

Selection, Roles and Responsibilities of
Advanced Skills Teachers in the New South
Wales Department of School Education:
An Alternate Career Pathway?

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the implementation of the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) concept by the NSW Department of School Education. Survey information was obtained from 480 classroom teachers and ASTs from the Hunter Region, and by interviewing ASTs and AST selection panel members from a single Cluster. Teachers' reasons for applying for AST status and the outcome of their application were examined. Roles and responsibilities assigned to appointed ASTs were analysed. Classroom teachers, ASTs and school executives differed in their views of the AST position. Perceptions were diverse as to whether the AST position provided a career path as an alternative to promotion or was, in fact, simply a stepping stone to future promotional opportunities.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the Australian schools and the teaching profession have experienced increased public scrutiny because of perceived inadequate student outcomes. Specifically, employers have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of literacy and numeracy of high school graduates, despite the lack of evidence to support these judgements. Generally, there have been concerns regarding the quality of education, and a realisation that classroom teaching and learning are critical activities when securing improvement in learning (Dimmock, 1991). This situation has resulted in education in Australia becoming more focussed on professional and

industrial agendas, in an effort to initiate the changes needed to enhance the image of Australian education.

Professionally, programs to improve the quality of education included The National Project on Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL) introduced in 1992. This project was committed to examining teacher roles and promoting professional teacher status. Industrially the notions of award restructuring, advancing the national skills base and the 'clever country' provided motivation for educational change. In an effort to keep effective teachers in the classroom (rather than promoting them to non-teaching administrative positions) and to provide teachers with recognition for demonstrating superior classroom teaching skills, the concept of Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) was developed.

IMPLEMENTATION IN AUSTRALIA

In a paper prepared by the Schools Council for the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1990), the nation-wide classification of Advanced Skills Teacher was presented. The AST classification was perceived as recognition of the fundamental importance of classroom teaching in education, and acknowledgment that many teachers gained their strongest sense of fulfilment from classroom teaching. These teachers did not wish to pursue careers in administration. The paper highlighted the importance of quality teaching and learning:

Good teaching happens through the working relationship between

teachers and students, and while school may have many other goals and priorities none exceeds the importance of quality classroom performance. (Schools Council, 1990 p.120)

Bluer and Carmichael (1991) perceived the national classification of AST as attempting to provide classroom teachers with greater awards for demonstrating superior classroom teaching skills, therefore embodying a significant career path change for Australia's more than 200 000 school teachers. The career restructure was seen as enabling greater motivation and incentive for experienced teachers, promoting the development of new and supportive relationships between ASTs and other teachers, developing systematic on-the-job skills acquisition programs for teachers and providing new methods for organising teachers' work.

Knight (1992) was supportive of the nation-wide introduction of the AST classification. It was seen as representing an alliance between national political and economic demands for efficiency and effectiveness, and a move towards improving the skills and flexibility of Australian workers. According to Knight, quality teaching was the central ingredient of quality schools. Award restructuring, including the AST classification, was seen as a means of rewarding effective teachers and therefore enhancing the quality of teaching.

Implementation of the AST Concept by the NSW Department of School Education

In 1992, the New South Wales Department of School Education initiated the classification of AST. According to departmental documents sent to schools, the AST position was created to encourage the retention in the classroom of highly skilled teachers. It was further stated:

The Advanced Skills Teacher position recognises and rewards experienced teachers who have a commitment to classroom teaching and who provide educational leadership, professional support and guidance to other classroom teachers.
(NSW Department of School Education, 1992 p.4)

The AST role was seen as one of collegial support but with its emphasis on teaching. As such, the concept of the AST could have provided a major breakthrough in career planning within the teaching profession.

WHAT IS AN ADVANCED SKILLS TEACHER?

Documentation sent to NSW Department of Education schools in 1992 included a definition of an Advanced Skill Teacher:

An Advanced Skills Teacher is a classroom teacher who provides educational leadership and guidance to classroom teachers. (NSW Department of School Education, 1992 p.4)

Plans were made for future AST career pathways to be developed through progression of ASTs to Levels Two and Three to enable successful ASTs to progress further in specialised teaching areas. Although these pathways were intended, they have not yet been implemented.

