



Stronger Smarter Institute Research & Impact Footprinting

Reading Review

“Building quality in teaching and teacher education”

Stronger Smarter Meta-Strategy links:

1. Acknowledging, embracing and developing a positive sense of identity in schools → 2. →3. High Expectations Relationships →

This Reading Review is based on an ACER report by Prof Nan Bahr, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Students) and Dean of Education at Southern Cross University, together with Suzanne Mellor from ACER. The ACER report provides a summary of current debate around teacher quality in Australia and looks at what we mean by teacher quality and what this might mean for teacher education. In this review we have provided a short summary of the context information provided in the report and focussed on the discussion around teacher quality. In our discussion, we have also brought in information from a 2011 project run by the Institute on ‘what makes a deadly teacher’, showing that the results of the Institute’s project align closely with the recommendations from the ACER report.

We recommend reading the full ACER report as it provides a deep insight into quality teaching and has a close alignment with the Stronger Smarter Approach and the Institute’s discussions around High-Expectations Relationships.

Page numbers throughout this review refer to the ACER report.

Research mapping

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What is a quality teacher?

As Prof Bahr says, every learner deserves a quality teacher. Bahr reports, however, that there has been little attention given in the contemporary literature to a definition and explication of quality teaching or the attributes of a quality teacher (p.58), and there is a lack of firm understanding of what teaching quality might be (p.59).

Bahr commences her report by considering the concept of quality. She suggests that if we take the ‘zero-defect’ approach to quality – where quality is considered to be something that doesn’t have flaws – we miss the unquantifiable elements such as the impact of relationships. She suggests that quality is a holistic, united whole that is more than the sum of its parts. She recommends that instead of trying to deconstruct quality into component elements, we would be better trying to identify the forces that hold them together.

This leads her to conclude that there is an equation for quality

$$\text{Quality} = (\text{competencies} + \text{productive behaviours}) \times \text{personal qualities.}$$

She describes the personal attributes in the equation as the forces that bring about quality. She suggests that “*quality is born of these competencies as they come together holistically through the acquisition and employment of productive behaviours*” (p.64).

As we discuss later in this review, we believe the personal qualities that Bahr is talking about equate to the Stronger Smarter concepts of High-Expectations Relationships and personal responsibility for change. Bahr’s report provides an endorsement of our view in the Institute that the Stronger Smarter Approach equates to quality teaching not just for Indigenous students, but for all students.

Teacher quality in Australia – the current debate

Bahr’s report provides a summary of the key contextual factors impacting on the reputational negativity that has grown up for the education profession in Australia. She describes how the current general commentary of government is that education is in crisis and that this must be the fault of the teachers and the system that produces them (i.e. teacher education) (p.5).

Bahr argues for an alternative view. She describes teachers as repositories of deep professional expertise on how to improve teaching and learning (p.3). The teaching profession encourages reflective practitioners, which she says the research describes as working systematically to identify areas of success and weakness, and focus areas for future content, as well as approaches for pedagogy, behaviour management and student support. Given that effective teachers have such deep professional insight and

knowledge into the drivers for quality teaching and learning, Bahr questions why, in the public commentary on what constitutes quality in teaching and teacher education, the voice of teachers or teacher educators is so noticeably absent.

Bahr talks about the current Australian value system which prioritises a range of skills beyond literacy and numeracy to include values such as creativity. And yet, NAPLAN and PISA results have been used as an indication of teacher quality, particularly by the media. She suggests that, as NAPLAN becomes mistaken for a high stakes test, some schools try to put themselves in a good light by teaching to the test, or suggesting poorer performing students abstain from testing. This undermines the usefulness of the tests for understanding the shifting profile of student achievement (p.15).

Bahr also considers the AITSL teacher competency frameworks and suggests that the idea that quality teaching can be shown by demonstrating achievement against a checklist of standards misses the very essence of the quality factors (p.21). Bahr argues that, while a competency framework may assist us to be confident in the basic competence of the teacher workforce, something more is needed to fully capture the personal attributes that transform an effective teacher to one of quality (p.23).

Bahr argues for a more complete model for quality teaching – a model that considers the dependent and intersectional elements that support and shape quality teaching. Bahr's Figure 2.4 (see Bahr, 2016, p. 22) shows this as an "Ecosystem of influences underpinning teachers of quality". Of significance in this model is the impact on the teacher of their life experiences and education, and the fact that we need to look at the distinctive characteristics, attributes and ways of being a teacher that set quality apart from simple competence (p.23).

