Covert Research: Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater

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ABSTRACT

Covert research is not a method generally used in research due to ethical considerations, but it should not be undermined as a valuable research method in certain research circumstances. This article argues for the use of covert research as a complementary method in research when issues of gate-keeping and access to data obstruct the research process. Furthermore, it is argued that covert research facilitates emergence of rich, nuanced data in a research context where there is an eclipse of data and where the sampling strategy can elicit concerns around trustworthiness. The data for this article draw from a multi-layered ethnographic doctoral study (2005) on teacher migration between South Africa (SA) and the United Kingdom (UK) at the height of teacher recruitment from developing countries in the south to developed countries of the north, when there was an absence of research data on the phenomenon. Covert research was used to glean critical data on the characteristics of teachers being sought by recruitment agencies for UK schools, the route traversed by migrant teachers in their recruitment from SA to the UK, as well as the role of recruitment agencies and their strategies in facilitating migration of South African teachers.

Keywords: covert research, teacher migration, recruitment agencies, ethics, gate-keeping, access

INTRODUCTION

Covert research has been defined as “research processes in which researchers do not disclose their presence and identity as researchers and participants have no knowledge of their research identity” (Holloway, 1997: 39). Covert research is not a method that is well known or frequently practiced in research (Smith, 2001). When discussing and crafting methodology for research, it is generally overlooked and shied away from. In fact, if researchers had to attach methodological status to the various research styles, I have little doubt that covert research will occupy the lowest rung on the ladder for many. This is largely due to baggage attached to the use of covert research which centres on ethics and morality.
Covert research: Dirty words in research

Covert research attracts negative criticism in the social sciences due to a host of ethical and moral reasons (Holloway, 1997), of which the most frequently cited centre on informed consent (Calvey, 2008). However, it is common knowledge that “ethical issues in research are often challenging”, especially in qualitative research “when research adopts unconventional forms” (Wertz et al., 2011: 354). Several authors discussing ethical practices in research refer to covert research as “deceptive” (Van Deventer, 2009; Herrera, 1999; Homan, 1991) creating a connotation of dishonesty. Hence it is understandable when researchers such as Calvey (2008: 907) claim “it is my contention that covert research is effectively stigmatized in the research world.”

It has been argued by proponents of covert research, as in the Hawthorne experiment, that the presence of the researcher alters the context of the research, and this has been perceived as a limitation (Van Deventer, 2009). It is then a distinct advantage if there is non-disclosure by the researcher in a study, thus allowing for data to be untainted by the disclosed presence of the researcher. Indeed this point, in addition to other justifications for the use of covert research, are presented by the Economic and Social Research Council (2010: 21), which states that “covert research may be undertaken when it may provide unique forms of evidence or where overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied. The broad principle should be that covert research must not be undertaken lightly or routinely. It is only justified if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance which cannot be uncovered in other ways are likely to be discovered.”

A key principle purported by many critics of covert research is that the use of such research should not be a researcher’s ‘first port of call’ when developing the research design for a study (Herrera, 1999). What also emerges is the view based on the value that covert research can offer to society if there is an important phenomenon being studied and other research avenues were unable to yield valuable insights. The latter view has for some time been espoused as a defence for the use of covert research, namely as reference to the ‘gains’ in data and uncovering what might never have been known (see Herrera, 1999). This is a frequently cited view, again articulated and expanded on by Wells (2004), who presents a strong argument that covert research should be perceived by researchers with respect to both the quality of data that will emanate and research essentialism instead of the usual morality and ethics debates. It is indeed the former reason that resonates with my use of covert research, in addition to numerous other challenges (which I explain below) that I experienced in undertaking to examine the nature of the phenomenon of teacher migration between South Africa (SA) and the United Kingdom (UK).

In this article I argue for the use of covert research as a complementary research method. Covert research was not initially part of the research design for the study, but the various challenges I encountered called for flexibility and creativity in the research design. Recently Kvale and Brinkman (2009) contended that qualitative research (including ethics) must be approached from the perspective of a ‘craft’, which calls for innovative responses and malleability in addressing research challenges. Hence I used covert research for a multiplicity of reasons: there was an absence of data on the phenomenon and authenticity was premium, the sampling strategy was possibly skewed, and issues of gate-keeping and access to data obstructed the research process. Hence, my contention is ‘don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater’ – covert research should not be dismissed, because there are a myriad of reasons that prop up the value of its contribution to research.
This article is organised as follows. The first section briefly outlines the ethical dimensions generally associated with covert research. The next sections are based on an ethnographic study on the nature of teacher migration between SA and the UK, wherein I account for my reasons for using covert research. Thereafter I present the findings that emerged as a result of the use of covert research. The final section concludes with a call to remove the deficit discourse associated with covert research, given the value of using covert research in particular research contexts.

