

# *Advanced skills teachers: professional identity and status*

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## **Advanced Skills Teachers: Professional Identity and Status**

*Fuller, C.; Goodwyn, A. and Francis-Brophy, E.*

### **Introduction**

Despite teaching remaining the first choice profession for university graduates and public opinion positioning teachers second only to doctors and nurses in terms of their professional status and prestige (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2001), research in the UK suggests teachers still believe they have much lower status than other professions. Large scale research by the General Teaching Council (UK) in 2002 found that 65% of the 70,000 teachers surveyed believed that the public, media and government had little respect for the teaching profession, with more recent research by Hargreaves et al (2006) finds much the same. With teacher job satisfaction considerably lower today than in 1962 (Klassen and Anderson, 2009) and on-going issues with teacher recruitment and retention, new government policies have set out to enhance the status of teachers both within and outside of the profession (Swann et al, 2010). In 2001 the then Secretary for Education Estelle Morris outlined the importance of addressing teachers' low morale and the need to boost both their confidence and sense of professional status. Central to this agenda was what she considered to be the crucial need for teachers to redefine and renegotiate their professionalism in line with other professions of the modern world. Her main assertion, however, centred on establishing greater trust between government and teachers; with an implied critique in her declaration that the days were long gone when "teachers could say with a straight face 'trust me, I'm a professional'"(2001: 19).

The Advanced Skill Teacher (AST) grade was introduced in 1998 as a means to recognise and reward teaching expertise. The policy was framed as a way of raising the status of the

teaching profession – in time. As to what a teaching professional should look like, the AST was in many ways positioned as the embodiment. However, despite the grade existing for more than 12 years, rather surprisingly research on ASTs in England is almost none existent. To address this gap this paper therefore reports the findings from the first large scale study of the experiences of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) undertaken in England in 2010. It focuses specifically on the value of recognising teaching expertise through awards, such as AST, in relation to its contribution to professional identity and status. In doing so, this paper also considers the intrinsic nature of what it means to be a professional.

## **Background**

### *Teachers' professional status and identity*

The teaching profession continues to struggle with defining itself in relation to other professions (Goodwyn, 2010). Despite teaching 'fitting' the criteria of what constitutes a profession in terms of knowledge, responsibility, autonomy, and organisation (Furlong et al, 2000; Whitty, 2006), the concept of the 'professional' within education remains debated and contested. Yet the Government's drive to define and redefine teachers' professional identities has placed teachers in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, teachers are encouraged to become 'responsible' and 'modern' professionals yet, on the other, the forms that this 'legitimate' professionalism takes is increasingly prescribed (Beck, 2008); eroding the key features of professions, that of autonomy, responsibility and knowledge via a much increased onus on accountability and standards (Sachs, 1999) that, in turn, defines their practice.

Whilst it could be argued that most professions are subject to scrutiny and regulation, as

Locke (2001) notes, the question as to whom professionals are accountable is an important one. Whilst the practice of doctors and lawyers, for example, is overseen and tightly regulated by their own professional organisations, teachers run the gauntlet of accountability in that they are answerable to the government, the profession, the media, school management, parents and students to name but a few. Evetts (2009) questions the way that overly bureaucratised and target-setting accountability may damage trust and the value frameworks that inform the work of teachers (Day, 1999). Inherent then, is that this will also erode a teacher's sense of professional status also.

Status, when used in relation to occupations and professions, typically refers to the social standing of various groups and is connected to the prestige, rewards and desirability of various occupations (Crompton, 1998). Professions with high social status also tend to have high social prestige because of perceptions relating to the knowledge required to 'do the job' (Winch, 2010). Teaching was formally recognised as a profession by the Office for National Statistics in the UK in 2001 Census (Hoyle, 2001) yet despite this, research by Hargreaves et al (2006) found that teachers still feel there is a significant gap between the status of teaching and other high status professions, particularly in relation to teaching being a respected and valued authority'. Importantly however, for teachers what mattered most was the status and esteem afforded teachers by colleagues and parents rather than that of public opinion (Hargreaves et al, 2010; 2006).

