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Leading teachers through the storm: Looking beyond the numbers and turning the implications of out-of-field teaching practices into positive challenges



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ABSTRACT

This paper claims that well informed and engaged school leaders turn the implications of out-of-field teaching practices into positive challenges. Teachers teaching outside their fields of qualification or expertise influence the quality of teaching and learning. A phenomenological approach moves beyond existing statistics on the out-of-field phenomenon towards an in-depth understanding of the lifeworld of teachers in these positions. Through various lenses of educational directors, principals, specialists, out-of-field teachers and parents, the paper examines unsettling truths about the pressures surrounding the out-of-field phenomenon. The findings offer evidence of the transformation school leaders can bring about. The paper asserts that an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon influences school leaders' decisions. Identification of tension between lived experiences and leaders' perceptions inform recommendations.

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1. Introduction

International research has shown that leaders have a powerful influence on school effectiveness and achievements of students (Harris & Chapman, 2001; Harris & Muijs, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to investigate school leaders' roles in overcoming the implications that out-of-field teaching has on school improvement efforts, and on the quality of education that the schools provide. Out-of-field teaching is defined as an instance where teachers teach subject areas and year levels outside their scope of qualification or expertise. Leithwood and Day (2008) underlined the role of school principals in educational improvement and in the teaching and learning space. In a recent newspaper article, it was stated that 76% of Queensland principals who took part in a major survey admitted that some maths and science classes at their schools were taught by teachers who were not fully qualified in these specialised subject areas (Wilson, 2016; April 1). Additionally, Workforce reports in Australia (Productivity Commission, 2012; Skills Australia, 2010) claim that 39% of metropolitan principals, and between 42% and 66% of principals in remote areas admit that they experience recruitment and placement difficulties. These principals also admitted that they assign positions to teachers who do not have suitable qualifications for those specific roles.

It is noteworthy that Darling-Hammond (2010) highlighted that school leaders influence the climate and culture of schools, while Gillies (2006) claimed that teachers play a "critical" (p. 271) in classroom interaction and engaging students.

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More than a decade ago, [Goldhaber \(2002\)](#) noted that the selection of teachers for a specific school is of the utmost significance, and identifies the dilemma that this selection does not receive enough attention at the local level. General concerns about the quality of education and schools' effectiveness to provide students with opportunities to excel turn the focus to the quality of teachers, school results, and the quality of teacher education programmes. I argue in this paper that a greater awareness by educational leaders' and a deeper understanding of the implications that out-of-field teaching practices have on the quality of education could change the current situation whereby governments' educational budgets are being drained without notable changes in student outcomes and results. This paper further provides information that will inform evidence-based decision-making. Finding and research evidence support governments to develop a deeper insight and enhance strategic decisions versus relying on extreme measures to rectify quality issues in certain subject areas. I argue that school leaders' must give careful consideration when teachers, and especially graduate teachers, are assigned to certain subject areas and year levels. This paper acknowledges the pressure on educational and school leaders to act upon information contained in the Australian Education Union's 2016 State of Our Schools report, which surveyed more than 1000 principals and 7000 teachers across the country ([Wilson, 2016; April 1](#)). This investigation will provide leaders with information to make informed decisions while reflecting policy development, for example, the appropriateness of making science and maths compulsory for year 11 and 12 students, or the recruitment of international teachers in certain states in Australia.

[Cochran-Smith \(2005\)](#) highlights the fact that education is influenced by political opinion. Educational ministers often feel compelled to make extreme decisions to influence public opinion ([Wilson, 2016; April 1](#)). It is important, however, to take note of the complexities that "quick fix" solutions add to already complicated teaching situations. This investigation emphasises the potential to turn the challenges of the multi-layered and complex out-of-field phenomenon and the prominent issues it poses into opportunities and positive challenges for the teachers and leaders involved. [Muijs and Reynolds \(2011\)](#) noted that school effectiveness is often linked to "a mindset of concern with the school rather than the teacher" (p. 6). Evidence-based information generated through extended research projects provides valuable insight to decision-makers and those involved in policy development.