Teaching as a Profession

In Chapter 3 of the report, Bahr argues that it is important to consider teaching as a profession. She describes teaching as complex work that goes beyond the direct interaction with students, where much of their work is 'invisible' (p.24 and p.26). In the invisible layer, this includes planning, meeting and engaging with colleagues and community – in other words building relationships within the school and the school community. Bahr argues that teachers don't just 'do' teaching, they are 'teachers' – they are expected to build their life and identity around the role. Bahr suggests that the view of complexity of teaching is better understood when teaching is properly considered as a profession rather than a para profession or a job.

Bahr suggests that when teaching is considered as a full profession, it is clearly inadequate to focus on a task list or suite of competencies. She explores how the recent focus on the need to raise the quality of teachers in Australia has included compliance-type guidelines for pedagogical approaches to ensure effectiveness. This has included endorsement from politicians for the use of specific pedagogical approaches such as the

Direct Instruction model, which Bahr suggests has occurred “*with no regard to the variability of teaching, no understanding of the limits and appropriateness of the approaches (the invisible considerations), and without consulting the teachers who tailor the learning experiences for their unique environments and learners*”(p.29).

Bahr argues that such pedagogical guidance can result in professional conflict for teachers and disconnect them from the supporting professional layers of context and community. She suggests that, if teachers are told to work in particular ways, and teachers’ visible work becomes one characterised by compliance, their work will be destabilised and their effectiveness as professionals undermined. Bahr says, “*To separate pedagogic purpose from a teacher’s capacity to respond intuitively to individual students’ responses and needs is disastrous, as it is this purpose that drives the essence of quality teaching beyond mere competence.*” (p.30).

Teachers’ work

Bahr goes on to look at what teachers need to know and be able to do, describing this under seven areas.

1. Understanding of learning and development theory
2. Discipline knowledge
3. Pedagogical content knowledge
4. Behaviour management knowledge
5. Assessment and data analysis knowledge
6. Personal and professional literacy and numeracy
7. Professional relationships dimension of teaching

Bahr describes areas 1- 6 as the attributes needed for a competent teacher. She concludes, however, that a quality teacher goes beyond competence, and that it is item 7 on the list – the professional relationships dimension of teaching – that sets aside a quality teacher from a competent teacher. She describes a quality teacher as a fully competent teacher who is also capable of developing positive relationships with students that imbue them with self-belief and encourage, excite and engage learners. Students do more than just achieve, they have a positivity about themselves as learners (p.38). In addition, quality teachers work well in teams, take the initiative for change and inspire others to work with them. Bahr says these relationships extend from their deep-seated identity and vocation as educators. Bahr says that “*there is a mutual dependency between the other facets and elements of a teacher’s work and the ability of a teacher to become established professionally within their school community*” (p.38).

