# TOWARDS QUALITY AND EQUITY: THE CASE FOR QUALITY TEACHING ROUNDS

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## Abstract

Improving the quality of school teaching through the professional development of teachers is a global concern echoed with growing urgency in a vast array of political and educational circles. In this paper, I outline our research on Quality Teaching and Quality Teaching Rounds, emphasising the importance of a strong pedagogical framework and adherence to principles of effective professional development in systematically avoiding the weaknesses associated with many approaches to pedagogical improvement. The power of combining evidence about professional learning communities, instructional rounds and Quality Teaching in our approach to teacher professional development, known as 'Quality Teaching Rounds', will be demonstrated using evidence from New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory schools. Our data indicate significant impact on the quality of teaching, the level of productive collaboration among teachers, and student outcomes (using NAPLAN data).

Interviews with teachers and principals corroborate these positive impacts, with many describing Quality Teaching Rounds as the most powerful professional development in which they have participated. With systematic observation and feedback on teaching high on national and international agendas, these encouraging results demonstrate how we can better support all teachers to produce high-quality teaching for all of their students.

In this paper, I summarise results from a program of research in which we have made a number of conceptual and methodological moves with important consequences for understanding how to improve both quality and equity. I argue that the Quality Teaching model of pedagogy and Quality Teaching Rounds approach to teacher development provide a powerful framework for enhancing teaching practice and offer tremendous potential for increasing both quality and equity in schools. In NSW and ACT schools – where Quality Teaching and Quality Teaching Rounds are already in use – we are already seeing this potential realised.

Quality and equity have long been joint concerns of teachers, parents, education systems, and politicians, and yet systematically achieving both has been somewhat elusive in Australian schooling. While Australia ostensibly has a 'high quality, high equity' schooling system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012, 2013), it is undeniable that we have more work to do in improving the schooling experience of large numbers of students who are bored, disengaged, failing and/or underachieving.

In this paper I summarise results from a program of research in which we have made a number of conceptual and methodological moves with important consequences for understanding how to improve both quality and equity. We have: (1) defined and mapped quality in teaching; (2) demonstrated the impact on students of improvements in teaching quality (including a positive impact on equity); and (3) identified a powerful way of supporting teachers in improving their individual and collective practice in order to enhance student learning outcomes.

The analysis of findings from this body of research demonstrates that our approach to the development of teaching – which we call Quality Teaching Rounds – not only increases both quality and equity but simultaneously addresses a number of other enduring challenges for researchers and policy makers in the fields of teaching and teacher development. Specifically, our approach provides: (1) measures of teaching quality that are both based in research and resonate with teachers, where such measures have been hard to come by (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010, 2012; Polikoff & Porter, 2014); (2) a powerful framework for enacting a research-based clinical approach to teacher development (Cordingley, 2013; Furlong, 2014), providing concepts and language with which to engage in deep discussions about teaching practice and how to refine it; and, given (1) and (2), (3) a mechanism for ensuring strong professional and social support for teachers at all stages of their careers.

In this paper, I argue that the Quality Teaching model of pedagogy and Quality Teaching Rounds approach to teacher development provide a productive framework for enhancing teaching practice with tremendous potential for increasing both quality and equity. In NSW and ACT schools – where Quality Teaching and Quality Teaching Rounds are already in use – we are already seeing this potential realised.

# The challenge of education reform

Before outlining this research, it is worth reflecting on why, despite the efforts of governments, education systems and dedicated teachers, and so many attempted reforms, we are still struggling with both quality and equity. After decades of intervention with such initiatives as the Disadvantaged Schools Program (1974–1990), the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (2006–2009), and the National Partnerships program (2008–2015), significant systemic change has been painfully slow.

Bryk (2014) argues that one of the main reasons why so many reforms fail is the tendency to implement new ideas quickly and on a wide scale, but then abandon those ideas because they appear not to have worked, and replace them with new ones, which perpetuates a cycle of minimal change. Bryk argues instead for an approach to reform that embraces the need to learn quickly in order to implement well. That is, change efforts require quick knowledge of whether it is even possible to effect change on a small scale and then apply and refine proposed reforms based on evidence from multiple sites. As one example of the problem of quick and wide implementation, Bryk reports on data from the United States that showed that small high schools might provide a solution for students who were failing, especially in disadvantaged communities. A total of 2600 new small schools were established and the Gates Foundation provided $2 billion to support the reform (Ravitch, 2008). Unsurprisingly, this initiative made little difference to student outcomes for a host of reasons, including a lack of small-school experience for many teachers, teacher resistance to the externally imposed reform, and many of the new schools differing significantly from the exemplars. As Bryk points out, failures are not typically the result of bad people; they are fundamentally problems of organisation – organisation of work and the social systems in which that work occurs.

