



The Cover Teacher's Tale: an exploration of the role of the cover teacher in contemporary secondary education: short-term fix or long-term threat?

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ABSTRACT: This research examined the role of cover teaching in contemporary secondary education in the United Kingdom and explored who cover supervisors are and what they are employed to do as well as investigated and highlighted the accounts that cover supervisors provide of what they do. Cover supervision occurs when no active teaching is taking place and involves the supervision of pre-set learning activities. According to the United Kingdom Teacher's Union, cover teachers are drafted in because of the unavailability of teachers that will supervise the work that has been set in accordance with the school policy; manage the behaviour of pupils while they are undertaking this work to ensure a constructive environment; respond to any questions from pupils about process and procedures, etc. However, in spite of the well stated roles, regulations and responsibilities expected from cover teachers, it is worrisome that nobody really monitors what they do and possibly, no one even cares. This while, worrisome is coupled with the issue of scarcity of researches in this area in the UK. This study was conducted to answer the following research questions, 'What are cover supervisors and what are they employed to do?; What accounts do cover supervisors provide of what they do?'. Via the exploration of the cover journals, views and reasoning, the mixed-method approach utilised focused on the writer of the research and one other cover teacher in an ethnography form as well as some other teachers and school administrators. The double-edge findings due to the mixed analysis showed different unfavourable behaviors shown by students, including the disengagement, nonparticipation of the students to the discussion, distractions etc. It also highlighted themes from the qualitative analysis. This study provides a strong basis on which other researchers will build, because studies in the past have not really elaborated on the activities of cover supervision and this is especially true in the UK. The study advised for a targeted interventions to tackle negative behaviours, to establish a dedicated and extensively trained corps of cover teachers and leverage technology and remote teaching to reduce the need for in-person cover supervision.

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KEYWORDS:

Cover, Substitute, Cover Teacher, Supervision.

INTRODUCTION

Peim identifies the origin of much research in terms of an instinct, an 'inkling that comes out of experience, professional or otherwise: "The researcher must have a sense, at least, an inkling, perhaps, that there is something unknown, or not fully known, or partially known, or known and understood wrongly, about the object."' (Peim, 2018:32). This research derives from my experiences

as a cover teacher. The cover teacher/cover supervisor has become a regular feature of secondary schools in the UK to address part of the challenge caused by a crisis in recruitment and retention (Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2021). Cover supervision occurs when no active teaching is taking place and involves the supervision of pre-set learning activities. According to the United Kingdom Teacher's Union, cover teachers are drafted in because of the unavailability of teachers that will supervise the work that has been set in accordance with the school policy; manage the behaviour of pupils while they are undertaking this work to ensure a constructive environment; respond to any questions from pupils about process and procedures; deal with any immediate problems or emergencies according to the school's policies and procedures; collect any completed work after the lesson and returning it to the appropriate teacher and report back as appropriate using the school's agreed referral procedures on the behaviour of pupils during the class, and any issues arising.

One noteworthy aspect of this type of teaching is the fact that it was only designed to be used for short-term absences. These might be known in advance (for example, where a teacher has a medical appointment or is undergoing professional development) or unexpected (for example, absence due to illness). It is expected that a longer-term absence, e.g., due to long-term sick or maternity leave, should be covered by a regular teacher. In all other circumstances, NEU advice is that cover supervision should not be used for more than five consecutive days, or over an extended period, one day a week for a half term in a primary school, or one lesson a week for a half term in a secondary school. Any sickness absence longer than five days should be deemed 'long-term' and covered accordingly. But, in the real sense, experience has shown that there is always a greater need for cover teachers' services as the semester goes on and absences from teachers increase.

RATIONALE

However, in spite of the well stated roles, regulations and responsibilities expected from cover teachers, it is worrisome that nobody really monitors what they do and possibly, no one even cares. This is challenging when one considers the enormous roles, they play in the school settings and the impact their performance has on the delivery of quality education across secondary schools in the United Kingdom. The fact that the National Education Union state that teachers should be required to provide cover 'only rarely', and only in circumstances that are not foreseeable (this does not apply to teachers who are employed wholly or mainly for the purpose of providing such cover).

This means that each school must have a cover policy that set out how provision can be made for the absence of teachers without increasing the workload for teachers, focus on the use of qualified teachers to provide cover, whether by teachers employed on a permanent full-time or part-time basis to provide cover or by supply teachers engaged as necessary. It was also suggested by the Union that supply teachers should be engaged directly wherever possible, not via supply agencies, to ensure appropriate pay and pension provision. All this confirms 'cover' as a significant part of current educational provision and worthy of investigation, however inconsistently it operates. This is coupled with other provision that has been set out to increase the efficiency of the cover supervision process.

CONTEXT

As a cover teacher, I have had a variety of situations that have all presented different problems. The numerous intricacies that frequently surface are especially important since they have shaped my understanding of the function of cover teachers. These difficulties have a big influence on the duties and obligations that are required of them. Below are a few of the difficulties cover teachers encounter in the paragraphs that follow.

Primarily, the process of hiring cover teachers appears to prioritize qualifications over the assessment of teaching capabilities. When I am assigned subjects that may not align with my area of expertise, these obstacles become more evident. At the onset of the school term, cover teachers are less in demand as regular teachers are present in classrooms. But as the semester goes on and absences from teachers increase, there is a greater need for cover teachers' services. At this point, I am sometimes charged with the responsibility of covering a variety of subject. This might make it difficult for cover teachers us to deliver a top-notch lesson because in an attempt to complete the day lesson, there might be rushing and skipping of some important part of the lesson; a position considered by Fehintola et al. (2021) to lower work satisfaction. The implication of this is that students' academic performance is

greatly affected because it has been established that teachers have a very important influence on student development (Koedel et al., 2015).

For those subjects that I am capable of handling, it is more manageable, but teaching unfamiliar subjects becomes a real challenge. This affects our confidence and our ability to deliver the material effectively. The lack of preparation might lead to confusion during class and impact the quality of the lessons. In addition, such scenarios often demand last-minute lesson preparations, leaving cover teachers with insufficient time to grasp the curriculum fully. As a result, this circumstance may have a detrimental effect on our ability to teach and on the learning experiences of our students.

