desire to influence transformation within home communities (Weldemariam et al., 2023; Achenbach, 2015). This perspective frames return migration not merely as an endpoint but as a potential catalyst for development, shaped by two central dimensions: time and space (Cassarino, 2004). The duration of the migration experience influences the temporal dimension of reintegration, with longer absences abroad often correlating with more complex re-adjustment periods (Dziekońska, 2023; Fonseca, Hart & Klink, 2015). In terms of spatial considerations, structural theorists maintain that reintegration experiences are significantly different for returnees who settle in rural areas and those who settle in urban areas upon their return, as inequalities may exist in terms of access to resources, networks, and reinsertion into the community (OECD, 2020; Cassarino, 2004). Furthermore, Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn and Vohs (2011) and Cassarino (2004) suggest that the desire to reintegrate socially may compel returnees to align their behaviours and consumption with local norms to gain social acceptance and as a result, they may engage in particular consumption practices to prevent exclusion and rejection. However, according to Konzett-Smoliner (2016), highly-skilled migrants, for example teachers, are believed to adjust immediately upon return as they possess a level of socio-cultural and economic capital. Interestingly, Konzett-Smoliner added that family can also stifle the readjustment period due to overwhelming family responsibilities upon return.

Transnational dynamics

Transnationalism is often regarded as inseparable from globalisation (Tedeschi, Vorobeve and Jauhiainen, 2022) however, the two concepts are not synonymous. Transnationalism conceptualises return migration as an integral and recurring element within the broader migration cycle (Li, Sadowski-Smith & Yu, 2018). It emphasises the enduring and multidirectional ties that migrants sustain across national borders. Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992, p. 2) define transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement.” Rather than viewing migration as a one-time, linear movement from a country of origin to a destination, transnationalism highlights how migrants actively maintain social, economic, political, and cultural connections with their home countries while building new lives abroad (Maviza & Carrasco, 2023; Coe, 2015). It challenges the traditional misconception that migrants cut ties with their home country after settling abroad (Baru, 2022; Ozkul, 2019), rather transmigrants are able to live in multiple locations without feeling uprooted. They are actively involved in their host and home societies, rather than being solely focused on one location. Migrants who uphold durable transnational ties and associations within different countries have “transcultural capital,” which (Baru, 2022, p. 133), entails comprehending cultural dissimilarities and mastering multilingualism. One of the central characteristics of transnationalism is co-existence (Tsuda, 2012, as cited by Kemppainen, Kemppainen, Rask, Saukkonen & Kuusio, 2020); migrants simultaneously participate in the daily lives and institutional structures of both the host and origin societies, such as sending remittances, engaging in cross-border entrepreneurship, participating in elections in their country of origin, or maintaining cultural practices and identities from their homeland. StatsSA (2023) confirms that highly-skilled individuals often send remittances to support family members, usually contributing to the primary source of the household income, or they invest in housing and education in SA, exemplifying the economic dimension of transnational engagement. This practice reflects a continued sense of responsibility and obligation to their home communities despite geographic separation.

Social networking

Migration scholarship indicates a wide range of factors influencing decision-making, including employment prospects, differences in amenities between locations, life-cycle dynamics, and financial costs associated with migration and return migration. Among these, social networks play a particularly influential role (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). Social network theory views networks as a carrier of social capital wherein migrants frequently access information about destination-and-home-specific opportunities and living conditions through their networks, while the composition and structure of their social ties in the country of origin often shape both their capacity and motivation to migrate (Blumenstock, Chi, & Tan, 2023). Blumenstock et al. (2023) aver that migrants are generally attracted to destinations where their personal social connections, such as friends, are concentrated. In addition, personal social ties, such as being a parent, influence migration decisions in ways that relate specifically to the needs and responsibilities of parenting. Tezcan (2022) and Piotrowski and Tong (2010) acknowledge the migrant's identity as a parent being a significant factor in return migration decision making. Manik's (2005) teacher migration study utilised the concepts of "phantom parent" and "phantom spouse" to emphasise migrants' inability to physically engage with the roles of being a parent or partner while abroad and migrant teachers' attempts to manage relationships across long distances. She found that a feeling of inadequacy lingers in the migrant teacher who is unable to uphold family responsibilities from abroad and this stress prompted return migration in her study.

