

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

PROFESSOR JENNY GORE

Professor Jenny Gore shares the history of the use of Quality Teaching Rounds in NSW public schools and explores the positive impact of the approach on student outcomes...

Lost in the growing call in NSW for a “back-to-basics” approach to curriculum, teaching and learning is recognition of the complex, intellectual work teachers do in every lesson to ensure relevant, meaningful, and powerful learning experiences. More than ever, in the face of growing classroom complexity, burgeoning workloads, budget constraints, high stress and burnout, the realities of teachers’ work should be recognised.

Our research on Quality Teaching Rounds professional development provides such recognition. It supports teachers by building morale, efficacy, and collegiality while simultaneously improving the quality of teaching and lifting student academic achievement.

THE QUALITY TEACHING APPROACH

More than 20 years ago, Associate Professor James Ladwig and I were commissioned by the NSW Department of Education to develop an evidence-based pedagogical framework to improve teaching quality across the state. Drawing on a wide body of research and hundreds of hours of lesson observations, the Quality Teaching (QT) Model was born (Ladwig & King, 2003). The Model addresses three key ideas:

- 1. Intellectual Quality:** Developing deep understanding of important knowledge
- 2. Quality Learning Environment:** Ensuring positive classrooms that boost student learning
- 3. Significance:** Connecting learning to students’ lives and the wider world

Under these dimensions sit 18 elements based on evidence of teaching practice that improves student outcomes. Launched in 2003, the QT Model has been the Department’s framework for teaching since. But creating a framework is never enough to change practice and impact teachers and students. We needed a powerful

way to support teachers to embed the Model in their everyday work.

A series of research studies between 2009 and 2012 developed and refined the approach to professional development we call Quality Teaching Rounds, or QTR (Bowe & Gore, 2017). QTR brings teachers together to learn from each other and improve their practice. Any four teachers form a professional learning community (face-to-face or online) and then observe, analyse and discuss one another’s lessons using the QT Model across four days of professional learning.

QTR treats teachers as professionals and builds on what they already know and do. Importantly, it doesn’t dictate particular teaching methods but focuses attention on improving pedagogy to make a difference where it matters most – ensuring high quality student learning experiences.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING

In 2014–15, with funding from the NSW Department of Education, we undertook the first randomised controlled trial on QTR. This trial set out to investigate the impact of QTR on the quality of teaching, teacher morale, and sense of recognition and appraisal. The trial, which involved 192 teachers from 24 NSW government schools, found significant positive effects on teaching quality for primary and secondary teachers, those in metropolitan and rural locations, regardless of their years of experience. Importantly, these effects were sustained six months later (Gore et al., 2017).

We also found participation in QTR had significant positive effects on teacher morale and sense of recognition and appraisal, and our qualitative data showed it improved collaboration among teachers, boosted beginning teacher confidence, and rejuvenated experienced teachers (Gore & Bowe, 2015; Gore & Rickards, 2021).

Our theory of change was supported by these findings. Improve the quality of teaching to improve student learning. But we needed to test the causal link between QTR and student achievement.

Funded by a \$17.2M philanthropic grant from the Paul Ramsay Foundation, the *Building Capacity for Quality Teaching in Australian Schools, 2018–2023*, remains unprecedented in the Australian education research landscape for its investment, scope, and ambition. The project also received funding and support from the NSW Department of Education, the Australian Research Council, and the University of Newcastle.

Through three interrelated activities – research, scaling, and setting up a sustainable business model – we set out to comprehensively explore what QTR could do for schooling in Australia (Gore et al., 2023).

AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST EDUCATION RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIAL

Between 2019 and 2023 we conducted a series of randomised controlled trials to investigate the impact of QTR on student and teacher outcomes in a range of contexts. These trials are the “gold standard” for research because voluntary participants are randomly allocated to either “intervention” (in our case QTR) or “control” (PD as usual) groups.

Randomised controlled trials are common in medicine. But they are much rarer in education because they typically involve “clustered” groups (students within classes within schools) and, therefore, require really large samples of teachers and students to account for this complexity. The need to collect data ourselves, using ACER's progressive achievement tests (because NAPLAN data wasn't fit for purpose due to the two year interval), made these trials hugely expensive.

Our first trial in NSW involved almost 500 teachers from 120 public schools and was the largest randomised controlled trial in Australian education. In total our four trials in this program of research involved 1,400 teachers and 14,500 students from 430 schools across New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

As well as experimental evidence in the form of randomised trials, the program of research included case studies, longitudinal research (where we tracked teach-

ers over the five years of the study), and evaluations of a partnership model for whole-school engagement in QTR which focused on improving outcomes for teachers and students in disadvantaged schools.

No other school-based intervention has been so thoroughly tested in Australian schools or amassed such a comprehensive body of evidence.

QTR IMPROVES STUDENT OUTCOMES

These trials replicated the results of the 2014–15 study, demonstrating that teacher participation in QTR improves the quality of teaching, teacher morale, sense of recognition and appraisal, and school culture. For the first time, we also tested for, and found, increased teacher efficacy.

