



Quality Teaching Rounds as a professional development intervention for enhancing the quality of teaching: Rationale and study protocol for a cluster randomised controlled trial



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ABSTRACT

Professional development is widely considered important for enhancing the quality of teaching for enhanced student learning. Yet few studies have demonstrated such impacts. This protocol for a cluster randomised controlled trial involving 24 schools tests a structured collaborative approach to professional development called Quality Teaching Rounds. The study seeks to establish: which features of Quality Teaching Rounds are fundamental to its effectiveness; how, why, and for whom participation in Quality Teaching Rounds supports improvement in teaching practice; and, to what extent the Quality Teaching Rounds intervention can be implemented to build and sustain teacher capacity. The primary outcome measure, quality of teaching, will be analysed using linear mixed models and the quantitative modelling will be complemented with qualitative evidence.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, and internationally, there has been an escalation of government investment (both rhetorical and financial) in improving the quality of teachers and teaching in order to improve student outcomes and reduce equity gaps (Carter, 2015; Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, & Burns, 2012; McKenzie, Santiago, Sliwka, & Hiroyuki, 2005; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014). Teaching standards, teacher institutes, and government investment in the science of learning and measurement of quality, all signal a growing urgency for finding ways to improve teaching. These initiatives rest, to a significant extent, on the capacity for and effectiveness of teacher development.

Evidence-based approaches to teacher development that improve teaching quality have been glacially slow to emerge in a context where rapid reform is urgently sought. Existing research is dominated by small-scale studies with a dearth of larger and longer term studies (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Moreover, few studies demonstrate clear relationships between teacher professional learning and improvement in teaching, let alone consequential improvements in student outcomes (Ladwig, Smith, Gore, Amosa, & Griffiths, 2007; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Collaborative forms of teacher development are increasingly privileged, informed by a growing consensus on principles of effective development (Avalos, 2011; Bowe & Gore, under review; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Imants & van Veen, 2010; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000).

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Where measures of teaching quality are used in research examining the impact of professional development, relatively low quality is found in many schools and classrooms (King & Bouchard, 2011; Ladwig et al., 2007; Newmann & Associates, 1996). Explanations for the low impact of professional development on teaching quality include: teaching cultures in many schools that perpetuate conservative approaches to teaching (Flores & Day, 2006; Little, 2006); conditions that limit teacher self-efficacy and collective responsibility (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004; Hoy, Hoy, & Kurz, 2008; Louis, 2006; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007) or inflate efficacy in ways that productively tend the status quo (Blase, 1988); high attrition amongst early career teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003); and high burnout and low morale among teachers in general (Day & Smethem, 2009; Dorman, 2003; Özer & Beycioglu, 2010) risking a recursive downward spiral in systems and schools.

This study is designed to intervene in this context by addressing the following major aims:

- 1 To test, on a rigorous scale, an approach to teacher professional development known as Quality Teaching Rounds for its capacity to impact on teaching quality and student outcomes; and
- 2 To explain the functioning of this approach to teacher development through analysis of interactions of the approach with teacher identity, teaching culture, and teachers' career trajectories.

The study takes the form of a three-arm cluster randomised controlled trial comparing the impact of participation in Quality Teaching Rounds for two intervention groups and a wait-listed control group. This paper outlines the protocol for the study.

2. Methodology

2.1. Background to the intervention

The study builds on our previous research into Quality Teaching, a pedagogical framework, and Quality Teaching Rounds, an approach to teacher development using the framework (outlined below) (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2007; Gore, 2014a, 2014b; Ladwig et al., 2007). This research has produced effect sizes of over 1.0 for teaching quality and teacher satisfaction in non-experimental studies, when comparing teachers who have received the Quality Teaching Rounds intervention and “non-intervention” populations. These prior studies have mapped the average quality of teaching prior to intervention, and investigated whether the intervention made a difference using both quasi-experimental and “design experiment” conditions (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011; see also Gore, 2014a for overview).

The next step in this program of research is to test the effects of Quality Teaching Rounds using the most rigorous of study designs, as proposed here, in order to contribute to the body of empirical evidence on impactful professional development initiatives (Gorard, 2010; Hattie, 2008). Quality Teaching Rounds, developed by Bowe and Gore in 2008, is designed to bring together the benefits of professional learning communities (e.g., DuFour, 2004), instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), and the Quality Teaching (QT) framework (New South Wales Department of Education and Training [NSWDET], 2003) in an approach to professional development that makes a measurable difference to the quality of teaching.

Quality Teaching Rounds involve groups of teachers (typically between four and eight teachers) working in a “professional learning community” (PLC) to analyse and refine the quality of their teaching practice. Each PLC member takes a turn to teach a regular lesson, observed by the other PLC members who use the Quality Teaching framework, as elaborated in the *Quality Teaching Classroom Practice Guide* (NSWDET, 2003), to guide their observations, coding, feedback, and discussion with other members of the PLC. The QT framework provides teachers with a shared set of concepts and language for discussing the quality of teaching and fostering collaboration. Informed by professional readings as well as the lesson observations, the emphasis of Quality Teaching Rounds is on the conversations teachers have about teaching and learning; not just for the lesson observed but how that lesson characterises the way they teach/teach in a particular subject area/teach at their school/have always taught (Bowe & Gore, under review).

The Quality Teaching framework is a pedagogical model comprised of three dimensions: Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment, and Significance. It builds on the Authentic Pedagogy (Newmann & Associates, 1996) and Productive Pedagogy (Gore, 2007; Gore et al., 2004; Lingard et al., 2001) frameworks. Each dimension consists of six elements as listed in Table 1 and Appendix A. The development of the QT framework was commissioned by the then-New South Wales Department of Education and Training and has been taken up by various school systems throughout Australia (NSW

Table 1
Elements of the Quality Teaching framework.

| 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 |

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