Sha (2021) stated that both short-term cyclical returnees and long-term migrants who maintain regular visits with their communities of origin contribute significantly to the maintenance and renewal of migrant networks. These networks are conceptualised as a form of social capital that serve as part of the broader migration infrastructure, offering critical support and resources to individuals engaged in transnational mobility. Meyer (2023), Ullah, Ferdous and Chatteraj (2022) and Mahmud (2020) added that migrants may also send remittances personally or collectively to an organisation not only for economic support but also to maintain reciprocal social relationships, reinforce family bonds and sustain social status within their community in the home country. Sending remittances is also a way for migrants to stay embedded in their community's social network of obligation, reciprocity, and connection. Maintaining transnational social ties through migrant networks, according to Schiller et al. (1992), is recog-

nized as a strategy for reducing migration-related risks. These connections offer migrants a form of security and flexibility, making it possible to return to the country of origin at various stages of the life course.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents findings from a study (Protocol Reference Number: HSS/1316/017M) explored the return migration of SA teachers. Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The research was grounded within an interpretivist paradigm, recognising the importance of capturing the subjective experiences and decision-making processes of return migrants. Employing a qualitative, small-scale case study design, the research was conducted over a two-year period (2017–2019) by a single researcher and involved a purposive sample of 30 participants. The study specifically targeted SA teachers who had returned to their country of origin after teaching abroad between 2005 and 2017. 2005 was selected as that was the year of Manik's (2005) doctoral study on international teacher migration (including return-migration). The term "return-migrant teacher/s" was broadly applied to include individuals who, although they may not hold formal South African teaching qualifications, had been teaching abroad prior to their return. While SA comprises nine provinces, the participants were drawn from three provinces: KwaZulu-Natal (n=23), Gauteng (n=6), and the Eastern Cape (n=1) due to the researchers being located in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

Sample

A non-probability sampling approach was deemed most appropriate for this study, as it involved the intentional selection of a specific target group—SA return-migrant teachers. Participants were recruited through multiple strategies, including snowball sampling, unsolicited phone calls and emails (cold-calling and cold-emailing), direct engagement with known individuals, and outreach via social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Among these methods, direct contact with known individuals in KwaZulu-Natal yielded the highest participant response rate, whereas WhatsApp emerged as the second most effective tool for recruitment and raising awareness of the study.

In migration research contexts, where participants are difficult to locate due to the absence of centralized databases from which to construct a sampling frame, snowball sampling emerged as the most effective method for participant recruitment. This technique relied on introductions facilitated through mutual acquaintances, enabling the initial participants to refer others to the study. Snowball sampling, as defined by Crossman (2018) and Simkus (2023), involved the researcher leveraging a limited number of initial contacts to identify additional eligible participants. In this study, existing participants directed the researcher to other potential participants who met the study's criteria and were willing to engage. This approach fostered a degree of trust, as participants felt more comfortable knowing the researcher was connected through a known intermediary, rather than being perceived as a complete outsider seeking access to personal and sensitive information. More than fifty prospective participants were provided with informed consent forms, which detailed the aims and objectives of the study, as well as clarified their voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any stage should they feel uncomfortable. Of those approached, thirty returned signed consent forms indicating their willingness to participate. To uphold confidentiality and ethical standards, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and access to the raw data was restricted solely to the researcher. Data generation commenced only after informed consent was formally obtained from each participant.

Data generation procedure

The study employed a combination of research instruments, including open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews (both face-to-face and telephonic), and focus group discussions (FGDs). Methodological rigour and data trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation of methods. All participants ($n=30$) completed a standardised questionnaire, which comprised two sections: the first included close-ended items capturing participants' socioeconomic profiles (such as age, race, gender, employment status, income levels in both the host and home countries, and remittance practices), while the second section featured open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives related to their social and professional return migration experiences. A subset of participants ($n=7$) was purposively selected for follow-up interviews, based on their questionnaire responses that either lacked sufficient detail or indicated particularly distinctive expe-

riences. One interview was conducted in person, while the remaining interviews were conducted telephonically, in accordance with participant preference. The interviews aimed to validate the questionnaire responses and to elicit deeper insights into the participants' return migration trajectories, with particular attention to their social and professional reintegration and future intentions. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Of the seven participants initially interviewed, six consented to participate in the focus group discussions (FGDs). Two FGDs were conducted, each comprising three participants, thereby meeting the minimum statistical threshold required for effective group discussions (Graham & Bryan, 2022; Krueger, 1994, as cited in Gundumogula, 2020). Participant selection for the FGDs was based primarily on the host country from which each individual had returned, ensuring that each discussion group consisted of returnees from distinct host countries. Additionally, willingness to participate in further stages of the study, as indicated in the consent forms, was a key criterion for selection in both the interviews and FGDs. The common themes that emerged during the interview phase served as the basis for the questions posed during the FGDs. These themes included: experiences in the host country, motivations for return, and reintegration experiences upon return. The FGDs were conducted via two modalities: a WhatsApp conference call (utilising mobile data) and a traditional conference call (requiring no data), in accordance with participant preferences. The FGDs proved valuable in uncovering both convergences and divergences in participants' transnational experiences and return trajectories. Notably, the group discussion format encouraged participants to recall and articulate past events that had previously gone unmentioned during individual interviews, prompted by the shared narratives of fellow returnees. To enhance the credibility and accuracy of the data, all interview and FGD transcripts were emailed to the participants for verification, thereby contributing to the study's validity.