Upon the unavailability or absence of the main teacher, some cover teachers are given a printed classwork to teach the class until the teacher arrive. But in the case of permanent absence or withdrawal, the position of the teacher is vacant and multiple cover teachers tends to cover the lesson and mostly work on classwork, thereby the curriculum or the syllabus is affected for several weeks until a teacher is employed to fill the vacant position. This study therefore seeks to explore the role of cover teachers in secondary education in the UK while also examining their accountability structure.

Purpose and Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to give an account of the activities of Cover teachers in the United Kingdom with a view to explore of the role of their role in contemporary Secondary education. Specifically, this research seeks to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To find out who cover supervisors are and what they are employed to do.
2. To investigate and highlight the accounts that cover supervisors provide of what they do.

Research Questions

A research question can be said to be a set of question(s) that a study is designed to answer. According to Hennink et al. (2011), a research question indicates question that a researcher intends to answer through data collection. The questions serve as a guide and roadmap for subsequent tasks in the research process. The end result of this sort of questions is to be answered after data collection and analysis. The stated authors noted that the principal role of the research question is to keep the researcher focused throughout the process of the study. For this study, two research questions were set to guide the study:

1. What are cover supervisors and what are they employed to do?
2. What accounts do cover supervisors provide of what they do?

METHODOLOGY

This section establishes the research design foundation, building on literature review's three key areas: legal identity and role of UK cover teachers, current cover supervision state, and ideal supervision models. It positions the study as exploratory research examining cover teaching as an educational phenomenon through mixed-methods case study approach, setting up the framework for investigating cover teachers' complex realities in secondary education (Topchyan & Woehler, 2020).

Where this positions me

The researcher adopts an interpretivist paradigm to explore cover teachers' complex lived reality in secondary schools. Using social constructivism perspective, the research acknowledges subjective, multiple realities formed through lived experience and social interactions. The study employs qualitative-dominant mixed methods, engaging with cover teacher participants as meaning-makers in their school environments, positioning the researcher as both investigator and insider within the educational context (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Research philosophy

The study adopts pragmatic research philosophy, rejecting strict adherence to either positivist quantitative or interpretivist qualitative methods alone. Pragmatism suits this research by focusing on problem-centered, real-world practice, allowing both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This approach addresses whether extensive cover teacher use represents short-term fix or long-term threat, avoiding epistemological debates by concentrating on research aims and practical educational implications (Saunders et al., 2009).

An ethnographic approach: a view from inside

The research incorporates ethnographic characteristics with the researcher as insider cover supervisor working alongside other cover supervisors. This semi-ethnographic approach provides opportunities to immerse in daily experiences and interactions of cover teachers, observing roles, challenges, and relationships. The researcher's prior documentation of cover teacher activities over several years addresses typical duration challenges of ethnographic research, enabling authentic insight into the profession (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Methodology: Mixed methods

The study employs mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. This approach effectively addresses research subjects that cannot be covered by either method alone. Quantitative methods provide frequency and development data, while qualitative methods offer comprehensive analysis of cover teachers' hidden work features and consequences for secondary education, enhancing validity through triangulation of different data sources (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The Type of Study

The research combines case study and action research approaches. Case studies enable detailed investigation of limited systems within real-life environments using multiple data collection techniques. Action research involves ongoing problem identification, intervention implementation, output evaluation, and reflection. This combination allows in-depth analysis of cover teacher experiences while addressing practical recruitment and management issues through collaboration between stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Justification for use

Case study methodology enables in-depth analysis of substitute teacher responsibilities and experiences in secondary schools, facilitating understanding of problems faced and effects on students, teachers, and education systems. Action research allows identification and solution of practical issues through collaboration between substitute teachers, regular teachers, and school authorities, potentially leading to improved coverage teaching strategies and policies that benefit all stakeholders (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Collection

Data collection uses cover journals and interviews as primary approaches. Cover journals provide written accounts of personal experiences, observations, and reflections during lessons, offering detailed, contextualized information about daily experiences. These journals capture the changing nature of cover teachers' roles and allow expression of thoughts without interviewer influence, providing natural recording of experiences in real-time with reduced bias or distortion (Ortlipp, 2008).

Developing the interview

Semi-structured interviews are chosen for their balance between structured and unstructured approaches, allowing researchers to explore participants' comments, identify emerging themes, and reveal unexpected insights. This method enables direct interaction between researchers and participants, fostering rapport and encouraging frank responses. The flexibility allows exploration of sensitive topics while maintaining focus on research objectives, providing rich contextual information that complements journal data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Validity

Validity is ensured through multiple measures including clear guidelines for cover journal maintenance, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and member-checking processes with research supervisors. For interviews, expert review and pilot-testing ensure question clarity, relevancy, and objectivity. The structured approach maintains consistency while allowing thorough exploration of participant experiences and opinions, ensuring research credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Reliability

Reliability is maintained through clear, consistent directions for all participants, standardization of data collection processes, and comprehensive audit trails documenting procedures. Multiple researchers independently assess journal samples and verify data

through coding. For interviews, structured guides ensure uniform conduct, with trained interviewers following consistent methodologies and pilot-testing protocols to ensure proper implementation and reduce variability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations

The study adheres to BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018), ensuring informed consent, privacy protection through pseudonyms and codes, secure data storage, and non-discriminatory recruitment. The research demonstrates beneficence by considering benefits outweighing risks, aiming to contribute knowledge and improve educational practices. Research integrity is maintained through rigorous data collection, accurate reporting, and prevention of data falsification throughout the project duration (BERA, 2018).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

