Making a difference through Quality Teaching Rounds: Evidence from a sustained program of research

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Abstract

Through rigorous forms of research, including a randomised controlled trial, Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR) has been shown to make a positive difference to the quality of teaching, teacher morale and school culture.

This presentation will draw on both quantitative and qualitative evidence to demonstrate the impact of QTR, outlining its effects across a range of NSW primary and secondary schools and for teachers at very different stages of their careers.

The essential components of QTR will be elaborated with analysis of the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the effectiveness of this form of professional development in improving teaching practice. As a relatively low-cost, short-term intervention with applicability across all subjects, stages of learning and schooling sectors, the multi-faceted evidence provided has significant implications for teacher development policy and practice. Importantly, the approach is founded in respect for the capacities of the teaching workforce in Australia, which is in stark contrast to some initiatives, here and around the world, that emphasise accountability at the expense of teacher growth and wellbeing.

Introduction

Around the world, educators are looking for powerful ways to improve teaching practice and produce better outcomes from schooling. Despite vast investment in teacher professional development (PD), few studies have shown rigorous evidence of impact on the performance of either teachers or students (Kennedy, 2016). Arguably, progress has been slow while impact remains piecemeal and difficult to measure. By contrast, Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR) stands out as an approach to PD with evidence of impact on the quality of teaching of a kind that is rare among research studies, globally.

What is Quality Teaching Rounds?

QTR, developed by Jenny Gore and Julie Bowe, involves teachers working in professional learning communities (PLCs) of four or more to observe and analyse each other's teaching (Bowe & Gore, 2017). There is a growing body of research that uses the term 'rounds' in relation to teacher development (Elmore, 2007; Goodwin, Del Prete, Reagan, & Roegman, 2015), but no other approach is founded on a rigorously developed pedagogical model, or attends so carefully to the power relations inherent in collaboration. The Quality Teaching (QT) model, developed by Gore and Ladwig (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003), guides teachers to ask three major questions about their practice:

- To what extent is there evidence of intellectual quality?
- In what ways is the environment supportive of student learning?
- How can learning be made more significant or meaningful for students?

The QT model depicted in Table 1 has a strong intellectual lineage (Newmann, 1996). While most other attempts to improve teaching lack a mechanism for developing a shared understanding of good teaching, the QT model provides teachers with a tested conceptual framework for articulating, sharing, assessing, and refining their practice. It is derived from a comprehensive review of empirical studies providing evidence on aspects of classroom practice that make a difference for students (Ladwig & King, 2003). Subsequently, it was refined through hours of classroom observational data and sophisticated statistical analysis involving multi-level modelling and factor analysis (Ladwig, 2007).

Teachers who participate in QTR work together in PLCs over a period of weeks, with each teacher taking a turn to host a 'round' involving observation in their classrooms. The host teacher's lesson (typically 30–80 minutes) is observed by the small group of peers in the PLCs. Coding and discussion follow immediately after. First, all the teachers (including the host) code the lesson, using one to five descriptors of quality associated with the 18 elements of the QT model. Then they engage in extended discussion (typically one to two hours) with each teacher sharing and justifying their codes, drawing on evidence gathered during the lesson. The goal is to reach consensus, a process that generates lively interaction and goes well beyond providing feedback to the host teacher. Teachers share targeted and critical insights in constructive ways, knowing that soon it will be their turn to host a lesson.

Currently, teachers begin QTR by attending a two-day workshop. The workshops develop teachers' understanding of 'quality' in tangible, accessible, and measurable ways; they extend teacher repertoire, not in terms of skills but of the conception of what it is to teach well. Unusually, while so many forms of PD rely on continued external support, teachers who attend these workshops (at least two per school) are empowered to

Table 1 Dimensions and elements of the Quality Teaching model

Intellectual quality	Quality learning environment	Significance
Deep knowledge	Explicit quality criteria	Background knowledge
Deep understanding	Engagement	Cultural knowledge
Problematic knowledge	High expectations	Knowledge integration
Higher-order thinking	Social support	Inclusivity
Metalanguage	Students' self-regulation	Connectedness
Substantive communication	Student direction	Narrative

implement QTR at their schools with no further external input. The initial investment produces ripple effects as participants form new professional learning communities over time. Teachers can also lead QTR with colleagues new to their schools or with colleagues in new schools if they move. They become a rich PD resource for themselves and others.