Data Analysis

The data was systematically organised into three distinct folders corresponding to each data generation instrument: questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Transcripts were subjected to repeated readings to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dominant

themes emerging from the data. Microsoft Excel was employed to tabulate and present the socioeconomic profiles of the thirty participants. A colour-coding technique was applied, utilising highlighters to identify and categorise the frequency of common and unique experiences expressed by participants. This coding approach was consistently implemented across all data sources, with each colour representing a specific thematic category. Subthemes were consolidated into broader umbrella categories; for example, motivations such as returning to care for loved ones, reuniting with family, and fulfilling spousal responsibilities were grouped under the overarching theme of family in the context of return migration. A summary of the common themes is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of common themes

Reasons for returning to the home country, SA	Duty to family (parents, children, spouse)
	Nature of employment contract
	Private matters pertaining to the individual
	Xenophobic hostility from natives
	Concealment of death of fellow expat
	Academic and professional advancement
	Socio-economic fluctuations
Reasons for opting to remain in the home country, SA	Duty to family
	Healthy work space in home country
	Employment and visa insecurity abroad
	No urge to re-migrate
Significant push-pull factors promoting remigration	Spousal bonds
	Greener pastures
	Socio-economic setbacks in home country
	Retirement goal
	Opportunities for their children

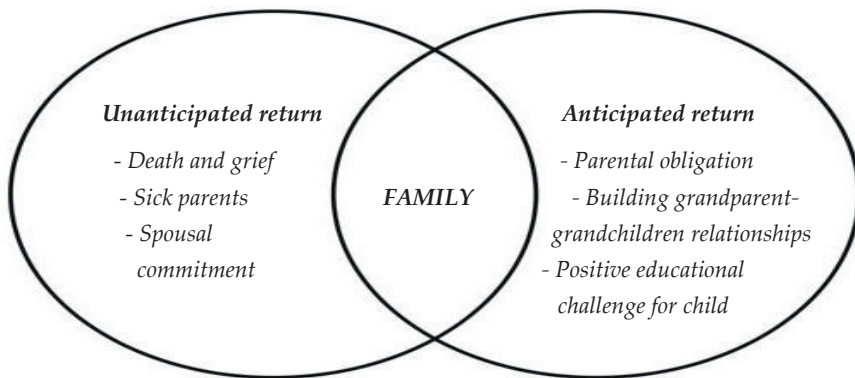
FINDINGS

SA migrant teachers returned to their country of origin for a variety of reasons; however, family obligations emerged as the dominant motivating factor. This finding echoes Baas's (2015) contention that the 'why' of return transcends economic logic and pivots on relational and identity questions. Among the 30 participants, the majority were married, yet only 6 teach-

ers had migrated with the entire family, and an even smaller group (n=5) migrated with their spouses. The largest proportion (n=19) had migrated alone, without any accompanying family members.

Given the separation from the immediate family for the majority of migrants, it is understandable that family-related considerations played a central role in return decision-making. The most frequently cited reason for return was a profound sense of homesickness stemming from prolonged separation from loved ones. Participants highlighted the significance of their family identities—as children, parents, and spouses—which strongly influenced their return decisions. For instance, as children, some sought to spend meaningful time with aging parents; as parents, others prioritized the well-being and upbringing of their children; and as spouses, several respondents acknowledged the importance of being physically present to nurture and support their spouses. The Venn diagram (in Figure 1), outlines both the anticipated and unanticipated family-related factors that influenced the return of teachers.

Figure 1: Family oriented reasons



At the forefront: Needs of parents

It was evident that once abroad, migrant teachers commenced adapting and integrating into their new lives socially and professionally, and their initial intentions of remaining abroad for a short period were set aside. It's only when news pertaining to the family, such as the state of health of loved ones, reached the migrant teachers, that return was once again considered.

