THE IMPACT OF THE 'ADVANCED SKILL' DISCOURSE ON TEACHERS' WORK

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ABSTRACT

 This paper examines the introduction of the advanced skills teacher
(AST) classification and its affect on the articulation and defence of
the work of experienced classroom teachers. We argue that the
specification of criteria for recognition of advanced teaching is best
seen as a discursive construction of the relation between the work of
the experienced teacher and educational policy. The purposeful
selection of certain skills and dispositions above others, and the
translation of the work of advanced teachers into written performance
indicators, privileges a policy discourse of skill over the oral
discourse of practice preferred by teachers. Official discourses on
advanced teaching encoded in written forms simultaneously enable and
disable competing conceptions of how experienced teachers should work.
In the AST scheme this has repositioned the discussion of advanced
teaching within policy frameworks through the devaluing of the
contextually rich articulation of practice in the selection process.

Introduction
The 1990's introduction of an advanced skill classification into
Australian schools heralded an official, career-based recognition of
the experienced classroom practitioner as an important pedagogical site
in schools. This paper examines the introduction of the advanced skills
teacher (AST) classification and its affect on the articulation and
defence of the work of experienced classroom teachers. We argue that
the specification of criteria for recognition of advanced teaching is
best seen as a discursive construction of the relation between the work

of the experienced teacher and educational policy. The purposeful
selection of certain skills and dispositions above others, and the
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disable competing conceptions of how experienced teachers should work.
In the AST scheme this has repositioned the discussion of advanced
teaching within policy frameworks through the devaluing of the
contextually rich articulation of practice in the selection process.

At its best the AST process is a celebration of quality teaching for
some teachers and at its worst it leads to the destruction of

self-esteem for others. Irrespective of their success or failure, all
teachers who encounter the AST process change their thinking about the
nature of their work and the value of the skills they employ in that
work. In drawing upon the accounts of AST applicants, and others
involved in AST selection processes, we present the case that the AST
skill discourse sits in contradiction to other discourses teachers
engage for the description and understanding of the complexity of their
work and the sophistication of the skills they bring to it.

Defining skill through an AST selection process
The selection of 'advanced' teachers from amongst the cohort of
experienced classroom teachers requires a statement about which subset
should be taken aside from the larger set of pedagogical skills and
nominally labelled as 'advanced'. This choice is recognisably both
arbitrary and value laden. Firstly, it is arbitrary because it requires
the separation of parts from the whole and, therefore, acts to sever
connected and interdependent teacher actions from the context of their
development. Indeed, the selection of some skills over others as more
important, or more highly developed, has little natural veracity for
experienced practitioners other than in the solipsistic act of making
personal choices about their contextual efficacy. Secondly, the choice
is arbitrary, even though it might be based in some position adopted
for the identification of technical or aesthetic qualities in the work
of teachers, because different positions are possible and capable of
being articulated in ways suited to informing a choice - any choice.
Furthermore, the selection of some skills is fundamentally about
valuing some aspects of teachers' work over others - it is about making
the claim: 'this is more important than that'. Those skills which are
tagged as advanced are valorised in a teacher's career profile because
they acquire some fungibility in obtaining status and extra salary from
AST recognition.

The AST selection process renders invisible the arbitrary nature of the
selected skill criteria by removing any indication of the vigorous
contestation between competing interests that was part of their

construction - as a school principal who was involved in developing the AST process recalls:

There was a long drawn out debate which often stalled. We had to negotiate the criteria and processes. The Department decided to keep the cost down by toughening the criteria and controlling the selection process. We tried very hard to come up with criteria that encapsulated good progressive teaching and to describe it in a way that would be useful for teachers.

The final shape of the process, the criteria and accompanying indicators, is not an objective statement of what advanced teaching looks like, but the result of negotiation and compromise; a statement on the work of experienced teachers which those representing teachers and employers could finally agree upon. An AST administrator acknowledged the arbitrary nature of the criteria by observing that other ways of nominating skill in a teacher's work are always possible.

It took two years to negotiate the final form of the criteria. They are quite good, but there could be other ones. While the criteria are fairly wide; having to make sure all indicators are "ticked off" was very contested - a real sticking point - because there are other indicators which we could accept.

Inevitably, a particular value position informs the competing desires to be "tough", "controlling" and "useful" and, therefore, successful engagement with the selection process requires competency in describing

skill and identifying the same values in your own work practices. Clearly, the AST process privileges some ways of viewing teaching skill over others; the selection criteria are not absolute, or ideologically neutral, but authored and, therefore, chosen over other formations of skill.

The criteria have values. Teachers who show the values get the money. This is what the criteria are about. It is about teachers articulating a certain view on teaching.