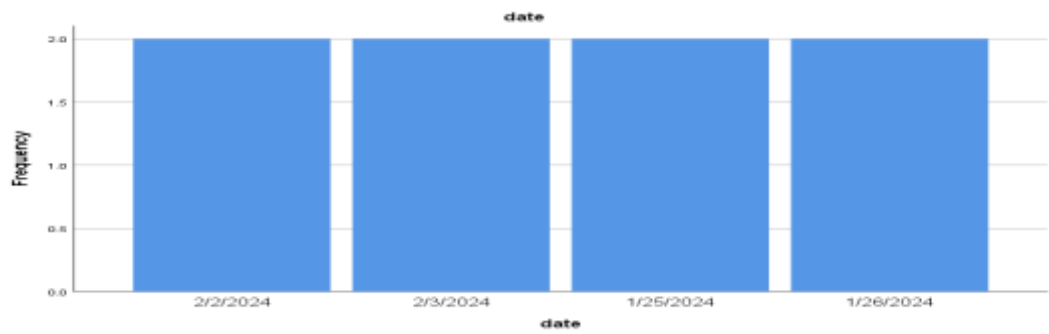
This research dissertation is aimed at addressing the role of cover teachers in contemporary secondary education in the UK, investigating whether they serve as a short-term fix or represent a long-term threat. To achieve the objectives of this research, a mixed-methods approach, which include both qualitative data, gained from cover teachers' journals, and quantitative data, received from semi-structured interviews was adopted and used for the study. This chapter features a comprehensive analysis of the data originating from the previously described research methods. It gives focus to the experiences of cover teachers, various challenges that cover teachers can face, and their involvement in the education environment at large. Data analysis starts with the investigation of the numbers gathered from the cover teacher journals entries, lessons taught, class attendance, students' performance, intrinsic objectives of the lesson, to mention but a few. With the help of this laborious data analysis, there were not only some detailed results but also a more comprehensive view of the relevant factors.

Besides assessing the qualitative and quantitative data, the detailed account of teachers and school administrators, who are the stakeholders of the study, from interviews brought incredible ideas and deeper knowledge to the whole teaching process. These interview sessions, thus, gives light into the dark corners of custom of substitute teacher, highlighting how the cover teacher spend their day, the difficulties he or she meets, and the techniques used to create favorable learning environments. The content analysis of the thematic data was done through the process of content coding that involved identifying recurring trends and patterns in respondents' narratives. This systematic approach made it possible to go behind the key concerns over cover teaching including the learning process of students, class atmosphere and the development of teachers or staff. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, this chapter is providing you with the full scope about the cover teacher's role in that they are including not only the objective data but also the personal experience.

Along with pinpointing the current stage of cover teaching in secondary schools, the findings also shed light among the best practices to improve the present stage and the possible options to work around the problems. On the other hand, this analysis reaches beyond the everyday experiences of cover teachers to explore their impact at the wider level. This study contributes to the current educational policy and practice in the area of secondary education as well. It takes a holistic look at the effect of supply teaching on the academic performance of the pupils as well as the workload of the teachers contributing to the general quality of education. At the end of the day, it also targets the core question that is, whether the massive deployment of supply teachers constitute a short-term reliever or a long-term threat to the education systems. The present chapter focuses on identifying the cover teacher's role and by adopting a step-by-step and comprehensive approach it aims to give clear and multiple insight on how it is shaped by various complexities and nuances that root it and manipulate it to become an integral part of education. The outcomes of such a study will lay down the foundation of the due course of discussion and the recommendations ensuing from it that will help towards a meaningful dialogue and eventually possible strategies aimed at overcoming the challenges and making the best of all the benefits of cover-teaching in the secondary education.

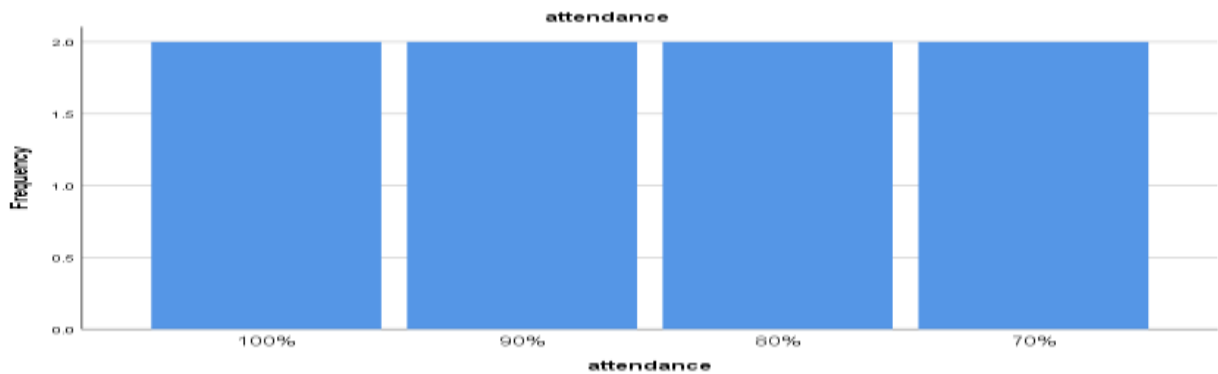
Quantitative Analysis

Chart 1: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Date



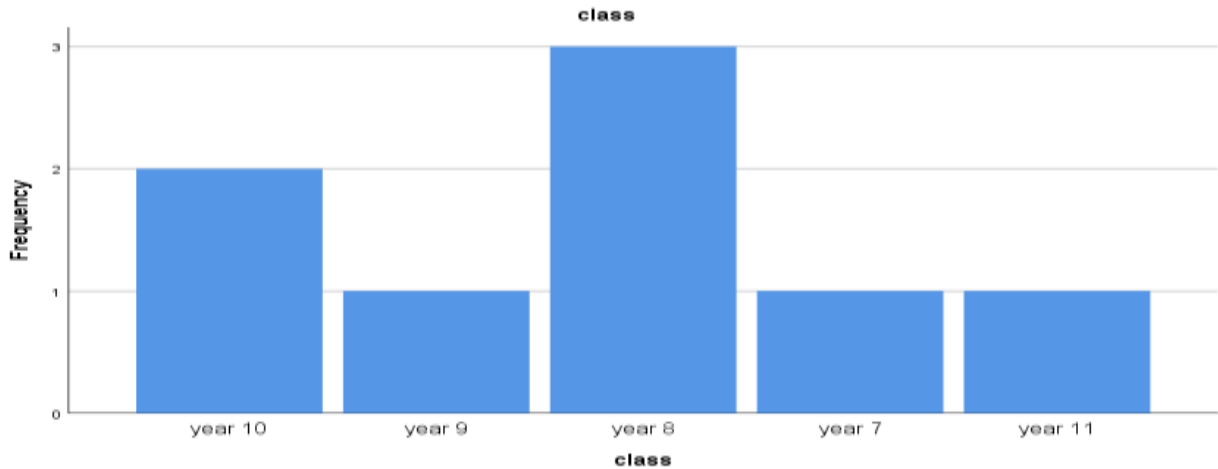
The table presents the frequency and percentage distribution of attendance on different dates. There were a total of 8 attendance records, with each date having 2 records. Each date accounted for 25% of the total attendance, and the cumulative percentage increased progressively as we moved down the table.