Shane (Q, 24)¹ and his spouse, who initially intended to reside in the UK for a maximum of 5 years, remained in the UK for an additional 8 years more than the initial timeframe, welcoming the birth of 2 of their 3 children in the UK. Their main reason for returning was personal. They grounded their reason for return in the age of his parents and his in-laws. Shane did not want his parents or his in-laws to “*grow old alone*.” He also desired the opportunity to afford his children quality time with their grandparents, as living abroad resulted in minimal interaction between his children and their grandparents. Similarly, Ishen, another return-migrant teacher, also yearned for his children to spend time with their grandparents. The children were born and raised in the UK, and he believed that holiday visits to his home country were insufficient for his children to bond with their grandparents, and he anticipated the fostering of close family bonds upon their return.

Multiple other reasons linked to family also featured, for example, feelings of responsibility for her ailing parents. For Faye, it was one of the five influential factors² that led to her return to SA. At the top of Faye’s (Q, 2) reasons for return was the poor health of her dad and a secondary reason that featured in her decision, was her desire to be around the extended family. The above-mentioned migrant teachers had time to ponder their return, making it an anticipated return. Other participants who also engaged in an anticipated return, (revealed in the questionnaire), were Pixie (Q, 26) and Aaron (Q, 27), who mentioned “*family reasons*” and “*family commitments*” respectively as a key contributing factor for their return while Anesh (Q, 23) declared that he wished to “*experience life with family and friends*”. It was evident that the toll of being abroad for years without family and friends eroded their desire to continue remaining abroad.

Trigger events (sudden unanticipated occurrences) were also responsible for return migration. Solomon’s (Q, 13) reasons for return, were twofold: the demise of his father and the need to assist his mum in the aftermath of this major loss as she “*did not cope*” with the grief and loneliness. Similarly, Adam (Q, 8) prioritised his dad’s deteriorating health, sacrificing his

¹ The tools used to retrieve the data are reflected within brackets together with its corresponding number for each participant. The symbols are displayed as follows: Questionnaire (Q), Interview (I) and Focus group discussion (FGD).

² The remaining three reasons that propelled Faye’s return included her view that South Africa was a ‘better’ country to raise her son rather than Abu Dhabi, steep school fees in Abu Dhabi, and the fact that her contract was reaching its termination date.

marriage and bond to his children. At the time of completing the questionnaire, he had resettled in his home country for five years after returning from the UK without his wife and children. Adam explained:

"My dad was ill, and being the only son, I had to return. My then Irish wife insisted I first get a job then she would come but she never did and stayed back with the children [aged 7 and 10]."

Adam also admitted that returning without his children was *"emotionally draining"* and his attempts to bring them to SA together with his now ex-wife were unsuccessful. However, he does not regret his decision to return for the sake of his father because he was able to enjoy five quality years together before his father succumbed to illness. He presently takes care of his mother, and he intends to re-migrate to join his children eventually. In both Solomon and Adam's narratives, it was evident that being the son and assuming responsibilities to be the head of the household were foregrounded as a result of an ailing father.

A mother's intuition

Feelings of guilt after the death of her ex-husband led to Afreen's return. Afreen (Q, 25) believed that her children needed her after the passing away of their father (whilst she was abroad) and this influenced her decision to return. She stated:

"Family responsibility/guilt after the death of my ex-husband made me review my decision. My children (all adults) seemed to need my presence as a mom [sic] I felt obligated to return. Their financial improvement also took the pressure of me to provide for them. My only daughter needed her mother to come 'home'.

Afreen believed that she sacrificed her independent, luxurious lifestyle abroad for the sake of her children because the well-being of her children was more valuable to her than the *"mind-shifting"* earnings she enjoyed abroad.

Also putting the concerns and welfare of her children at the forefront, another participant Lovania (Q, 15; I, 2) like Afreen, returned for the welfare of her children. After residing alone in Abu Dhabi for 4 months, Lovania felt that her children missed their mother. They were being taken-care off by a person that was trusted by the family, however, this trust was jeopardised, raising welfare concerns. A prominent factor that triggered her speedy

return was her husband's view that only mothers could provide the best care for their children. Her husband stated:

"No one can take better care of children than their mother can."

His comment *"affected [her] motherly instinct"* which triggered her return. Afreen and Lovania engaged in an unanticipated return as they never expected to return so soon, nor did they expect to give up the opportunities that presented itself abroad such as better salaries, less expenses, travel, etc. which constituted material well-being. Lovania and Afreen's return was unanticipated since they expected to remain for a longer duration abroad but their plans were swiftly altered with the sudden developments affecting their children. Thalasa's experience in the host country was shorter in comparison to both Afreen and Lovania.