Building the quality teacher

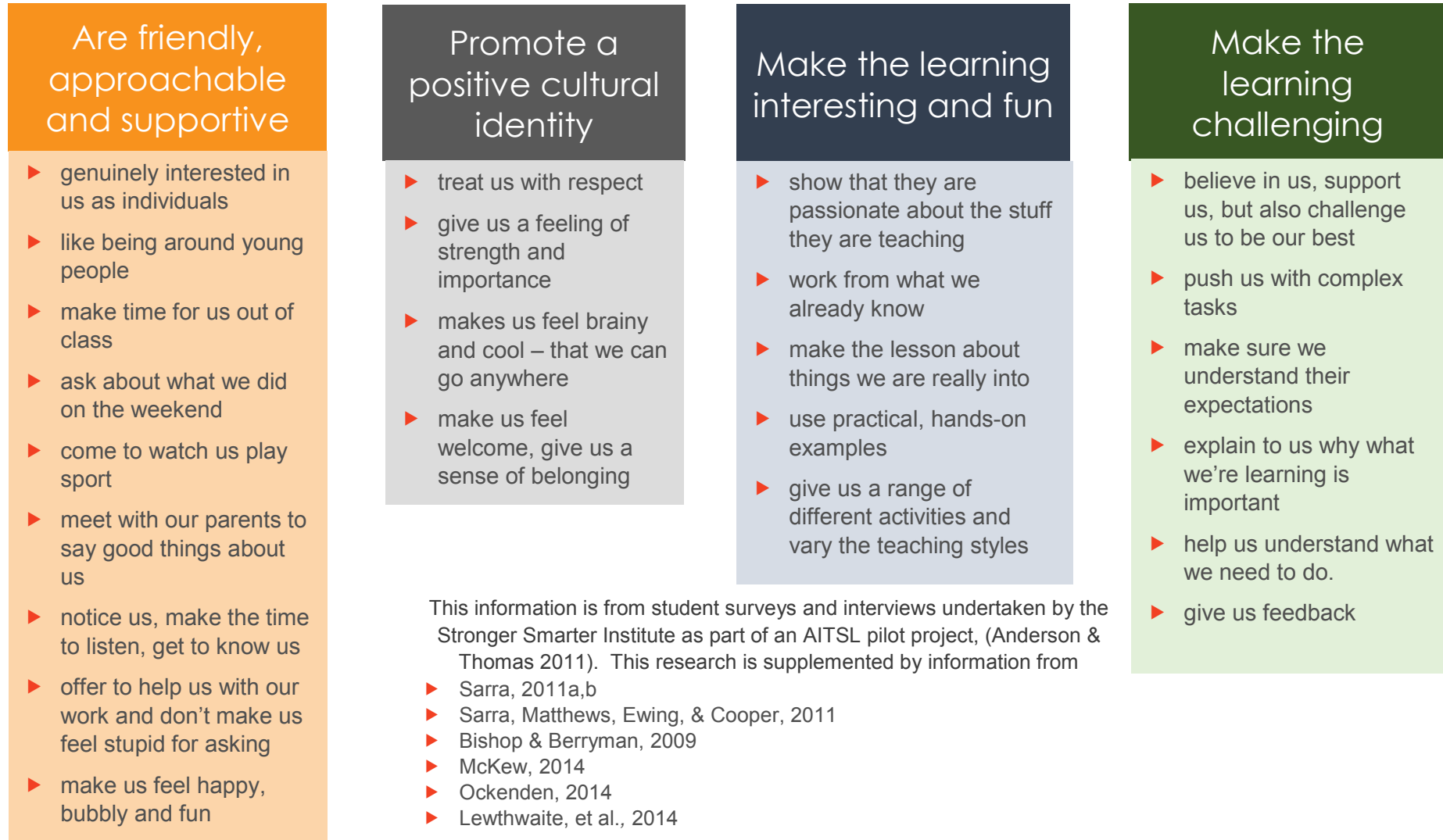
Bahr notes that students as young as six have been shown to be able to articulate attributes for teacher quality. In 2011, the Stronger Smarter Institute undertook a project (Anderson & Thomas, 2011), funded by AITSL, where we captured the student voice about ‘What makes a deadly teacher’ (the report authors describe ‘deadly’ as meaning valued, effective and impressive). This research involved various activities with several groups of both primary and secondary students.

Figure 1 provides, from the point of view of students, a summary of the personal characteristics of teachers that students say will support them in their learning. In other words, ‘what makes a deadly teacher.’ This is taken from the results of the Institute’s study, supported by additional information from the research literature. Students’ responses in the Institute’s study overwhelmingly demonstrated the importance of the relationships teachers build with their students.

Bahr concludes her report by describing four key personal attributes that are recurrent in the research she has considered – high expectations, kindness and care, a positive attitude to teaching, and humour. These are the personal qualities she puts in her equation for quality teaching. The results of the Institute’s study align with Bahr’s list of qualities as follows:

- ▶ **High expectations** – In our study, students described how a *deadly* teacher helped their self-belief. One Northern NSW student summed up her experience of a teacher making her feel like she was ‘*on top of the world*’ and teaching her so she can ‘*go anywhere, even to the city and graduate.*’
- ▶ **Kindness and care** – Students talked about teachers making them feel welcome and feel like they belonged. Respectful relationships were a consistent theme around students feeling that teachers treated them and their communities with respect. This sense of belonging at school aligns with the Stronger Smarter Institute’s metastrategy of a positive sense of student identity. If Indigenous students are being asked to ‘fit in’ to a western education system, this kindness and care from teachers becomes even more significant.
- ▶ **A positive attitude to teaching** – the research shows that students want to see that their teachers are passionate about what they are teaching.
- ▶ **Humour** – In our study, one student said, “*A deadly teacher makes me feel happy, bubbly and fun. When it is fun we wanted to do more so we could have fun and learn*”.

Figure 1: Students say that Stronger Smarter Teachers are deadly teachers who ...