Chart 2: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Attendance



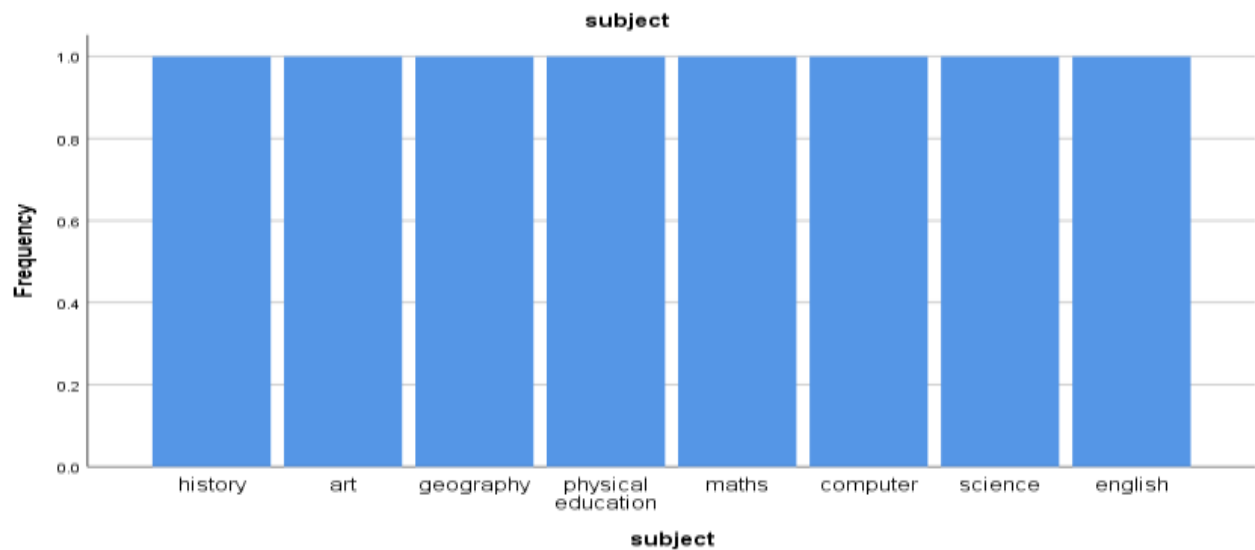
The table analyzes attendance levels, showing that each category (100%, 90%, 80%, and 70%) occurred two times, representing 25% of the total attendance.

Chart 3: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Class



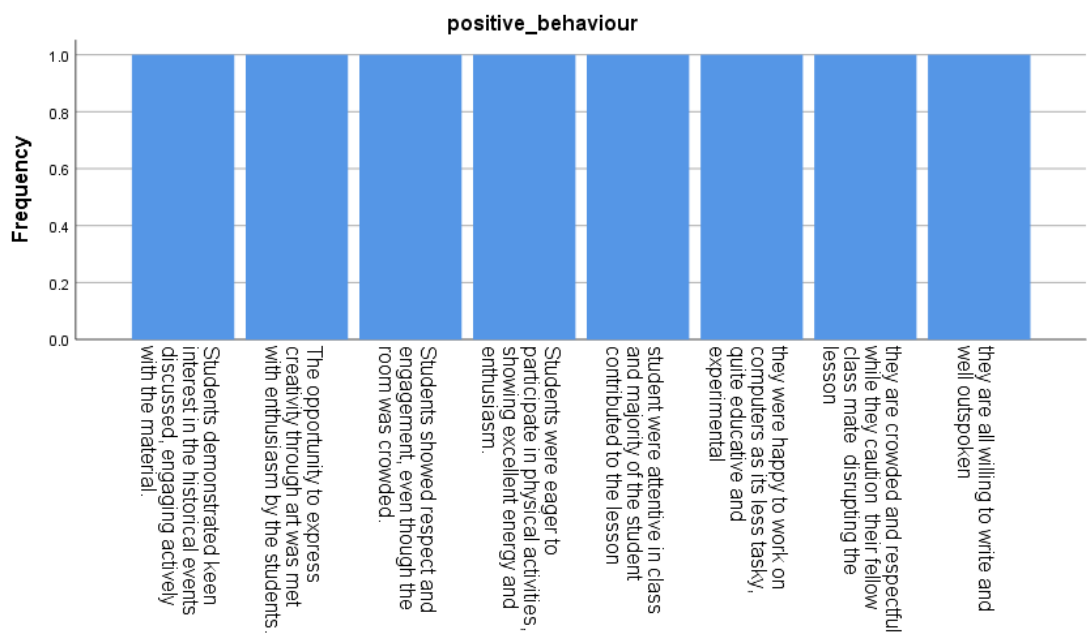
The given table depicts students' distribution across different class levels, with the highest number of students at year 8 with 3 bringing about a percentage of 37.5% of the total, while the other class levels of year 11, year 9, year 7 and year 10 each have 1 or 2 students, adding up to the total reaching 100% at the end of the table

