



# Out-of-field teaching and professional development: A transnational investigation across Australia and South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically reflects on the lived meaning of out-of-field teaching for professional development. Out-of-field teaching is a commonly used term that refers to teachers who are assigned to teach subjects and year levels when they are not suitably qualified to do so. Out-of-field teaching is a transnational common practice with developing concerns in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Turkey, South Africa and Europe (Norway and Germany). Understanding the interrelations between leaders' perceptions, the real-life experiences of out-of-field teachers and what it means for their professional development is an under-researched field. Results from seven very different school settings in Australia and South Africa revealed assumptions and misconceptions about out-of-field teaching and its meaning for professional development. Through the different lenses of participants out-of-field teaching was investigated to reveal meaning, perceptions and leaders' influence on teachers' professional learning.

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## 1. Introduction

Martin Luther King (Jr) once said, "... the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education" (King, King, & Washington, 1986). We argue that providing suitable professional development for teachers in complicated teaching situations, such as those teaching outside their field of qualification, is a step towards upholding the true character of education. It protects these teachers from compromising intensive and critical thinking while it improves their knowledge base and supports their confidence development. Teachers are at the centre of exceptional educational reform and the key to the prosperous development of nations (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Hoon, 2001). Governments often turn their attention to education to manipulate power. These approaches are seen as "soft" power practices in order to achieve control (Sharma, 2012). The quality of education, however, is determined by the teachers in the classroom. Hattie (2009) claimed that teachers are the most valuable resources in schools. It seems, though, that educational leaders often overlook the fact that education takes place in the classroom and not around large meeting tables.

We argue that teachers' placements steer educational quality. The purpose of arguments offered is to investigate the life-world of teachers and their leaders in relation to out-of-field teaching. Focus is on the meaning of lived experiences such as confidence issues and self-esteem concerns, communication break-downs, trust relationships and respect in order to

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understand its effect on professional development efforts. We additionally argue that teachers' placements in positions outside their field of qualification have major implications for professional development programmes and the effective development of these teachers. Teaching out-of-field means that teachers teach subjects or year levels without having the appropriate qualifications, which causes them to have specific developmental needs. We further argue that educational leaders' misunderstandings of the meaning of out-of-field teaching and its impact on professional development not only influences the effectiveness of the teaching and learning environment but also influences these teachers' development opportunities.

Restricting professional development of teachers means restricting educational development. In this paper professional development is looked upon as the professional learning of out-of-field teachers, which involves informal and opportunistic developmental experiences these teachers can have in unfamiliar subjects. Professional learning includes corridor chats with experts or specialists, formal and informal mentoring from specialist teachers, and meetings. However, we argue that these professional learning incidents play a major role in the effective application of formal professional development programmes. We argue that the more connected or related these efforts are the more benefit out-of-field teachers might receive. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the multilayered meaning of out-of-field teaching for professional development and thus for the quality of education. The practice of out-of-field teaching is an international concern which includes countries such as Australia (Hobbs, 2012a; McConney & Price, 2009), US (Ingersoll, 2002, 2003), UK (Loveys, 2011), Europe (Bonesrønning, Falch, & Strøm, 2003; Maaranen, Kynäslähti, & Krokfors, 2008) which includes countries such as Norway and Germany, Turkey (Kan, Çinkir, Olgun, Eryilmaz, & Cemaloğlu, 2013) and South Africa (Du Plessis, 2005, 2010).

When teachers are assigned to positions for which they are not suitably qualified this often results in the lived experiences of not feeling "at home" or a struggle to experience "belongingness" in specific out-of-field subjects or year levels. These feelings of "uneasiness" about subjects or year levels influence the stability within a school's teaching and learning environment. Zepeda (2006) noted that half of beginning teachers do not receive the support they need from educational leaders. We argue that professional development which is disconnected from the "life-world" of out-of-field teachers is limited and has no benefits for these teachers' professional development. However, professional development that is targeted to their professional needs has the potential to positively change out-of-field teachers' career options. Borman and Dowling (2008) noted that teacher attrition decreases as teachers develop a sound and specific knowledge capital from which they can teach.

Hallinger and Heck (1996) claimed that school leaders outline teachers' professional development and initiate changes to improve teaching practices according to their perceptions and understandings. We argue that assigning teachers to out-of-field positions without understanding their lived experiences has significant meaning for the support they receive from leaders as well as professional development opportunities that are available to them. Hobbs (2013a) claimed that there is an urgent need to understand the complexities surrounding out-of-field teaching. Taking note of a workforce report in Australia (Skills Australia, 2010), that 39% of metropolitan principals and between 42 and 66% in remote areas admit that they experience recruitment and placement difficulties, 50% of principals admitted that they would assign teachers to positions without them having suitable qualifications for a specific position. Detailed statistics portray the seriousness of this concern for professional development programmes with Darby (2012) noting that on average 16% of the science teachers and 24% of the mathematics teachers in Australia lack suitable qualifications for the positions in which they teach. Additionally it is noted that 39% of all science teachers in South Africa are unsuitably qualified for their specific positions (Silva, 2010) while 26.6% of the maths teachers, 28.7% of the geography teachers and 31.4% of the physics teachers in the UK are not suitably qualified for the subject they teach (Loveys, 2011). The transnational tendency to assign teachers to positions for which they are not qualified turns our focus to the specific professional development opportunities made available for these teachers.

A plethora of literature exists about professional development and professional development programmes. The dilemma we faced was that there is no literature available that unpacks the lived meaning of out-of-field teaching for professional development or professional development programmes in relation to the specific needs of these teachers and the perceptions of their leaders. It is an area riddled with complexities but unresearched and overlooked up to now. Guskey (2000) claimed, however, that professional development is closely connected to teachers' experiences, practices and beliefs in relation to teaching and learning. We argued that overlooking the specific developmental needs of teachers in out-of-field positions is detrimental for both the teachers and the professional development efforts.

A continuing movement between development, change and transformation is the nature of effective teaching and learning environments. Day (1999) claimed that continuing reflections about pedagogies and beliefs influence teachers' understanding of the need to improve and change. Professional development programmes should thus cater for the specific professional needs of teachers and we argue that teachers in complex teaching situations such as out-of-field teaching positions would not benefit from, as Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) suggested, "one-size-fits-all" programmes. We argue that such programmes have an adverse influence on out-of-field teachers as these programmes tend by highlighting the gaps and lack of pedagogical knowledge they have in these positions and further influences their already fragile self-image and confidence. Kagan (1992) suggested that professional development programmes have the potential to achieve a fine balance between developing professionalism, cultivating new knowledge and expertise. This paper aims to unveil the significant need to understand the meaning of out-of-field teaching for developing the balance between being professional, acquiring content knowledge, and developing expertise.

It is a misunderstanding to assume that teacher expertise in one field would automatically translate into expertise in other fields (Timperley et al., 2007). Shriki and Lavy (2012) shared concerns about how ineffectively the needs of teachers are

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