The written specification of a subset of all teaching skills, as advanced, in AST criteria formalises the choice implicit in the selective highlighting of some work practices. At the same time, it legitimises those skills as advanced and problematises the value of any other highly developed, and arguably (according to your position) equally sophisticated, skills possessed by experienced teachers. In consequence, the discussion of advanced skill in teaching is largely set within the limits of that which has been written down in the selection criteria and the supporting notes found in selection manuals. Immediately, there is less possibility for the discussion of alternate formations of advanced teaching because that requires the interruption

of legitimised, officially endorsed, career structures with other, different, portrayals of skill in teachers' work. Alternate portrayals are likely to be seen, at best, as irrelevant or non-conformist, and at worst, as dangerous and deviant. A changing formation of skill in teachers' work takes shape out of the AST process itself - one which finds many contradictory moments with practitioner celebration of the rich tapestry of practice found in the complexity of working with children and colleagues.

An AST skill discourse and teachers' work
The formation of a discourse about advanced skill in classroom teaching creates possibilities for the articulation and negotiation of shared understandings about teachers' work. In simple terms, a discourse about skill in teachers' work will be that which is written and said about the skills teachers acquire and demonstrate in their work. Also, the discourse broadly defines what it is possible to write and say about work skills possessed by classroom teachers through making discursive boundaries which inform how we are to be credible and meaningfully heard by others who share that discourse. Indeed, the kinds of conversation about teachers' work which go on as a result of the official articulation of teaching practice in documents like the AST criteria are the means by which shared knowledge of skilful teaching becomes constructed in the practitioner community. As official discourses on teaching change, practitioner discourses in schools also change; while they are in some ways distinct, over time the tendency is for them to merge. New practice and ways of conversing about practice become established ways of practice and conversation about practice.

There are a number of consequences of having a skill discourse anchored in a definitive statement of advanced teaching like that found in the AST selection criteria. Coming to terms with the discursive patterns can be a huge challenge for many teachers. Many are left perplexed as to how their work can be connected with the criteria because the way in which teaching is described in the criteria, including the kind of words used in those descriptions, is not something that many teachers are familiar, or comfortable, with in discussing their work. This discursive gulf between quotidian and bureaucratic forms of talk about teaching can lead to frustration and intense pressure as teachers are compelled to (re)interpret their understandings of skill to make a case for AST recognition. Moreover, having to talk about your work in someone else's language, one which is alien to classroom and staffroom

talk, is not easily, or eagerly embraced.

When I first started my application, it seemed very difficult. I thought I'll never get through this. It seemed a completely overwhelming task; unless you break it down and look at what's required. Try to understand the wording that's used, have a clear idea or definition of words; for example, "collaboration".

Indeed, for this teacher learning the discursive rules of the skill
game, in matching classroom experience to the kind of demonstrable
evidence required by the criteria, was more difficult than actually
self-assessing the suitability of one's experience as a potential AST.

My concern was not whether I was AST material, but that I didn't know
what the game was. I didn't know whether I was going to play by the
right rules. I didn't know whether the process was going to try and
trip me up, to find some area where I didn't have the appropriate
knowledge, or whether it in fact was an assessment of what I am doing,
or have done as a teacher.

Implicit in comments like these is a recognition that the discursive
rules of the AST game separates the satisfaction of criteria from
actual teaching skills, as they exist in the relational world of
teacher-student interactions, in order to facilitate the 'productivity'
of the selection process. In such a process it becomes possible for
highly regarded classroom practitioners to be unsuccessful in their
engagement with the process; a result that is discursively possible,
but experientially nonsensical.

Discourse, however, is not as simple as just what is written and said -
it is more than that. Discourses are about "ways of behaving,
interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading
and writing" (Gee, 1990: xix) that must be understood within the roles
and identities we occupy and develop. Discourses provide both language
and practice frames for the construction and communication of meaning
and belief to other people; they are "a kind of self-enclosed semantic
and practical universe within which people operate as if [in original]
everyone knew what everyone else was saying" (Garman, 1994: 5).

In the case of advanced classroom teaching, the discourse is that
language-practice 'place' where teachers and others with an interest in
defining teachers' work manoeuvre epistemically (and politically) to
seek, co-opt, and command knowledge of each other's position that will
possibly give advantage in the struggle for a negotiated - but power
skewed - position of shared understanding about what is important in
the work of teaching. Therefore, the culture of teaching, as work, is
not static but constantly reshaped by those who participate in the
discourse on teachers' work skills by contesting their positions
through the 'politics of the discursive regime' (Foucault, 1980). It is
the people who are teachers, school administrators, educational
bureaucrats, academics, government policy makers, and union officials
who creatively engage what is said and written about teachers' work
that have the capacity to discursively define what counts as advanced
skill in the work of teaching.

