

Equity and pedagogy: familiar patterns and QT based possibilities¹

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Abstract:

International research highlights the persistence of educational inequities within school systems, with some specific national variations. In the Australian context, two of the most persistent dimensions of educational disadvantage are socio-economic status (SES) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) status. In this paper we report on the distribution of pedagogy received by cohorts of students being tracked in the Systemic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement (SIPA) Longitudinal Study being conducted in the state of New South Wales, Australia. Specifically, we examine differences in the quality of pedagogy received – measured using the Quality Teaching framework to rate the quality of classroom practice and tasks – according to students' SES and ATSI status.

At the school level, we report a relatively even distribution of pedagogy, with some mild correlations with SES and ATSI. At the micro level, we compare results between classes and report some strengthening of these patterns, in particular a moderate to strong positive correlation between SES and the quality of pedagogy received, measured in both classroom practice and tasks. These findings are considered in light of teachers' interview data which show how differential expectations for students are expressed, raising questions as to whether and how the Quality Teaching framework may assist teachers in changing their practice, as a strategy for changed expectations and improved learning outcomes.

Introduction:

For over thirty years in Australia and internationally, understandings of educational disadvantage have consistently identified social and economic characteristics of student populations, sought to explore the ways in which these characteristics interact with students' experience of schooling to contribute to disadvantage, and elaborate interventions to address identified problems and contribute to more equitable outcomes. Increasingly over this period, such understandings and interventions have emphasised the need to move beyond 'deficit' approaches that effectively individualise or pathologise the problem within students (their families, their culture, etc), to those which locate the problem in educational institutions –

¹ As part of a symposium, this paper should be read in conjunction with the other papers presented; the complete series is: GRI07282, LAD07283, AMO07284 and GOR07285.

their structure, culture, curricula, practices etcetera, and / or in the broader social structures that effectively construct the identified disadvantaged populations.

Results from the latest round of the large international comparative studies, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), show ongoing or increased rates of inequity within systems (Thompson & Fleming, 2003; Thomson, Cresswell, & De Bortoli, 2004). In particular, outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in general continue to fall behind (New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated & New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004), while more than thirty years of the Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP, and the Disadvantaged Schools Program it replaced) targeting schools with low-SES student populations, have not overcome the educational inequities experienced by these students.

Public discourse in Australia around public education in particular, and educational under-achievement and failure, however, frequently relies on deficit accounts that attribute blame on disadvantaged groups and / or their teachers. McInerney (2006) notes the ongoing discourses of blame the student, blame the school and blame the system, when responding to disadvantage, advocating an alternative Freirean interpretation that highlights the ways in which social and political structures, including those of formal schooling, contribute to youth alienation and disengagement from schooling and society. Such an interpretation argues for alternative “pedagogies of engagement” that directly connect with students experiences, their personal backgrounds beyond the school, and to ‘real-life’ concerns of students and their world in ways that help to prepare “active and politically informed citizens” able to “read and act on their world” (pp. 21-22).

Such research into student engagement casts light on a core aspect of the schooling experience that contributes to lower outcomes for disadvantaged groups: the extent to which these student populations see some relevance in schooling and school knowledge, and are able to make some connection between this knowledge and the associated activities and the world that they experience and understand. While work like McInerney’s (2006) highlights the limited capacity of schools and teachers to resolve educational inequity tied to broader social and economic inequalities, such qualifications are also found in efforts advocating reform for improved equity (Rothstein, 2004). The critical pedagogy response, however, is to call for pedagogy that is explicitly linked to student interests and concerns, and to broader social justice campaigns and initiatives, as a strategy for improving disadvantaged students’ engagement and using schooling to contribute to wider social changes needed to address the factors that underlie such students’ disengagement from schooling (Di Bartolo, 2005; McInerney, 2006).

The pedagogical reform initiative in NSW public schools, centred on the application of the *Quality Teaching* (hereafter QT) framework, has the potential to impact positively on the engagement and outcomes of students in general, and disadvantaged groups in particular, by detailing how student engagement may be improved in mainstream classes without compromising the intellectual quality of students’ school experience. The three dimensions of the framework seek to lift the *Intellectual Quality* of work students are engaged in, in a supportive *Quality Learning Environment* that also raises the *Significance* of work for students by connecting curriculum content and activities to students lived experience beyond the school (Ladwig & King, 2003; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003a, 2003b). Each of the framework’s dimensions, and the individual elements within them are theoretically inter-related to increase student interest, motivation, and engagement in the intellectual work of schooling, ultimately contributing to improved learning outcomes. These connections appear to be straight-forward, for example including students’ background and cultural knowledge in a task that addresses a real-life problem in a way that is intellectually challenging, allows students to make substantive decisions about the activity and their

learning, and requires them to engage with and understand in depth the problematic nature of the knowledge being addressed.