Selection Criteria

Details of general and desirable AST selection criteria were listed by the NSW Department of School Education in 1991, when it outlined specific skills and abilities. Teachers applying for selection as an AST needed to focus on general skills:

- * generation of positive attitudes to learning,
- * creation and maintenance of positive classroom dynamics, and
- * innovation in planning and teaching.

In order for teachers to apply for AST status, they also needed to outline their involvement in the desirable criterion areas such as:

- * participation in professional development programs,
- * contribution to curriculum development, and
- * assisting beginning teachers by providing professional support and guidance related to classroom performance.

AST Eligibility and Suitability

All permanent and temporary unpromoted teachers who were on the final step of their salary scale were eligible to apply for AST status. Eligible teachers who satisfied the school-based AST interview and selection panel and also met the general AST criteria, were considered suitable. All suitable applicants were placed on a list within a school or Cluster of schools. From the suitability list, principals appointed Level I ASTs, subject to the confirmation of the service requirement by regional officers, and then negotiated specific AST roles and responsibilities aimed at meeting specified school needs.

Applicants were deemed ineligible if they did not meet the service requirements. They were considered unsuitable if they did not satisfy the panel that their skills and experience

within the context of the AST general criteria were of an acceptable standard. Lack of positions could mean that an

eligible and suitable applicant would not be appointed.

The Review Process

Appointed ASTs were subject to a review at the end of 12 months. This review determined whether appointed ASTs had fulfilled the specific roles and responsibilities of their position. Re-appointment and/or progression to AST Level Two was to be based on this review.

AST Salary

Teachers appointed as ASTs who were four-year trained or higher who were paid an annual allowance of \$1230, with the option of the allowance to be considered for superannuation benefit. Appointed ASTs who were two or three-year trained were granted pay equivalent to four-year trained teachers. Their four-year pay continued for the remainder of their teaching career. Thus the financial incentive was much higher for two and three-year trained teachers.

The AST classification has been operating in NSW Department of Education schools since the beginning of 1992. Selection criteria have been identified and application outcomes classified. Although the 12 monthly review process has been activated, there are no AST future pathways to the proposed Level II and III AST appointments available at this stage.

THE 1992 AST SURVEY STUDY

Teacher perceptions of AST classification and selection were surveyed. Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from teachers concerning aspects of school leadership, supervision and issues related to the AST position. Information specifically involving AST as a career path has been chosen for discussion here.

Questionnaire Results

Questionnaires measuring teacher attitudes were sent to 480 non-executive teachers from 66 primary schools in the Hunter Region of NSW. Useable responses were received from 340 (71%) of the teachers. The schools were randomly selected to represent a cross-section of school size and location. The 30-item questionnaire contained scales which assessed teacher

attitudes towards leadership, supervision and the AST selection process. A four point Likert response scale was used (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), utilising a neutral category (3 = Undecided). One item from the AST scale concerned the notion of AST as a career path:

The AST process has provided classroom teachers with a suitable career path.

The mean for this item was 2.7 (less than 3.0 denoted a negative response) indicating a generally negative opinion of the AST position providing classroom teachers with a suitable career path. When teacher responses to this item were analysed, significant differences were found to be linked with a number of variables.

First, teachers who had not yet reached the final step of their salary scale (and therefore were ineligible to apply for AST status) had more positive attitudes towards the idea that the AST position was a suitable career path, than teachers who

were eligible. Secondly, teachers who applied for AST status had significantly more positive attitudes about the AST position providing a suitable career path than teachers who chose not to apply. Finally, of the teachers who did apply for AST status, there were significant differences in attitude to AST and career path based on the outcome of their application. Teachers who gained an AST position felt more positive than teachers who were deemed suitable but were not appointed. As would be expected, the attitudes of teachers who were deemed unsuitable were lower than both of the other groups.