THE STUDY: TEACHER MIGRATION BETWEEN SA AND THE UK

The purpose of the study (2005) was to explain teacher migration between SA (in the post-apartheid era) and the UK.

The critical questions that informed the study were as follows:

i) Which teachers are leaving SA?

ii) What are their reasons for leaving SA?

iii) What are teachers’ experiences in the UK?

iv) Why are teachers returning to SA?

Questions ii, iii and iv had a hermeneutic focus in that the research pursued an understanding of teachers’ thoughts, decisions and actions. These were accomplished by examining data prior to teachers’ migration, upon their migration to the UK and after their return to SA. The methodological tools initially included in the study were questionnaires, interviews, observations and a focus group discussion.

An eclipse of data on the phenomenon

Democracy in SA (which dawned in 1994) facilitated ease of movement across national boundaries for professionals that did not exist during apartheid. Media and political hype in SA over concerns about the loss of the highly skilled in the fields of health (nurses, doctors etc.), teaching, engineering, accounting and information technology – known as the ‘brain drain’ – led to some empirical studies on health professionals and scientists (Crush, 2004; Kahn et al., 2004). However, there were no studies or data available on teacher migration between SA and the UK, which was eliciting some political and media attention via the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal (Curtis, 2003), who labelled the UK as ‘poaching’ teachers from SA. Many industrialised countries like the United States of America, UK and Canada have an ageing teaching fraternity (Ochs, 2007) and resorted to the unfettered recruitment of teachers from less developed countries to replenish their coffers, drawing large-scale criticism at Commonwealth level which led to the development of the Teacher Recruitment Protocol in 2004 ). The recruitment of teachers from SA to the UK was thus a phenomenon of national concern that required empirical research.

Before commencing fieldwork it was necessary to ascertain whether teachers who were exiting the profession in SA were a sizeable fraction of the teacher workforce, as there were no statistics on teacher migration. The following section outlines the rationale for a baseline study and also justifies
incorporation of a research method (covert research) that was not initially decided upon at the outset of the study.

**Attempts at a baseline study**

Prior to conducting fieldwork an attempt was made to review the existing data and policy on teacher attrition. This happened in two ways: firstly, in trying to obtain data to ascertain how many teachers had left SA; and secondly, in trying to elicit data from recruitment agencies regarding teachers recruited to the UK. Such teachers’ professional details were necessary since this would reveal the subjects taught by teachers which were in demand in the UK. Findings in each segment of the baseline study are presented below.

- **Attrition Statistics**

  It was envisaged that attrition statistics would be examined with the assistance of the Department of Education (DoE). It was necessary to ascertain what percentage of the teacher workforce had exited, and whether this was significant in itself or when added to SA attrition statistics.\(^1\) This would inform issues of teacher shortage and a potential brain drain. According to Boe, Bobbit and Cook (1995), teacher attrition is a component of teacher turnover (changes in teacher status from year to year). Teacher turnover may include teachers exiting the profession, but may also include those who change fields or schools. In this study teachers exiting the teaching profession through either boarding or retirement were not considered. The DoE in Pretoria (SA) willingly submitted their provincial resignation statistics. However, as teachers were under no obligation to stipulate their reason/s for resignation, it was impossible to calculate the number who had resigned from SA to teach abroad, and to locate the population. Thus sampling for the research proved a challenge.

- **Sampling**

  A major issue with regard to sampling is to determine a selection that best represents a population, thus allowing for accurate presentation of results (Bless & Higson-Smith, 1999). This is termed a representative sample. To ensure a representative sample, the use of a correct sampling frame is vital. There are no reliable data available regarding teachers migrating from or returning to SA. Teachers were not declaring their intention to migrate to the UK in advance, due to departmental investigations. Also, teachers who resigned were not under obligation to specify their reasons. Due to the absence of a sampling frame from which to select individuals, the application of a random method of selection was impossible. For the purposes of this study a non-probability sampling technique was applied since the SA migrant population was difficult to trace. The technique of selection which was utilised was snowball sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research (Babbie & Mouton, 2010).

