

# Factors Influencing Migration Of Grade R Teachers From Their Practising Schools In The Gauteng District

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*Grade R is the reception year in the foundation phase of South Africa's education system. The teachers here support children aged three to five in developing the skills required for formal schooling. This study explored the factors influencing the migration of Grade R teachers from their practising schools in the Gauteng District. The study was grounded in Push Factor Theory developed by Everett Lee in 1966. A qualitative research approach was adopted, with data collected from ten Grade R teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke. The findings revealed that factors that push Grade R teachers to migrate include high learner-to-teacher ratios, inadequate facilities and teaching resources, opportunities for promotion and professional growth, and lack of institutional support for teacher well-being. It was recommended that National and provincial education policies need to give stronger attention to the professional status of Grade R teachers by promoting reasonable class sizes, fair salaries, and well-defined career advancement routes.*

**Key words:** *Foundation phase, Grade R, Teacher professional development, Teacher migration, South Africa*

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## Introduction

Grade R represents the reception year within the foundation phase of South Africa's education system. Therefore, Grade R teachers help children aged three to five develop the skills needed for formal schooling. Additionally, they foster social, emotional, and cognitive abilities through a curriculum that is structured and centred on play (Dirks, 2021). They work to foster a love of learning by designing engaging, welcoming classroom environments that promote creativity and curiosity. Foundational literacy and numeracy skills are prioritised, along with encouraging social interaction and physical development. Such teachers are practitioners who lay a solid educational foundation to support both future academic success and personal development of learners.

The migration of Grade R teachers from their assigned schools presents a significant disruption to this foundational learning. This teacher turnover interrupts continuity in the classroom, resulting in gaps in instruction, inconsistent curriculum delivery, and weakened teacher-learner relationships. In South African township schools, such as those in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, the loss of trained Grade R teachers often forces schools to rely on unqualified personnel or operate with understaffed classes, compromising early learning quality (Nkosi, 2019).

The quality of Grade R schools is a critical issue of grave concern to successive governments in South Africa. Despite government initiatives to improve the quality of education at this level in the country (Biersteker, 2018; Shiyi, 2021), teachers either migrate to higher grades, schools or other countries. These disruptions disproportionately affect marginalised communities, exacerbating pre-existing educational inequalities and limiting access to quality education. This practice creates a significant research gap in understanding the underlying push factors influencing the migration of such teachers. This is critical because there are limited empirical data exist on what cause the movement of Grade R teacher in Gauteng district. The current study seeks to correct empirical data to fill the gap.

## Objective

To determine the push factors influencing migration of Grade R teachers from their practicing schools.

## Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Push Factor Theory (PFT). PFT was developed by Everett Lee in 1966 as part of his broader Theory of Migration. It was introduced to explain why people migrate away from their current location, alongside pull factors that attract them elsewhere. Methodologically, the theory supports the use of a qualitative

approach, as it prioritises individuals lived experiences and perceptions of unfavourable conditions that compel them to leave their practising schools. Exploring teachers' narratives allows the study to capture how factors that operate as push factors. In terms of findings, the theory provides a strong explanatory lens by demonstrating the push factors causing Grade R teachers to migrate in response to persistent negative working conditions.

## **Literature review**

### *Remuneration of teachers*

Low remuneration stands out as one of the primary causes of teacher migration across different educational settings. Gundlach (2025) emphasises that dissatisfaction with pay is a dominant factor influencing teachers' decisions to leave their schools, districts, or even the teaching profession entirely. When teachers feel that their salaries do not correspond with the amount of work, dedication, and responsibility they assume, they often seek employment opportunities that offer better financial security. This situation leads to instability in the education workforce, causing disruptions in teaching and learning continuity. The challenge is even more severe in developing countries, where economic hardships further push teachers to migrate to urban areas or other nations for better wages and living standards. Zikanga et al. (2021) argue that inadequate remuneration affects teacher retention and negatively influences their motivation and overall performance. Teachers who feel underpaid often experience low morale, which leads to reduced commitment to teaching and poor learner outcomes.

According to Muremela et al. (2023), the lack of adequate pay also makes it difficult to recruit and retain teachers in remote or under-resourced communities. In the South African context, rural schools face a chronic shortage of teachers because the salaries offered do not match the difficult living and working conditions in these areas. The unattractive remuneration discourages new entrants from joining the profession, especially in early childhood education (Okeke and Nyanhoto, 2021), where pay scales are typically lower than those of other education levels. The result is a weakened teaching workforce that struggles to maintain continuity and quality in education. This issue highlights the importance of reviewing salary structures and offering rural incentives to retain teachers in underserved areas.