For teachers, finding that participation in the AST discourse is
possible is only the first challenge. It is also necessary to be able

to render your own unique experience of working in classrooms into a portrayal of skill that is legitimately admissible into the discursive frame of the selection process.

My experiences as a teacher are very different from those of many other

teachers. I've spent most of my working life going from school to school as a contract teacher - more than 20 schools over 10 years. It was difficult to demonstrate that I was competent and skilled because my experience didn't match up with what most people do in schools. So, when I saw the criteria some of them frightened me, as I didn't feel they addressed what I was strong in.

In this sense, the preparation of an application becomes a matter of conforming to the required pattern of elucidation of the criteria by conversing about your work using the patois of the AST discourse. In doing so, any contextual grounding in classroom practice can be relegated secondary to the task of participating in the kind of discussion of teaching required by the discursive frame of the AST criteria. An understanding of implicit contradictions in these discursive constraints is found in these remarks from a teacher who chose not to apply for AST.

Certainly a great deal of garbage is written just to satisfy the terminology and to cover the criteria. They may not even be applicable to the people who are applying but they have to cover them, so they do. I just find that wrong. It's about playing the game. Personally, I can't be bothered doing that.

Comments of this kind indicate a belief that the AST discourse selectively focuses on those aspects of a teacher's work which can be easily written down but avoids the more ineffable aspects of that work. Inevitably, the absence of the contextual leads to limited portrayals of teachers' work that fail to capture many of the truly evocative essences of the classroom life of a teacher. This is a major complaint about the process and teachers often think that the criteria do not connect, concretely, to what teachers do in classrooms.

I found it too clinical and overladen with a kind of bureaucratic legalese that was remote from my experience as a classroom teacher. I would question the extent to which the process emphasises the applicant's ability to articulate what they do and be explicit about some aspects of their work. I don't see it as an accurate test of good classroom teaching because while some criteria are central, others are more peripheral to classroom teaching.

A lot of research focussed on the nature of teaching suggests that teachers labour within a "discursive community" (Strike, 1993) that valorises a certain way of talking and persuasion about teaching as

work (Shacklock, 1995; Kainan, 1995; Nias, 1989). Generally, it is one which is narrative in form and contextually rich in substance about the relational nature of the schoolworld. The discourse of teaching preferred by teachers when they represent their work to each other is one that seeks to bring out the essences of that work in a form which is evocative and veritable in its attention to the complexity of classrooms. Teachers seek a quality in their work-discourse which enables teaching to be represented in ways which 'ring true' and allow vicarious participation in the deeply engaging, but often evanescent, significant relational moments that characterise classroom work. In such discourse the contextual details are preserved in vibrant, storied descriptions of classroom life. One AST applicant put it like this:

I would have placed far more emphasis on what I do in the classroom. I feel that's where I do my job. They wanted to know a lot more about the peripheral issues of being a teacher, which are important, but I think I would have preferred to concentrate more on what I do in my classroom. If it hadn't said these are the criteria you must address, I would have given more prominence to my classroom experiences.

From this teacher's view, the most desirable representation of 'advanced' classroom skill was not possible because the criteria were directed toward presenting evidence about other things. This apparent artificiality is a concern for many teachers because it closes the window on a whole range of ways of looking at skill in classroom teaching. Applying Nelson Goodman's (1978) principle: 'you see what you know how to say' suggests that the terminology presented in the criteria would both enable and disable certain kinds of evidence in a criterion driven application. It includes discussion of policy implementation, but simultaneously excludes a lot of evidence about classroom work.

I tried to make my application as honest as I could, yet I found the jargon in the criteria, and the way everything had to be classified according to it, to be fairly intimidating. The only way I could deal with it was to give examples of myself working in particular situations. The way you had to channel everything according to those seven criteria was artificial. In the classroom, when I was thinking about my application, I wasn't thinking "I do this well" but, rather, "what could I tell them that's going to fit criteria number 5". It's like trying to get all the ducks in a row.

Under such conditions teaching as complex work gets hacked down to a shape where it fits the mould set by the limits imposed by the criteria because the discourse narrows the representation of skill to just a small part of what teachers do in classrooms. What must be recognised is that criteria focussed rhetoric on teachers' work is a different, contradictory kind of work-discourse on teaching to that privileged by

teachers because it fetishises general over specific forms of knowledge and technicist over narrative forms of representation in the portrayal of teachers' work.

Discursive practices in action: merging skill and policy discourses
The linking of discourses with practice, the ways in the textual construction of social identity and interaction informs, limits and enables how people live their lives can be described as 'discursive practice'; a term used by Davies and Harré for "all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities" (1990:45). The work which teachers do in schools is discursive in nature and that which can be known about doing the work of teaching is inextricably linked to the discourses informing that work - teaching is 'discourse-bound' (Gee, 1990). We read and write ourselves, as teachers, within discourses and not outside of them.