  Snowball sampling was selected for its appropriateness in locating members of the teaching population. Since the researcher is a teacher, she had some colleagues and acquaintances that had migrated. These teachers also assisted in the location of the sample. The procedure consisted of collecting data on a few members of the population that could be located, and then asking those individuals to provide information to locate other members of the population within the province of KwaZulu-Natal, SA. The

\(^1\) Attrition is the termination of teachers’ services through any of the following: expiry of contract, death, resignation, retirement, medical boarding, suspension or discharge.
researcher also attended recruitment seminars where she interacted with prospective migrant teachers, and selected participants for the study based on teachers’ willingness to be a part of the study. Ultimately I couldn’t help but be concerned that I may have a skewed sample, and I also worried about the trustworthiness of the data being generated. I felt it was imperative to be able to triangulate the data that were emerging from the migrant teachers (interviews and focus group discussions) as I was engaging in an ethnography.

**Embarking on an ethnography**

According to Crowl (1996) ethnography is a way of life of some identifiable group of people, and that is exactly what the research aimed to achieve - a picture of South African teachers who were migrating to the UK and their resulting experiences. Ethnographic research, according to Daymon and Holloway (2002), entails extended periods of fieldwork in a group or community with the researcher observing and asking questions about the manner in which people interact, collaborate and communicate. But it is not only fieldwork, ethnography is also a description (a written story or report) about a particular group of people, and in this study this group was migrant teachers.

One of the main characteristics of ethnography is the researcher striving to achieve a ‘thick’ (Geertz, 1973) description. A thick description in the present study meant describing through a detailed account the recruitment process, experiences of and connections between relationships that join people, for example, social networks of family or other teachers in the UK and recruitment agency support, which facilitated the migration and supported the movement of participants. McHugh (2000: 74) contends that migration researchers have favoured demographic approaches to migration, thereby “shying away from alternate forms of meaning and understanding.” Both Fielding (1992: 205) and McHugh (2000: 73) agree that “only ethnographic research can reveal the subtle details of the experience of migration”. The research study responded to this criticism by using an ethnographic approach to move beyond statistical trends, by providing a rich and authentic explanation of the migration of teachers between SA and the UK. Thus, in attempting to elicit rich data recruitment agencies were perceived as being able to provide valuable insights.

**Accessing recruitment agency data**

It was also anticipated that the attrition data from the DoE could be triangulated with information received from the four recruitment agencies. However, recruitment agencies at the local level (SA) were unwilling to divulge statistics about the number of teachers in the different learning areas that they had recruited. They feared that it would have repercussions for their companies and provide information for their competitors. Smith (2001: 221) alluded to gate-keeping when she stated that “gatekeepers tend to deny and delay researchers because they are concerned, not unreasonably from their point of view, about the uses to which the research data will be put. They cite the need for confidentiality for firms”. Recruitment managers also stated that all documentation was forwarded to the UK and that there was an absence of any kind of statistics at agencies in SA. All queries for the study were directed to the human resources departments in the UK. However, no responses were forthcoming in spite of numerous attempts by the researcher via email.

It was obvious that recruitment agencies held many answers to understanding the migration of South African teachers to the UK, but that they were reluctant to reveal such information, since it would be
quoted for the purposes of research. The decision was then made to embark on covert research to extricate the necessary data. Covert research was utilised to glean recruitment data from agencies and to understand the route traversed by migrants in recruitment, as well as the role of agencies and their strategies in facilitating the migration of SA teachers to the UK.

**Going undercover as a prospective migrant teacher**

It was not difficult to move from being an ‘outsider’ (researcher) to an ‘insider’ (prospective migrant teacher) as I was a qualified teacher with 13 years of experience. This was a professional ethnography as I had the requisite teaching qualifications and experience, which constituted a form of sociocultural capital. Covert researchers maintain that they can detect ‘tacit’ consent from their subjects (Herrera, 1999: 336), and in my instance I had the teaching qualification which afforded me entry into the recruitment seminar. Furthermore, I applied to the agency and was granted an interview with a recruitment agent as the interviewer and myself as the interviewee; I merely reversed roles intermittently to validate certain claims made by either the agent or the migrant teacher. Also, the recruitment agents are not ‘strangers to deception’ (Herrera, 1999: 337), as I also discovered via the recruitment seminars, focus group discussions and interviews with migrant teachers.