Fullard and Zuccollo (2021) stress that fair remuneration is a critical factor in enhancing job satisfaction, loyalty, and teacher retention. Teachers who feel financially secure are more likely to demonstrate professional dedication and higher levels of motivation. However, low pay fosters disillusionment and prompts teachers to consider alternative career paths that offer better rewards. Marangu et al. (2024) and Mishra et al. (2025) further explain that migration driven by salary disparities destabilises schools and hinders effective curriculum implementation. The loss of experienced educators disrupts institutional memory and continuity, making it difficult for schools to maintain consistent performance. Therefore, improving teacher salaries and benefits is a vital strategy to reduce migration, promote stability, and strengthen the overall quality of education systems.

Most research studies in the above paragraphs focus on general teacher turnover, leaving a gap in understanding how low pay specifically shapes the migration patterns of Grade R teachers, whose remuneration conditions differ from other phases. There is also limited empirical evidence from the Gauteng District on how inadequate salaries influence teachers' decisions to move between schools rather than leave the profession entirely. This study is therefore important because it addresses these gaps by providing context-specific insights that can inform salary reforms, retention strategies, and policies aimed at stabilising the Grade R teaching workforce and improving continuity in early childhood education.

### *Job security of teachers*

Lack of job security remains a central factor driving the migration of teachers within and across education systems. When teachers perceive instability in their employment, they are more likely to pursue opportunities that offer stronger professional stability and financial reliability. Dindi, Likoko, and Nabwire (2022) found that uncertainty about job continuity in Kenyan primary schools leads teachers to seek transfers or exit the profession altogether. Similarly, Mwelwa (2022) revealed that temporary contracts, unclear promotion pathways, and inconsistent government postings in Zambia heighten teachers' feelings of vulnerability, prompting them to migrate to better-secured positions. This insecurity reduces motivation, weakens commitment, and contributes to workforce instability within the education sector.

According to Kazak (2021), the absence of permanent employment structures forces teachers to frequently change schools or regions in search of better prospects. Such instability undermines professional commitment and erodes the continuity of teaching and learning. Learners are often affected when experienced teachers depart unexpectedly, leading to gaps in instructional delivery and a decline in overall academic performance. Furthermore, job insecurity diminishes teachers' professional identity, as they perceive teaching as a temporary occupation rather than a long-term career. This weakens teacher retention and contributes to persistent staffing shortages, especially in rural and underserved communities.

Globally, job insecurity has been linked to teacher shortages and declining retention rates. Leijen et al. (2025) and Cuervo and Vera-Toscano (2025) note that teachers in Estonia and Australia experience stress and professional dissatisfaction due to limited job protection and career advancement opportunities. These findings are reinforced by Farahmandpour and Voelkel (2025), who argue that the lack of employment stability is a systemic issue resulting from inadequate policies and insufficient investment in teacher welfare. Without clear contractual frameworks and long-

term employment guarantees, education systems struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers, thereby affecting the consistency and quality of education delivery.

The implications of job insecurity are significant and justify why it is a critical challenge for education systems. Kim and Cho (2025) emphasise that perceived employment instability leads to psychological stress, reduced morale, and diminished classroom performance. In Burkina Faso, Bedasso and Acosta (2025) found that job insecurity contributes to high teacher attrition, leaving schools understaffed and compromising learners' access to quality education. Addressing job insecurity is therefore vital to improving teacher retention and strengthening the overall education system. Providing stable employment contracts, transparent career progression, and supportive working conditions can enhance professional commitment, reduce migration, and promote sustainable educational outcomes.

Job insecurity remains underexplored in the context of Grade R teachers, creating a significant research gap that limits understanding of why such teachers migrate from their practising schools. Although existing studies highlight general insecurity linked to temporary contracts, unclear promotion pathways, and inconsistent postings, little is known about how these conditions specifically affect Grade R teachers, who already work in a vulnerable and often undervalued phase of schooling. This gap is critical because inadequate job stability disrupts teacher retention and weakens continuity in early childhood learning. Without focused research on Grade R teachers in the Gauteng District, policies cannot be effectively tailored to strengthen employment stability, reduce migration, and ensure that young learners receive consistent and quality foundational education.

#### *Recognition and professional status of teachers*

Inadequate recognition and low professional status are widely acknowledged as critical causes of teacher migration, including that of Grade R teachers. McDaid and Nowlan (2022) assert that teachers who perceive their work as undervalued or insufficiently acknowledged are more likely to experience reduced job satisfaction and diminished motivation, which in turn increases their likelihood of leaving their positions or seeking opportunities elsewhere. Stromquist (2018) supports this view, noting that the teaching profession, especially at the early childhood level, is often regarded as low-status work, which erodes teachers' professional identity and diminishes their sense of belonging within the education sector. This undervaluation negatively affects both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, creating a scenario in which teachers consider migration as a viable option to achieve recognition and professional respect.