Further, the dimension of *Significance* calls on teachers to consider questions of student engagement by consciously including students' background and cultural knowledge, integrating this with formal curricula knowledge in ways that directly connect with real-life student concerns. Aspects of the *Quality learning environment* dimension also directly address the issue of student engagement, advocating experiences and activities in which students regulate their own activity, have some control over the experiences and are independently engaged in the tasks being undertaken. Where other initiatives aimed at improving disadvantaged or marginalised students' connection with schooling may fail to impact on student learning outcomes (Munns, 2005; R Teese & Polesel, 2003), the QT framework makes learning and deep understanding of significant concepts and content central to the proposed strategy. Such an approach, we argue, aligns with a critical pedagogy or liberatory perspective in which the curriculum knowledge presented to students, and what is done with it, connects directly with the experiences, concerns, and world of students in ways that have not traditionally occurred.

The *Quality teaching* framework thus offers some of the detail by which such pedagogy can occur as part of mainstream teachers' everyday teaching and assessment practices (see Gore, 2001). Further, it potentially addresses causes of student disengagement generated within schools via curriculum choices and teachers' pedagogical practice. The focus on including students' background knowledge in ways that connect with real-world applications may also connect student learning to local (national and international) social justice campaigns.

In the analysis that follows, we report on measured differences in the quality of pedagogy distributed between schools, and between classes, based on students' SES and ATSI status. The results align with predictable, but mild, patterns of lower quality pedagogy being received in schools, and more strongly in classes, with lower mean SES scores and higher proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Following this analysis we consider interview data collected from teachers in participating schools, identifying differential expectations for students which may help to account for the differential quality of pedagogy received.

The SIPA research

This paper draws its data from the longitudinal research project (2004-2007), *Systemic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement in New South Wales Public Schools* (SIPA). A collaborative study between NSW DET and the University of Newcastle, the purpose of SIPA is to examine, over time, the relationships between teachers' professional development, pedagogy and student outcomes. Having commenced data collection in 2004, SIPA is tracking three cohorts of students as they move from Year 3 to Year 6; Year 5 to Year 8; and Year 7 to Year 10.

The teaching and learning experiences of teachers and students are being recorded through four data collection processes: collection of in-class assessment tasks and their resultant student work products; field visits to each of the 33 participating schools, involving classroom observations and teacher interviews; a four point longitudinal survey of all teachers in the participating schools (SIPAQ); and the collection of student demographic and prior achievement data.

Field visits to participating schools are conducting direct observations of teachers' classroom practice, and interviews of teachers and school executive, throughout the study. Using a QT classroom observation manual (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003a), 550 observations over the 2004-2006 period are included in school level analyses, involving 269

teachers. The 18-item, three-dimensional Quality Teaching scale was used to code the degree to which the lessons exhibit high levels of quality pedagogy within each of the three Quality Teaching dimensions: *Intellectual Quality*, *Quality Learning Environment*, and *Significance* (see NSW DET, 2003b). Each of the 18 elements in the guide for coding classroom practice is coded on a one to five scale.

The collection and coding of assessment tasks and student performances at six points from 2004 to 2007 is replicating the procedures used in Newmann, Marks and Gamoran (1996) and subsequent studies led by Newmann (Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001; Smith, Lee, & Newmann, 2001). For each data collection, teachers in the targeted classes submit sets of student work on regular in-class assessment tasks. For the analyses in this paper, 411 distinct assessment tasks from 387 teachers from five of these six collection points were coded using a QT assessment practice manual for measuring pedagogy as represented in the quality of learning tasks (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). The 14-item, three-dimensional Quality Teaching scale was used to code the degree to which the tasks exhibit high levels of quality pedagogy, within each of the three dimensions: *Intellectual Quality*, *Quality Learning Environment*, and *Significance* (see NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). Each of the 14 elements in the guide for coding assessment practice is coded on a one to five scale.