Despite a tension between what the public think and teachers' own views on teaching, there is little doubt that perceptions of an overly regulated profession that is poorly remunerated

profession has important consequences for teachers' overall sense of professional status, morale, recruitment and retention (Ingersoll and Perda, 2008; Hall and Langton, 2006). Research by Hall and Langton (2006) suggest the primary drivers of status are power, money and fame. When secondary drivers of status, namely training, skill, expertise and social influence, are not seen as contributing to the more important primary drivers, then attempts to raise teachers' status could be considered as ineffectual. This is perceived to be the case for teaching,

Yet how teachers see and identify themselves as professionals is important for a number of reasons, including their sense of self-efficacy, motivation and job satisfaction (Day, Kingston, Stobart and Sammons, 2006). Day et al (2007) suggests that teachers' identity, – 'how teachers define themselves to themselves' (2007:102) – consists of three elements which reflect personal, situational and professional aspects. Personal identity relates to identities outside of school, such as being a mother or a local volunteer. Situated identity is the context in which teachers work and the ways it impacts on individual agency and by extension sense of self. Professional identity is the aspect of teacher's identity that is most influenced by changes in local and national policy, roles and responsibilities.

Day et al (2007) found that opportunities for promotion which increased responsibility and recognised high performance were important to the identities that teachers aspired to achieve. Given the dimensions of identity interconnect and interrelate with each other, a focus on the impact of policy initiatives, such as the AST, on professional identity, and how instrumental these are in raising the status of those teachers who attain it, becomes of significance. Not

only does it shed some light on how being defined as a professional is articulated by these teachers, it also allows for perceptions as to the status of teachers to be explored.

### *The Advanced Skills Teacher*

In many western industrialised countries significant policy pressure has been directed towards the greater accountability of teachers in improving the quality of classroom education and student results. With the teacher also identified as the most important variable in any high performing educational system (Mckinsey Report, 2007), a number of international policy initiatives now acknowledge and reward those teachers assessed and thus considered to be expert (SMHC, 2009). From the Highly Accomplished Teacher in the USA, the Chartered Teacher in Scotland and the Advanced Skills Teacher in Australia and England, what international policies share in common is an understanding that harnessing the skills of expert teachers within the classroom is essential in educational reform and its development (Hopkins, 1996; Ingvarson, 2009).

The Advanced Skills Teacher grade was introduced into maintained schools in England in 1998 in response to a growing recognition of the need to attract and retain excellent classroom teachers as well as raise student attainment by broadening the skills and knowledge base of schools. Alongside a range of additional responsibilities geared towards increasing the quality of teaching and learning in their own schools, there is also a clear expectation that at least 20% of an ASTs time is spent on ‘outreach’ work in other schools, where the focus is on using their expertise to improve the practice of other teachers.

Prior to the award of the grade of AST, candidates undergo a comprehensive assessment to satisfy a set of standards designed to demonstrate ‘an excellent classroom teacher’ (CfBT, 2004:4). Once appointed, ASTs move to a pay scale that is comparable to management, designed to reflect the expertise and challenges of the role, whilst offering a realistic alternative to the leadership and management route. Despite initial hostility from teaching unions and school principals in England over concerns that the grade would be divisive, Office for Standards in Education studies in 2000 and 2003 and a more thorough review undertaken by CfBT in 2004 were all largely encouraging about the overall value of the AST role in terms of its impact and value.

Because of the objective criteria that must be satisfied prior to the award of AST status, in many ways the AST grade can be observed as not only establishing the parameters of teaching expertise but also that of a teaching professional. Jackson (2006) argues that professional trust is no longer based simply on qualifications or experience but on a teacher’s ability to satisfy and meet performance indicators. In an increasingly globally driven market place, skills and credentials have become particularly important. Competition requires people to advertise their ‘individuality... uniqueness of their work and of their accomplishments’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001:33) and for Bourdieu, credentials provide a key source of status distinctions between groups (Swartz, 1997). If, as Giddens (1984) contends, identities emerge through standardised markers, such as age and gender, then awards such as the AST grade could also work in the same way; not just an objective measure of government’s trust in ASTs as professionals but, as an important means by which teachers are able to define their own professional status and identity. Hall and Langton (2006) write that when the teaching profession draws attention to its top performers, the status of those individuals is



raised considerably. In this paper we consider the impact of the AST designation on teachers' perceptions of their professional identity and analyse whether such awards do contribute in positive ways to a teacher's sense of professional status.