Differences were found for teachers in different age bands. Teachers aged up to 30 years (n=36, mean=3.4) were most positive about the AST position as a suitable career path, and this was the only group where there was a large majority of positive responses (70%). Teachers from 36 to 40 years (n=112, mean=2.3) were the group with the least positive attitudes towards the AST as a career path, with only 28 per cent of positive responses. The length of service of these teachers also makes them most likely to be career oriented and eligible for AST status. Mean responses from teachers in other age bands indicated they were about equally divided between those giving positive and negative responses. Responses on career paths were not related to gender, male and female teachers highlighting the general negative response to item 20 (males n=54, mean=2.6; female n=283, mean=2.7).

In summary, except for the youngest respondents, the teachers surveyed generally did not feel that the AST process provided teachers with a suitable career path. This feeling was also evident in the following qualitative responses.

Open-Ended Responses

The 'Teacher Attitude Survey' asked teachers to give their reasons for applying or not applying for Advanced Skills Teaching Status. A greater proportion of female quotes have been used to highlight teacher responses, as 84 per cent of respondents were female.

From the sample, 244 (72%) of the 340 teachers were eligible to apply, yet only 67 (27%) had applied. Motivating factors for teachers applying included personal satisfaction, financial gain and the enhancement of career/promotional opportunities. The original notion of AST was to provide an alternate career path for teachers who wanted recognition without promotion, yet many teachers saw AST as a means of gaining promotional status.

From the teachers eligible to apply for AST status in this study, 73 per cent of teachers chose not apply. Teachers' apprehensions of the system (AST selection and the education system as a whole) was the major deterrent, accounting for more than 3 per cent of respondents' reasons for not applying.

The following response from a 35-year-old female exemplified the distrust many teachers felt with both the AST selection system and the education system as a whole:

I feel the initial idea of ASTs being to reward hard working classroom teachers who contributed to school and its management was a great idea. However, I feel now that it's just another name for ET [Executive Teacher]. I don't wish to climb through the ranks of Executive. I wish to remain a classroom teacher and be acknowledged for the extra work I do for the school.

The proposed elimination of the Executive Teacher (ET) position (the lowest executive position in NSW Department of School Education primary schools) was announced during the introduction of the AST classification. Although the decision to abolish the ET position was eventually reversed (July 1993), many teachers felt the AST position was replacing the ET position, and was therefore a 'pseudo' executive position. This professional and industrial situation contributed to

teachers' apprehensions about applying for AST positions.

Outcome of AST Application

Of the teachers who applied, 37 per cent gained AST positions while 45 per cent were considered suitable. About 13 per cent of responses regarding suitability were made by applicants in acting executive positions. Several applicants were successful in application and interview, yet could not accept AST positions because they were in relieving positions on the school executive. These applicants appeared to view the AST role as a 'stepping stone' to promotion, possibly the only one available to them.

Of applicants for AST status, 18 per cent were deemed unsuitable. The following comment came from 39-year-old female, whose unsuitability was seen to be related to the AST/promotion dilemma, and perceived to be unfair:

... I hadn't supervised anyone but had experience as a classroom teacher and had shared that knowledge with colleagues. I understood the position to be one of excellence in classroom teaching, not leadership.

Many teachers were concerned that the AST position was becoming a promotions position, not the non-promotional classroom position advertised. The following two comments exemplified this notion:

(Female, 38 yrs, eligible but did not apply)

The original idea of rewarding outstanding classroom teachers who don't want to go for promotion has been thrown out. Now AST seems to be another step on the promotions scale...

(Female, 53 yrs, unsuitable)

The original intent of AST status was as a reward for competent classroom teachers who did not want an executive position, but were happy to remain in the classroom. The intent was not to create another executive position who would take over some duties of the executive. If I had wanted to be an administrator and not teach, I would have gone for promotion years ago.