The researcher assumed the status of a prospective migrant teacher and attended recruitment seminars and mingled with prospective migrant teachers. Discussion centred on their reasons for migration and their emotions prior to departure. The researcher was thus privy to pre-migrants’ concerns voiced at seminars, and the marketing strategies used by agencies to attract SA teachers. After attending seminars the researcher filled in the necessary documentation that was mailed, and awaited a response for an interview. In this manner the lived experiences of the prospective migrant teacher (Geertz, 1973) were illuminated.

The most frequent covert research method involves participant observation (see Calvey’s study on bouncers, 2008). However, the covert research method that I engaged in differed, in that it was ‘participant interview’, specifically fashioned for the purposes of validating the interview data that I sourced from migrant teachers and uncovering the profile of migrant teachers and role of recruitment agencies in teacher migration. When I was granted an interview with the recruitment agency the questions were diplomatically interwoven as queries to the recruitment agent to gather insight into the type of teachers that agencies were specifically attempting to recruit, and the way London schools were presented to prospective migrants. In this manner the researcher (as a prospective migrant teacher) gleaned information from three recruitment agencies via covert research, after one interview with limited data from a recruitment agency.

Smith (2001: 222) has succinctly warned that “as an ethnographer you can’t help but worry that you may be getting only a partial view and so strive to supplement or cross-check data with other types of data”. Thus data from recruitment seminars were enriched and triangulated with data derived from other sources, namely migration questionnaires, interviews and a focus group discussion. As Herrera (1999: 336) pronounced: “the question is not so much whether a study is covert, but how covert it is.” In this particular study, it was partly and not entirely covert.

**FINDINGS**
This section provides empirical evidence on the role of recruitment agencies in the migration of teachers from SA to the UK. Rich data on the recruitment of teachers emerged through the use of covert research in unison with data derived from migrant interviews and a focus group discussion.

The persuasive influence of recruitment agencies

The important role of recruitment agencies in the migration of SA teachers was revealed. Recruitment agencies entice SA teachers to go abroad in pursuit of a host of goals. These include earning British pounds, still the strongest currency at present and in the early 2000 with an exchange rate of approximately 12 South African rands for a pound,² travelling to and within Europe, and professional opportunities such as career advancement through gaining global teaching experience. Each of these categories is discussed below.

- The Money and the Perks

Recruitment agencies were largely responsible for the hype created post-apartheid about the benefits of teaching in the UK (covert research, 24-05-02; 12-11-02; 25-03-03). The carrot dangled by recruitment agencies in their weekly advertisements in newspapers had many facets: the earning potential, exciting perks such as free flights, accommodation and the opportunity to travel as a migrant teacher within the UK and to Europe. Prior to 2008 there was an increasing momentum in the human capital flight of professionals from SA. A cursory glance through national newspaper, the Sunday Times (no authors since they are advertisements, 08-09-02; author, 01-09-02) revealed attractive advertisements by recruitment agencies which were aimed at SA teachers, offering them rewarding packages to teach in the UK: “Taking your career on holiday, ... extend your teaching skills, ... join countless other teachers, ... comprehensive support programme, ... the best package you’ll find ... free” and promises of a daily rate of 100 pounds.

The recruitment strategy offering various perks was a distinct pull factor to UK schools: a currency conversion of 100 pounds into rands makes for a very attractive salary for a South African teacher. While the agency advertisements assured a minimum of 100 pounds a day, the salary deductions of the teacher were not divulged, which thus gave the wrong impression about the migrant teacher’s earnings. The disposable income was seldom discussed during recruitment seminars. Interestingly, migrant teachers Ben and Mersan (focus group, 10-04-03, UK) confirmed that the salary rate per day is set at 180 pounds. However, when the ‘researcher as migrant teacher’ queried the salary during the participant interview with the recruitment agent (covert research, 29/05/03, SA), the reply was: “Where did you hear that? Perhaps you misunderstood the amount, you might have been told 118 pounds. We could never pay that figure”. Indeed, it appeared that recruitment agencies were making a sizeable profit of sixty-two pounds per day for each teacher. This was in addition to having the school pay the recruitment agency for procurement of a teacher.