## **Research Methods**

### *Data collection*

Data was collected using a mixed method research design, through online survey and in-depth interviews with ASTs in England. Using the National College database of 1,400 ASTs as our sampling frame, ASTs were invited to participate in the study via email. In total, 849 ASTs from across England participated in the online survey, giving an extremely high response rate of 61%. The national survey collected data on the motivations for becoming an ASTs alongside experiences of the role. The reliability of the survey was first tested with a small pilot of 15 ASTs who offered feedback of the survey design. Piloting allowed for correcting any potential bias or ambiguity issues. Questions were both closed and open ended and included a number of Likert scaled questions that allowed for an exploration of strength and direction of responses. For example, questions explored how strongly ASTs agreed with the view that the AST award was recognition of their teaching expertise; how supported ASTs felt in terms of their own professional development and how well they felt their skills were utilised. A further 31 follow up in-depth telephone interviews were then carried out with a sub-sample of ASTs from the survey. These were selected based on willingness to be interviewed. Telephone interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes, were recorded and then transcribed. Interviews were used to investigate survey responses in more depth. For example, questions explored why ASTs had decided to pursue the route, how supportive their

school and colleagues had been and their career plans for the future. An initial analysis of the survey data highlighted interesting results which indicated themes connected to notions of professional status and identity. Additional questions were therefore added to the interview schedule to allow for further exploration of these areas. Questions considered the ways that the award of AST had or had not impacted on individual teacher's sense of professional identity and whether being an AST had increased teachers' sense of professional status and recognition in the workforce. For example, ASTs were asked what they liked most about being an AST; how, if at all, the role impacted on their relationships with colleagues and other professionals and whether they felt the AST role and grade was an appropriate means to recognise their professional expertise.

### *Sample*

Of those included in the survey, 75% of ASTs were female and 25% male. Sixty percent of ASTs work in secondary schools; 33% in primary and 7% in special and 'other' schools. Thirty-four (34) areas of specialism were captured across all curriculum subject areas, with science (12%), English (9.5%) and maths (9%) most frequently represented and replicating the main subject areas for ASTs in the English secondary sector. All 150 Local Authorities (LA) are included. Significantly 85% of AST posts are funded by their LA, with the remaining 15% being funded by their employing school. Of the interview sample, 68% were female and 32% male, with 35% from primary and 65% from secondary schools. The interview sample includes ASTs from 22 different LAs and across 13 curriculum areas. In terms of gender and type of school, the interview sample is fairly representative of the survey sample over all.

### *Data analysis*

The online survey included closed and open-ended questions. The survey data was analysed in SPSS with frequencies of responses and cross-tabulations used to explore the data. Using frequencies allowed us an overall picture of the data, whilst cross-tabulations enabled exploration of patterns and trends. A Chi-square test of association was also carried out on key variables of interest and within sub-sets of the data to explore relationships between responses and the strength of these.

The interview data was analysed using NVivo. In the first instance data was coded deductively with themes already identified. 'Free' or open coding was applied initially, to themes covering professional status and recognition within the workplace. Data was also categorised inductively in response to emergent themes arising through the first stage of the coding process. Data was coded by two separate coders and the results of the coding process were then compared. Comparing the similarity and difference in the coding process, via inter-coder reliability testing, allows for a degree of confidence both in the reliability and validity of the codes identified and with their application to the data. Hence comparing the coding in this research demonstrated a high degree of coding similarity. Once coded, free codes (referred to as nodes in Nvivo 8) were then organised into clusters of codes (referred to as tree nodes in Nvivo 8) that represented similar themes. Next these were organised in hierarchically, permitting a more detailed data picture. Jaccard's Similarity Co-efficient Test was also used within Nvivo to measure the similarity between the coding of nodes. Using this test allows for an analysis of patterns within the coding to be explored as well as an

investigation of the strength and direction of any possible relationships. For the purposes of this paper the key themes drawn are those that can be considered as relating to professional identities, for example, recognition, respect and reward. In carrying out this research full ethical clearance was sought and granted from The University's Ethics Committee and all ethical procedures and guidelines were complied with. In reporting the data, all identifying information has been removed.