Chart 4: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Subject



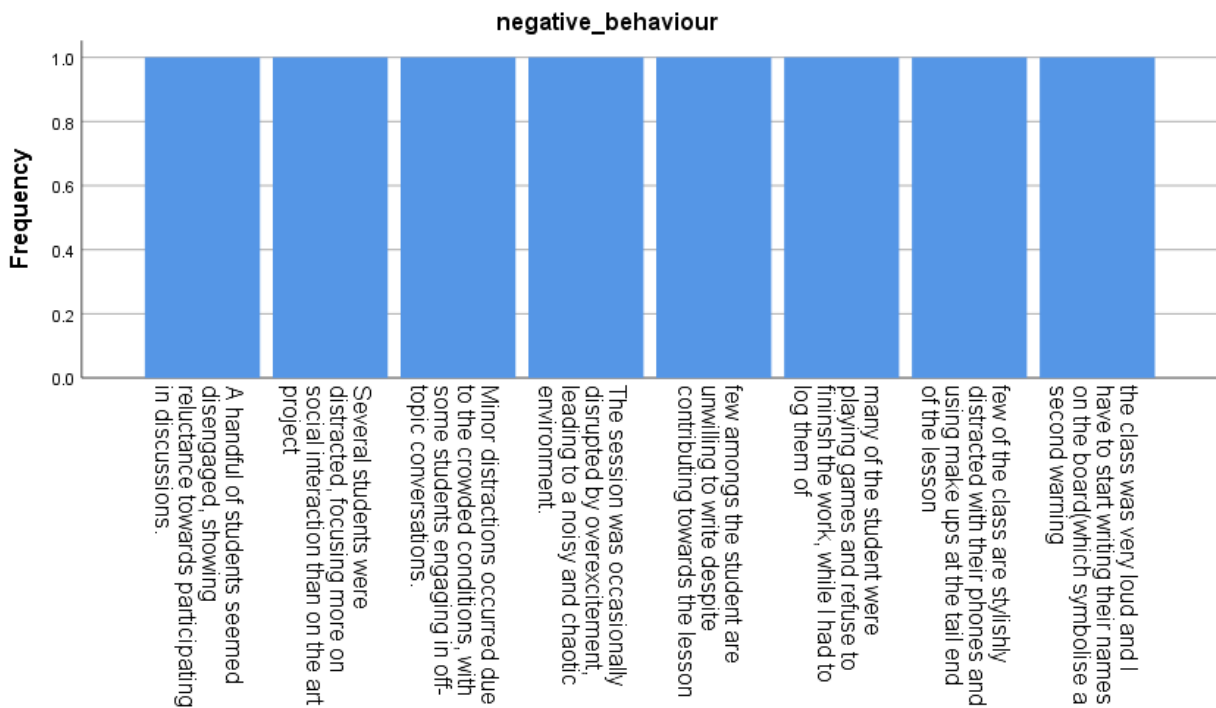
The table displays the distribution of subjects among students, with each subject (history, art, geography, physical education, maths, computer, science, and English).

Chart 5: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Positive Behaviour



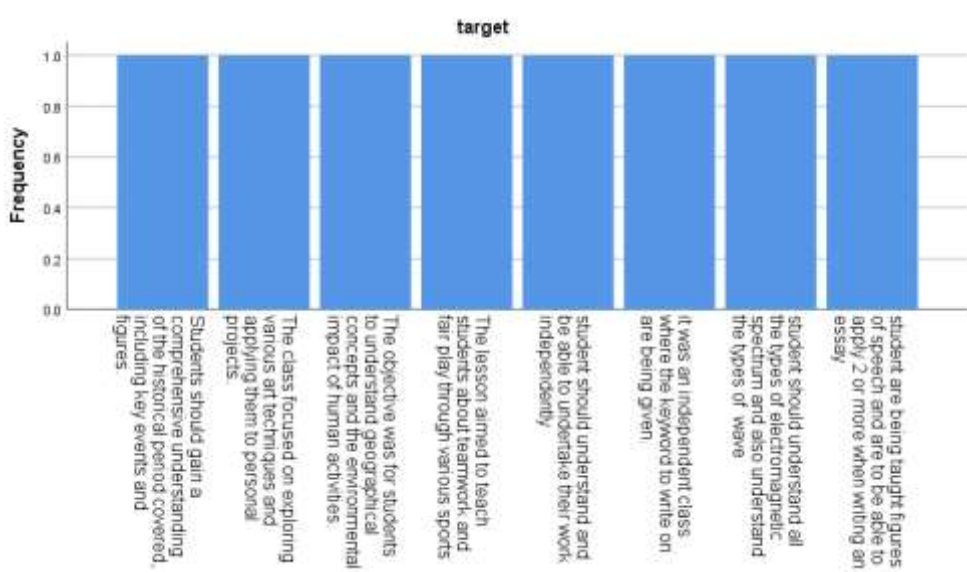
The graph gives the readers a glimpse of the fruitful actions which remains in the positive side of our students, for example the curiosity and eagerness in learning history, creating their outputs, and sharing ideas despite the crowded conditions, active participation in physical activities, attentiveness and active contributions to the class, being happy and comfortable with the computers, respecting others while cautioning disruptive students, and the dedication in writing and expressing themselves

Chart 6: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Negative Behaviour



The figure illustrates different unfavorable behaviors shown by students, including the disengagement, nonparticipation of the students to the discussion, distractions and concentration on social communication rather than the given work, off-topic conversations and minor disruptions according to the crowdedness, disorder and commotion leading lesson is interrupted, disobedience of students to write though they are active, playing games and dislike to complete the lessons

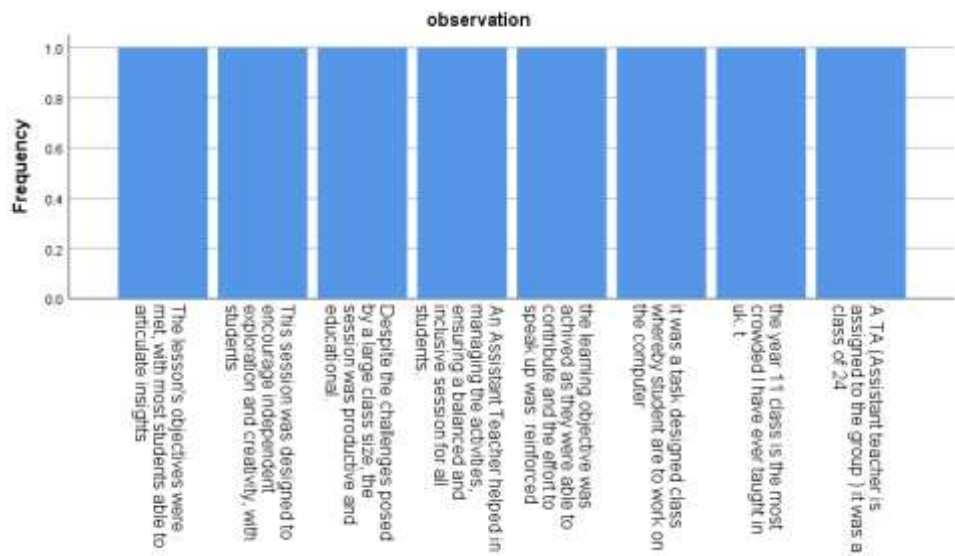
Chart 7: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Target