An agency information package for migrant teachers did affirm that London rentals were excessive, with the estimated amount provided as a guideline between 80 to 120 pounds for a double shared room in a house. If the migrant teacher intended renting a flat or a house then the costs were greater. Migrant teachers were informed in agency interviews that they would be given the option of occupying agency accommodation when they arrived in the UK. Migrant teachers would frequently share accommodation in order to save costs. Furthermore, approximately 30% of the migrants’ earnings will be deducted for tax and obligatory national insurance. What was quite interesting was the clause in an agency contract

² September 2003 exchange rate.
which stated that "any information given is only intended as a guide and as such the accuracy of this information cannot be guaranteed and should not be relied upon". Hence the agency was attempting to absolve itself of any claim of deception.

The recruitment of teachers is not a gratis service, although it may be presented in this manner during introductory recruitment seminars (covert research, 24-05-02, 11-12-02, 06-06-02). A recruitment agency is a business and the aim is to make a profit, but it is never revealed as a business exploit. There were agencies that feigned free recruitment of teachers. The agencies claimed to offer a complimentary service, but upon securing a job for the migrant teacher the agency was responsible for the teacher’s salary, and the school was only the site for the service. An agency newsletter elucidated the working contract: “at the end of each week you will need to fill in a timesheet indicating the number of days you have worked. You will need to post them every Friday ... we process the timesheets every second Monday with the money being deposited in your account the next Friday”. Thus, the school had entrusted the agency to acquire the teacher and would pay for this procurement. In addition, the school would pay a daily rate for each migrant teacher reporting to teach at the school. All agencies failed to reveal that when a teacher is positioned in a school, for every day that the teacher is present at the school, the agency would receive an additional payment of approximately 50 pounds per day (focus group discussion, 07-04-03). Return migrant Colet (interview, 24-08-03) passionately declared: “Agencies are a rip-off! The school paid 175 pounds per teacher per day, however, the agency only paid the teachers 90 pounds”.

Clearly, some of the clauses in the contract which bound the migrant teacher to recruitment agency rules were unfavourable, such as the regulation dealing with leave from school. The migrant teacher is not entitled to paid sick leave, which is not declared to teachers. A teacher is paid according to the number of hours he/she has worked, which is indicated on the time sheet. Furthermore, migrant teachers who are supply teachers (temporary positions at schools) are not permanent members of staff and do not therefore obtain holiday pay, which in effect means a reduced salary (focus group discussion, 07-04-03; migrant interview with Ben, 06-06-02).

Ultimately, recruitment agencies were attempting to create an impressive economic drive to persuade local SA teachers to go to the UK. This is a contention of Gould (2002: 3), who cautions South African teachers to be “aware of slick sales representatives.” A migrant teacher from SA who posted an article on the Internet also declared a similar view (Suntimes, 2002). The article counsels migrant teachers as follows: “agencies get up to 180 pounds per teacher per day ... ensure that your agency provides you with support when you need it”.

Also in the limelight during the same period was a group of migrant teachers from Africa who were exploited by a recruitment agency (Garner, 2003). The agency recruited teachers from African countries (including SA) with the promise of regular work. Upon arrival in the UK the teachers were informed that work would not be regular. Furthermore, after a period of time when their visas expired, they were not renewed. These teachers were then requested to leave the UK. The article alleged that “the treatment of the teachers has been disgraceful and many were living in poverty because they could not find work”. (Garner, 2003). The Deputy General Secretary of NASUWT (one of the teacher unions in the UK) described their dilemma as “the worst exploitation of a group of teachers that I have ever come across” (Garner, 2003). One agency contract did specify in their abundant terms and conditions of employment (five pages in total) that there could be episodes when work will not be easily available.

All three recruitment agents were quick to emphasise the many perks that their business could provide (covert research, 24-05-02, 11-12-02, 06-06-02), such as arrangements to assist in obtaining
accommodation, help in opening a bank account and the provision of holiday jobs. An agency also offered ‘a less 14% tax concession’ to teachers and flight arrangements such as reduced rates to travel to the UK. At times recruitment agency undertakings did not materialise, as confirmed by Colet (migrant interview, 24-08-03). She stated that they (a group of migrant teachers recruited by the agency) were abandoned at the airport although they were promised free travel by the agency, and the cost to her was 70 pounds in taxi fare. She revealed that migrant teachers were also disappointed when other promises were not adhered to, such as free cell phones, bank accounts and free accommodation for two weeks when they were recruited in SA. This was not provided upon arrival in the UK, and migrant teachers had to cope on their own without agency support.