## **Results**

### *Recognition and Respect*

From the survey data it is clear that being an AST was a positive experience for almost all of those who responded, with 97% of ASTs enjoying their role most of the time. Results suggest that teachers awarded the AST grade feel a great sense of achievement in being awarded the designation. From interviews it was evident that teachers feel that their skills and abilities are recognised as an AST, which appeared linked to experiencing an increased sense of professional respect (Jaccard's similarity co-efficient 0.69). In part, this sense of recognition may result from the formal assessment procedure required to become an AST. Having demonstrated and met the standards, teaching expertise has become objectified and 'official' because of the scrutiny and validation process. This may possibly explain why more than three quarters of those surveyed felt their skills were more appreciated in school since becoming an ASTs, with 64% of these also feeling more respected by colleagues:

*"I don't have to prove myself now; people trust my word a little bit more."*

*“...it’s seen as almost a ‘pat on the back, well done’ you’ve obviously earned the job that you do.”*

*“I get a bit of kudos before I meet anyone. It gives you a head start. It’s good.”*

*“I do feel recognised.”*

*“I feel more respected because of my role.”*

*“...It’s nice to be recognised, that I take my job seriously.”*

### *Individual Professional Status*

Through interviews it was clear that professional ‘recognition’ was important to an AST and that recognition of expertise was strongly related to feeling that skills were being rewarded with the AST award. (Jaccard’s similarity co-efficient 0.83). References to a sense of reward were also strongly associated to ideas of having an increased sense of professional status (Jaccard’s similarity co-efficient 0.83) and feeling more respected (Jaccard’s similarity co-efficient 0.62). All of the ASTs interviewed explicitly expressed the view that they had experienced a much greater sense of professional status amongst colleagues since becoming an AST, including the few who were currently not enjoying the role:

*“There is a sense of value, a sense of respect and status about what I’m doing.”*

*“My status has grown and it has been good for me.”*

*“Well, people ask my advice now and value my judgement.”*

*“People think that you’re a big-wig or people think that you know your stuff. So your status is higher. Yes. And the respect is higher at ground level.”*

*“...you feel you have status, you’ve got it on paper and they can’t take that away from you..Tthere is some pressure that comes with it but, in the end, you’ve earned it.”*

Despite experiencing an increased sense of status and respect, not all ASTs felt their role was understood. From the survey responses, 30% of ASTs said that staff in their school were either unaware of what their role entailed (15%) or were negative towards it (15%). From interviews, this was explained as a lack of understanding of what the term Advanced Skills Teacher meant and what work they carried out in other schools. As teachers noted:

*“...the outreach...known to them as your day off!”*

*“I think there are staff who sort of begrudge to see we get paid more and (think we) have more free time.”*

On a personal level, teachers primarily felt that the AST award was recognising and rewarding their expertise. Whilst this was not true for a small minority of AST, most spoke of experiencing a sense of satisfaction that their work and skills appeared to be more respected. However, it is interesting to note that even though 55% of those surveyed agreed that the title ‘Advanced Skills Teacher’ summed up adequately their level of expertise; more than two thirds had a preference for a title other than AST. In interviews teachers expressed some

embarrassment and anxiety about possible misconceptions as to what the title meant in terms of their level of skill. Concern related to the way that the term ‘Advanced’ carried connotations of wide ranging teaching proficiency and abilities. ASTs were keen to point out that they *‘don’t have all the answers’*.