Furthermore, the lack of professional acknowledgement constrains career progression (Mpuangan, 2024), which contributes significantly to teacher migration. Amitai and Van Houtte (2022) observed that educators who feel "pushed out" due to limited opportunities for recognition often pursue employment in institutions or countries where their expertise is valued, thereby perpetuating a cycle of talent loss. Diamond and Adam (2023) emphasise that formal acknowledgement of scholarly, professional, and creative contributions is essential for retaining competent educators, yet early childhood teachers frequently receive minimal recognition for their instructional and developmental work. This systemic lack of recognition undermines teacher morale and contributes to high turnover, disrupting institutional stability and impeding long-term program implementation.

The association between professional recognition and teacher performance further exacerbates the problem. Ibwongo and Komakech (2021) and Phiri and Mulenga (2020) found that teachers who feel professionally undervalued demonstrate lower engagement levels and are more likely to seek transfers or leave the profession entirely. Darling-Hammond, DiNapoli, and Kini (2023) argue that policy interventions aimed at enhancing teacher retention must prioritise professional recognition, as ignoring this factor leads to persistent teacher shortages and inequitable distribution of qualified personnel. Torres and Weiner (2018) highlight that recognition is integral to the perceived quality and respectability of the teaching profession, with teachers showing greater commitment and job satisfaction when their professional contributions are acknowledged and rewarded appropriately.

The consequences of inadequate recognition and low professional status extend beyond teacher retention to affect learner outcomes and institutional efficiency. Tehseen and Hadi (2015) report that migration caused by insufficient recognition results in staffing gaps, reduced instructional quality, and increased recruitment and training costs for educational institutions. In the context of Grade R education, the migration of teachers due to low professional status presents a particularly serious problem, as it disrupts the continuity of early childhood learning, affects social-emotional development, and undermines foundational educational outcomes (Ingersoll, May & Collins, 2019). Addressing this issue requires targeted strategies, including structured recognition programs, career advancement pathways, and public acknowledgement of teacher contributions to foster a motivated, stable, and highly competent workforce.

Existing studies show that low professional status contributes to teacher migration, but very few focus specifically on Grade R teachers. The work of these teachers is often overlooked, even though they play a crucial role in early learning. Much of the current scholarship highlights general teacher dissatisfaction, but there is insufficient attention to how inadequate recognition weakens early childhood teachers' professional identity, disrupts their career pathways, and contributes to chronic instability in the foundation phase. The literature also lacks a clear examination of how systemic undervaluation interacts with local policy environments, particularly in South Africa, where Grade R teachers face inconsistent recognition, limited progression opportunities, and weaker professional support structures than their counterparts in higher grades. This study is therefore critical because it addresses these overlooked dimensions by exploring how recognition practices, professional status, and career mobility shape Grade R teacher

retention. This seeks to help policymakers and education leaders design more responsive strategies that promote dignity, stability, and effectiveness in early childhood education.

#### *Teachers' workload*

Overcrowded classrooms are widely recognised as a major factor driving the migration of Grade R teachers, as they directly affect teaching quality, teacher effectiveness, and professional satisfaction. Marais (2016) observes that student teachers in South Africa report significant stress and a sense of helplessness when faced with excessively large classes, which limits their ability to provide individualised attention and undermines their confidence in teaching. Bano, Minaz, and Idris (2025) further argue that teachers in elementary schools with high learner-to-teacher ratios struggle to manage classroom behaviour, monitor learner progress, and implement meaningful instructional strategies, all of which contribute to dissatisfaction and motivate teachers to seek transfers or leave the profession altogether. Such challenges make overcrowding a persistent push factor in the migration of Grade R educators.

In addition to administrative and instructional difficulties, overcrowded classrooms constrain the ability of teachers to implement differentiated pedagogical approaches. Daşcıoğlu and Bümen (2025) explain that tailoring lessons to individual learners' needs becomes exceedingly difficult when class sizes are excessive, reducing the effectiveness of instruction. Alhomoud (2025) reinforces this point by emphasising that when teachers are unable to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of learners due to overcrowding, they often feel professionally ineffective. This persistent sense of inadequacy contributes to low morale, professional frustration, and eventually motivates teachers to migrate to environments that allow more manageable class sizes, highlighting the role of recognition and competence in teacher retention.

Overcrowding also imposes considerable physical and emotional strain on teachers, accelerating attrition and migration. Vakili, Vakili, Ajilian Abbasi, Masoudi, and Saeidi (2024) note that the constant demands of managing large numbers of learners can lead to burnout, chronic stress, absenteeism, and declining overall health, all of which encourage teachers to leave their current positions. Shirinkam, Munir, Shakil, Younas, and Khan (2025) similarly report that overpopulated classrooms generate higher levels of learner conflict, disciplinary challenges, and noise, exacerbating teachers' stress and reducing job satisfaction. For Grade R teachers, who must provide close guidance to support early childhood development, such conditions severely compromise their ability to teach effectively and increase the likelihood of migration.

