

Supporting Out-of-Field Subject English Teachers

VATE Report

November 2024





VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

VATE acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which the VATE office is situated. We pay our respects to Elders from all nations – and to their Ancestors and Elders past and present.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first storytellers; and that knowledge transfer through storytelling is woven into the fabric of this Country.

We acknowledge all First Nations peoples who make contributions to teaching and learning communities. VATE is committed to working towards Makarrata and truth-telling – we strive to use language that recognises First Nations peoples' continuing connection to land, waters, and cultures.

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Introduction

Out-of-field English teaching is a significant issue in schools, especially when used in schools as a solution to teacher shortages (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 5). The Australian National Summit on Teaching Out-of-Field estimated that a significant 28% of English classes in Australia were being taught by non-English trained teachers (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 8).

VATE is invested in acting both proactively and responsively to the phenomenon of out-of-field English teaching. This report is written directly in response to both the 2022 Teaching Out-of-Field Summit Report (Hobbs et al., 2022), and a survey distributed to the VATE membership in March 2024, where English teachers from around the state were asked how the teaching out-of-field phenomenon is experienced at their school with regards to English teaching.

This report is divided into three sections. The first section includes an introduction to the scope and complexity around the out-of-field teaching phenomenon and its definition. The second section of the report aims to share some of the key themes and issues to emerge from the VATE survey. The third and final section of this report aims to articulate and open discussion around VATE's response, including recommendations and areas of action.

Definitions of out-of-field teaching

Researching and attempting to establish a definition for out-of-field teaching has been a difficult and confusing endeavour. While AITSL publishes reports on out-of-field teaching they do not provide a definition for the phenomenon. The VIT registers teachers with an approved qualification to teach and doesn't collect information around or specify subjects that a teacher may or may not teach.

In New South Wales, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) has made attempts to define out-of-field teaching as part of policy which aims to eliminate the phenomenon from schools. Their definitional scope of in-field teaching is focused entirely on university qualifications, including a major and minor study. The NESA rejects teaching experience as a way of becoming in-field stating that 'teaching experience is not considered in lieu of academic study for teaching subjects' (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2021). While NESA has attempted to eliminate, restrict or ban out-of-field teaching, parliamentary reports have acknowledged that teaching shortages have led to 'merged classes, minimal classroom supervision and out-of-field teaching' (Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council, 2023, p. 8). Additionally, teachers and teacher-educators working in New South Wales schools are able to teach subjects out-of-field by being classified as, 'Willing to teach' (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2024).

The Teaching Out-of-Field Summit Report highlighted the practice of out-of-field teaching leading to 'teachers teaching content they are unfamiliar with, and often relying on teaching strategies that are not informed by best practice for that subject.' (Hobbs et al, 2022, p. 9), further mentioning the impact this practice has on those teachers' 'well-being, identity, and self-efficacy' (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 9). There was an acknowledgement for the need for 'multi-layered language' (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 11) around the issue, suggesting that any definitions of

out-of-field teaching involved factors of qualifications, specialisations, workloads, and capabilities (pp. 12-13).

Another layer to the definition reflected in the survey involves generalist primary school teachers teaching secondary English classes. While these teachers often come into a secondary setting with vast experience, primary teachers who are currently working in a secondary school articulated a lack of the specialist knowledge contained within secondary English, even though they are qualified English teachers. This also led to the perception that those teachers often teach English as a Literacy class, akin to what happens in a primary school. This opens questions around the specialist knowledge required in secondary English teaching which is echoed both by teachers in the survey and in the summit report. Teachers also brought up issues around specialisations within English such as English as an Additional Language, Literature, English Language and vocational English which reflected the summit report's assertion that the standard teachers are held to, in order to know the subject and how to teach it, is 'challenged when teachers are assigned or employed to teach out-of-field.' (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 5).