*“I am quite embarrassed by it to be honest with you, which is not necessarily a good thing. It shouldn’t be embarrassing.”*

*“Because of the term ‘advanced teachers’, people think you are going to be goody, goody. You’re successful every time.”*

*“...it sounds like you’re way, way above everybody else.”*

*“...everybody expects you to be perfect all the time.”*

Thus, while ASTs welcome the award of AST because of the sense of increased respect, recognition and status that they felt the designation has conferred, there was also some unease about potentially unrealistic expectations from colleagues about their range of expertise. Implicit then is an apparent tension between the intrinsic and extrinsic value of the AST grade. On the one hand, feeling rewarded and recognised was important to ASTs, on the other there was anxiety and reluctance about being perceived as “Master” teachers.

### *Teachers and Status*

Overall the AST award had a positive impact on a teacher's identity as a professional.

However, 83% of those interviewed believed that it had done nothing to raise the status of teachers more broadly, outside of the profession or in the public sphere. Again, largely this was seen as the result of a lack of knowledge about the role:

*"I never say 'Advanced Teacher' because people wouldn't know what it was."*

*"I think people do not fully understand the role. The problem with teaching is it's something that everyone has been through and therefore has an opinion on."*

But again the perceived effects of lower public status were of lesser importance than as Hargreaves et al (2006) found, it was the opinion of colleagues and pupil's parents that mattered most to teachers:

*"I know that the parents of my kids like the fact I am an AST. They feel that their children are being taught by an expert and they seem to respect me for it."*

*"Parents like it, yes. Parents are very good at gauging themselves as to how good a teacher you are. When things like that go out on a newsletter, it highlights that it's not just being recognised within your own school, it's a national thing. They appreciate it."*



*“...you are not in the same position as a deputy or assistant head but you have a range of knowledge and expertise so your colleagues hold you with a certain amount of esteem...and that matters a lot to me.”*

Finally, from survey responses, 78% of ASTs felt that they were making a difference and were having an impact in the classroom, expressing the view that the grade was achieving desired policy outcomes. Capturing this in measurable terms however, was considered problematic not least because, as one ASTs notes *“you see, it all depends on how you measure these things”*.

#### *Being an AST*

Needing a new challenge was the primary motivator in deciding to become an AST for 97% of ASTs. Two other factors were also important motivators: an opportunity to stay in the classroom (21%) and a desire to share skills (19%). Teachers opting to undertake the AST route discuss having reached a point in their career development where they needed greater challenge and responsibility; yet remaining connected to the classroom as well as their subject were also very important to the type of professional lives teachers wanted. The AST role was thus seen as an important career opportunity offering professional development without the *“sheer administration...of the Senior Management Route”*. This commitment to the classroom is clearly evident in AST future career plans. Although 27% of AST plan to move into management in the future, 66% of ASTs intend to remain in an AST role for the foreseeable future.

*“I always wanted to keep attached to my subject...I never thought of becoming a deputy head.*

*This was a new promotional route for teachers who want to stay connected to their subject area.”*

*“[I really enjoy the role] ...I get the best of both...I am involved in leadership decisions but I am also in the classroom which is very important to me.”*

Ninety seven per cent (97%) of those surveyed enjoy being an AST ‘most of the time’, with more than two fifths stating that the role is what they expected.. However, almost all ASTs find the role demanding, primarily because of large workloads (24%) and the amount of time it required (33%). Levels and perceptions of support vary but centre on practical issues that relate to the facilitation of out-reach work and appropriate preparation time. A key focus for the work of an AST is the 20% of teaching time spent on out-reach. However, issues around timetabling, lesson cover, as well as attitudes to the role of the Head Teacher/Principal and the Senior Leadership Team have an important impact on how well this requirement is facilitated.

*“..how well you are supported in your own school and how your colleagues see you will be very much dependant on the head’s attitudes...the first head I had was completely opposed to out-reach so was not supportive. She wanted my focus to be on my own school. My new head is much more behind out-reach and so it is easier.”*

As expected, there is a strong association between how much an AST enjoys the role and these levels of support [Chi-Square 53.928 (4df) < 0.001 significance] and clearly attitudes of

the senior leaders in schools matter to how well an AST feels their role is valued. Despite these tensions, the AST role is clearly achieving a key policy aim of keeping good teachers in the classroom.