The consequences of overcrowded classrooms extend beyond teacher migration, affecting learners' academic outcomes and overall school performance. Botha (2022) explains that teachers in overcrowded classrooms cannot deliver sufficient formative assessments, feedback, or individualised support, leading to suboptimal learner engagement and academic performance. Morgan (2023) highlights that overcrowding contributes to ongoing teacher shortages, particularly in rural and underserved areas, as experienced educators leave for schools with smaller, more manageable class sizes. The cyclical effect of overcrowding and teacher migration threatens educational equity and the quality of early childhood education, making it imperative for policy interventions, strategic resource allocation, and classroom management reforms to address this pervasive problem effectively.

Gaps in the current literature indicate that while overcrowded classrooms are widely acknowledged as a major contributor to teacher stress and migration, very few studies focus specifically on how these workload pressures uniquely affect Grade R teachers, whose roles require close learner support and developmentally appropriate instruction. Existing research largely overlooks how overcrowding undermines early childhood pedagogies, leading to professional frustration and weakened teacher retention at this foundational level. This study is therefore critical because it addresses the underexplored link between excessive workload, emotional strain, and the migration of Grade R teachers. It offers insights that can inform targeted policies to stabilise the early childhood education workforce.

#### *School resources*

Inadequate resources in schools are a significant factor contributing to the migration of teachers, particularly in early childhood and Grade R settings. Ragadu and Rothmann (2025) argue that the lack of teaching materials, limited classroom infrastructure, and insufficient professional development opportunities increase the workload for teachers while constraining their capacity to deliver effective instruction. Teachers working under these conditions often experience frustration and stress, which can motivate them to leave their current positions for schools or institutions with better resources (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). This issue is particularly critical in early childhood education, where foundational learning heavily depends on appropriate teaching materials, learning aids, and classroom support.

The scarcity of resources also negatively impacts teachers' professional well-being and resilience. Liu (2024) highlights that teachers in resource-constrained environments often experience reduced psychological resilience, which mediates their intention to leave the profession. When classrooms lack essential tools and support, teachers must expend extra effort to maintain instructional quality, leading to burnout and an increased likelihood of migration. Brandenburg, Larsen, Simpson, Sallis, and Trần (2024) note that the cumulative effect of resource deficiencies contributes to higher attrition rates across educational contexts, as teachers seek workplaces that can adequately support their professional and career needs.

Inadequate resources not only influence teacher migration but also directly affect learner outcomes and the overall quality of education. Leijen, Lepp, Saks, Pedaste, and Poom-Valickis (2025) point out that resource constraints exacerbate teacher shortages, particularly in rural or underfunded schools, creating a cycle in which remaining teachers face increased workloads and deteriorating working conditions. García, Han, and Weiss (2022) further argue

that limited resources reduce the perceived prestige and satisfaction of the teaching profession, contributing to attrition. Kraft and Lyon (2024) support this view, showing that teachers in under-resourced settings are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and eventually leave the profession.

The problem of inadequate resources, therefore, has far-reaching consequences. Seelig and McCabe (2021) emphasise that teacher migration due to resource inadequacies disrupts educational continuity and weakens learner support, which negatively impacts student achievement and educational equity. The persistent lack of resources creates an unstable teaching workforce and compromises the quality of education delivered, particularly in early childhood and rural settings. Addressing resource inadequacies is critical not only for retaining teachers but also for ensuring that learners receive high-quality, consistent educational experiences.

It can be learnt from the above paragraphs that teacher migration is among the major global trends that heavily influence education systems, especially in the developing world. Brain drain, attrition, and migration slow down Nigeria's development by leading instructors to emigrate abroad for better career opportunities and remuneration possibilities (Manabete, 2022). Chang (1992) offers a Taiwanese comparative outlook since there, educators seek economic stability and professional advancement elsewhere due to reasons that are also analogous. Looking at the case in Pakistan, Behlol & Dad (2020) note how educational migration leads to brain drain by reducing the number of educated students enrolling in local universities.

In South Africa, Grade R practitioners' migration from their practice schools is influenced by a set of interdependent factors. Serfontein (2016) investigates the stakeholders' experiences regarding the enactment of a Grade R diploma programme offered by Open Distance Learning (ODL). The objective of the program was to enhance professional development, but inadequate support systems and technological limitations were in its way. As a result of these issues, the efficacy of the programme was put at risk, and quality training for most practitioners was not provided. As a result of there being little available effective professional development, Grade R practitioners resign to work in other positions because they feel there are other opportunities for development. Samuels et al. (2012) write about the developmental systems model in early childhood intervention in South Africa. Their study identifies structural issues like the lack of resources and support for early childhood practitioners, such as Grade R teachers. Practitioners transfer to other schools or regions in search of optimum support and resources for their practice because of such deficiencies, and these also lead to isolation and discontentment at work.