The graph shows the different kinds of teaching targets in the class that includes, but are not limited to, comprehending a particular historical period, working with art techniques, understanding geographical concepts and their effects on the environment, learning about team work and fair play through sports, fostering independence in work, teaching essay writing skills through the use of

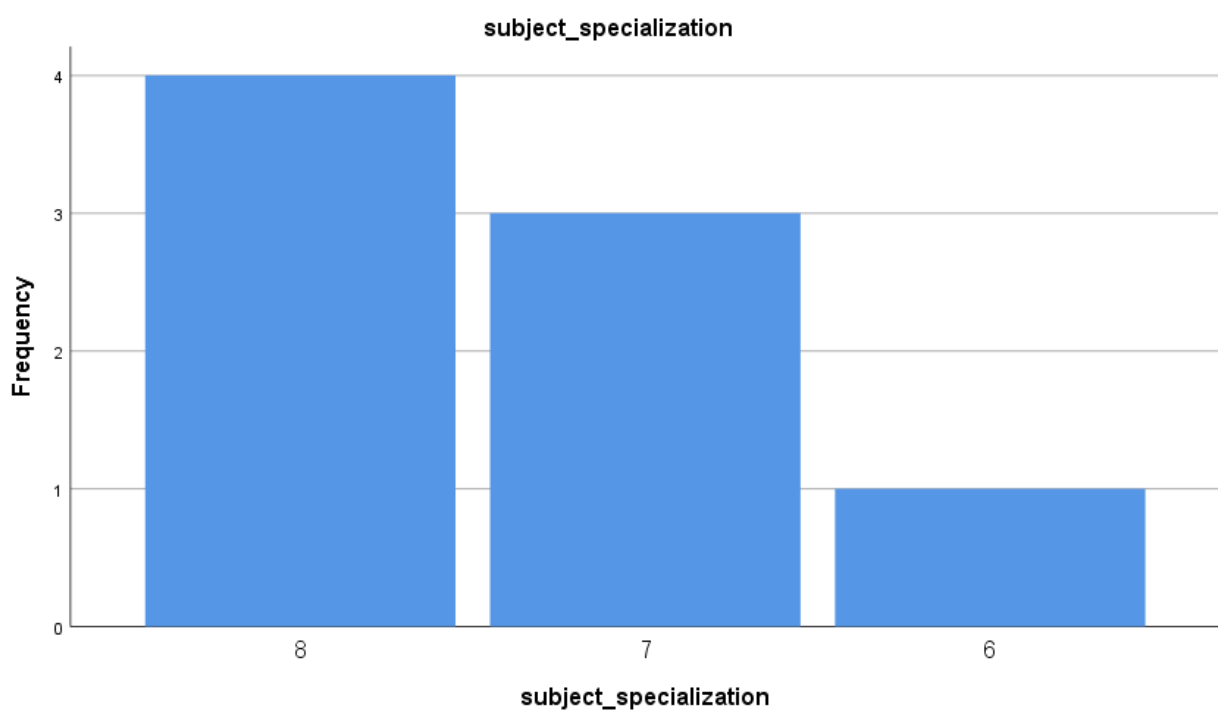
keywords, understanding the electromagnetic spectrum and types of waves, and developing figures of speech that can

Chart 8: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Observation



The graph displays details from the class or session and is used as a basis to make observations. I have completed a learning survey through which I have understood the different aspects of the job which includes but not limited to: actively participating while achieving the lesson objectives, independently exploring, being creative, maintaining productivity for effective learning despite the fact of having a large class size (Year 11), asking a TA to come and help with the activities and ensure that the class is inclusive, achieving the learning objectives by getting as many active participation and reinforcement

Chart 9: Bar Chart Showing the Cover Observations by Observation



The chart implies that three layers of subject specialty were being observed. The first level with 8 of frequency is represented by the 50 percent of all occurrences. The following level, 7, in the sequence, with a frequency of 37.5%, is as much as 37.5% of all the cases. The last and ultimate level, with a percentage incidence of 0.06, composed 12.5 percent of the total occurrences. The additive

grade indicates the continuous increase in the numbers of the subject levels while at the first level, one has reached 50%, at the second level, 87.5% and all three levels added up is at 100%.

Qualitative Procedure

For the qualitative analysis, Nvivo statistical software was used to convert interview responses into codes that tended to measurement in the qualitative analysis. This code was framed in numbers and letters to group the themes and participant responses. However, the themes of the study representing the research variables were divided into three, namely; The Role and Identity of Cover Teachers, The Current State of Cover Supervision in Schools, and An Ideal Model for Cover Supervision. The codes in presenting these themes were between numbers of 1 to 3 with the initials of the themes (i.e. The Role and Identity of Cover Teachers – TRAI1, The Current State of Cover Supervision in Schools – TCS2, and An Ideal Model for Cover Supervision – AIM3). Also, the participant response was presented in sub-figures under the theme numbers. For instance, The Role and Identity of Cover Teachers as theme TRAI1 will have participant response code such as TRAI1-1, TRAI1-2, TRAI1-3, etc., so also as other themes. The flow of this response was analyzed and presented for interpretations and discussion of findings with empirical back-up as envisaged in the literature.

Qualitative Analysis

This is a qualitative study conducted in accordance with inductive research approach; apart from the review of relevant literature, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interview of 3 (three) participants. The main themes identified to cover the cover teachers activities sub-constructs such as the role and identity of cover teachers, the current state of cover supervision in schools, and an ideal model for cover supervision. The covers teachers activities was also covered to explain the participant perceptual influence of these sub-constructs on cover teachers activities. Verbatim quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate these themes and to illustrate transparency validly in the research process and subjected to “*thematic analysis*” leading to the result as presented below:

Thematic Analyses

Theme 1: The Role and Identity of Cover Teachers

The study sought to explore perceived changes, contradictions, impacts on identity, training issues, and administrative viewpoints surrounding the evolving role of cover teachers based on the participants' experiences.