All participating teachers in the study were invited to be interviewed during the field visits, the semi-structured interviews seeking teachers' views about their goals of teaching, the QT initiative, and professional learning, in terms of their own experience and practice and that of the school more generally. Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcriptions prepared and returned to teachers to check and edit, before being used in the study. A total of 319 such transcripts were available for this paper, with preliminary analyses using section coding by interview question, and then coding on from these around themes of equity and expectations.

Pedagogy, SES and ATSI at the school level

The experience of low-SES students in schooling continues to receive much attention in research literature, indicating of the persistence of inequitable outcomes linked to socio-economic status. Work in the Australian Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth series (<http://www.acer.edu.au/research/LSAY/research.html>), for example, finds persistent links between SES and student participation in Year 12 (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley, & Hillman, 2003), subject choices (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Fullarton et al., 2003; Lamb & Ball, 1999), and between school differences in student performance (Rothman & McMillan, 2003). Such findings align with international research finding substantive differences in the quality of pedagogy received by students in identified poor or low-SES schools (Fransoo, Brownell, Roos, Ward, & Wilson, 2005; Haberman, 2002; Lee & Wong, 2004).

Students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent continue to achieve at comparatively lower standards than their non-Indigenous counterparts. As noted above, reports from the TIMSS and PISA studies have highlighted such findings, the PISA 2003 report noting that Indigenous students were "over-represented in the lower categories of mathematics proficiency and under-represented in the highest category", that "similar results were evident for reading and scientific literacy and for problem solving (Thomson *et al.*, 2004, p. 10). The 2003/4 review of the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy linked teaching practices with student outcomes to find that Indigenous students needed to be more engaged, and that their teachers need to convey higher expectations for their work (New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated & New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004).

Socio-economic Status

Findings from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth research series highlight the difficulty of articulating the impact of SES in any definitive way. Within this work there appears to be a strong view that SES matters more for between school than within school differences in student outcomes, and that after prior achievement is accounted for the effect of SES on variations in student achievement drops significantly. Teese (2004) has critiqued the use of such findings to argue that the quality of teaching is more important than SES, underlining the embedded nature of things like SES within measures of students' prior achievement.

A recent review of literature on SES and Learning conducted for the NSWDET noted the impact of SES on variables like prior achievement (and school attended), highlighting the ongoing influence of SES on student outcomes in Australia and internationally (Erebus International, 2005). In acknowledging the complexity of the relationship, the report emphasised that, in the Australian context, increased socio-economic segmentation has "contributed to the transfer of the effects of socio-economic status from the individual level to the school level" (p. 13), with an accompanying lack of certainty about how these SES effects work or are experienced at the school level (pp. 13-15).

To investigate the relationship between SES (at the school level) and the quality of pedagogy received by students, we have used two measures. First, we use the broad measure of whether a school qualifies for the State governments "Priority School Funding Program" (PSFP). This program uses a survey of students families to construct an SES score, based on parents employment status, occupation status weighted for hours work, parent's average educational qualifications, parents' receipt of government welfare payments, sole parent families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (see: <http://www.psfps.nsw.edu.au/about/faqs/index.html>). Eligibility for the program is determined every four years. In the current round (2004-2008) there are 541 schools in NSW on the PSFP (406 primary, 80 secondary, 20 central schools and 35 schools for specific purposes).

No statistically significant differences were found in the quality of classroom practice recorded in PSFP and non-PSFP schools. Some statistically significant differences were recorded in the quality of tasks received by students in PSFP and non-PSFP schools, with those in PSFP schools receiving lower quality tasks against all three dimensions of the QT framework, as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. T-Test: Quality of tasks by PSFP Status

	PSFP Schools			Non-PSFP Schools			Significance (2-tailed)
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	
Intellectual Quality	13.45	10	1.77	16.07	23	2.65	0.008**
Quality Learning Environment	5.40	10	0.88	6.81	23	1.81	0.027*
Significance	8.94	10	1.26	10.31	23	1.96	0.052