For the past 15 years, I have been engaged with colleagues in a research agenda that meets Bryk's conditions for quick learning by iteratively developing practice-based evidence and supporting the view that if you want to fix something, you are first obliged to understand it (Gawande, 2012). For the remainder of this paper, I will outline this agenda and provide evidence of how quality and equity can be addressed simultaneously in Australian schools.

# Defining and mapping quality in teaching

One of the biggest challenges in moving toward greater quality is defining what quality is. While 'quality' as measurable student outcomes on standardised tests is reasonably widely used and accepted (despite contestation), consensus about 'quality' as it pertains to teaching has proved much harder to achieve. As City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel put it:

> We have worked, collectively and separately, in dozens of school districts where there was no common point of view on instruction, where ten educators from the same district could watch a fifteen-minute classroom video and have ten different opinions about its quality, ranging the full gamut from high praise to excoriation. *Gaining an explicit and widely held view of what constitutes good teaching and learning in your setting is a first step toward any systematic efforts to scaling up quality* [emphasis added]. (2009, p. 173)

Building on our original research in the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, during which we developed the Productive Pedagogy model (Education Queensland, 2001), the studies reported on here are all underpinned by what is known as the Quality Teaching model, a model of pedagogy that I developed with James Ladwig in 1993 for the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (Gore, 2007; Ladwig, 2005; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003).

The Quality Teaching model is a three-dimensional model of pedagogy (with six elements per dimension). It focuses on the intellectual quality of learning experiences, the quality of the learning environment and the significance of the learning for students, all of which must take into account what and who are being taught. The Quality Teaching materials that are used for both research and professional development are based on a 1–5 coding system for each element of the model. For each element, a key question is asked and those who are analysing a lesson or assessment task are asked to make judgements about the degree to which the practice they observe is commensurate with the descriptors on the coding scale. For example, teachers are asked in relation to the element *deep*

*knowledge*: 'To what extent is the knowledge being addressed focused on a small number of key concepts and the relationships between and among concepts?' Or for *explicit quality criteria*: 'To what extent are students provided with explicit criteria for the quality of work they are to produce?' Or for *cultural knowledge*: 'To what extent do lessons regularly incorporate the cultural knowledge of diverse social groupings?' While the coding system is numerical, the numbers are primarily a means for analysing, diagnosing and discussing good teaching, and not an end in themselves. Our surveys of teachers conducted over the past decade[1] show strong agreement with the fundamental tenets of the model. Whole sample ratings in all of the studies we have conducted are no lower than 21 on a scale from 4 to 24, indicating strong agreement with the idea that intellectual quality, a quality learning environment and significance are important standards for addressing teaching quality and supporting equity.

When we used the Quality Teaching model to map the quality of teaching in NSW public schools, we found that on average the quality of pedagogy was below the theoretical mid-point of the scales for each dimension, indicating substantial room for improvement. Importantly, we also found that some teachers, including beginning teachers, were delivering pedagogy that scored high on the Quality Teaching measures. This finding was critical in addressing the first question in our research program: Can teachers do it? Can they teach in ways that are commensurate with the model? We found that some can.

## Teaching quality and student equity

Having established that, in general, teachers' beliefs aligned with the principles of the Quality Teaching model and that some were producing quality teaching as defined by the model, we wanted to check that Quality Teaching would support better outcomes for students, including equity outcomes. To address this question, we investigated differences in the quality of teaching for different students and found that Aboriginal

1   Studies include Gore, J. M., Ladwig, J. G., Griffiths, T., & Amosa, W. A. *Systemic implications of pedagogy and achievement in New South Wales public schools (SIPA)*, ARC Linkage Grant 2003–2007; Gore, J. M., & Amosa, W. A. *Effective implementation of pedagogical reform* (EIPR), ARC Linkage Grant, 2009–2012; Gore et al., 2012.

students and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds on average received poorer quality pedagogy, as measured by the model, than their non-Aboriginal or higher SES peers, as did students with lower prior attainment, who often overlapped with students in these equity target groups (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths & Gore, 2007).

It is not surprising that equity problems persist when students with the lowest prior achievement receive, on average, poorer quality pedagogy, a factor that plays a significant role in our failure as a nation to achieve greater equity in education. Schools do not simply reproduce societal inequalities, they contribute to the production of inequality. For instance, given our finding that students typically do not receive explicit criteria for the quality of work they are to produce, it makes sense that students who are already succeeding at school are more easily able to figure out what is required. Providing all students with a chance to succeed includes letting them all in on what counts as success. Given that expectations of students were modest, higher order thinking was not a feature of every lesson, and substantive communication happened infrequently in typical classrooms, as just a few additional examples, it is predictable that student learning and engagement would be hampered. We also found that teachers' dispositions were related to the context in which they were working, with many teachers struggling to focus on learning in some of the lower SES schools. These findings demonstrate the now widespread view that teachers and teaching have a significant impact on student outcomes.

