Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

We argue that achieving educational excellence in Australian schools will depend substantially on investing in the quality of teaching. Other high-performing nations including Shanghai (China) and Singapore ensure that significant time is allocated to in-school teacher professional development. Beyond time, the quality of professional development activities is crucial. However, robust evidence on the effects of professional development is rather scarce, internationally.

Our research on the 'Quality Teaching Rounds' approach to school-based teacher development (Bowe & Gore, 2017) is world-leading in demonstrating impact of professional development on both the quality of teaching and on teacher morale.

With demonstrated effect (d = 0.4–0.5) from a randomised controlled trial conducted in diverse primary and secondary schools in NSW, we have demonstrated the potential of Quality Teaching Rounds to build teachers' capacity for ongoing improvement.

Most professional development addresses teaching practice one subject, one set of skills, or one lesson at a time. The tested Quality Teaching Rounds approach builds the collective capacity of teachers to comprehensively improve their own and each other's practice, across year levels and subject areas, with transferable and sustainable effects. These effects have been demonstrated with an investment of as little as four half-days of professional learning time for teachers.

Australia often looks to other nations for models of improvement. We contend that our sustained program of research into Quality Teaching and Quality Teaching Rounds has produced local evidence of a kind that is rare on the international stage. The approach is universally embraced by teachers who have tried it, is scalable and sustainable, and will help build the teaching workforce by attracting, supporting, and keeping teachers who can make a difference.

Main submission

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

The most critical in-school factor influencing a range of student outcomes is the quality of teaching (Hattie, 2008; OECD, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Rowe, 2003). As a result, every year, millions of dollars are invested in teacher professional development (PD) to foster teacher change and ongoing professional learning.

In the United States, among other nations, current policy settings are heavily focussed on accountability, using value-added measures (VAMs) and other means of making (often high-stakes) judgements about teachers, teaching, schools, and teacher education provision (Worrell et al., 2014). Alternatives to VAMs such as surveys, portfolios, and classroom observations are also advocated and becoming increasingly sophisticated (Feuer et al., 2013; Coe et al., 2014; Pecheone & Chung, 2006). Each of these approaches has identifiable costs and benefits, and intended and unintended consequences, including potentially profession-shaping impacts on who opts to pursue a career in teaching, the effectiveness of those currently in teaching, and who chooses to stay (Goldhaber, 2015; Gore, Barron, Holmes, & Smith, 2016).

One reason why the accountability agenda has become so prominent is that the field of teacher professional development is characterised by relatively weak empirical evidence of impact. With a history of small-scale studies that fail to build the knowledge of the profession (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Sleeter, 2014), the dearth of studies documenting impactful teacher development (partly due to lack of investment in powerful forms of research) helps explain why the accountability paradigm has occupied what some commentators see as an evidence void (CAEP, 2015; Cuban, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2013). Moreover, the field has been hampered by a failure to systematically identify what constitutes effective teaching (Ball & Hill, 2008; City et al., 2009; Coe et al., 2014; Cuban, 2013).

Improving teaching remains among the most enduring challenges in education. Preliminary studies we have conducted suggest not only that our approach to teacher professional development, Quality Teaching Rounds (described below), has enormous potential for meeting both improvement and accountability agendas (Gore, 2014b), but that it can do so in ways that genuinely support rather than thwart teacher development (Gore & Bowe, 2015).

Given well-established links between the quality of teaching and outcomes from schooling, we contend that investment in the quality of teaching (rather than the quality of teachers) is fundamental to ensuring school quality and educational success.

What can we do to improve and support ongoing improvement over time?

We have strong evidence that the Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR) approach to teacher development can effectively and efficiently (with as little as four half-days of teachers' time spread over a single school term) improve the quality of teaching with concomitant gains for all students, including those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable and academically advanced.

QTR is a form of teacher professional development designed by Bowe and Gore which brings together the benefits of professional learning communities (PLCs), instructional 'rounds', and the Quality Teaching (QT) pedagogical framework (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003).

The QT framework has been used in our decade-long program of research showing that:

- The scales that make up the framework, Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment, and Significance, have technical power in terms of validity and reliability;

- The conceptual basis of the framework resonates with teachers;

- The framework enables productive professional conversations among and between student teachers, teachers, and teacher educators by providing a shared set of concepts and language for talking about teaching;

- Student performance increases when Quality Teaching is high; and

- Equity gaps for low SES and Aboriginal students narrow when Quality Teaching is high (see Gore 2014a; Ladwig, 2007, 2010; Ladwig et al., 2007).

QTR involves teachers working in PLCs of three or more teachers to observe and analyse each other's teaching, using the QT framework, followed by extended conversation about their collective practice. QTR is a distinctive form of professional development which: is applicable across stages (year levels) and subject areas; addresses teaching comprehensively; requires minimal external input; and is adaptable to the specific teaching context. This is in contrast to professional development that: is stage or subject-specific; addresses a part of teaching practice only; requires ongoing provision of external expertise; and is highly prescriptive of practice.

In our recent randomised controlled trial (Gore et al., 2017), 24 NSW public schools participated in an investigation of the impact of QTR. Eight teachers at each of the schools were involved in the study, with lesson observations carried out by researchers, who were blinded to group allocation, at three time points – baseline, post-intervention (6-months), and follow up (12- months). School ICSEA ranged from 766 to 1209, enrolment of students with language backgrounds other than English ranged from 2% to 92%, and enrolments of Indigenous students from 0% to 62%.

Participating in QTR was found to significantly impact on the quality of teaching (d = 0.4–0.5) within the relatively short timeframe of this intervention (most teachers were involved for four days or less). Effects were sustained six months later, signalling the sustainability of impact into a new school year. Effects were independent of school type (primary/ secondary) and location (urban/rural) and years of teaching experience (Gore, Weaver, Lloyd, & Smith, 2016). Effects on teacher morale and sense of recognition and appraisal yielded similarly positive results for the two intervention groups, relative to the control group.