Thalasa (Q, 6; I, 4), who was only in Abu Dhabi for 17 days, also felt that her teenage children needed her physical presence during their important schooling years, and this encouraged her to take the step to return home, viewing her migration as poorly timed. Thalasa felt that she was doing her daughter and son a disservice during their grade 9 (exit exam) and matric year (exit exam) respectively by being away from home, contributing to her thoughts of returning. She acknowledged another reason that compelled her to return to her *"young family"*:

"...it was the first time I went abroad without my family [in 24 years], and my son was in grade 12 and my daughter in grade 9. It was, you know, I thought I was strong but I think it was... just the timing was all wrong."

Thalasa returned to offer a mother's support to her children. Zahara also returned for her children. She (Q, 11), emigrated with her husband and children, but realised that it was imperative that her children interact with their family in the home country. Zahara stated:

"As our kids are growing older, we felt the need for them to reconnect with the family. This was the ultimate reason for our return."

Zahara added that some of the positive aspects of returning included around extended family and friends, being exposed to their traditions, and an English medium environment. Returning home was a decision made for the benefit of her children, despite the financial downgrade in earnings. Sharing the same mind-set, apart from missing family and friends back home, Donell and his wife wanted their children to have a relationship with extended family members, and they were curious to observe the

reintegration process of their sons upon returning to their home country. Donell stated that he always knew that he would eventually return because he was patriotic to SA throughout the 14 years which he had spent in the UK. Likewise, Feroza (Q, 7), who emigrated to Saudi Arabia for 6 years with her husband and her three sons, felt guilty depriving their children of the opportunity to be surrounded by loved ones; hence their return. Feroza explained the "guilt" she and her husband endured knowing that their children longed to be around family and which initiated the idea of return. She explained:

"After 14 years, we had 3 kids who began to miss home terribly. Guilt set in for us as parents, and so we decided to return home. There was no real quality of life over there without family..."

She also felt that she was suppressing their playfulness and stifling their childhood because the extreme heat (climate in the Middle East) forced them to remain indoors despite their desire to explore the outdoors. Being unable to endure her children feeling unhappy, Feroza and her husband reached the decision to return to their home country. Similarly, Courtney who resided in the UAE for two years with her immediate family also realised that her children were unhappy residing in the host country. This was a contributing factor in her decision to return.

Driven by relationship ties in SA

Attachment to a partner in the home country can cause a migrant to exit the destination country in an attempt to keep the 'home flames burning'. One of the catalysts for return for Lauren (Q, 21; I, 1) was a change in "personal circumstances" as she was "asked to return home" by her partner. Despite her mental health "taking a knock" in the host country as a result of problematic learners and the anxiety she endured, she admitted that returning home was more for personal romantic reasons and not so much for her health. After loathing his experience in Bahrain upon his visit, Lauren's partner has no intention to permanently join her in the host country. She stated he is "very much an African through and through [and] he won't leave the country;" hence, Lauren decided to remain in SA with him after her visit to SA. In the interview, Lauren revealed "if there hadn't been this potential, sort of romantic relationship back home," she would have accepted a post at another host school where the working environment presented less professional stress, mimicking her friend's footsteps. Although her return was depend-

ent on securing a post at her previous school, the idea of returning to SA stemmed from her partner. Since her return to SA, Lauren has chosen not to re-migrate to uphold her commitment to her partner.

Another return-migrant teacher, Tim (Q, 5), had a different narrative and he returned to SA after his wife retired. Tim's spouse, a *"South African born Scottish,"* wished to reside near the ocean upon her retirement; however, due to being unable to afford purchasing a property with an ocean view in the UK, they opted to return home to SA. Tim and his wife decided to settle in Scottburgh which was his wife's childhood holiday destination, situated in a town south of Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal where *"[she] spent many holidays as a child"* and always dreamed of retiring there. They also preferred the weather in SA opposed to the weather in the UK, which they never acclimatised to. Initially, Tim migrated to the UK with his wife as *"she wanted to return to her roots."* Similarly, Tim prioritised his wife's desire once again to reside in SA upon retirement, hence their decision to return to SA. In both instances, Tim opted to migrate to satisfy his wife's needs. Three other return migrant teachers in the study (Courtney, Raqueeba and Sharon) also returned home with their spouses since their spouses were unable to secure employment abroad. All three spouses were **'tied movers'** hoping to secure employment abroad, however it did not materialise. As a result, this propelled them to return home.