Conceptual and methodological framing

Figure 1 shows how the work is underpinned by rigorous research including systematic attention to processes of development, proof of concept, efficacy testing, real-world trials, and dissemination – processes that are relatively rare in educational research.

Importantly, QTR emphasises the quality of teaching, rather than the quality of teachers. This reframing of the 'problem' of teacher quality is manifest in QTR's resolute focus on pedagogy, recognising that what matters most is what teachers actually do in their interactions with students. Unlike approaches to PD that start with content or the use of instructional material or techniques, QTR starts with the principles of intellectual quality, quality learning environment, and significance (see Table 1). These principles distil the knowledge base for teaching and help teachers reconceptualise what good teaching is. As a result, teachers are empowered to undertake more critical and deeper analytical work on their practice, always with the aim of improving student learning.

Recognition of the importance of power relations and profound respect for teachers also pervade the QTR approach. QTR explicitly builds on what teachers already know and do, extending their professional knowledge and capacity to refine their own teaching. Misguidedly, many government agencies and PD providers seek to improve teaching through accountability regimes.

Teachers are subjected to new forms of scrutiny and onerous systems of performance to prove they are making a difference. Not only do these approaches lack strong evidence of positive impact, they also convey a lack of faith in teachers. Our mission is to build teachers' confidence by helping them to identify and fortify quality in their own and others' practice.

Relatedly, QTR flattens power hierarchies in schools. The process of undertaking rounds builds collaboration and professionalism. It deliberately brings together teachers with diverse experiences to encourage multiple perspectives on their diagnostic work. Our most recent analysis (Gore, Rosser, & Bowe, manuscript in preparation) found that the teachers and principals who participated in QTR reported:

- enhanced capacity to reflect on their own and each other's practice
- an increase in quantity and quality of dialogue about teaching
- new confidence and insights about themselves, other teachers, and their students
- greater professionalism in school culture
- strengthened relationships among staff, based on heightened trust and respect.

These wide-ranging effects suggest that QTR succeeds in overriding obstacles based on power and hierarchy and generates new ways of interacting about pedagogy. Subject and grade level boundaries in schools often obstruct dialogue, exchange, and sharing. Early career teachers often have no way to challenge their more experienced colleagues or ask for help because they don't want to be seen as lacking. QTR gives them tools to articulate what is happening in classrooms, regardless of their experience and status in the school. As a result of a shared lens on good teaching and a non-judgemental mode of critique, collaborative relationships thrive. One experienced teacher captures

Timeline	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Evidence/ Scientific purpose	Preliminary studies of pedagogy and power relations		Development of the QT model			Proof of concept testing the QT model in real-world settings		Effectiveness in new settings and development of the QTR approach		Proof of concept and pilot testing of QTR			Design experiments to refine QTR for wider implementation			RCT efficacy trial to examine impact of QTR on teaching quality and teacher morale			Mixed methods including RCTs to test QTR: • impact on student outcomes • sustainability of effects two years post-intervention • efficacy of trainer delivery and digital delivery • translation to new jurisdictions, nationally and globally.				

Figure 1 Timeline of research program

the transformative effect in a nutshell: 'They did not like me, and I did not like them, which was only on hearsay and reputation alone … But when I was in the room with them and working with them, I respected them and I learned to trust them and I learned who they really were' (secondary teacher).

Research on Quality Teaching Rounds

One of the most exciting findings of our research to date is that QTR improves the quality of teaching while impacting positively on teachers' morale. Following protocols of the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) including the requirement for observers to be blinded to group allocation (Moher et al., 2010), our randomised controlled trial (RCT) (2015–2016) produced effect sizes of .4 to .5 – effects that were consistent across representative school sectors (primary/secondary), school-level socio-educational advantage, and teachers' years of experience (Gore et al., 2017). These results were obtained with teachers participating in as few as four half-days of QTR. Furthermore, the effects were sustained six months after the intervention and in a new school year with new students. Our next study will examine sustainability of effects 12 and 24 months after participation in QTR, providing even more robust data on the long-term benefits for teachers.