Gustafsson (2016) presents a detailed report of the deficit of teachers and learning standards in South Africa, varying in working conditions across different areas. The study highlights that Grade R practitioners frequently experience uncooperative working conditions, such as sub-standard buildings, low earnings, and high workload, especially in poorer and rural areas. Such deplorable working conditions are powerful migration drivers since workers are in search of stable and decent remunerative working conditions. Biersteker (2018) discusses the policy environment and its implications for early childhood education in South Africa. Biersteker observes that although there have been attempts at prioritising early childhood education, the speed at which policies have been formulated has been uneven and slow. They are impacted in their migration by such disequilibrium and indeterminate career direction manuals, and the failure to appreciate the functions of Grade R practitioners. The research identifies the necessity of robust and periodical enforced policy frameworks that prioritise early childhood education most highly and are responsive to practitioner professionalisation and maintenance.

Gaps in the literature show that although many studies acknowledge that poor school resources contribute to teacher migration, very limited research specifically examines how this resource shortages uniquely affect Grade R teachers. Since these teachers work rely on age-appropriate materials, learning aids, and structured support systems, addressing this gap in this study is critical. Existing studies also overlook how resource inadequacies interact with other factors such as professional identity, motivation, and early childhood pedagogy, leaving a gap in understanding the full extent to which poor school environments push Grade R teachers to leave their posts. This study is therefore critical because it addresses these overlooked dimensions. It offers insight into how resource deficits undermine Grade R teacher stability, disrupt early learning, and weaken efforts to strengthen the early childhood education workforce.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research approach***

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study. As noted by Candra et al. (2024), qualitative research focuses on understanding the deeper reasons behind human behaviour rather than merely identifying what occurs. This approach was suitable because it allowed the researcher to gain detailed and contextual insights into the factors influencing teacher migration among Grade R practitioners in the Gauteng district. It provided an opportunity to explore teachers' lived experiences, their working environments, and the broader systemic issues shaping their decisions.

### ***Research design***

In this study, a multiple case study design was adopted. A case study is an in-depth, context-focused research approach used to examine a particular individual, group, organisation, or phenomenon within its natural setting (Yin, 2009). Using multiple cases was particularly suitable for this study because the Gauteng district has only ten Grade R schools available for investigation. This makes it possible to examine each school as a unique case while still comparing patterns across sites.

### ***Population of the study***

Cohen et al. (2018) describe a population as the full set of individuals, organisations, events, or objects that share a characteristic connected to a study's focus. In this research, the population includes Grade R teachers, Grade R learners, and pre-school centres in the Gauteng district. These groups were selected because they are directly affected by the issue of teacher migration. All members within this population were viewed as potential sources of information to help build a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping migration among Grade R practitioners.

#### **Sample and sampling technique**

The sample of this study comprises teachers currently employed in Grade R schools located within the Gauteng district. For this research, ten teachers from each Grade R institution in the district were selected to participate. The Ten Grade R teachers were selected from the only ten schools in the Gauteng District that currently offer Grade R education. The participants were selected by using purposive sampling techniques. Purposive sampling helped in selecting participants because they possess specific characteristics, experiences, or knowledge that relate directly to the research focus (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2025). Through this technique the researchers were able to focus on a specific subgroup with common traits, such as profession, background, or environment.

#### **Data collection instrument**

In this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable data collection instrument. This method allowed the researcher to explore the individual experiences of participants regarding the push factors influencing the migration of Grade R teachers. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to gather participants' recommendations and suggestions for improving retention and addressing the challenges they face.

#### **Data analysis**

In this study, the data analysis was done by following the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2024). This approach adheres to the steps presented as follows.

- i. **Becoming Familiar with the Data:** The first step involved carefully transcribing all interviews word for word and reading through them several times to become immersed in the content.
- ii. **Identifying Patterns in the Data:** Once familiar with the interviews, the researcher started marking out recurring ideas and notable points across the responses from all ten participants.
- iii. **Developing Early Themes:** Collating codes into potential themes. This phase involves grouping similar codes under broader categories or patterns of meaning.
- iv. **Refining the Themes:** At this point, the themes were revisited to make sure they captured the essence of the participants' experiences without overlapping. Some categories were combined or restructured for better clarity.
- v. **Giving Themes Meaningful Names:** Once the themes were finalised, each was carefully named to reflect the core message it carried.
- vi. **Presenting the Findings:** In the final stage, the researcher brought together the themes into a coherent narrative that answered the research questions. Real quotes from participants were included to support each theme and give voice to the teachers' lived experiences.