While Lauren, Tim, Courtney, Raqueeba, and Sharon took time to ponder their return before reaching a decision, Whitney's (Q, 28; I, 7) return was unanticipated, and she was forced to return to her home country after learning of her pregnancy. She felt a responsibility to return home to the father of her child. She explained the trigger for return:

"I met someone online from South Africa, who I used to communicate with often and then I met in person during a visit to SA, he wanted to me to remain in SA and settle down. On my return to South Korea I found out I was pregnant, so I had no other choice but to head back to SA to start a family."

Whitney intended to return to her boyfriend back home after fulfilling her renewed 6-month contract in South Korea; however, her new circumstance of pregnancy, was the trigger event that forced her to return sooner.

DISCUSSION

It was revealed that return migration for the participants in this study stemmed from either anticipated or unanticipated conditions. Return could be precipitated by an event abroad; the sudden illness or death of a parent or sudden fear of children's safety in the home country. Return could also be due to the migrant's realisation in the host country, such as the unanticipated pregnancy. These are trigger reasons which are unanticipated. Return migration is anticipated when return is due to a migrant's desire to return to the home country building over a period of time to spend time with ageing parents and grant their children the opportunity to build stronger family relationships. This decision-making is protracted, and not sudden.

It was very evident that migrant teachers' identities as parents (or parent to be), spouses and/ children took precedence in propelling their return migration to SA.

Understanding the varied temporalities of return, whether planned or spontaneous, also requires acknowledging that return does not necessarily represent the conclusion of the migration journey. Mulvey and Davidson (2019) conceptualise return migration as part of a cyclical and dynamic process rather than as a permanent endpoint. They argue that return, reintegration, and remigration are interconnected phases in many migrants' lives, shaped by both structural conditions in the home country and shifting personal circumstances. In a similar vein, Ibričević (2024) asserted that successful reintegration is not guaranteed upon return; instead, it depends on the migrant's ability to reconcile expectations formed abroad with realities at home. Where reintegration proves difficult, whether due to limited professional opportunities, unmet social expectations, or emotional dissatisfaction, many returnees contemplate or engage in further migration. This framework provides an important perspective for understanding the South African teachers in this study, many of whom expressed intentions to re-migrate despite strong family-based motivations for returning. Their experiences illustrate the fluidity and ongoing negotiation inherent in the migration cycle.

A return to close the relations gap

Taking care of aging or grieving parents, being unable to adjust to life as a "phantom parent" (Manik, 2005), desiring to create stronger grandchild-

dren-and-grandparent relationships, better prospects for the children in the home country, as well as the yearning to eliminate the physical distance that exists between the spouse and migrant teachers, were some of the reasons that urged SA migrant teachers to return home to their country of birth. These reasons concur with the ‘social networking theory’ (Blumenstock et al., 2023; Tezcan, 2022; Manik, 2005) and transnationalism (Merry, Kevork, & Hille, 2023), acknowledging that attachment to family as well as strained relationships are factors that motivate return migration. In the case of Shane and Ishen, who wanted their children to become more familiar with their grandparents through physical interaction, their decision was voluntary but not dependent on achieving a pre-set target in the host country. Return migration that is not driven by monetary factors is a characteristic of transnationalism (Merry, Kevork, & Hille, 2023).

The return decisions of Lauren, Tim, Courtney, Raqueeba, and Sharon align with Gmelch’s (1980, as cited in Yue, Li, & Feldman, 2016) assertion that spousal commitment can outweigh financial incentives in migration contexts. Specifically, Courtney, Raqueeba, Sharon, and Tim returned to their country of origin to accompany their spouses, a dynamic described by Freitas-Monteiro (2024) as that of a tied-mover—individuals who engage in migration, including return migration, primarily to preserve family unity. The findings of this study suggest that emotional and relational ties, particularly those linked to marital commitment, exert a stronger influence on return decisions than the economic advantages of remaining in the host country. In Whitney’s case, her return due to pregnancy reflects the influence of transnational practices, such as home visits, on return migration decisions, as noted by de Haas (2021) and Carling and Erdal (2014). Furthermore, the needs of pregnant women and new mothers—especially those caring for children under the age of five—often necessitate increased familial support, making return migration a more viable and appealing option (Merry, Kevork, & Hille, 2023).

Nostalgia emanating from memories

Sharon, Thalasa, Marissa, Courtney, Feroza, Zahara, and Layani all expressed profound experiences of homesickness and a deep longing for familial connections. While Feroza spent 14 years in the host country, Saudi Arabia, whereas Thalasa’s international stay lasted only 17 days. Nevertheless, the intensity of homesickness appeared to be consistent, regardless of

the duration spent in the host country. This finding challenges Ying's (2005, as cited in Hack-Polay, 2020) claim that homesickness typically declines after two years of resettlement. However, Hack-Polay (2020) also notes that the trajectory and duration of homesickness remain inconclusive—an assertion that aligns with the current study's results. The continued relevance of homesickness among SA migrant teachers echoes the findings from Manik's (2005) earlier research, underscoring that the emotional strain of separation from home and familiar environments remains a persistent and influential factor in decisions to return migrate. Evidently, these cross-border interactions align with transnationalism (Maviza & Carrasco, 2023; Coe, 2015).