It emerged that some of the strategies used by recruitment agencies to offer assistance to teachers were attempts to reduce the costs of migration by offering accommodation, cheaper flying rates and tax concessions. However, what some recruitment agencies did not tell migrant teachers was that the support in accommodation was at a boarding establishment, at an excessive amount. The rental was on average 400 pounds per month according to migrant teachers Hannah and Charlie (interviewed on 17-08-03 and 22-08-03 respectively). The price of the airline ticket that migrant teachers were charged was higher than the average price quoted by travel agents, and this migrant teachers only realised much later. Hence the gratis services that were presented by the agency were strategically included in the costs of migration.

Migrant teachers did divulge that there were a few agencies that provided a few free services. Upon migration some participants (post-migrant interviews, Lyn 03-04-03, Rena 08-04-03) explained their appreciation for their agencies’ support in arranging transport from the airport, acquiring holiday visas and organising gatherings for foreign teachers to assist in their socio-cultural integration into schools. It became apparent through the data from covert research, interviews and focus group discussion that the recruitment of teachers was a profitable industry and was broadened to various supplementary services that were offered to migrant teachers at a price.

The value of the teacher as a commodity for the recruitment agency to sell to UK schools was revealed. As Rene, a post-migrant in the UK, stated during a focus group discussion (07-04-03, UK): “They [recruitment agency] charge a fee to the school and you feel so cheap, it’s so terrible.” In this instance the migrant teacher conceptualised herself as a commodity, but it led to her feeling worthless as she felt that this diminished her professional status. In SA Rene was a Grade 12 teacher and she perceived herself to be professionally on a higher ranking than other level one teachers. It should also be noted that she willingly left SA and migrated to the UK. However, she was either unaware of the commodification of teachers in the UK or simply ill-informed.

Covert research as a prospective migrant (12-11-02, 25-03-03, 28-03-03) revealed that in order for the teacher to be perceived as a valuable commodity, there were numerous documents that required detailed explanations of various aspects of the migrant’s personal and professional nature. The introductory package mailed to the prospective migrant teacher was quite considerable. There were some documents which were common to all agencies, such as the curriculum vitae, a police clearance, certified copies of professional qualifications and letters of recommendation for work. However, the distinguishing features of each agency were the lengthy profiles in which South African teachers had to discuss their teaching methods, their educational philosophy and the disciplinary measures they would utilise. Indeed, the aim was to explore the teacher’s personality in an attempt to ascertain suitability as a teacher in UK schools. It could also be used to establish whether the migrant would be an investment for the business and adjust, instead of hopping on the next available flight back to SA. Of course, this
could have been a genuine endeavour to place SA teachers in UK schools or for recruitment agencies to settle on whether the migrant teacher was a useful asset.

Interviews (post-migrants Rene 07-04-03 and Sera 14-08-03, SA, and return-migrant Mala 21-08-03, SA) and covert research (04-04-03, UK) revealed that recruitment agencies were responsible for omitting key information from their seminars and interviews before migrants’ departure to the UK. Travel costs to and from schools in the UK varied if a teacher intended using public transport to reach the school. Depending on the area, it may be necessary to travel by train and bus across different travel zones, and this will impact on the costs of a travel card. As post-migrant, Sera (interview, 14-08-03, SA) stated that she “lived three hours away from school and had to take a train, two buses and a walk to get to school”.

Recruitment agencies were involved in gate-keeping strategies with reference to the recruitment of teachers to specific learning areas. In 2000, in order to attract Maths teachers to UK schools teachers were offered 4000 pounds as an incentive to teach the subject. However, the need for Maths teachers in secondary schools was still great in 2002/2003 (The Royal Society, 2007). Teachers in the Maths and Science fields were declared to be in demand, as recruitment seminars in SA highlighted jobs for teachers in specific fields where there was a need in the UK. Gate-keeping was also evident at the level of recruitment by virtue of race. A manager (interview ProTeachers, 11-07-02) referred to having 10% of their enquiries from African teachers, yet failed to recruit any due to English being a second language for Africans in SA. In respect of Indian teachers, English is their first language, so this did not apply. It was unlikely that African teachers were aware of this type of racial and linguistic discrimination.