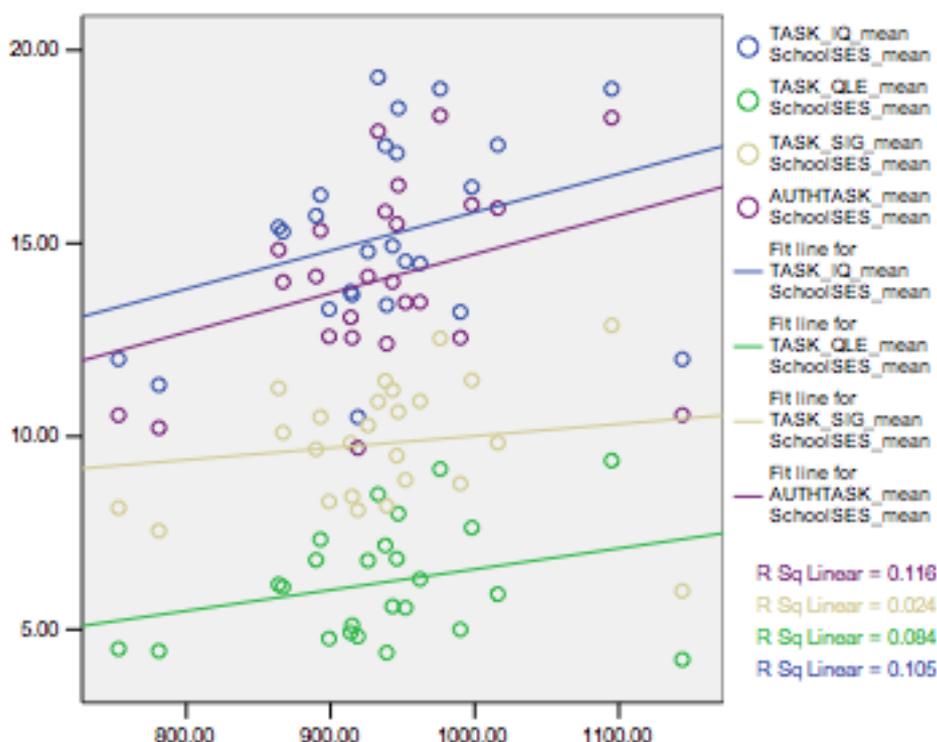
** Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The second measure of SES used in our analysis is a SES scale, based on individual student scores drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics figures from Census Collection Districts. This level of data provides an SES score based on student addresses within Census collection districts that amount to several blocks of homes, within suburbs, within postcode areas. Measures of these scores for individual students were aggregated to produce a whole school score. This index allowed for correlations between the quality of pedagogy and relative socio-economic status of schools to be measured.

At the whole school level, no statistically significant correlations were found between the measured quality of pedagogy (classroom practice or tasks) and the mean SES for schools. Positive correlations were recorded between the quality of tasks and the mean SES of the school, but these were not statistically significant (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Scatter Plot: Quality of Tasks and SES at school level.



Further analyses were done comparing mean scores for schools at the extreme ends of the SES scale, calculated as those more than one Standard Deviation below or above the mean SES score for the whole sample. Interestingly, this comparison also failed to produce statistically significant differences in the quality of pedagogy, either as classroom practice or tasks, between the two groups. The clear pattern to emerge from this data is that pedagogy as measured by classroom practice is relatively evenly distributed between schools, based on their relative SES at the whole school level.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status

To investigate the distribution of pedagogy in terms of students' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, we first analysed basic correlations between the measured quality of pedagogy (classroom practice and tasks) and the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the school level. As with the analysis of SES above, it is important to keep in mind that here we are using whole school measures, offering some insight into the distribution of pedagogy in schools with a range of ATSI enrolments.

Table 2. Correlations: Quality of Pedagogy and mean ATSI % at school level

		Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Quality of classroom Pedagogy	Intellectual Quality	-0.326	0.097	27
	Quality Learning Environment	-0.191	0.340	27
	Significance	-0.348	0.076	27
Quality of Tasks	Intellectual Quality	-0.102	0.571	33
	Quality Learning Environment	-0.160	0.373	33
	Significance	-0.126	0.484	33

As reported in Table 2 above, the findings show some predictable, but not statistically significant, directions in correlations: the higher the percentage of ATSI students the lower the quality of pedagogical practice at a whole school level.

Pedagogy, SES and ATSI at the class level

Working with individual student data from our cohorts of students being followed in the longitudinal study, we can aggregate data at the classroom level to produce a mean SES and ATSI percentage score at this level, and then examine the relationship between these and the mean scores for the quality of pedagogy received by students at the classroom level. These findings are reported below (see Table 3), and provide stronger evidence of the indicative trends outlined above.