Return for the benefit of the children

Courtney and Feroza reported that their children experienced significant difficulty acclimatising to the environmental and socio-cultural conditions of the host countries, particularly with regard to the climate. The emotional distress and discomfort expressed by their children played a pivotal role in motivating these migrant parents to return to South Africa. This aligns with the findings of Deng, Xing, Katz and Li (2022) as well as Dumont and Spielvogel (2008), who also identified children's dissatisfaction and adjustment difficulties as critical factors influencing return migration. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with the research conducted by Minehan and Wesselbaum (2023), which highlights that extreme temperatures and other adverse environmental conditions often act as drivers of migration, as individuals seek to avoid climatic discomfort or hazards. In this context, Feroza may be classified as a "climate migrant," a term used by Parker (2018, p. 1), given that her decision to return was partially influenced by the environmental conditions of the host country.

Similarly, Layani, who migrated independently and gave birth to a daughter in the United States, expressed a desire to raise her child within the cultural and moral framework of her country of origin—a sentiment echoed by other participants, including Courtney and Feroza. Faye also perceived SA as a more suitable environment for raising her child and, having left her son behind during migration, ultimately decided to return in order to reunite with him. While Battistella (2018) observed that children of migrants may struggle to adapt to their parents' country of origin, Layani's case diverges in that her daughter, being a newborn at the time of return, did not undergo a migratory experience. In contrast, the children of Courtney, Feroza, and

Zahara had lived in South Africa prior to emigration, which contributed to their familiarity with and preference for the cultural values of the home country. Moreover, the ongoing communication and emotional ties these teachers maintained with family and friends in South Africa during their time abroad reflect a sustained level of social capital (Sahin-Mencütek et al., 2023; Gashi & Adnett, 2015; Reynolds, 2010). This social capital, which remained intact despite geographical separation, played an instrumental role in facilitating their return migration.

Tezcan (2022) and Piotrowski and Tong (2010) assert that the fulfilment of parental responsibilities is a key motivation for return migration, a finding that is echoed in the present study. Within this research, the well-being of children emerged as the second most influential factor shaping the return decisions of migrant teachers. For instance, Afreen faced a situation in which her children required her physical presence, particularly following the death of their father. She expressed a fear of becoming what Manik (2005) refers to as a 'phantom' parent during their period of bereavement. Consequently, she relinquished her aspirations of teaching abroad in order to prioritise her maternal duties. Similarly, Lovania was confronted with a dilemma that forced her to weigh the safety and well-being of her children against the opportunities for professional advancement and financial stability she experienced overseas. Thalasa, too, reported feelings of guilt and perceived neglect, believing she had abandoned her children during a pivotal phase of their education. This emotional burden ultimately influenced her decision to return to the SA. Anderson (2022) and De Bree, Davids, and de Haas (2010) suggest that motherhood constitutes a central aspect of a woman's identity, encompassing the full spectrum of maternal roles. This perspective resonates with the motivations of Lovania, Thalasa, and Afreen, whose return was largely driven by the imperative to uphold their maternal responsibilities and to safeguard their children's welfare.

Returning to fulfil the role of a child

Faye and Adam returned to South Africa primarily to care for their ailing parents, with Adam making the significant decision to leave his immediate family behind in the United Kingdom in order to fulfil his filial responsibilities. Years later, Adam continues to uphold this duty by ensuring his mother receives the necessary care. Similarly, Solomon returned to support his grieving mother, whereas Shane acknowledged that the advanced age

of his parents and in-laws influenced his decision to repatriate. These findings align with the arguments presented by Ślusarczyk (2023) and Gmelch (1980, as cited in Yue, Li, & Feldman, 2016), who contend that a common impetus for return migration is the migrant's sense of duty toward elderly or ill parents, or spousal obligations. However, Adam's experience also illustrates the potential strain that return migration may impose on other familial roles; in attempting to fulfil his responsibilities as a son, his role as a husband was compromised. This situation reflects the findings of Thenmozhi and Mohan (2024) and Caarls and Mazzucato (2015), who argue that while some migrants successfully manage the geographical separation from spouses that migration can entail, others struggle to adapt, sometimes leading to marital strain or even divorce, as was the case with Adam.