The transformative effects of QTR were also demonstrated in qualitative evidence from teacher interviews and focus groups. The word most frequently used by teachers was 'changed'. Teachers reported change not only in their teaching practice, but also in their perceptions and expectations of their students, how they see their colleagues, and how they understand good teaching. QTR produced changes in their goals, relationships with colleagues, and commitment to the profession. The research documented growing confidence and skill among early career teachers, while re-energising and re-engaging those with more experience. The transformative effect on one school leader was described unequivocally: 'This is the first time in my career I feel I'm actually teaching students. Until now, I've just been giving them work to do' (primary deputy principal).

Other outcomes for teachers include:

- gains in professional knowledge about what constitutes good teaching
- greater skill and efficacy (both individual and collective) as a result of using the shared concepts and language of the QT model
- stronger professional identities as a result of both the affirmation and challenge from scrutinising practice in constructive ways

- improved wellbeing, morale, and engagement in the profession
- enhanced capacity to lead colleagues, including the next generation of teachers, in ongoing refinement of teaching.

We will soon commence a mixed methods investigation of the efficacy, complexity, and sustainability of teacher change (2018–2021), a project that promises new evidence of the impact of QTR on student outcomes. In this study, we will examine academic performance using progressive achievement tests to demonstrate literacy, numeracy, and science achievement. Anticipated outcomes for students also include increased engagement in school and improved social outcomes. These will be measured by constructs such as student self-concept, student attitudes toward learning, and student aspirations.

Implications for making a difference

QTR build capacity across schools and systems, not just one subject, one lesson or one small group of teachers at a time. A defining characteristic of QTR is its focus on pedagogy. It can be applied broadly to any teaching and learning context. Any combination of teachers can work together to analyse pedagogy, regardless of subject or grade level. Science teachers can work with art, English, physical education, history, or maths teachers. Elementary can work with secondary. QTR can focus on specific issues like the use of technology, problem-based learning, or literacy across the curriculum. These varying uses add to the scalability of the approach, especially given that the costs to schools are limited to releasing teachers to engage in a set of rounds and sending a couple of colleagues to a QTR workshop.

QTR also has clear capacity to address teacher attrition, a worrying challenge in many developed nations. Even when systematic induction into the workforce is provided, the support is usually administrative, personal, and social. Rarely do early career teachers receive comprehensive pedagogical guidance. They are urged to improve their teaching without conceptual clarity about what it is to teach well, contributing to their frustration and disillusionment. What QTR does is scaffold improvement outside the usual hierarchical mentoring or coaching relationship. It provides collegial support and collaborative critique, encouraging teachers at all career stages to learn from one another. This reciprocity is key to interrupting attrition (Gore & Bowe, 2015), raising quality, and ensuring the health of the profession.

The ultimate beneficiaries of PD are school students, now and well into the future. To date, evidence of the impact on student learning comes mainly from correlations between teacher participation in QTR and student

performance on national standardised tests. Participating schools that were previously ranked as low performing in their districts report significant turnaround within a short period of time. Powerful narratives from teachers and school leaders also indicate strong improvements in student engagement and outcomes. One principal reported a significant dip in results for students whose teachers had *not* participated in QTR: 'The rest of the school was on a momentum shift … there's been an identifiable link to our NAPLAN results in terms of student improvement' (primary principal). Our next RCT will test these claims under experimental conditions.

Conclusion

With pervasive calls to improve the quality of teaching, QTR is achieving this goal. As a way of diagnosing and improving teaching, QTR transcends new fads and innovations. It can usefully apply to whatever technological or curriculum innovation is being introduced. QTR is not a framework attached to any specific style of teaching, discipline area or technology. It can be used in traditional settings and more experimental '21st century' problem-based, inquiry-oriented learning spaces. Because QTR is about principles of pedagogy, it is durable and future-oriented. Arguably, QTR might just be a key piece of the jigsaw of educational improvement that has been missing in many contexts around the world.

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