Comments from Executive Staff

Executive staff members from schools participating in this study were invited to comment on aspects of the AST selection process. Similar to the classroom teachers in this study, executive staff expressed concerns about the definition of the AST role, and indicated their confusion about whether this role was an executive position. This comment from a 42-year-

old female Assistant Principal highlighted this confusion:

AST positions were originally regarded as a reward for good classroom teachers who didn't want to take the promotion path. However that extremely credible ideal was lost in the mire of productivity and cost cuts... For example at our school leadership was considered in an executive meeting to be a quality which we hadn't considered in

the AST role - we had looked at the pastoral care role of staff morale, beginning teachers, curriculum expertise ... Yet at interview two teachers (very good teachers) were deemed ineligible [unsuitable] on the leadership issue. My understanding was that AST was not an executive role and yet the interview seemed to want as much or more from the teachers...

Classroom teachers, ASTs and executive staff agreed that there were inconsistencies, confusions and dilemmas over the AST role considered as an executive position, which affected the success of the venture. Of the teachers who were eligible to apply for AST status, a large majority (73%) did not apply. This may be a reflection of many teachers' apprehension and confusion regarding the process. The following summary of the 1993 interview study also features confusion concerning whether the AST position has provided teachers with a suitable career path which is an alternative to promotion.

THE 1993 AST INTERVIEW STUDY

Approximately 30 ASTs and AST selection panel members from a focus Cluster in the Hunter Region were interviewed. Interviews concerned the AST selection, review and the effects of ASTs in schools.

First, ASTs were asked about the roles and responsibilities given to them. It was found that AST roles were diverse and covered teaching and administrative areas. The major categories included student welfare (e.g. pastoral care program coordinator), curriculum (e.g. coordinator of visual and performing arts), teaching and learning (e.g. promotion of student collaborative learning), staff welfare (e.g. helping new/inexperienced teachers), leadership (e.g. supervision and development of new staff members) and administration (e.g. design computer reporting system).

The roles and responsibilities given to ASTs included those stated specifically in the criteria - student welfare and assisting other teachers. AST responsibilities were also in leadership and administrative areas, which were generally the

responsibility of executive staff. The alternative notions of AST as a teaching career path or as a de facto promotion position was questioned by interviewees.

Allocation of AST Positions across the Cluster. Both ASTs and panel members were asked their opinions of the various aspects of the AST selection process, such as the allocation of AST positions across the Cluster. ASTs and panel members felt that quotas were unfair. The following comment from a 45-year-old male panel member exemplified opinions of AST allocation:

If you go back to look at the real role of Advanced Skills Teachers which is to recognise good classroom practice, then the fact of having quota negates the whole thing ... you don't determine good teaching practice by saying you're going to have 20% of people ... you put in a set of criteria and all who meet that criteria will be eligible.

The Advanced Skills Teacher Review Process. ASTs and Panel Members were questioned about their experiences with the AST Review, which took place 12 months following appointment. All ASTs who had held their positions for at least 12 months had been involved in a review process which evaluated the performance of the AST in terms of initial roles and responsibilities. Most Panel Members and ASTs agreed that the

process was very informal, but were satisfied with the structure. However, some ASTs indicated they would have preferred more feedback and a more structured review process.

Effects of Advanced Skills Teachers in Schools. Interviewees were asked whether they felt the appointment of ASTs had affected teacher efficiency, student outcomes and their school's overall effectiveness. AST status was seen as increasing self esteem of teachers. Appointments were a catalyst in promoting greater enthusiasm and commitment which would, in turn, motivate others. The point was made, however, that some roles had taken ASTs from their classroom, and hence a short-term negative AST effect on student outcomes was possible. The following comment from a 43-year-old female AST highlighted the perceived influential effect of increased teacher self esteem:

If a member of staff's self esteem is raised then they become more aware ... their teaching is better ... they have more care for kids ... the kids benefit.

The Future of the AST Classification. ASTs and Panel Members felt that the future of AST concept was dependent on money,

but that the position could become more accountable and subject to scrutiny beyond the school. They suggested that the AST position would become more like a normal promotions position, with the possibility that middle management positions would be replaced by a greater number of ASTs. Interviewees felt that there would be more AST positions available, and hoped that changes would be made to AST selection criteria and application procedures to alleviate the present inconsistencies. The delay in implementation of the further AST pathways (AST Two and Three), was questioned.

