

Yes, quality teaching improves student outcomes. But that means all teachers need support – not just those in training

May 4 2021, by Jenny Gore



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In his speech to [The Age Schools Summit](#) in Melbourne last week, federal Education Minister Alan Tudge talked about his [recently launched review](#) of initial teacher education. He said quality teaching was the most important in-school factor for determining student

outcomes, and the review was a step towards this goal.

[Some research](#)

[backs the minister's claim—teaching has a significant impact on student outcomes. But the focus on initial](#)

[teacher](#) education is insufficient.

First, [research also shows](#) a school's level of advantage or disadvantage has a significant role to play in student outcomes, in some cases more so than the "quality" of its teachers.

And second, [15,000 teachers](#) are graduating from Australian universities each year. This is a fraction of the [300,000 teachers](#) in the workforce, all having and continuing to have an impact on students.

This means reviewing initial teacher education does little to help the [more than 4 million students](#) enrolled in Australian schools.

Helping all teachers improve their teaching is a better and faster way to improve the performance of Australian students. Our research shows how we can do this.

Quality teaching and equality

In 2019, Deloitte Access Economics issued a report, commissioned by the federal Education Department, called "[School quality in Australia: Exploring the drivers of student outcomes and the links to practice and schooling quality](#)". The report found the most important in-school factor driving student outcomes was teaching practice.

According to the report, the effect of teaching practice on student

outcomes is twice as great as the next most significant driver—the classroom environment.

However, other studies, both in [Australia](#) and [internationally](#), point to socio-economic inequalities having concentrated and considerable effects on student engagement and achievement.

For instance, a 2014 [Australian study](#) noted leaders have tended to cherry-pick evidence. The study's author's wrote: "[...] State and Commonwealth education ministers have tended to focus quite selectively on research findings that speak to the positive outcomes associated with quality teaching, while neglecting the complexity of this field [...] The phenomenon of "residualisation" in particular, whereby disadvantage is concentrated in certain public schools as a result of "school choice", has quite powerful effects on the engagement and achievement of low SES [socioeconomic] students."

The education minister's current approach emphasises in-school factors while minimising the impact of out-of-school factors on student achievement. Both are important if we are to improve our students' results.

How do we improve teaching quality?

Worldwide, [four broad strategies](#) are used to improve teaching:

- Recruiting and training "better" teachers
- Improving initial teacher education
- Measuring and evaluating the quality of teaching
- Providing professional development to build the capacity of practising teachers.

Recruiting strong candidates into teaching and improving teacher

education have merit, but they are long-term strategies. Evaluating the quality of teaching might be helpful in identifying needed reforms but does not, in itself, guarantee improvement.

However, building teaching capacity in all teachers will deliver results. This is especially true when seeking quick outcomes, such as [Alan Tudge's goal](#) for Australian schools to be back "among the world's top nations" in reading, maths and science by 2030.

So, how do we build capacity?

As a profession, we struggle to agree on what makes a quality teacher. We developed an approach focused on what teachers do in the classroom rather than who they are. In other words, quality teaching rather than quality teachers.

At the core of our approach is a framework called the [quality teaching model](#), which focuses on three key concepts:

- The need for intellectual quality, rigour or challenge in every learning experience
- The need to create classroom environments that support not only students but also their learning
- The need to increase the significance of student learning so they can see its connection to the world beyond the classroom.

Using this model, we devised a professional development process called "[quality teaching rounds](#)". It is applicable to every grade, subject and teacher career stage.

These rounds involve teachers collaborating in professional learning communities of four or more. They observe and analyse each other's teaching using the quality teaching model. Over a period of weeks, each

teacher takes a turn to host a lesson observed by their peers.

All the teachers (including the host) assess the lesson using the elements of quality in our model. Next, they have discussions about each teacher's justification of their assessment, drawing on evidence gathered during the lesson.

The goal is to reach consensus on what is working. This process generates lively interaction, critical insights and goes well beyond providing feedback to the host teacher. Importantly, the assessments remain confidential to the participants, creating a safe space for their analysis.

Does it work?

This approach has been shown to improve the quality of teaching, teacher morale and, most importantly in the current context, student performance.

We conducted a trial involving 192 teachers randomly assigned to two groups: the first group did quality teaching rounds and the comparison group did professional development as usual. The researchers were blinded to group allocation.

Our [findings](#) show the quality of teaching (measured by our quality teaching model) improved significantly in the group that participated in rounds.

This year, we [published findings](#) of a more recent trial involving 234 year 3 and 4 primary teachers and more than 5,000 students from 133 New South Wales government schools. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a group involved in quality teaching rounds; a less structured form of peer observation; or professional

development as usual (control).

Compared to the control group, student outcomes in mathematics improved by 25% in the group where teachers participated in quality teaching rounds. This was equal to two months additional improvement over an eight month period. The results also improved by less than one month in the peer observation group but were not statistically significant.

Resources matter too

If we are to meet the education minister's objectives for Australia to again be among the world's leading nations in student performance, we must support all teachers with [professional development](#) shown to work.

Yet it would be remiss not to acknowledge the enormous contribution of out-of-school factors in determining [student](#) outcomes.

Inadequate resources and disadvantage in low socioeconomic schools play a significant role in students' poorer educational outcomes.

Teachers, [teaching](#) and teacher education cannot alone make the improvements sought without considerable commitment to, and investment in, rectifying longstanding inequalities.

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