In interviews, teachers reported positive impacts on their own and their colleagues' teaching and professional confidence, on collegiality and school culture, and on their students. In addition, we have found universal support among participating teachers for the approach as a valuable and supportive learning experience. The next study in this program of work is another RCT designed to investigate systematically the impact of QTR on student learning outcomes.

In short, QTR was found to be an effective form of professional development, improving the quality of teaching in primary and secondary schools across subject areas and for teachers at different stages of their careers. The positive effects of QTR are thus highly generalisable across school contexts.

The approach not only builds on widely accepted 'principles of effective PD,' but can be implemented at scale and at a relatively low cost (less than $1,000 per teacher). It is not overly burdensome for universities, systems and schools. It focuses on the quality of teaching, rather than on the quality of teachers. It supports teachers in improving their practice while also developing their efficacy, well-being and professional engagement. This is in stark contrast to approaches that subject teachers to greater levels of accountability, evaluation, and performance review.

This Australian approach, developed at the University of Newcastle, simultaneously and ambitiously provides evidence of a kind that is persuasive to governments and education systems that want to both empower teachers and ensure that their investments have pay-off. Such an approach is part of the jigsaw of educational improvement that has somehow been missing in many contexts around the world. We argue that improving teaching in order to improve students' learning depends, in large part, on teachers' confidence in themselves and each other. This differs from prevailing approaches that seek to improve teaching through forms of accountability premised on a lack of confidence in and respect for teachers. In short, QTR is an alternative that can build public confidence in teachers from the ground up.

- How can system enablers … be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

Bentley and Savage (2017) say of Australia, over the past decade "the policy landscape has become riddled with reform 'solutions' that subject students, teachers, administrators and policymakers to mounting levels of pressure and stress" and that "the short-term cyclical churn of today's politics and media clearly exacerbates these problems."

Although the policy context of other countries differs in detail, their actual policies have much in common. In many countries, regulation and accountability have taken hold of government attitudes towards the teaching profession, alongside (though in different degrees) a belief in market forces as providing a way forward. Education academics (ourselves included) have been rather better at critique of such developments than in pointing to an alternative way forward. We argue that widely sought-after improvements in teaching will remain elusive unless teachers are afforded more respect, trust and, especially, professional support (Gore & Whitty, 2017).

Globally, policies to address the quality of teaching in schools adopt three main strategies: evaluating the quality of teaching (Grissom & Youngs, 2015), restricting entry to teaching (TEMAG, 2014; Wilson et al., 2015), and providing PD for teachers (Desimone, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). We know that evaluating teaching will have limited impact on improving teaching unless linked to effective models of PD and that restricting entry to only the 'best and the brightest' (TEMAG, 2014; Wilson et al., 2015) fails to provide a short-term solution and requires dramatic economic changes (Goldhaber, 2015; Gore, Barron, Holmes, & Smith, 2016). Arguably, these two approaches have gained political traction due to a lack of robust evidence for the efficacy of the third approach, providing powerful PD for teachers. Given the existing workforce of around 260,000 teachers and their impact on students currently in schools, we suggest that serious investment in good PD will provide the greatest pay-off.

- Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

With demonstrated positive effects of QTR on the quality of teaching, teacher morale, and teaching culture in schools, the next step in this program of research is to systematically evaluate its impact on student outcomes. In our next study, we plan to test the efficacy of QTR in relation to literacy and numeracy outcomes of students, primarily within lower socio-economic status schools. Such evidence is needed (but too seldom available) to inform education system leaders and policy makers about the impact of investment in teacher development. If positive effects are established, QTR has the potential to be tailored to the needs of different schools across whole, highly diverse, education systems.

Further investigation is critical to understanding the effects of QTR on student outcomes in order to advance knowledge in the field of PD research and practice. To this end, we propose future developments would involve:

- testing the impact of QTR on student achievement, thus linking PD not only to changes in classroom practice but also to improved outcomes for students;

- studying what teacher change looks like in practice, both in classrooms and in professional conversations, thus illuminating the enactment of PD;

- unpacking mediating effects of QTR on both teachers and students, acknowledging the complex variables influencing teacher and student learning; and,

- examining the sustainability of teacher change, to discover if enduring changes in practice, with concomitant gains for students, are possible.

Future developments would also test the transferability of the QTR approach, investigating its validity, impact and the conditions for its effectiveness in other educational jurisdictions across Australia. If found to be valid and effective in these different contexts, this would significantly advance the national agenda of improving instructional practice with concomitant gains for: (1) the quality and equity of student learning; (2) the well-being and professional satisfaction of teachers; and (3) meeting the reasonable accountability concerns of governments, education departments and the public.

The conceptual framework underpinning these future developments begins from the premise that in efforts to improve outcomes from schooling, teachers are often being asked to do something they do not know how to do (Elmore, 2002). If teaching is to improve, and student outcomes and opportunities are to be enhanced, teachers need a clearer concept of what it means to teach well and guidance on how to analyse what is and is not working for whom, in what contexts. We also work from the premise that all teachers are capable of great teaching with the appropriate guidance and support, and that much of the support they need can come from each other through engaging in guided critical collaborative analysis of practice. We acknowledge the complex power relations that characterise work in schools and emphasise the importance of motivating change through hope rather than fear. In framing this work, teacher learning is understood as including intellectual, attitudinal and behavioural components (Evans, 2014) and student learning is taken to include, but be much broader than, academic outcomes measured on standardised tests (Ladwig, 2010).

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