Method

VATE emailed a survey to approximately 8000 of its members in the first term of 2024 with the aim of collecting members' experiences of the existence and perception of the out-of-field teaching phenomenon in their school context. After collecting some school information such as school type, sector and region, the survey asked members the following questions:

- How would you define out-of-field English teaching?
- How many years have you been teaching?
- What method areas did you complete at university?
- Do you identify as an out-of-field English teacher? If so, in what way?
- How is out-of-field teaching treated in the English subject area at your school?
- Have you been asked to teach classes out-of-field during your career? If so, which subjects have you been asked to teach?
- What mentoring and support services are available to new English teachers at your school?
- What resources, opportunities for learning or professional development might assist you and other teachers in your English department in supporting teachers taking an English class out-of-field?

The questions were left open-ended which allowed respondents to interpret and respond qualitatively to the question as they perceived it. It is important to note that we left it to respondents to self-identify as 'in-field' or 'out-of-field'.

118 VATE members responded to the survey. Key figures describing the background attributes of members can be found in the following graphs:

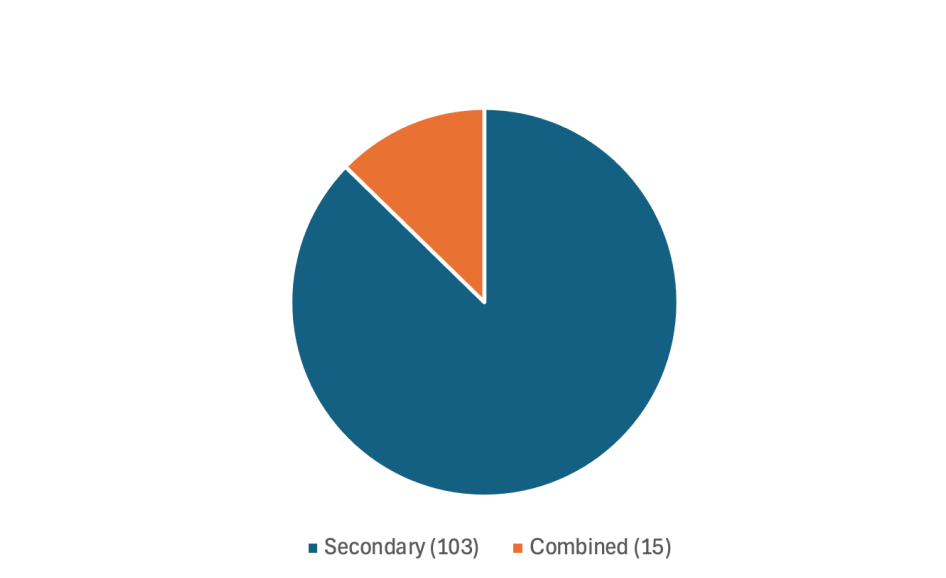


Figure 1: Responses organised by secondary and combined schools

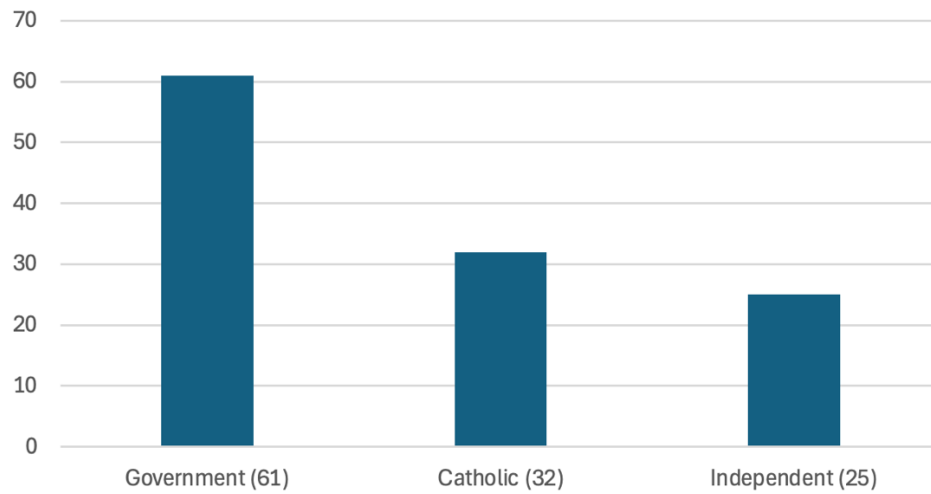


Figure 2: Responses organised across school sectors

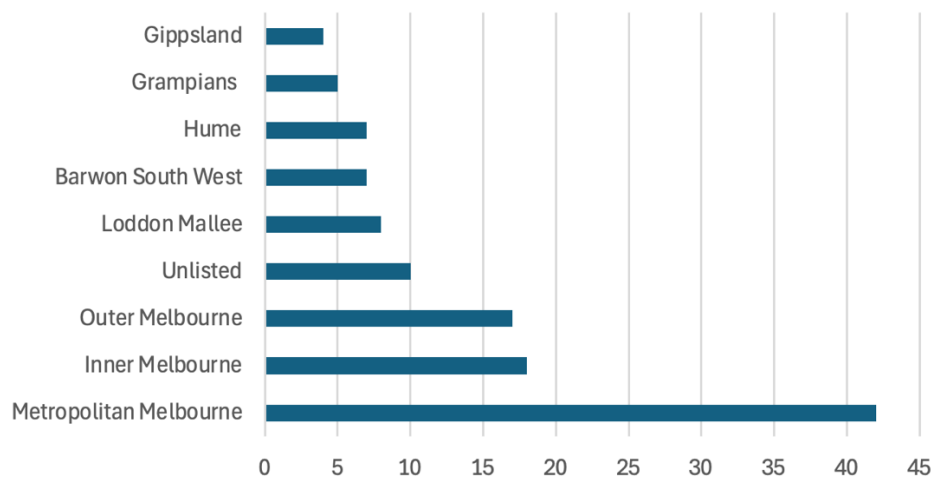


Figure 3: Responses organised across regions

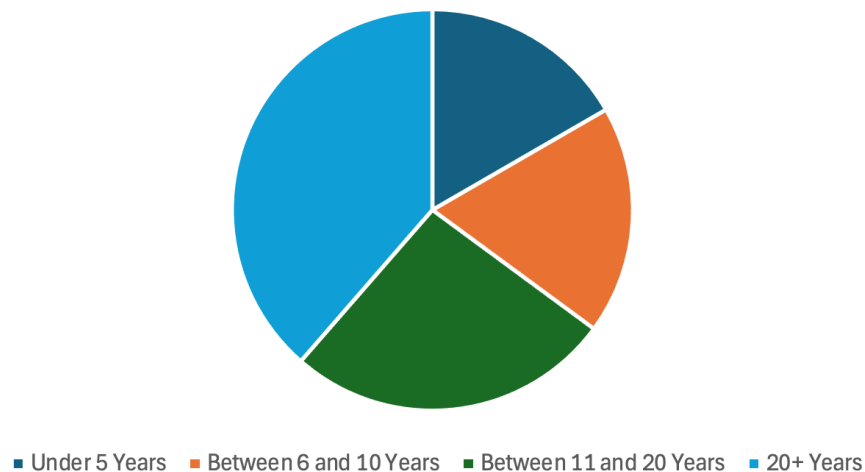


Figure 4: Responses organised by years of teaching experience

We included an option for respondents to leave their contact details at the end of the survey in order to assess interest in further work and/or research in the area by VATE. Twenty respondents who self-identified as out-of-field English teachers left their contact details, expressing interest in further discussing their work as an out-of-field English teacher. Twelve respondents who identified as English teachers indicated interest in being part of further work and research into out-of-field teaching, i.e. they wanted to support VATE's work around out-of-field English teaching or wanted to develop their ability to support out-of-field English teachers working in their schools.

Defining out-of-field English teaching

In clarifying their definition of out-of-field English teaching, 100 out of the 118 responses identified one defining characteristic of being an in-field English teacher being linked to their university qualification.