Comparison with the Catholic System

Many peripheral issues concerning the AST selection process and outcomes were raised during interviews. Comparisons were frequently made between the AST concept in the NSW Department of School Education and the Catholic Education System. In the NSW state system, ASTs were placed on a 12 month contract with the possibility of renewal after that time. If they transferred to another school during that time, their AST status was forfeited. At this stage in the NSW Department of School Education, there are no future AST pathways because AST Two and Three appointments have not been made.

In the Catholic system the AST concept is defined by three characteristics missing in the State classification. The AST position is permanent, portable (AST status is kept regardless of teacher mobility/transfer) and personal, with each person judged on their individual merits, there being no quota system. Within the Hunter Region in the Maitland Diocese, which typifies the Catholic system, AST II pathways have been available since 1992 (Diocese of Maitland, 1992).

The AST as an Alternative Career Path

Generally, ASTs perceived that AST was not an alternative career path, nor was it a chance to keep good teachers in the classroom. Some ASTs found their teaching suffered because of the AST roles and responsibilities which had taken them from their teaching. Some ASTs who had gained relieving executive positions found important differences between the two roles, others felt the two roles were indistinguishable.

There was a feeling that their AST roles were 'filling in gaps' between teachers and executives because they got the 'left over' jobs. Some ASTs said they applied for an AST position because they believed they were good teachers and wanted to stay teaching. Others said that they applied

because there was no executive option available to them and they would opt for an executive position if the chance arose.

According to Panel Members, the notion of keeping good teachers teaching was lost during the AST process. The AST position was perceived as an executive stepping stone especially since the recent controversy regarding continuation of the Executive Teacher position in schools.

However, some ASTs and panel members felt that having the AST classification as a promotional stepping stone was not necessarily a bad thing. If an AST had interests and/or expertise in administrative areas, there was no harm in providing role statements which focussed in this area. The point was made that if ASTs were going to assume responsibilities like program implementation, they would need leadership qualities and a knowledge of administrative practices. Leadership, administration and AST roles were perceived as being naturally merged and interrelated. The following comment from a 49-year-old AST described how the AST role, with an executive emphasis, could be helpful:

Everybody needs experience and if you haven't got some means of getting that experience ... then it makes it very hard for you to qualify for executive positions.

Review of AST Seminars and Workshops

Crowther and Gaffney (1993) reviewed topics and related issues from AST seminars held nationally in 1992. They found that career path planning was one of the three major topics discussed in group analyses and workshops. Questions such as, 'how are teachers prepared for AST positions' and, 'what are the linkages in performance criteria between the AST I, II and III levels' were raised and addressed.

Similar to the findings of the 1993 interview study discussed in this paper, the series of seminars highlighted concerns in AST selection such as erosion of staff morale. A 38-year-old male AST made the following comment during the 1993 interview study, illustrating this point:

The disharmony in schools was certainly made worse because some people missed out on AST.

Positive and negative issues were found relating to career path planning. Crowther and Gaffney perceived that the introduction of AST classification encouraged teachers to consider career options, although it was also found that AST roles generally did not provide opportunities for highly

specialised development of teacher talents.

The chances of applicants to experience interviews, image building and curriculum vitae application were seen as positive features of the AST process, as was the incentive AST status had given teachers, namely the chance to expand and refine classroom skills. This comment from a 51-year-old male panel member demonstrated the power of AST status in relation to positive recognition:

It's been the tradition of teachers that they do not 'blow their own

trumpet', they do not even perceive that they are terribly adequate at the job they do ... when someone does get that recognition it is a 'shot in the arm' to their morale - to their self esteem. It gives them a new release of energy in their job.

The AST situation, in the NSW Department of School Education, is ambiguous regarding whether it provides teachers with an alternate career path, or if it offers access to a career path at all. As Crowther and Gaffney (1993) found:

At this stage, implementation of the AST classification is more appropriately characterised in terms of career reward than career development ...