Table 3: Class level correlations: Quality of pedagogy, dimensions of disadvantage, and student prior achievement

			SES	ATSI	Prior Achievement (literacy)	Prior achievement (numeracy)
Quality of observed classroom practice	Intellectual Quality	Pearson Correlation	.328(*)	-0.214	-0.178	-0.227
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.012	0.11	0.186	0.089
		N	58	57	57	57
	Quality Learning Environment	Pearson Correlation	0.086	-0.074	-.498(**)	-.474(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.523	0.585	0	0
		N	58	57	57	57
	Significance	Pearson Correlation	.506(**)	-.372(**)	0.081	0.044
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.004	0.548	0.747
		N	58	57	57	57
	Authentic Pedagogy proxy ¹	Pearson Correlation	.460(**)	-.490(**)	.645(**)	.571(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0	0	0
		N	49	49	49	49
Quality of Tasks	Intellectual Quality	Pearson Correlation	.229(*)	-0.155	.444(**)	.408(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.022	0.134	0	0
		N	99	95	95	95
	Quality Learning Environment	Pearson Correlation	.311(**)	-.253(*)	.590(**)	.580(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002	0.013	0	0
		N	99	95	95	95
	Significance	Pearson Correlation	0.167	-0.069	.397(**)	.336(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.098	0.508	0	0.001
		N	99	95	95	95
	Authentic Task proxy ²	Pearson Correlation	.354(**)	-.227(*)	.600(**)	.573(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.027	0	0
		N	99	95	95	95

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

1. The Authentic Pedagogy proxy is the mean of the elements of: *Deep Knowledge, Deep Understanding, Higher order Thinking, Substantive Communication, and Connectedness.*
2. The Authentic Task proxy is the mean of these elements for tasks.

These results clearly demonstrate that the relationship between the quality of classroom pedagogy and tasks received by students, based on their SES and ATSI status, is highly significant at the class level. Whereas at the macro between school level we found a relatively even distribution of classroom pedagogy based on the aggregated SES measure for the school, this data shows moderate to strong correlations for measures of *Intellectual quality* and *Significance* respectively with the mean SES at the class level. That is, the higher the mean SES at the class level (i.e. the more advantaged), the higher the measure of the intellectual quality of the work experienced in the classroom. Importantly, there is a very

strong correlation (0.506) with the measured significance of the work experienced in the classroom.

This finding is important in light of the attention given to student engagement, and calls for a pedagogy of engagement, cited above. The contrasting pedagogy received by disadvantaged groups is characterised by McNeil (2000) as “defensive teaching,” whereby in an effort to control student behaviour through pedagogical choices teachers “simplify the content and reduce the demands on students” (p. 158) in ways that work to further alienate disadvantaged students from the school / school knowledge. Such approaches are understandable, but as McNeil argues the process reinforces teachers’ teaching for control, which may also deepen students’ internalisation of “silent and hidden” forms of resistance (pp. 188). In both cases, there is a negative impact on student learning of the serious academic knowledge required to reduce equity gaps within and beyond schooling.

The dilemma inherent in McNeil’s (2000) work is that there is clear justification for the response by teachers, needing to manage student behaviour as part of any broader strategy of implementing quality teaching practices, while this sort of response works directly against the principles of the QT framework. So, rather than provide intellectually challenging work that is both connected to students’ background knowledge and life experiences, and to key concepts that explored in depth, the defensive or behaviour control approach results in content and experiences that are removed from students’ personal experience and not taken seriously by them (McNeil, 2000, p. 184). The link between SES and pedagogy at the class level is disturbing, potentially aligning with McNeil’s (2000) hypothesis that disadvantaged students, in this case low-SES students, are receiving a pedagogy in the classroom which, through its weak connection to these students life experiences outside of the school, their background and cultural knowledge, and to other subjects, may in effect be contributing to their further alienation from schooling / school knowledge.

This same trend extends to ATSI students, in which the weak, negative correlation for *Significance* at the whole school level becomes stronger (-0.37) at the classroom level, such that the higher the percentage of ATSI students within a class, the lower the level of *significance* in classroom practice received by these students. As with low-SES students, it appears the pedagogy received by students in classes with a high percentage of ATSI students provides weaker connections to students background and cultural knowledge, to their out of school experience, and to other subjects. Here again at the point where higher levels of significance are arguably most needed to address student alienation from schooling, we find a distribution of pedagogy in the opposite direction.