Teachers teaching English subjects who do not have a qualification in that field.

Many further clarified this response, highlighting other contributing factors that might impact their definition and perception of the experience of out-of-field English teaching. These included factors such as:

- The confidence, expertise, experience and interests of a teacher (individual characteristics and factors). This includes whether a teacher specifically asked to teach an English class, or was asked, assigned, or forced to take an English class by their school leadership.

Non-English teachers (often Humanities trained) being forced to teach English – again, the assumption is that the language and writing basis of Humanities translates easily into English teaching.

- Whether they taught English on placement as a pre-service teacher.

I am teaching VCE Literature currently and have also taught junior literacy classes in the past, neither of which I have received specific training for as I received general training and pre service teacher opportunities only in mainstream English lessons.

- Engagement with professional learning.

It is possible for a teacher to develop this field of training through professional development, but it is the lack of academic grounding in the subject that is the key criteria.

- Changes to the curriculum and the impact of taking extended leave (such as family leave) has on feeling able to confidently teach the subject.

My English course mostly involved going through the VCE Study Design, which is now out of date.

- The specialist training required to teach subjects such as English Language, vocational English and English as an Additional Language.

Teaching English without a method in English or teaching a specialisation e.g. teaching English Language without studying linguistics at university or teaching EAL without an EAL method.

- Being stuck in a certain year level and feeling detached from other areas in the school.

It should also include teachers that teach outside of their year level, e.g. many secondary English teachers teach Year 7 students with literacy levels that are early to mid primary.

Self-identification as in-field or out-of-field

Of the 118 responses, 64 respondents indicated that they had a university qualification to teach secondary English. 70 respondents self-identified as teaching English out-of-field. This included some respondents with an English method who also self-identified as teaching English out-of-field in some way.

I don't identify as out-of-field in English, however, I do feel that in English Language due to its highly specialised nature.

Yes, I have been teaching English since I was a graduate teacher which was outside my methods at university.

I did linguistics at uni so am comfortable teaching English Language, however, have no knowledge of teaching English, literacy, novels, etc.

Explanations for this self-identification were grouped into issues such as:

- **Missing the specialist knowledge required.** This included references to specialisations within English such as English Language, EAL, primary school teachers who have

transitioned into secondary teaching, and those feeling ill-equipped by their university studies.

I think you need specialist knowledge to teach those areas (EAL or English Language) as they require more scientific approaches with hard skills.

- **Teacher autonomy and support.** This included responses around teachers choosing to take on English classes out-of-field or being coerced into taking classes by leadership.

I often feel less adept at teaching English and have worked really hard through professional development and my own research/reading and professional memberships to make up what I feel could be a shortfall.

- **Classroom experience.** This mainly involved teachers self-identifying as in-field English teachers due to their experience in teaching and attending professional learning.

I've been teaching in secondary English for 23 years now and feel completely confident to do so.

- **Disposition and life skills,** such as being an avid reader or having a deep understanding of language, transitioning into their work as English teachers.

I am really enjoying teaching Year 7 English as I have always had very good literacy skills and did Literature in VCE. I am able to write essays at a university level, I passed the LANTITE and Literacy is a curriculum-wide priority means that I am pretty confident in my ability to teach English effectively.

The experience of out-of-field teaching in schools

In discussing the experience of out-of-field teaching as experienced in Victorian schools by respondents, some interesting themes emerged, particularly around school culture. There was a clear juxtaposition between schools where out-of-field teaching was effectively banned in their school and schools struggling immensely with teacher shortages who were employing and assigning classes out of desperation or an obligation to at least have a teacher in front of a class. The effect of teaching shortages emerged as a key theme throughout the survey responses where teachers expressed difficulty in employing teachers at their school.

We do not allow it.

It is more common than fully qualified English teachers.