The establishment of an AST discourse sets the tone for the discussion of advanced teaching and, in the formalisation of processes for the documentation and verification of such skills builds a discursive practice of skill formation. A common complaint of the AST process made by teachers and principals is that the criteria are too general and peripheral to working with children in classrooms. Such complaints represent a belief that those skills which assist teachers in the implementation of policy initiatives, and the demonstration of commitment to bureaucracy-endorsed preferred-ways of working in schools, are too significant in decisions about whether teachers qualify to be labelled as advanced workers. When this is the case the skill discourse is open to significant influence by the latest formations in educational policy and the selection processes will tend, therefore, to advantage those candidates who have close identification with, and commitment to, those kind of teaching practices which support that vision of teaching. The discursive borders of the skill discourse describe a pedagogical terrain which favours those teachers who are

prepared to be proselytised to new policy and school reform by becoming school-site conduits for the latest, in vogue, educational ideologies.

One teacher said about the AST experience:

This year it's National Profiles and the standardised testing that the Government is bringing in. You need to sympathise with policy and have an understanding about it as an issue and to use the policy jargon.

Pragmatically, expressing an awareness of policy is integral to participating in the AST discourse and for teachers with little knowledge of policy the chances of being able to negotiate the AST process become greatly diminished. A familiarity with policy, being able to converse in the jargon, is the entry ticket to the AST process discourse game.

Sure, I can satisfy all the criteria but it's the actual expression of those ideas. If you don't write about all the policy things, even if you haven't necessarily experienced or confronted them in your teaching life, you're in trouble. You have to present a position that is acceptable.

Some teachers see an emphasis on policy implementation leading to the replacement of classroom context by competence conformity; a situation where the satisfaction of selection criteria can be more easily obtained through the demonstration of policy understanding than through demonstration of teaching experiences. This is an example of the how the regimes of power in the discursive practice of skill in teaching are played out (through selection processes) in the lives of real teachers. About the AST process, teachers say things like:

Jargon and current ideologies can over-ride common sense expressions of teaching.

I have seen applications which neatly represent policy views, yet they're not the views of the person who is applying.

The underlying distrust of this invasive pattern of policy satisfaction into the skill discourse is worrisome because the richness and diversity of individual manifestations of teaching become devalued and uniformity in how skilful classroom work can be portrayed becomes more likely. It is the unsuccessful AST applicants who often experience the sharp end of contradictions that arise from the privileging of policy discourse in their struggle to satisfy the selection criteria.

Things I thought would be pluses in my application, turned out to be minuses. Things which had always worked brilliantly for me, are now a no-no. As I tried to push what I thought were still valued educational ideas, I was unknowingly "digging my own grave".

In situations like these it is no wonder that teachers feel that policy imperatives are the dominant factor in how teaching skills are meant to be represented. Their work falls into line behind policy. Sadly, for a lot of teachers there seems little room for manoeuvring around such things and they end up becoming unsuccessful AST applicants who carry away a lot of cynicism from their experience with AST process.

Our portrayal shows how understandings of skill in teaching are sites of struggle, within discursive regimes of power, for teachers in bringing their contextual experience of teaching to the AST selection process. Moreover, skill and policy become inextricably linked as the skill and policy discourses merge and visions of the highly skilled

teacher become identical to one who successfully implements educational

policy into classrooms.

Summary
The AST process for recognition of highly skilled classroom teaching
has established a discourse of skill which defines an occupationally
legitimised way in which teachers and others are able to converse about
teaching. At the base of that discourse is the set of AST selection
criteria which articulate in written form specific indicators for
skilled teaching practice, which, has embedded within, a choice about
what is admissible, and what is not, as evidence of advanced teaching.
An excavation of the authorship of those criteria, and the agenda about
the definition of teachers' work which they enable, is important for
seeing how some kinds of pedagogical skill are recognised as advanced
whilst others are not. The linking of occupational rewards to
descriptions of teaching practice that are congruent with the preferred
skill discourse advantages some teachers and politicises the
development of skills in teaching. The preferred valuing of skills
connected to the implementation of policy, and those which are
generalisable beyond the context of individual classrooms, prevents
many teachers from being able to productively demonstrate their
pedagogical skill, in ways that are acceptable and satisfying, within
the boundaries of the AST discourse. The introduction of the advanced
skills teacher classification into Australian schools is a poignant
example of how discursive practices shape the lives of teachers through
patterns of reward, processes and criteria. Further, in recognising a
specific set of skills in teaching as advanced the AST process has
encouraged their development in the many experienced teachers who seek
advanced status. Indeed, it has legitimised, possibly even mandated,
their acquisition by the cohort of soon to be experienced teachers who
seek long, productive and well paid, high status careers in the
classroom.

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