The AST concept does not yet represent much more than another step in increment salary scales. The conceptualisation of a new career path for outstanding classroom practitioners remains to be seen. (pp.43-44)

CONCLUSIONS

The major question of whether AST appointment in the NSW system offers an alternative career path, and the linked question of the future of the AST concept are summarised briefly.

An Alternative Career Path

It would seem that the existing application of the AST concept in the NSW Department of School Education does not currently provide an alternative career path. The following reasons have been offered.

Future Pathways. AST Two and Three career pathways are yet to be put into operation.

Accountability. Accountability processes are unplanned, and the 12 monthly review process lacks formality.

Permanency. No permanency is guaranteed beyond the initial 12 month appointment. The following comment from a 37-year-old male AST during the 1993 interview study highlights the problems relating to accountability and the temporary nature of the AST position:

Any program of change which is temporary, which is short, which has no substantial follow-up is always going to be ineffective.

Recognition. Some suitable ASTs were not enthusiastic about undertaking AST roles 12 months after being deemed suitable.

Portability. AST status is forfeited upon teacher transfer.

Status. On official documentation there are two classifications - teachers and executives, but none for AST.

There are many reasons the AST position has not provided teachers with a suitable career path, which is an alternative to promotion. The confusion over promotions positions (involving controversy regarding the Executive Teacher position) only heightened teachers' misconceptions about the stated purposes of the AST positions in schools.

The 1993 interview study has shown that some of the roles and responsibilities given to ASTs were of an administrative and/or leadership orientation. This comment from a 51-year-old male Panel Member, which may be a realistic assessment of the future of the AST concept, concerns the career/promotion

dilemma.

I think many, many people who go into the AST slot will be using it as a furtherment of their career path not an alternative. More and more it is being seen almost the alternative to the ET position ... it could have even more credibility than the ET.

Finally, Goodger (1992) highlighted many of the concerns ASTs and Panel Members shared in this study, also with inferences regarding the future of AST:

The introduction of ASTs has had and will have far-reaching effects on staff in schools. It caused confusion, divisiveness through its apparent competitiveness and resulted in a further lowering of morale in staff including staff who, while not directly involved in the process, witnessed the debilitating effect of almost daily variations in expectations and/or requirements of the program. (p.4)

AST and the Future

The innovative classification of Advanced Skills Teacher to schools in the N.S.W. Department of School Education would appear to be a positive step. It is an effort to reward and give recognition to superior teachers while allowing them to retain their classroom status. Yet there are many aspects of this selection, retention and review process which need to be considered, and many questions to be raised. For example, has the competitive aspect of the AST selection process undermined staff collegiality? Have principals and supervisors submitted accurate work reports for prospective AST candidates? Have interview panels remained unbiased in their decisions of suitability, unsuitability and AST selection? Has the review process reflected effective teaching practices which are supported by educational research? Can the AST concept provide an alternative career path, or can it be no more than a stepping stone to future promotional opportunities?

Major aims of the introduction of the AST classification were to improve teacher quality and student learning outcomes. But the introduction of the AST classification or any other alternate career structure will not, alone, be effective in improving teacher quality. As Berkely (1991) suggested, teachers are the most necessary ingredients of quality education, but they are not sufficient to guarantee that quality. He further stated:

Teachers cannot be held solely accountable for what happens in schools. The curriculum with which they have to work and the way in which decisions are made about it will be important determinants of quality schooling. The organisational structures of the schools and of the systems to which the schools belong and the support mechanisms those structures deliver to teachers and students are also important ingredients. The social context in which schooling takes place is another extremely important influence. (p.23)

Having its origins in political, industrial and professional agendas, the concept of AST and the AST selection process was a major development in Australian education. A clear conceptualisation of what constitutes Advanced Skills Teaching has not yet been made. Roles and responsibilities relating to leadership and supervision are being given to ASTs as well as other responsibilities. Only if the problems and concerns regarding AST implementation are recognised and acted upon, will the concept of the AST meet the aims intended for it.

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