To support data analysis, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, after which unique codes were assigned to each participant to ensure clarity and ease of reference during the coding process. The participants were labelled as follows: GRT1 (Grade R Teacher 1), GRT2 (Grade R Teacher 2), GRT3 (Grade R Teacher 3), GRT4 (Grade R Teacher 4), GRT5 (Grade R Teacher 5), GRT6 (Grade R Teacher 6), GRT7 (Grade R Teacher 7), GRT8 (Grade R Teacher 8), GRT9 (Grade R Teacher 9), and GRT10 (Grade R Teacher 10). These codes enabled the researcher to organise patterns efficiently, and the data were subsequently analysed to develop key themes that reflected the factors influencing Grade R teacher migration.

### **Findings**

Analysis of data on the push factors influencing migration of Grade R teachers from their practicing schools to other phases or schools revealed four themes. The themes that emerged are interpreted as follows.

#### **Theme one: high learner-to-teacher ratio**

One of the most prominent issues raised by participants was the high learner-to-teacher ratio, which places immense pressure on teachers and hinders their ability to foster meaningful educational relationships. As one participant reflected, "My colleague left because of managing so many learners daily" (GRT3), indicating that oversized classes often result in teacher fatigue and eventual resignation. Another teacher shared a similar concern, noting, "I will move if large class size stresses me" (GRT8), while GRT6 added, "Teachers here leave when they can't build meaningful connections in large classes." These responses suggest that overcrowded classrooms not only challenge teachers logistically but also erode the relational and emotional foundations essential to effective teaching at the foundational phase.

A second issue raised under this theme was school facilities and teaching resources, which participants identified as a deterrent to remaining in their roles. The absence of essential facilities and resources impeded their ability to deliver quality education and contributed to their dissatisfaction. For instance, one teacher stated, "I moved from my previous schools because of no facilities at the centre" (GRT1), and another affirmed, "I will move if I can no longer support my learners" (GRT7). The emotional strain associated with under-resourced environments was poignantly described by GRT4: "I loved teaching, but the empty shelves broke my heart to move." Similarly, GRT10 observed, "We can't

do much here when there are no facilities to support us.” These insights illustrate how insufficient resources undermine teaching and learning and contribute to emotional fatigue and disillusionment among teachers.

*Theme Two: Opportunities for promotion and professional growth*

Data about issues concerning opportunities for promotion or professional growth, showed that despite attending professional development workshops, many teachers feel these sessions do not adequately support their long-term career progression. As one teacher noted, “Although they do attend professional development workshops, many feel these sessions don’t really support their long-term career growth.” Another teacher highlighted the limited scope for exploring different curricula, stating, “I feel there are no opportunities for me to explore a curriculum like other grades.” Additionally, some teachers expressed that there are few chances for promotion at the Grade R level, with one participant noting, “It’s hard to see a future for promotion while remaining in the Grade R level.” These concerns point to the lack of upward mobility and professional development in the current roles, leading teachers to seek new opportunities elsewhere.

The attractive working conditions in other provinces or countries also play a significant role in teachers' decisions to move. Financial constraints were a recurring theme, with one teacher stating, “The money is small, and I hope they will fix it.” Another participant added, “I enjoy training young minds,” but the financial limitations made it difficult to stay. Teachers like GRT9 shared, “I was not getting enough money,” and GRT6 emphasised the difference in support for teachers, stating, “In other countries, teachers' wellbeing is given more attention and care.” These reflections suggest that better pay and improved working conditions in other regions are key motivators for teachers to seek positions elsewhere.

*Theme Three: Systemic and institutional causes*

The data highlights two systemic and institutional factors that affect Grade R teachers, including institutional support of teacher wellbeing and services, and many Grade R teachers operate under temporary or contract terms, with no guarantee of long-term job security. On the issue of institutional support, some teachers recognised the support provided by the Department of Education (DoE), particularly regarding professional development and funding. GRT3 noted that the DoE “provided me funding to study and stay,” which illustrates the financial backing that helped support their career growth. Similarly, GRT1 mentioned attending “a lot of workshops,” signalling the availability of development opportunities. In addition, GRT1 also shared that they received funding for their degree, which emphasises how the DoE facilitates further qualifications for teachers. However, not all teachers felt the support was comprehensive, as GRT8 expressed a desire for more personalised engagement, stating, “Personally, I would like to have more class visits.” This reflects a need for more direct or ongoing professional interaction to support teachers.

Another issue emerged under this theme is job insecurity. It was learnt that a significant number of Grade R teachers operate under temporary or contract terms, which affects their stability and overall commitment to their roles. For instance, GRT10 shared, “I wasn’t getting paid at Grade-R. I started on a voluntary basis at Grade-R,” highlighting the financial uncertainty that some teachers face when starting in the Grade R sector. GRT3 emphasised the importance of making teachers feel secure in their positions, noting, “You need to make them feel more comfortable that this area or this environment that they are in, they are safe.” This reflects a broader concern for creating a stable work environment where teachers feel supported and valued. Additionally, GRT7 noted that Grade R teachers were not fully integrated with the foundation phase, stating, “We weren’t officially together with the foundation phase,” pointing to a lack of organisational cohesion that could contribute to a sense of isolation among Grade R educators.