The impact of a school's culture on the experience of teaching out-of-field was strongly evident through survey responses. This included factors such as school leadership, where teachers spoke of principal acknowledgement (or lack thereof) of the practice, the use of 'load filler' classes being an expected part of being a teacher at the school, and not understanding the demands or requirements of English teachers.

Our principal views junior English as a subject that anyone can teach and will therefore assign it to non-English teachers to meet timetable requirements and to avoid hiring more English teachers.

This feedback contrasted with other responses that spoke of teaching English out-of-field as a positive experience, and about how they were welcomed and 'brought into the fold' of the English department. In this, support by middle leaders emerged as a key theme: teachers spoke about factors affecting their integration into the English department including the existence of documented curriculum, whether they could join in English department meetings, being given extra opportunities for professional learning, acknowledging the extra time needed to plan and assess for English classes especially as an out-of-field teacher, and the importance of the notion of upskilling being a value within the school.

We have a very supportive principal. I wanted to teach English and even though I only have primary training, I am now teaching both Years 11 and 12. Our principal is supportive of what we want to teach.

71 teachers stressed the importance of having supportive teachers around them, suggesting that the experience of being an out-of-field English teacher is heavily dependent on who is around them in their day-to-day work.

School type	Number of responses	Positive support at school	Negative stigma in school
Independent	12 / 25 = 48%	9	3
Catholic	24 / 32 = 75%	12	12
Government	35 / 61 = 57%	23	12

Figure 5: Teachers specifically identifying and discussing the importance of collegial support

The perception of support was discussed as an influence for teachers feeling out of depth with their work or pivoting away from English classes (even as qualified English teachers) because the work was more intensive than other subjects.

Fellow English teachers try to give as much support as possible, however, there is nothing formally in place in terms of procedures/policies etc. to ensure that this will happen. It relies on the general benevolence of the other English teachers.

I think most English teachers at my school try to get out of teaching English because of the inequitable workload and burnout attached.

They have been treated with derision (a primary teacher 'trying' to teach Year 12 English), sympathy (poor PE teacher trying to teach Year 7 English)... basically they aren't given enough support, or even any support, as they are often experienced teachers in their own field that cannot get work in their special area.

How are 'new' English teachers supported?

As the experience of out-of-field teaching varied wildly from school to school, contrasting themes emerged around the kinds of supports that were offered to new English teachers at schools. These supports ranged from teachers receiving no support whatsoever, to the kinds of informal and unofficial mentoring that happens when teachers look out for and after each other, to formal processes that schools can use, to relying on external PD supports such as the ones offered by VATE.

None. PD gets knocked back so often and on top of that, nobody wants to teach English and waste their PD on English. I basically write every lesson in a way a CRT could teach (which is becoming an unmanageable workload issue).

Some other supports articulated included:

- Direct informal support from a head of department.

Learning Area Teams and year level teams. Very collaborative, lots of sharing of lesson plans, support from Learning Area Heads, observation is encouraged.

- Mentor teachers which, depending on the mentor, varied in its effectiveness.

They are set up with a 'mentor' teacher who teaches most of the subjects they are teaching. Unfortunately I was not told who my mentor was and they were not very welcoming or happy when I found out who they were. It largely is a case of luck as far as the quality of experience goes with mentor situations.

- A school's culture of sharing and collaboration.

Informal ongoing support when requested – meetings or catch-ups over lunch for example.

- Class observations/open classroom policies.

We work in PLCs and all staff conduct peer observations each term.

- Team planning and team-teaching.

I sat in on a VCE 3/4 English class for my first year of teaching, then taught it the following year.

- In-school staff led professional development.

There are informal Learning Area Heads, as the role has been retired. Periodic staff-delivered PD in literacy, English instruction and best practice, as well as time for moderation of student work, assessment standards, and instructional methods.

- Access to professional learning and conferences from VATE and other organisations.

VATE mini-methods for those teaching VCE, strong PLT structure, requirement of school to have all classes teach the same curriculum.

What would teachers like to see from VATE?