Stronger Smarter Provocations and Discussion

Bahr's (p.59) discussion of the attributes of quality teachers is shown in the three text boxes on the following pages. These areas are personal vocation, identity as a professional educator, and purpose. Below we provide a discussion of Bahr's description of quality teachers and the alignment with the work of the Stronger Smarter Institute. While the Institute's work has been driven by the need to improve outcomes for Indigenous education, we strongly believe that what we describe as quality teaching for Indigenous students is the same as quality teaching for all students.

Personal vocation – believing in the education profession. We agree with Bahr that education is complex work that should be considered as a profession. When we talk to young teachers in remote Indigenous communities who tell us how they spend their weekends running activities and taking part in community events to get to know their students and families better, we know what it means for teachers to build their life and their identity around the role. We meet many wonderful teachers, principals, school support and Aboriginal Education workers in our programs. We believe that, rather than blaming the teaching profession, we need to believe in the agency and ability of our educators and bring their voices into the system and policy-level discussions. When we see schools take a strength-based approach – starting from a belief in their teachers and an understanding that the school communities already have the skills and knowledge to solve complex issues – this is when we see success.

Personal vocation

The quality teacher has a strong vocation (p.59)

- ▶ They are committed to ensuring high-quality learning outcomes and have high expectations for their learners.
- ▶ They are brought to teaching to make a difference for individuals and for society. Teaching is not their job; it is their profession and provides them with important rewards for self-worth.
- ▶ They are loyal to their students, their students' families and the community, and are genuinely committed to providing enhanced learning experience in their teaching endeavours. This commitment is recognised by their students and colleagues and is such that it informs their engagement in all aspects of their teacher work.

Purpose and identity – responsibility for change. Australia’s historical context and a western education system can leave educators with out-of-awareness assumptions when it comes to Indigenous education. If our political and education systems continue to work within a deficit paradigm, this will inevitably impact on teachers’ self-belief about their ability to make a difference to Indigenous education. The Institute’s companion reading review looks at Collie and Martin’s (2017) study of teacher motivation, where they showed that only 40% of educators surveyed were in success motivation profiles – with 60% in amotivated or failure profiles. The Stronger Smarter Approach is about ensuring that educators are able to maintain their positive attitude to teaching and become agents for change. The Stronger Smarter Approach begins with the concept of professional accountability (Sarra, 2011) and asks educators to first examine their own beliefs and mindsets and look at their out-of-awareness assumptions.

Sarra (2011, p.161) says, *‘Education systems have demonstrated a tendency to readily accept Indigenous underachievement in schools as somehow ‘normal’ or ‘given’..... It has seemingly been easier for education authorities to hold Indigenous communities culpable for failing to engage with schools for the purpose of education.... However the professional challenges for classroom teachers and their support infrastructures is to reflect inwards and evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practices and ask what it is that they are doing or not doing as a teacher that contributes to Indigenous student failure.’*

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Programs have shown that when educators are supported to reflect in this way, they become more confident and have a greater self-belief in their ability to be an agent of change.

Identity as a professional educator

The quality teacher has a strong identity as a professional educator (p.59).

- ▶ This sense of professional identity supports their pursuit of excellence, through their own professional development and their careful consideration of learner needs and effective employment of responsive practice.
- ▶ They strive to be expert, with a detailed and principled knowledge of all aspects of their practice and are able to adapt their practice to meet changing contexts, priorities and students.
- ▶ Their practice is nuanced by these deep understandings which they are able to describe in detail as they plan and reflect on teaching and learning.

Developing High-Expectations

Relationships – Firm and Fair. Bahr talks about how high expectations can liberate learners and help them to achieve despite systematic and circumstantial disadvantage and setbacks.

She describes the democratic classroom (p.60) where a teacher with a cooperative and democratic attitude can provide a context for students to safely explore their understandings. She describes effective teachers as overtly demonstrating fairness and impartiality as a key component of developing positive working relationships with their students. These attributes are the same as those we describe as High-Expectations Relationships. We describe a High-Expectations Relationship as a relationship that is both firm and fair (i.e. both challenging with high expectations, but also supportive and caring) (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). A High-Expectations Relationships learning environment is one where students feel they can ask questions, and where their teachers are interested in the individual strengths they bring to the classroom.

Summary

Bahr summarises as follows. *“Quality teachers, have an enduring impact. Their ability to make the student think and feel in productive ways about their learning, and themselves as learners, provides a transferable orientation to learning and thinking that has an indelible impact, beyond the moment. This is the essence of quality. And this is the teaching every learner can respond to and deserves.”* (p.60).