*Theme Four: Desire to pursue higher academic qualifications*

A second reason revolves around the desire to pursue higher academic qualifications to secure better career opportunities. Many teachers shared their commitment to furthering their education to move up the career ladder. GRT8 shared their journey, saying, “I studied further with level 5 and then I went on to study my MPDE,” which shows their dedication to personal and professional growth. GRT10 expressed a similar need, saying, “I needed to continue with my studies.” GRT4 also mentioned that they’re working toward a BA degree in the foundation phase, and might move into another role in the future, saying, “I’m doing a BA degree in the foundation phase and may move.” These insights reflect how continuing education is seen as essential for career advancement and how teachers are eager to open new doors for themselves.

Lastly under this theme, many teachers expressed a desire for teachers to pursue roles that give them more freedom to innovate. For some, teaching Grade R is a fulfilling role, but they still want more freedom to teach without being weighed down by administrative tasks. GRT8 reflected on their love for early childhood education, saying, “I think the love of going to grade R started by the time I was having my own daycare centre.” GRT6 shared the hope of spending more time teaching and less time on paperwork, saying, “Less administration, and more time for teaching and learning.” GRT4 also expressed satisfaction with their current role because it allows them to teach mathematics in the FET phase, stating, “I am okay here because I can teach at the FET phase.” These teachers value having the freedom to focus on what they are passionate about teaching without being bogged down by excessive administrative duties.

The findings of the study generated four key themes that explain the factors influencing the migration of Grade R teachers in the Gauteng district. These themes highlight the complex personal, institutional, and systemic pressures shaping teachers’ decisions to leave their practising schools. They include challenges related to high learner-to-

teacher ratios, limited opportunities for promotion and career growth, systemic and institutional constraints such as insufficient support and job insecurity, and the strong desire among teachers to pursue higher academic qualifications for better prospects. The next section discusses these themes in detail and shows how they contribute to teacher migration.

### **Discussion Of Findings**

This study explored the push factors influencing migration of Grade R teachers from their practicing schools. The data indicate that high learner-to-teacher ratios significantly contribute to teacher migration. This phenomenon increases workload and reduces teachers' ability to deliver quality instruction. This finding is in line with the Push and Pull Theory developed by Everett Lee in 1966. Based on Everett Lee's Push and Pull Theory (1966), poor working conditions act as "push factors" that drive teachers away from their roles, while improved environments elsewhere serve as "pull factors." Consequently, large class sizes reduce teaching effectiveness and also intensify attrition as teachers seek environments that better support their well-being and professional effectiveness.

In the South African context, Venketsamy (2023) highlights that overcrowded classrooms prevent teachers from effectively engaging all learners, making it difficult to apply learner-centred teaching methods. The pressure of managing large classes leads to stress, fatigue, and feelings of ineffectiveness. Similarly, Donch (2024), confirms that teachers working with large class sizes experience higher levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion, which often push them to consider leaving the profession. However, the impact of this factor is not uniform across all teaching contexts. Grillo and Kier (2021) argue that some teachers continue working in high-ratio environments due to strong personal commitment and a deep sense of professional identity. These teachers are motivated by their belief in making a difference and their connection to the school community. This suggests that while class size is a key factor in teacher dissatisfaction, it does not operate in isolation. Personal values, school culture, and the availability of support structures also influence teacher retention. Addressing high learner-to-teacher ratios is essential but must be combined with strategies that build teacher resilience and morale.

Inadequate facilities and teaching resources is a major reason why many teachers choose to leave the profession. This is consistent with Ullah and Gillani (2025) indicating that poor school infrastructure and limited access to teaching materials reduce teachers' motivation and ability to deliver quality education. This issue is especially critical in early childhood education, where the availability of age-appropriate resources is essential for effective learning. Shaik (2022) highlights that in Grade R classrooms in South Africa, the absence of learning tools restricts teachers from using participatory and engaging methods, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction. These difficult working conditions often result in low morale and high turnover. However, not all teachers react the same way.

Opportunities for promotion and professional growth play a crucial role in teacher retention and movement. Many teachers seek environments where they can advance professionally and develop their skills. According to Everett Lee's Push and Pull Theory (1966), favourable prospects such as career advancement, further training, and supportive work conditions act as "pull factors" that attract teachers elsewhere. When these opportunities are limited, teachers often seek environments that offer better recognition and pathways for growth. Li, Li, and Tinmaz (2024) agree that rural teachers in China are more likely to consider leaving their posts when there are limited opportunities for career advancement. In contrast, those who identify strongly with their profession and have access to professional growth tend to remain committed. Al Sulaimi and bin Jantan (2024) support this by showing that both professional development and compensation significantly influence teacher satisfaction in Oman. Teachers who feel supported by their institutions are more motivated and less likely to leave. The availability of training, leadership roles, and clear promotion paths encourages teachers to stay in their positions (Mpuangnan et al., 2024). Therefore, systems that invest in teacher development and career progression are more likely to retain skilled educators and promote long-term stability in schools.