Most importantly, three of the four trials in the *Building Capacity* project produced robust evidence of positive effects on student achievement. Excitingly, we found these results were stronger in disadvantaged schools, signalling the potential for QTR to help narrow pervasive equity gaps (Gore et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2022; Povey et al., 2023).

Our studies compared students' scores on progressive achievement tests in mathematics and reading. Across the four trials (including one conducted by the University of Queensland and one by ACER to provide independent replication), we tested students in Term 1 to provide a baseline score and then again in Term 4 after their teachers had participated in QTR (intervention group) or completed their usual PD (control group).

While we didn't see an identical set of results in every study, three of the four trials produced statistically significant positive effects on student learning. These improvements ranged from two-to-three months' worth of additional achievement growth in mathematics and reading for the students whose teachers participated in QTR compared to teachers who didn't.

Education research is messy. Mixed results are common in education given the complexity of conducting research in schools. An analysis of large-scale education randomised trials in the US and UK found that only one quarter of trials produced a statistically significant result. For example, a trial of Dylan Wiliam's formative assessment program found improvements of one month's

growth, however, these improvements were not statistically significant.

Achieving significant results in *multiple* trials is especially rare and even more remarkable considering the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that QTR professional development is “distal” from the student achievement measure – meaning, we changed teachers’ pedagogy and improved academic achievement, rather than a “proximal” intervention focused specifically on the instruction of mathematics or reading.

Importantly, these results were amplified by the qualitative insights of teachers and principals throughout the project. These rich qualitative data enabled a deeper understanding of how, why, and under what conditions QTR is effective (Gore et al., 2023). Here are just two examples:

“Long after the QTR process is done, I don’t think I’ll ever not think about these 18 elements to some level as I go through my practice. Even now when I start thinking about planning the next area or planning the next unit, I will run through the things in my head like, “How am I going to make sure I’m inclusive? How am I going to make sure that I look at different cultural knowledge? Where can I draw on the kids’ background knowledge?” I just find it’s going to be beneficial and helpful long term.” (Ava, teacher in a metropolitan secondary school)

“QTR is the vehicle through which we can achieve our school’s goals. It’s not the end point. It’s enabling that professional learning, that reflection, that dialogue to happen. And that’s going to improve our knowledge of students, improve explicit teaching, improve lesson planning. That’s going to improve all those elements that sit underneath the QT Model. That’s all going to be what we achieve through Rounds.” (Gwen, principal in a metropolitan secondary school)

WHAT NEXT?

Thanks to the funding provided in the *Building Capacity* project, teachers across Australia can access QTR through our non-profit social enterprise, the QT Academy.

The Australian Government has also provided funding for 1,600 teachers to take part in a free QTR workshop between 2023 and 2026 as part of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (Department of Education, 2022). *The Strengthening Induction through QTR* project aims

to improve the morale, confidence, job satisfaction, and retention of early career teachers across Australia (Teachers and Teaching Research Centre, 2024).

Our partnership with Cessnock High School, one of the most disadvantaged schools in NSW, led to the school achieving the greatest NAPLAN growth from Year 7 to 9 in the Hunter region and the 11th greatest in the state by engaging in whole school Quality Teaching Rounds (Duffy, 2024). Simultaneously, teachers reported greater morale and improved school culture, which are critical factors in addressing the current teacher shortage crisis.

“We are really proud of the results we have achieved so far. We’re not just trying to help kids through school here, we’re trying to help the Cessnock community by producing kids who are capable of getting quality jobs, being able to operate as a community member, and adding to our community.” (Peter Riley, Principal, Cessnock High School)

Thanks to additional funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation, this partnership model is now being rolled out to 25 disadvantaged schools in NSW to support teachers and improve outcomes with a key focus on equity.

Our research shows the Quality Teaching approach, which was born here in NSW, has clear potential to address many of the most pressing concerns facing education in this country. By engaging in QTR on a wide scale, we can support the teaching workforce while achieving excellence and more equitable outcomes for Australian students.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laureate Professor Jenny Gore AM is the Director of the [Teachers and Teaching Research Centre](https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/teachers-and-teaching/quality-teaching-rounds/strengthening-induction-through-qtr) at the University of Newcastle. With almost \$35 million in external funding since 1992, Jenny's research is driven by the notion that all children should experience high quality teaching. Her ongoing work with colleagues on Quality Teaching and Quality Teaching Rounds over the last decade has shown how this framework can effectively support teacher professional development, increase teacher satisfaction, enhance teaching quality in schools, and improve student achievement while narrowing equity gaps. Jenny's research on improving teaching and learning saw the QT Academy established in 2020. She has received awards and recognition from the ACDE, ACEL, AARE, AERA, ASSA, Royal Society of NSW, the Paul Brock Memorial Medal and was most recently awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2024 Australia Day Honours for significant service to tertiary education.