The final question on the survey asked respondents about the kinds of supports they saw as being useful in supporting both out-of-field English teachers and English departments where out-of-field teaching is a common feature. The respondents were keen to share their ideas around both what has helped in their journey as a teacher, an out-of-field teacher, or middle leader. These responses have been clustered together into categories including:

- **External professional development** by organisations such as VATE. This included references to the mini-methods, State Conferences, and other days and resources from VATE. An underlying theme here was that while out-of-field English teachers were often enticed by tricks and resources, the learning needed to focus on building capacity, depth and the identity of an English teacher.

Collaboration and moderation of assessments.

Our English teams work really closely with one another. I don't think having so many out-of-field English teachers would be possible without the way our English teams work together. Everything is collaborative, everything is shared.

- **School culture driven by teachers and middle leaders.** These included all the school dependent factors that impacted the intensity or ease of taking on English classes as an out-of-field teacher, including factors such as sharing and collaboration, team-teaching, the generosity of other staff and connection with their team.

Greater availability of staff to model and mentoring the classroom.

- **Utilising the experience of English teachers in school** to connect with, mentor and shadow out-of-field English teachers.

Understanding how to mark extended pieces of writing, rubrics only help so much.

I would really benefit from professional development in analysing text.

Curriculum information, the different ways of teaching activities in the subject, particularly things like grammar and the mechanics of writing – as I find many of my colleagues who can have discussions about syntax and phrasing, and I am confused.

- **Practical resources and support.** These included many suggestions of practical resources and 'crash-course' style professional development, however, there was also a strong wariness here about over-producing prescriptive lessons which can lead to a sense of devaluing teacher experience, passion, and expertise of English teachers within the department. There was also an emphasis in these responses about the need for easily available and online support for out-of-field teachers to connect with the profession.

Time and space to be able to know the texts well and be able to discuss the plan for each Term/Semester.

It is not about the PD but about time to create resources, understand skills and know how to differentiate and extend as well as mark properly.

- **The time and space required by teachers to learn and upskill both self and others.**

One of the biggest needs is time. I have had to support teachers over the years and it requires you to take a long time going through work and planning whether they are trained in the subject or not. The burnout from doing that over many years was what made moving to a new school so essential for my wellbeing.

Many responses to this question touched on the heavy demands and workload on English teachers, and how successful out-of-field English teaching practices were only possible through ‘good’ teams inside schools, both formal and informal teams working in a school’s English department.

Recommendations

We have attempted to balance feedback from teachers through the teaching out-of-field survey along with recommendations from the Teaching Out-of-Field Summit Report. While there are many strategies, recommendations and approaches that *could* be done to work with this issue, we have tried to limit the recommendations to the scope of work that can be done by VATE, as a subject association.

Recommendation 1

Finding ways to reach out-of-field English teachers to publicise and share what VATE already offers

Survey responses and the Teaching Out-of-Field Summit Report recognised one of the key issues affecting out-of-field teachers is the lack of specialised subject knowledge which makes teaching a subject like English a difficult experience. The report acknowledged that many out-of-field English teachers are aware of their adverse situation and feel guilt around the consequential impact this has on their students, and if the culture is not supportive, they do not feel confident in discussing their limitations with others and tend to disengage and keep quiet (p. 22).

VATE already offers a range of professional learning and resources for teachers, including the State Conference, Activating Reading Capabilities book, online mini-methods, Idiom, etc., so some of this work centres around reaching, publicising these resources to, and engaging out-of-field English teachers. Some teachers also spoke about wanting to create communities of sharing online, akin to the established VATE online networks, which indicated that they may not be aware of the existence of these networks. This may be addressed by encouraging organisational administrator members to ensure every teacher who teaches English at the school is registered with VATE and are encouraged to join the networks that apply to their work.