Schools that are well-resourced tend to attract and retain qualified teachers. This is in line with Leonide and Onyango (2024), indicating that effective human resource management practices, such as proper staffing, access to materials, and fair evaluation systems, improve teacher retention. In contrast, Tibane et al. (2024) observe that the lack of teaching and learning resources in South African community learning centres negatively affects both instructional quality and learner outcomes. Ngwenya (2021) supports this by stating that poor working conditions, including overcrowded classrooms and limited supplies, reduce teacher morale and job performance, leading to attrition.

Moreover, the lack of institutional support for teacher well-being causes teacher migration. This is in line with Alberts (2024) arguing that when schools fail to prioritise teacher wellness, the result is often increased anxiety. Without systems that care for their mental and physical health, these pressures build up and can cause stress and emotional exhaustion. As stress increases, teachers begin to feel overwhelmed and unsupported. In Grade R settings, where teachers are already working under challenging conditions, the absence of emotional and professional support intensifies dissatisfaction and attrition.

Another push factor is the use of temporary or contract-based employment. This phenomenon is common among many Grade R teachers in South Africa. Thusi and Chauke (2023) explain that such uncertainty in the public sector contributes to high turnover, as teachers leave in search of more stable and secure opportunities. Without permanent posts, teachers often feel undervalued and uncertain about their future, which discourages long-term commitment.

Teachers often leave the profession to pursue personal growth and academic advancement. Murray (2021) supports that teachers are committed to lifelong learning and view education as a continuous journey. When institutions fail to provide opportunities for advancement, teachers may feel professionally stagnant. This lack of progression reduces job satisfaction and increases the desire to explore other careers or sectors that offer more promise. The absence of clear development paths can demotivate even the most passionate educators, leading them to seek environments where their ambitions can be realised.

Freedom to teach creatively influences teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession. Ngo-Henha et al. (2022) agree that when teachers feel trusted and supported, they are more likely to remain committed to their roles. A sense of professional autonomy helps them innovate and meet learners' needs. In contrast, Marx et al. (2023) argue that some teachers leave because they feel their voices are ignored and their ideas dismissed. When educators are silenced or micromanaged, it undermines their motivation. Respect and freedom at work are essential. Teachers want to feel valued, heard, and empowered to make a difference.

Human Capital Theory (HCT) can also be used to explain why the push factors identified in this study drive Grade R teachers to migrate from their schools. According to HCT, individuals invest in their skills, knowledge, and professional growth with the expectation of receiving fair returns through supportive working conditions, adequate resources, recognition, and opportunities for advancement. When teachers face high learner-to-teacher ratios, lack of facilities, limited career progression, job insecurity, and restricted autonomy, their human capital is undervalued. These conditions reduce the returns on their educational investment, prompting them to seek environments where their expertise is better supported and rewarded. Thus, the findings demonstrate that teacher migration is strongly influenced by the mismatch between teachers' professional investment and the limited institutional rewards provided in their current Grade R contexts.

### Recommendations

- i. National and provincial education policies need to give stronger attention to the professional status of Grade R teachers by promoting reasonable class sizes, fair salaries, and well-defined career advancement routes.
- ii. Grade R teachers should be formally recognised as part of the Foundation Phase, with access to permanent appointments, promotion opportunities, and ongoing professional development that reflects their training and experience.
- iii. The Department of Basic Education should prioritise investment in school infrastructure, adequate teaching and learning resources, and sustained funding for teacher development programmes.
- iv. For school management, creating supportive working environments, encouraging professional autonomy, and recognising teachers' contributions can help reduce migration.
- v. Future research should extend this work by examining Grade R teacher migration across provinces and using mixed or longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effects of policy and human capital investments.

### Conclusion

This study examined the push factors influencing the migration of Grade R teachers from their practising schools. High learner-to-teacher ratios emerged as a major driver, increasing workload, stress, and emotional exhaustion while limiting learner-centred teaching. Consistent with Everett Lee's Push and Pull Theory, poor working conditions function as push factors, while better-resourced environments attract teachers. In South Africa, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and limited resources further undermine morale and instructional quality. Drawing on Human Capital Theory, the findings show that teachers migrate when their skills and qualifications are undervalued through limited promotion prospects, job insecurity, weak institutional support, and restricted autonomy. The outcome of this study implies that failure to invest in Grade R teachers' working conditions and career pathways will continue to weaken teacher retention and compromise the quality of early childhood education in Guateng district.

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