Most importantly, we found that when students received better quality pedagogy, in the form of assessment tasks that scored high on Quality Teaching, improvements resulted both in student performance overall and in narrowing equity gaps for low-SES and Aboriginal students, thus signalling the potential for Quality Teaching to enable more equitable outcomes. Reinforcing these findings, we also found improvements in NAPLAN outcomes in schools that were participating in Quality Teaching Rounds (see next section), including in schools with relatively low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scores (see Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012), thus demonstrating the potential of Quality Teaching to positively impact on student outcomes.

## Supporting teacher development through Quality Teaching Rounds

If Quality Teaching can be produced by some teachers and impact positively on students, our next major question was: Can professional development, using the Quality Teaching model, support more teachers in producing better teaching? Despite talk of a consensus about principles of effective professional development for teachers (Hawley & Valli, 1999), a vast array of empirical studies has shown limited impact on teaching practice and/or student outcomes (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). We were aware that the Quality Teaching model, available to teachers in the form of a document and associated resources, was never going to be sufficient for bringing about systemic improvements focused on quality and equity. Its impact would depend on its use.

In three major studies since 2009, we have been testing the efficacy of an approach to professional development we call Quality Teaching Rounds, developed with Julie Bowe. Quality Teaching Rounds involves teachers in a small, highly focused and critically supportive 'professional learning community', each teaching a lesson observed by the other members of the learning community, using the Quality Teaching model and materials to guide their observations, coding, feedback, discussion and planning for improvement. The emphasis is on the conversations teachers have about teaching and learning and what it means to teach well – not just for the lesson observed, but for how that lesson characterises the way they teach. Quality Teaching Rounds draw on such exemplars of collaborative professional development as professional learning communities and instructional rounds (e.g. Elmore, 2007; Stoll & Louis, 2007). But its critical point of distinction is the Quality Teaching model, which is used as a lens for guiding teachers' diagnostic work, through the use of shared concepts and a shared language with which to engage in rigorous professional conversations. As one participant in Quality Teaching Rounds reported its impact on her teaching:

> I know there's no turning back, I'd never go back to the way I was teaching, even though I thought it was fine and getting good results … It wasn't as exciting as teaching

is now. Like now I guess I've been re-energised to teach in a different way … You know, it's a big awakening too, just cruising along the way I was, which was getting through to them and doing the things you had to do and following the syllabus and all this kind of thing, but it wasn't exciting. And now I'm excited about it. It's not the humdrum, it's great stuff all the time.

Such excitement and re-energising of teachers is likely to be a key factor in teaching that makes a difference to quality and equity.

In a study with the Parramatta Catholic Education Office, we found that Quality Teaching Rounds were effective under ideal conditions. Subsequently, we worked with the ACT Education and Training Department, where 18 schools conducted 'design experiments' in order to enable us to test the power of the Quality Teaching Rounds approach across a different system and different school types, and using a modified form of the intervention (Gore et al., 2012). Having found positive impacts on teaching quality (including effect sizes over 1.0) and student outcomes (including NAPLAN results, as noted above), we are now testing the approach through a cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT) in NSW public schools. Following Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005), who argue that RCTs are only meaningful in education after many iterative studies, we believe our theoretical and empirical work provides enough evidence to design competing interventions that reflect the most promising combinations of components and conditions shown to have a positive impact on teacher learning, teaching quality and student outcomes.

Using the RCT protocols, observations of the quality of teaching of 192 teachers before and after the Quality Teaching Rounds intervention, and again 6 months later, is being supplemented by qualitative data on how participation in Quality Teaching Rounds impacts on teachers' identities, teaching culture and teachers' career commitments. This study will produce robust evidence of the kind needed (but too seldom available) to advise education system leaders and policy makers about the impact of their investments in teacher development in a way that, we hypothesise, can be tailored to the needs of different schools across whole, highly diverse, education systems. The impact of this approach on teachers is best captured in the words

of one participant, a deputy principal who at the time had been teaching for 20 years: 'For the first time in my career, I feel I'm actually teaching students, not just giving them work to do.'

With this kind of impact on teaching quality, and given our earlier findings of improved outcomes for students, including narrowing of equity gaps, this Quality Teaching program of research demonstrates the potential for quality and equity to be simultaneously realised. Through Quality Teaching Rounds we are supporting the development of new teachers, supporting the professional growth of all teachers, re-energising and leveraging high-performing teachers, and ensuring that all student groups are receiving better quality teaching. Educational reform is glacially slow. Our approach, developed and tested over many years, is showing promising quick gains.

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