The motivations for return migration described in this section can be interpreted through a structuralist lens, as they are rooted in obligations linked to familial and spousal roles. Structuralist explanations for return migration are often embedded within transnational practices, such as maintaining interpersonal relationships, building social capital, and engaging in periodic home visits. Regular communication with loved ones and physical return visits serve to reinforce emotional attachments, which in turn catalyse the decision to return. While such contact may intensify feelings of homesickness, the social capital cultivated during time abroad—especially through relationships with individuals in the home country—can function as a protective mechanism, facilitating a smoother reintegration process upon return. These observations are supported by Sahin-Mencütek, Mielke, Schmitz-Pranghe, and Vollmer (2023), Gashi and Adnett (2015), and Reynolds (2010), who highlight the centrality of social capital, particularly familial ties, in influencing return migration decisions. Ultimately, the strength of a migrant's personal and emotional connections to their home country appears to be a significant predictor of return, a pattern that is clearly reflected in the present study.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the centrality of familial obligations as a primary motivation for the return of migrant teachers to SA, whether the return was anticipated or unanticipated. Regular visits to the home country and sustained transnational communication with family members during their time abroad emerged as significant factors influencing return

decisions. Family ties and the associated sense of duty played a critical role for most returnee teachers, many of whom held multiple social roles—as parents, partners, or children—and cited these roles as central to their decision to return in order to fulfil corresponding responsibilities. Additionally, their return was shaped by a specific public sector recruitment policy that penalised returning teachers by assigning them the lowest priority on the placement list. However, this policy was not enforced in cases involving teachers with expertise in high-demand subject areas. The study concludes that the return of migrant teachers to SA was primarily driven by personal rather than professional or economic considerations. This is evident in the participants’ narratives, which frequently characterised their return as unplanned. Nevertheless, when considering the prospect of remigration, professional and economic incentives abroad appeared to outweigh the personal motivations to remain. Indeed, the majority of participants (n=21) expressed either a strong intention to remigrate or were actively considering it at the time of data generation. The findings of the current study reinforce Mulvey and Davidson’s (2019) view, showing that while family served as the dominant pull factor, return remained a flexible and a seemingly reversible decision for many participants, rather than a definitive homecoming to South Africa.

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Povratak svojim korijenima: Obitelj kao privlačni čimbenik povratka migrantskih učitelja u Južnu Afriku

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SAŽETAK

Visokoobrazovani migranti u kontekstu Južne Afrike nisu dobili dovoljnu istraživačku pozornost unatoč aktualnim raspravama o međunarodnim migracijama i *cirkuliranju* mozgova. U literaturi postoji nedostatak istraživanja o napuštanju zemlje domaćina i ponovnom povratku južnoafričkih državljana u matičnu zemlju, što predstavlja jasnu prazninu u istraživanjima povratnih migracija. Ovaj rad raspravlja o glavnom razlogu povratka učitelja u Južnu Afriku nakon razdoblja rada u inozemstvu, a to je obitelj. Podaci proizlaze iz kvalitativne studije slučaja koja obuhvaća trideset povratnih migrantskih učitelja u Južnu Afriku. Teorijski okvir oslanja se na rad Cassarina (2004), koji se bavi razlozima povratnih migracija, kao i na Wrightovu (2012) tipologiju dobrobiti migranata. Instrumenti korišteni za prikupljanje podataka uključivali su upitnike (s otvorenim pitanjima), intervju i fokus-grupne rasprave. Iako su učitelji bili specijalizirani za različite nastavne predmete, STEM područja i engleski jezik pokazali su se kao posebno tražena područja i u Južnoj Africi i u inozemstvu. Rezultati istraživanja ukazali su na niz očekivanih i neočekivanih razloga te okidača povratnih migracija koji su utemeljeni na konceptu obitelji. Jedan od ključnih razloga bio je nastojanje da se djeci migranata osigura prikladno obiteljsko okruženje. Također, postojali su i neočekivani razlozi za povratak u matičnu zemlju, potaknuti pogoršanjem zdravstvenog stanja članova obitelji ili smrću u obitelji. Među povratnim migrantskim učiteljima bilo je očito da su, iako su napustili Južnu Afriku iz razloga povezanih s funkcionalnom dobrobiti, odluku o povratku donosili prvenstveno zbog razloga povezanih sa svojom psihosocijalnom dobrobiti, koja je snažno utemeljena u obiteljskim odnosima.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Južna Afrika, povratni migrantski učitelji, migracija učitelja, povratne migracije, obitelj