We have drawn three key points from Bahr’s report – that relationships are what makes a quality teacher as opposed to a competent teacher, that teaching should be looked on as a profession, where professional accountability is important, and that educators should be considered as the agents for change.

Relationships are key. The first key point we draw from Bahr’s work is that we need to look beyond the competent teacher as described in competency frameworks. Bahr describes quality as a holistic, united whole that is more than the sum of its parts, and the quality teacher as one where the elements of competency are held together by

Purpose

The quality teacher brings purpose to their teaching (p.59).

- ▶ They understand and can enact targeted behaviours as teachers that move them beyond the learning event at hand, to the holistic purposes of the education process. This purpose is greater than simply wishing for students to learn required concepts.
- ▶ The purposeful teacher aligns all their activity to ensure students reach their highest possible potential. The competent teacher, by contrast, is focused on the learning at hand.

relationships (p.59). When Bahr describes these relationships as having high expectations, and involving kindness, care and humour, she is describing the same characteristics as we describe in High-Expectations Relationships.

Another large international study came to the same conclusion. A 2016 study by Pearson Education (McKnight et al, 2016) which surveyed students, principals, education researchers, education policy makers and parents in 23 countries, reaffirmed the notion that ‘at it’s foundation, teaching is about relationships between teachers and students that ultimately foster student success’. At the top of their list was the ability for teachers to develop trusting, productive relationships with students, followed by a patient, caring and kind personality. This study also states that researchers have documented the link between strong, collaborative relationships between teachers and students and learning outcome.

McKnight et al’s (2016) analysis of their survey results suggests that respondents tend to think about teacher competencies in the following way:

- ▶ **dispositions of care** – building trusting, compassionate relationships; patience, caring, and kindness,
- ▶ **dispositions of character** – professionalism in and dedication to one’s work, and
- ▶ **technical knowledge and skills** – knowledge of subject matter and curriculum, and knowledge of learners and the ability to target learning tasks to their individual needs.

The survey findings in McKnight et al’s study made it clear that all key education stakeholders valued the disposition of care (building trusting relationships) as the most important trait of an effective teacher.

Professional accountability. When Bahr describes a positive attitude to teaching, she is describing the same aspects that we describe when talking about professional accountability. If educators are a profession and educators build their identity around being a teacher, it is reasonable to expect that all teachers would be in the success seeking and success approach profiles (Collie & Martin, 2017). We agree with Bahr that in looking at what is or isn’t happening to promote high quality education, blaming the teachers is not the answer. We need to look at what is happening in the education system that is preventing teachers from continuing to be in these success profiles throughout their careers. For Indigenous education, we believe this is about understanding the historical context, taking a strength-based approach and working with Indigenous communities. In doing so, educators have the support and self-belief to be the professional and purposeful educators that Bahr describes.

A belief in the power of educators – We believe, as Bahr describes, that we need to look at how our education system perceives teachers. We agree with Bahr when she says that if our political system promotes pedagogical approaches that are designed to take the quality of the teacher out of the equation, this undermines both the profession of teaching and the quality of the learning environment for students.

Stronger Smarter Metastrategies

- ▶ **Metastrategy 1: Promoting a positive sense of student identity.** For Indigenous students, promoting a positive sense of student identity in the classroom is interwoven in the characteristics described here for a quality teacher. This is about making sure a student feels welcome in the classroom and that being Strong and Smart in school is a part of their identity.
- ▶ **Metastrategy 3: High Expectations Relationships.** As we have described above, the four key personal attributes described by Bahr are clearly those also described by High-Expectations Relationships.
- ▶ **The Stronger Smarter Approach** - Teachers need to be able to build compassionate, trusting relationships with students to create a safe, positive, and productive teaching and learning environments (McKnight et al, 2016). We believe that bringing together the elements of the Stronger Smarter Approach (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017) and the Stronger Smarter Metastrategies with a foundation of High-Expectations Relationships do just this – for Indigenous students this creates a safe, positive and productive learning environment with high expectations. We believe this is the learning environment built from quality teaching that needs to be in place for Indigenous student success. Once such a learning environment is in place, this is then a space for pedagogical approaches that are based on a belief that the educator is best placed to know how to teach their diverse classroom of learners.

References

Key reference for this Reading Review

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For full reference list on what makes a deadly teacher – see the Stronger Smarter Approach paper.