Furthermore, the National Director of Teacher Development of the DoE (S. Nxesi) stated that most of the 58 000 underqualified teachers come from formerly African colleges (Sukhraj, Mkhize and Govender, 08-02-04: 01). The implication is that the majority of unqualified teachers are African. Hence, due to their lack of a recognised teaching qualification, they will not be eligible for recruitment, since the advertisements mention the need for specific professional qualifications. It is therefore strange that the UK does not recognise SA teachers’ qualifications. Upon migration, SA teachers were informed that they would need to undertake the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) exam if they wanted to be recognised as teachers in the UK.

There were some recruitment managers who were honest in assisting prospective migrant teachers. Their efforts included making personal telephone calls to prospective migrants (covert research, 06-06-02, 29-05-03) to concern over the brain drain and the DoE forcing teachers to resign before they exit SA (interview with ProTeachers, 11-07-02). ProTeacher’s manager was disappointed in the DoE’s attitude to South African teachers. She was of the opinion that South African teachers should have the same opportunities as those from New Zealand and Australia, where teachers are supported in their migration for professional development reasons for a maximum period of a year. The post at the home school is temporarily filled by a substitute during the period of absence. The manager of ProTeachers was of the opinion that the DoE in SA was forcing teachers to exit permanently, by asking for teachers’ resignation from the profession.

DISCUSSION

This article argues for the use of covert research in particular research circumstances, by drawing on the use of covert research as an additional research strategy in a pioneering study on teacher migration between SA and the UK. The study initially experienced challenges that warranted the inclusion of covert research to both uncover and validate several findings emerging from a snowball sample of
migrant teachers. There was no existing literature on SA-UK teacher migration prior to this study, which was published in 2005. The study was undertaken at a time when teacher migration from SA to the UK was at its height, yet there was a lack of empirical studies on the nature of the phenomenon in the South African context. Thus, teacher migration from SA was an unresearched phenomenon but one of national concern, since highly skilled South African professionals in critical subjects, who were needed by the home country, were being recruited by a developed country, the UK. This is why the use of covert research was justified (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010). Also, recruitment agencies were using gate-keeping strategies to obstruct the research process.

Covert research was responsible for revealing a rich tapestry of data on teacher migration, a phenomenon being aided and abetted by recruitment agencies which facilitated the migration of teachers from less developed to more developed countries. The study, through covert research methods, put the spotlight clearly on the role of recruitment agencies and their strategies in luring teachers from SA to the UK. The commodification of migrant teachers was easily discernable in the practices of the recruitment agencies. Commodification is generated from commodification theory, which is a feature of labour theory, purporting that capitalism turns all “objects, work and relationships into commodities, things that can be bought, sold and valued” (Lye, 2003: 1). Lye (2003: 1) maintains that “our understandings of ourselves and our relations to others and society changes” in that context. Recruitment agencies had realised the extent to which recruitment was lucrative, and South African teachers were being sold to schools in the UK that were in need of teachers. This was the “authentic picture” (Calvey, 2008: 911) that emerged by choosing to use covert research.

CONCLUSION

Covert research was used in the study as a complementary method in the research which examined the nature of teacher migration between SA and the UK. Various challenges were experienced in the research design such as the lack of empirical studies on SA-UK teacher migration, sampling, gate-keeping strategies by recruitment agencies and the need to triangulate emerging data; these were all reasons that warranted the use of covert research. The significance of the data that emerged is enormous: not only nuanced data on the workings of recruitment agencies in enticing teachers, but their treatment of teachers as mere commodities.

The evidence that was generated through covert methods bridged a critical chasm, namely recruitment literature, on the phenomenon of teacher migration from developing to developed countries. These data were later presented to the Commonwealth Council (see Manik, 2010) as part of a collective attempt to address the mobility of teachers in Commonwealth countries.

I am strongly of the opinion that the time has come to remove the deficit discourse when discussing covert research as a research method, given the quality of the data that have been generated through its use. Indeed, with this new knowledge countries can begin to consider producing national legislation that protects recruited teachers from labour exploitation by recruitment agencies.
REFERENCES