[Hattie \(2009\)](#) claims that teachers are the most valuable resources in schools. It is therefore important to take note of existing literature, statistical information, and the available numbers of teachers assigned to out-of-field positions. Research ([Du Plessis, 2014; Ee-gyeong, 2011; Hobbs, 2012a, 2012b; Ingersoll, 2002, 2003](#)) shows that out-of-field teaching is an international concern with major effects on the quality of teachers and teaching. [McConney and Price \(2009\)](#) claim that 20%–24% of teachers in Western Australia work in positions outside their field of qualification, while [Ingvarson, Beavis, and Kleinhenz \(2004\)](#) claim that 25%–30% of teachers in Victoria, Australia, feel unqualified for the position in which they teach. Norway appoints student teachers in positions outside their field of training in certain schools with ethnic minorities because of a shortage of qualified teachers ([Bonesrønning, Falch, & Strøm, 2003](#)). I argue that to lead teachers through this complex phenomenon, educational leaders have to look beyond the numbers ([Lingard, 2011](#)) towards the lifeworld of out-of-field teachers, their real-life experiences in classrooms, and what they need to make a success of their out-of-field assignments. The pressure on teachers to meet leaders' expectations while they are assigned to positions outside their qualifications leaves them feeling anxious, incompetent, and uncertain ([Du Plessis, 2014](#)). Research ([Du Plessis, 2014](#)) further highlights that out-of-field teaching does not only affect mathematics and science subjects, but also has a significant influence on interdisciplinary quality improvement strategies involving subjects across the board in primary and secondary schools. The phenomenon has implications for stability in the teaching workforce because of its impact on teacher turnover, attrition, and retention ([Ingersoll, 2001a, 2001b, 2003](#)). Expectation that schools will prepare students for the demands of the 21st century have turned the focus to the quality of teaching that is being offered ([Mulford, 2011](#)). [Davies and Bansel \(2007\)](#) mentioned that the expectation for students to "be" and to "become" is closely linked to the quality of education they receive.

The move toward more independently managed schools brings significant changes to the expectations of school leaders' effective leadership. These expectations are vested in the vision to produce highly individualised and results-driven students ([Davies & Bansel, 2007](#)). In addition, the move to independently and locally managed schools gives school leaders significant power to make decisions that have implications on the quality of teaching and learning as well as school improvement policies ([Furlong, 2013](#)). Demands for greater competitiveness of government schools ([McGregor, 2009](#)) has developed, and [Furlong \(2013\)](#) highlights that governments who aim to transform education usually turn to teachers to make this happen. Teachers become the centre of effective educational reform and are seen as the key to successful development of nations ([Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Hoon, 2001](#)). [Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, and Russ \(2004\)](#) emphasised that classrooms are predictors of quality and school effectiveness. The reality in classrooms and the influence teachers have on academic achievement and development of students are a direct outcome of leaders' decisions ([Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003](#)).

The argument in this paper highlights the responsibility of leaders, concerns about leadership models, and the impact that out-of-field teacher placements have on leaders' styles, skills and strategies. [Bourdieu \(1986\)](#) suggests that power is culturally and symbolically developed and continuously changes through the interrelationship between agency and structure. The realisation that school leaders with a "hard-to-staff" image find it harder to recruit suitably qualified teachers ([Darling-Hammond, 2010](#)) further underlines the need to ensure that school leaders at these schools understand the implications of out-of-field teaching practices. School leaders' decisions, strategies, and leadership styles influence quality education and how effective teachers are in their classrooms ([Bush, 2008; Curry, 2013; Steyn & Du Plessis, 2007](#)). Moreover, schools in low socioeconomic environments are more likely to rely on inexperienced and out-of-field teachers in their

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