Recommendation 2

Development of a targeted online Community of Practice for out-of-field English teachers

A key recommendation from the Teaching Out-of-Field Summit Report centred around supporting out-of-field teachers to upskill and share their learning and development through communities of practice. The aim for these communities of practice groups were to prioritise professional learning as a 'social endeavour ... aligned with local policies or expectations on what in-field teachers need to know and do and include opportunities to "try out" their learnings' (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 37). Based on survey feedback this could include focus areas such as English teaching capabilities, e.g. how to teach across the language modes, unpacking the curriculum and understanding how to mark and assess student work. This should also include work on the outlook, identity and disposition of English teachers in an environment that holds and values individual teacher's experience as an out-of-field English teacher and their understandings (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 10).

Recommendation 3

Support for middle leaders in schools employing the practice of out-of-field English teaching at Leadership, Middle Years, State and National Conferences

Middle leaders' (discipline leaders) proficiencies play an important role in mentoring and supporting the professional learning of out-of-field teachers, although this can be time-consuming in some situations. Middle leaders need to be upskilled to effectively implement a range of support mechanisms known to be effective, including, for example: co-planning/co-teaching/co-reflection; providing demonstration lessons and observing expert teachers; and collaborative planning. (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 24)

In response to survey feedback around the importance of school culture and middle leadership, this recommendation centres around supporting middle leaders in schools. The survey data echoed Hobbs et al.'s notion that 'Different leadership actions, experiences and practices have the capacity to intensify the lived experience of out-of-field teachers or transform the challenges of out-of-field teaching practices into professional learning opportunities.' (2022, p. 22).

There are opportunities through the calendar year for VATE to provide time and space for middle leaders to engage in dialogue and support processes for out-of-field English teachers in their schools. In 2025, we could aim to feature at least one targeted session at each of the conferences through the year including the Leadership, Middle Years, State and National Conferences.

Recommendation 4

Utilising the VATE Leadership Network

This recommendation involves utilising time and opportunities within the VATE Leadership Network as a place to develop the capacity of middle leaders around supporting out-of-field English teaching across a more sustained cycle of time, using a formal process (in this case the Narrative Inquiry Cycle). In this year's Leadership Network, several teachers within the project identified out-of-field English teaching practices to be an issue at their school, and there are opportunities within this group to address out-of-field teaching through, or as part of, the inquiry cycle.

There is also an opportunity to frame the next cycle of the Leadership Network more specifically around out-of-field English teaching as a problem of practice. In this way, middle leaders could work alongside a critical friend across the year to develop their capacity to support out-of-field English teachers at their school. This project could also provide VATE with the opportunity to collect more data around the pervasiveness, nature, and experience of out-of-field English teaching and better understand precisely what and how we work to address the practice with schools, middle leaders, and out-of-field English teachers.

Recommendation 5

Advocacy and policy work

The size and nature of the response to this survey on out-of-field English teaching recognised the significant impact the practice has on different parts of a school and on the professional identity of English teachers. This work includes advocating for out-of-field English teaching practices to government bodies such as the Department of Education, the government, and the VIT. This advocacy work is an issue of the rights of teachers of English in schools and thus students in Victorian secondary schools, especially around equitable support, resourcing, and access to quality professional learning. This recommendation centres around VATE finding opportunities to advocate for English teachers both in-field and out-of-field by developing advocacy and policy work such as:

- **Networking across state and national English teaching associations**

State and national associations collaborating and sharing how they are approaching and addressing out-of-field English teaching and develop pathways to improve and support the practice in schools (Hobbs et al., 2022, p. 41). There is opportunity to proactively reach out to other associations at the state and national level to form some kind of network to share our experiences, work and policies.

- **The OOFTAS Collective**

The Out-of-Field Teaching Across Specialisations (OOFTAS) Collective is made up of researchers and practitioners from around the world who are engaged with the issue of teaching specialisations out-of-field. While there are a few Australian researchers and practitioners focused on the incidence and experience of teaching English out-of-field, engaging with this collective will help VATE ensure we connect with academics working in the area and with ideas around best practice in terms of researching, gathering data and supporting teachers in schools using the practice of out-of-field English teaching.

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