Of course a critical question then is how to account for the differential pedagogy, as a pre-requisite to any strategy intended to overcome such differences and contribute to more equitable outcomes for disadvantaged groups. Analyses of the mismatches between mainstream and high value curricula and disadvantaged students get us some way (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Lamb & Ball, 1999; R Teese, McLean, & Polesel, 1993; R Teese & Polesel, 2003), with differential pedagogy associated with subject choices. Studies of the impact of streaming or tracking students based on ‘ability’, and the high rate of convergence between low-stream classes and disadvantaged student groups (Zevenbergen, 2001), add to explanations for differential pedagogy, connecting with the analysis of McNeil (2000) and others suggesting a distinct pedagogy for identified low-stream or low-ability classes (e.g. Fransoo et al., 2005; Haberman, 1994; Lee & Wong, 2004).

The correlations recorded at the classroom level between the quality of pedagogy and the mean SES and percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students raises the possibility that teachers’ expectations of these students impacts on their practice in ways that may inadvertently reinforce student under-achievement. The strong correlation between the measured quality of pedagogy (particularly the quality of tasks) and two measures of student prior achievement add another factor which may impact on teachers’ expectations and subsequent practice. Students from a non-ATSI, high-SES, and high-prior achievement

background are thus more likely to experience activities and tasks that treat knowledge more problematically, that require them to demonstrate deeper levels of understanding using higher order thinking, that communicate higher expectations to students, that are more connected to their background and cultural knowledge, and to real-life applications.

Correlations like these do not provide us with definitive answers about how they occur, nor the causal direction of any relationships. Interview data from teachers, however, does help to both account for the differences in the quality of pedagogy recorded, and make the case for the wider application of the QT as a way of addressing the identified disparity in practice.

Teachers' expectations

As reported by Griffiths et al (2006), participating teachers in the SIPA project report varying understandings of student ability, of disadvantage, and of the appropriate associated pedagogical response of teachers in their daily practice. Some teachers clearly articulate views that align with the QT principles of providing meaningful, intellectually challenging experiences for all students as part of a broader approach to improve equity outcomes and learning in general. Many teachers articulate views expressing differential expectations for groups of students, based on judgements about their ability and capacity for intellectually demanding work, which ultimately account for differences in the quality of pedagogy. For example, the following responses were recorded by teachers in schools with high populations of low-SES and ATSI student populations:

“I remember talking to one parent and I said, ‘look, until we can control their behaviours, I’m not going to try and teach your child, I’m going to... I’ve got to get them to manage their own behaviour in the classroom before we can even think about learning’.”

“So it’s not so much that I’ve lowered my expectation of them but I’ve had to really cut down the way I talk to them and how I deliver things. So there’s still an expectation that they work and that they do well but the work is heavily modified to suit them.”

It is not surprising that ideas of managing behaviour as a pre-requisite for high quality classroom practice, and modifying work for students based on some judgement about their level of competence, emerge as quite generalised views. The potential for such views to readily slip into differential expectations of whole groups of students, in a de-facto streaming sense, and an associated lowering of the quality of pedagogy received by groups with a high proportion of low-SES, low-prior achieving or ATSI students, is the concern in terms of equity. The following responses from teachers give some indication of how this may play out in practice:

“And yes ... [my aspirations are] ... different for different groups of students because some of them are not university material and the ones who aren’t, as long as they’re equipped with the right skills and they’ve got enough skills to survive and be happy in life, then that’s good enough for me.”

“I think I do have different aspirations for different groups simply because the different groups are at different levels ... So there level is at a level where I have really, really high aspirations, whereas some of my other classes, I try to fill in the gaps a lot of the time, so yeah, I know that I’m not going to get as far with the English syllabus with them as I would like, but I hope to give them life skills that they can come out of with, with all of this.”

“Always my aspirations for the kids, to get the best possible outcome for themselves ... And they’re all going to be different. I can’t have single aspirations for the kids and I can’t have generic ones, they’ve got to be specific to them.”

“Most of these kids, they just come from such a poor background, they don’t really seem interested in anything you tell them. I just want my kids to come out of my class hoping that they’ve enjoyed it and maybe develop a little bit socially in the long term.”

Once again comments like these are understandable, and on some levels do respond directly to the reality of a range of student abilities, levels of competence and behaviours experienced by teachers in their regular classroom practice. The first two do appear to have made the shift in their expectations and practice, such that that the sort of outcomes envisaged by the QT framework are simply seen as not appropriate for some groups of students. The subsequent focus on life or survival skills, often expressed as basic literacy and numeracy, may well compound student disengagement, contributing to a familiar cycle.