PARTICIPANT #3

.... When I first started cover teaching over 15 years ago, it really was just meant for truly short-term absences. But these days, with teacher shortages, I often find myself covering classes for weeks or even months at a time. The expectations have definitely expanded.

TRAI1-3

There is support in literature for such opinion as expressed by PARTICIPANT #3 above, specifically Barnes (2022) claimed that “the role of cover teachers has evolved significantly over the past 15 years, with increased expectations and responsibilities. This expansion of work roles has led to overwork and strain, as teachers strive to meet these new demands without adequate support”.

PARTICIPANT #2

... The policies around cover teachers seem a bit contradictory at times. On one hand, they say we should only rarely use cover supervision, but then with all the vacancies, they rely on us heavily. I wish they'd be more upfront about the vital role we play

TRAI12

This view is similar in the literature which emphasized, “the need for clarity and transparency in education policies, which is particularly relevant to the vital role of cover teachers.” (Bing-qing, 2010).

PARTICIPANT #1

... The rise of school-based teacher training has been a double-edged sword for cover teachers. We get recruited more easily, but there's less emphasis on preparation specifically for the cover role

TRAI1

This view is similar in the literature which emphasized, “The recent shift in initial teacher training provision from higher education to school-based routes has raised concerns about the quality of trainees' preparation and the overall impact on the profession.”

Theme 2: Cover Supervision in Practice: Challenges and Realities

The study sought to explore key challenges like lack of preparedness, disruption to learning, struggles with classroom management, misperceptions of their role, heavy workloads, and the shortcomings of extended cover supervision.

PARTICIPANT #3

... The biggest challenge is rarely having enough information about the students or what was previously covered in the class. You're just thrown in and expected to pick up where the regular teacher left off

TCS3

This view is similar in the literature which emphasized, “The challenge of insufficient information about students and previous class content is a common issue in education.” (Britton and Propper, 2016).

PARTICIPANT #2

... I feel like I'm just crowd control half the time. The students don't take me seriously as an authority figure when I'm just the 'cover' teacher

TCS2

This view is similar in the literature who explored, “the reluctance of some students, particularly those training to be teachers, to engage in classroom activities and reflect on their learning. The study suggest that the perception of teacher authority and control is influenced by a range of factors, including disciplinary techniques, power dynamics, and student attitudes towards education”.

PARTICIPANT #1

... There's a perception that cover supervisors are just babysitters. But we have to prepare lesson plan, mark work, communicate with teachers - our workload is massive

TCS1

This view is similar in the literature who mentioned, “that the role of cover teachers is often misunderstood, with their workload being underestimated”

Theme 3: Towards an Optimal Model of Cover Teacher Utilization

The study sought to explore key challenges like lack of preparedness, disruption to learning, struggles with classroom management, misperceptions of their role, heavy workloads, and the shortcomings of extended cover supervision.

PARTICIPANT #3

... What we really need is a dedicated core of cover teachers who are extensively trained in pedagogy and classroom management, not just thrown in as a stop-gap measure

AIM3

This view is similar in the literature that experienced teachers often feel underprepared in classroom management, indicating a need for ongoing training (Cornwall, 2004). This training should be centered around core teaching practices, which can be a key component of teacher education.

PARTICIPANT #2

... I think we could learn from how some countries use technology and remote teaching to cut down on the need for in-person cover supervision during short-term absences

AIM2

This view is similar in the literature that the use of technology in remote teaching and supervision has been explored in various contexts. Konecki (2020) highlight the benefits of technology in supervising student teachers, with Gruenhagen specifically noting the benefits for pre-service teachers, university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and school districts.

PARTICIPANT #1

... If we're going to rely so heavily on cover staff, we should look at models where they are attached to a particular department and receive subject-specific mentoring and development.

AIM1

This view is similar in the literature where a range of studies support the idea of attaching cover staff to specific departments and

providing them with subject-specific mentoring and development. Loso (2022) emphasize the importance of integrating knowledge management systems and on-site staff development models, which can be tailored to specific departments.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study examined the role as well as the identity of cover teachers, the current state of cover supervision in schools, and the ideal model for cover supervision. Interview was carried out with three participants.

Theme 1: The Role and Identity of Cover Teachers

The participants pointed out that the covering teachers' role has undergone a transformation over the past years, and new expectations and responsibilities are now expected of them. They added that pupil-teacher ratio could not be maintained at the same level as before and the cover teachers would face overwork and strain. The literature confirms such views, stressing the importance of clarity, transparency and sufficient support for cover.

Theme 2: Cover Supervision in Practice: Challenges and Realities

The participants indicated the difficulties which included lack of preparedness, disruption of learning, managing the class, misunderstanding their roles and having heavy workloads. They said that many times not enough information about students and some of the class content is the problem that occurred. Teachers substitute may fail to be recognized like authority individuals in the class therefore managing the students becomes a problem. The burden of cover teachers is usually overlooked by many, and the misconception of their job is common. The above data are similar with the already known literature on the challenges cover teachers go through.

Theme 3: Towards an Optimal Model of Cover Teacher Utilization

The participants were able to come up with practical solutions to address the possibility of a cover teacher shortage. They suggested creating an experienced corps of substitute teachers who will participate in professional development workshops in the areas of pedagogy and classroom management. The suggestion to use technology or remote teaching for short-term absences as an alternative to in-person cover supervision was included in their response. Additionally, participants recommended attaching cover staff to specific departments and providing them with subject-specific mentoring and development. The literature supports these ideas, emphasizing the importance of ongoing training, the use of technology in supervision, and subject-specific mentoring and development for cover teachers.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

This study provides a strong basis on which other researchers will build, because studies in the past have not really elaborated on the activities of cover supervision and this is especially true in the UK. This research sought to explore the role of the Cover Teacher in contemporary Secondary education. I also set out to find out who cover supervisors are and what they are employed to do as well as investigate and highlight the accounts that cover supervisors provide of what they do.