The teacher cited in the last quotation above went on to say:

“When I first started I felt very, very responsible [for students’ learning] and I felt like I was failing because they weren’t...you look at the syllabus and they just weren’t achieving what the syllabus requires. I now realise what the syllabus requires just isn’t realistic for a lot of these kids, but I still consider it my responsibility to teach what maths that ...to the level that they need to be taught as much as they can possibly learn. I consider it’s my job and I do take it very seriously and I want them to learn the maths that they’re supposed to learn, that is the primary focus...”

In a similar way, another respondent expressed a determination to challenge all students, having acknowledged the diverse abilities and levels of competence in the group:

“I have high expectations for them. Only because I feel that they need to ... I feel if they piqued they should excel and they can only excel if they actually apply themselves. So if I push them to the point like I know where their boundaries are and sometimes taking them out of their comfort zone really rattles them, but once they complete a work or ... they’re satisfied and they’re quite happy and they actually ... yeah, all students.”

Within these responses, and others like them, the intention to push or challenge students to learn at a level appropriate to their current level, but also to their perceived ability, is clear. Again, it is the latter point which takes on significance in light of the differential quality of pedagogy recorded according to the proportion of low-SES and ATSI students. In similar ways, teacher responses endorse ideas of individual students reaching their full potential, however problematic determining this might be, increasing the likelihood of clearly differentiated expectations and practices for some groups of students:

“Ah yes, some of the groups of students you know, we want to...we know that we can work on them and get good results from them you know, results that they are able to achieve. Other groups in the school you know, we know that they can do better but it’s an extremely difficult job to get them to want to do any better and we keep working on it but I guess for all of them, all groups we want to improve them and some are more successful at than others, I guess.”

“I just have a pretty simple philosophy. You don’t have to be the best but you’ve got to try and do your best and sometimes, depending what class it is and where they’re at and everything, that can be quite challenging. But yeah, depending on the group, if you know that they’ve got a bit of ability like I’ll try and push them along, whereas the others, I still have sort of the same high expectation.”

The same teacher went on to add:

“I feel that I’m very responsible in a sense that they’re in my classroom and I’m employed to teach those kids how to learn and if they walk out with nothing then it’s my fault ... I’d like to think that all kids will reach the best ... the highest of their ability you know, to reach their potential. I don’t differentiate ... I try and encourage them to strive for the best they possibly can and to feel proud of what they’ve done. With the classes that I’ve had over the years, I’ve certainly had a range of kids and if I think a kid can walk out of the room after I’ve finished and think...like end of the course, that they have had done the best that they can do, then I feel very good and that goes for the brightest to the weakest child. That’s what I like, that’s what I aim to try and do, is to get them to reach what they can.”

Our purpose here is to highlight how non-controversial such responses are for teachers and teacher educators, and the potential for such views to lead to teachers challenging all students / all groups of students to higher and deeper levels of learning, and / or to contribute to qualitatively different sets of expectations and associated practice for students / groups of students in ways that reinforce a negative cycle of disengagement and under-achievement.

Conclusion

In this paper we have documented some predictable differences in the quality of pedagogy received by two of the most persistent equity groups in the Australian context, those defined by SES and ATSI status. These findings have been set out in the context of work highlighting the need to improve such students engagement or connection with schooling / school knowledge, in part through a shift in the pedagogy they experience, if schools are to play a positive role in improving the experience and outcomes of these groups. Our findings suggest that high quality pedagogy, as measured against the QT framework, is most absent where it is most needed – in schools and classes with high levels of low-SES and ATSI students.

As we indicated in the introduction to this paper, the QT framework offers a detailed, generic framework, available to all NSW teachers, which provides the explicit criteria and direction for delivering a pedagogy that may improve the engagement, connection, and substantive learning of disadvantaged groups. The reported views of teachers highlight the difficulty, and perhaps the futility, of responses that seek to directly change teachers’ assessments of their students’ ability and associated expectations of their learning. Instead, a focused application of the QT framework, supported by professional learning opportunities, has the potential to reconnect students over time, this in turn challenging teachers’ beliefs and expectations in ways that might reinforce a more positive cycle of increasingly high quality pedagogy for low-SES and ATSI student groups.

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