I sought to address two research questions:

1. What are cover supervisors and what are they employed to do?
2. What accounts do cover supervisors provide of what they do?

While these questions have been addressed in the body of this work, I will provide a brief account of what I am essentially taking away from this study and what I hope interested parties will consider important enough to build on.

For research question one, irrespective of any formal designation (e.g. "A cover teacher is a person who fills in for a normal teacher when they are unwell, on personal leave, or pregnant" (Gershenson, 2012) the 'state of play in 2024 is as follows: When I first heard about the job opening to work as a cover teacher, I said to myself, this is the opportunity to fulfil the dream I had about becoming a teacher. The tag 'cover', their duties unknown to me gave me a sense of importance – I was really proud to be associated to a word like that. As a matter of fact, I could not wait to inform people of my new job. Little did I know of what lay ahead. As a cover teacher, I had a variety of situations that have all presented different problems and are largely confirmed by this research. In the simplest terms 'cover' is a role confounded by difficulties and contradictions. This I consider better named 'emergency' teaching, a condition that not only hampers the development of the teacher but also of the students. My guess is that 'experience is the best

teacher' but there must be better experience than this.

The process of hiring cover teachers appears to prioritize qualifications over the assessment of teaching capabilities, which is revealing in itself. It reinforces that the priority is to have an educated body in the classroom, 'looking' like a teacher, but given little encouragement to function like one. There is little or no alignment with subject specialisms and opportunities to do more than patrol come usually with increasing absences from teachers. The implications of this is that students' academic performance is greatly affected which is also uncomfortable for cover teachers. There is a contextual lack of respect because providers often demand last-minute lesson preparations, leaving cover teachers with insufficient time to grasp the curriculum fully. As a result, this circumstance may have a detrimental effect on our ability to teach and on the learning experiences of our students.

For research question two - What accounts do cover supervisors provide of what they do? I will also try to draw out the essence of this experience. A critical look at the research findings indicated that it is clear there were both positive and negative elements that emerged from the interactions and observations the cover teachers including myself had with the students. One of the positives I noted is a genuine curiosity and eagerness to learn on the part of the students, particularly as it relates to engaging with history lessons and projects that demands high creativity. Also, in spite of the challenging atmospheric conditions and a crowded class, many students actively participated, contributed ideas, and showed dedication in their writing and self-expression. This, as a teacher is beyond me as I have had the premonition that when environment is not conducive, active learning is impossible.

In furtherance to this, it was greatly satisfying to see students' enthusiasm for physical activities, their attentiveness and willingness to be involved in classroom discussions. Their comfort and familiarity with technology, like computers, was also a promising sign for their continued learning and growth.

Yet, I cannot deny that participants also reported negative behaviours were exhibited. Students would be more and more distracted and disengaged, and some would drift away from the main course to engage in social communication or even off topic conversations. Often the disorderly and crowded environment would bring the lesson to a standstill with frequent disruptions. In the cases of disobedience, there were some who refused to write or complete tasks and there was a general dislike for continuing lessons or assignments.

The participants proposed having a dedicated core of cover teachers who receive extensive training in pedagogy and classroom management. They also mentioned the possibility of using technology and remote teaching to reduce the need for in-person cover supervision during short-term absences. The literature supports these ideas, emphasizing the importance of ongoing training, the use of technology in supervision, and subject-specific mentoring and development for cover teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed several issues that need to be tackled head-on. I have provided below some possible ways to do this:

Targeted interventions to tackle negative behaviours

The journals of cover emphasised negative behaviours that students had been expressing in class. Though what is undetermined is whether the students would also show these behaviours when the regular teachers are in charge of the class, this seems a problem that requires a response. As a remedy, I propose the use of the focused interventions to change the negative behaviours noted in the class. Simonsen et al. (2008) propose that preventive classroom management approaches can contribute to the minimization of the above-mentioned negative behaviours.

The other important approach is to set the rules of conduct inside the classroom very precisely. Such a process entails a direct and honest communication of the rules and norms to the students and consistently adhering to the rules (Simonsen et al., 2008). For example, the teacher could provide guidelines on how to be involved in class activities, which the cover would then use.

Training of cover teachers to address lack of preparedness and classroom management

Participants suggested that "what we really need are devoted cover teachers who are well trained in pedagogy and classroom management" (AIM3). This is backed up by studies that prioritises the need for ongoing training and development geared towards ensuring effective classroom management.

Leverage technology and remote teaching

Participants suggested that we could replicate the adoption of remote teaching to reduce the need for in-person cover supervision

during short-term absences" (AIM2).

Attaching cover teachers to departments

It was suggested that "if we're going to rely so heavily on cover staff, we should look at models where they are attached to a particular department and receive subject-specific mentoring and development" (AIM1).

To sum it up, the cover teachers should strive to create an atmosphere where students are able to feel like they are capable of owning their learning journey, they are supported, and they are proud of their achievements – an environment that encourages students to celebrate their victories while also addressing areas that require special attention. Hence, as a result, the students will be availed of the opportunity to achieve the maximum of their academic potential, personally as well, especially through creating the kind of environment that is accepting and interactive.

Final thoughts

As an immigrant who came to the UK with my family, I faced a unique set of challenges while writing my dissertation on "The Cover Teacher's Tale: an exploration of the role of the Cover Teacher in contemporary Secondary education: short term fix or long-term threat?". First, the transition to a new educational setting, coupled with the high expectations from my family back home, added an extra layer of complexity to the already daunting task of completing a master's dissertation. One hurdle I encountered was determining the appropriate focus of my study. Coming from a different educational system, I find it extremely difficult to understand the nature of the cover teacher's role in the UK.

Although, I am presently in the profession; yet because of the difference in the UK educational settings – I could not easily grasp the full extent of my profession. When my research topic was approved, I was confused between examining the cover teacher's role broadly, to gain a comprehensive understanding, or to streamline my focus to specific aspects that resonated with my personal experiences and observations. Thanks to my supervisor, who had a wealth of knowledge and experience in navigating the complexities of educational research in the UK. He played a pivotal role in guiding me through this challenge.

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