### **Discussion/conclusion**

In terms of the policy initiatives underpinning the introduction of the AST grade, teachers are clear they are having an impact. Conceding that establishing this in quantifiable terms is exceedingly difficult, they firmly articulate the AST role contributes in meaningful ways to their sense of professional efficacy, satisfaction and enjoyment. In terms of raising the status of the teacher profession more generally by drawing, as Hall and Langton (2006) note, attention to its top performers, the AST grade does appear to meet this criteria. The AST role is perceived to be not well understood at the level of the individual teacher, as opposed to the profession more broadly. In addition, although the ASTs in this research clearly expressed experiencing an enhanced sense of professional status, there was some tension with this in relation to anxiety around possible misconceptions as to levels of expertise. Thus, whilst the AST award appears to impact in positive ways on a teacher's professional identity, the benefit of this appears to be more in terms of its intrinsic value, especially in raised self esteem. Paradoxically, ASTs like feeling that the grade is recognising and rewarding their expertise but they are also reticent about being perceived as having all the answers; thereby exemplifying 'expertise'. This reticence may well reflect ASTs' understanding of the broader political issues within teaching, defined by standards, accountability and outcomes. With a need to justify funding by proving 'impact', ASTs reluctance can be interpreted as concerns that they have 'all the answers' to the many challenges and issues experienced in

the context specific classroom. An element of reserve allows for a circumnavigation around ideas of ‘magic wands’ and thus avoids the risk of ‘failing’.

In considering the ways that the AST award may or may not contribute in positive ways to a teacher’s sense of professional identity and status, The results from this research suggest that the AST award contributes in positive ways to a teacher’s sense of professional identity and status, However, establishing causality in research such as this is nigh on impossible. It is therefore also difficult to establish the direction of any such relationship. Does the designation as an AST result in a greater sense of professional status, which in turn promotes feelings of value, recognition and respect? Or, does becoming an AST promote these feelings, which then leads to a greater sense of professional status? Either way, the AST award does appear to have a significant impact on a teacher’s identity, promoting a sense of professional status and esteem that is doing what the government hoped it would; that is, keeping excellent teachers in the classroom and enhancing a teacher’s sense of their professional identity. What the future of the AST grade is, is unclear. What is clear is that good teachers need recognition for their skills and expertise. It is therefore important to recognise the relevancy of offering models of extended professional development that provide viable alternatives to leadership and management. Recognising and valuing the role of teachers in raising standards in teaching and learning is essential in supporting teacher retention as it allows highly accomplished teachers to remain where, in this research, they say they want to be, in the classroom.

In conclusion the findings from this research raise some pertinent points about what being a professional means for ASTs. As Beck (1992) notes, we live in an increasingly credentialised society and as the teachers in this research reiterate feelings increased and more appreciated can result from being formally recognised. Hence as ASTs feel their status as a professional is enhanced by objectivising their skills it is evident that credentials do matter, as Beck suggests, in defining professional identities. Exploring the ways that the objective shapes the subjective, in terms of teachers' professional identities, it could appear then, to be in part understood as a process of social reflection. The enhanced sense of professional identity, the status and esteem of the ASTs included in this research reflects and resonates very strongly with external/'objective' recognition of their skills and expertise. It could be argued, then, that professional biographies (what it means to be a professional at the level of the individual) is reflexively defined. The notion of a 'looking glass self' (Cooley, 1922); the idea that individual's shape an awareness of their own identity from an understanding of the perceptions of others of them; has some currency for the ASTs included here. We propose the intrinsic nature of what it means to be a professional is objectively determined and then subjectively defined by the individual AST. Thus, if policy is used to boost teachers' sense of their professional status, as the previous government suggested, clearly more needs to be done to objectify the value of all teachers by finding ways of recognising and rewarding good practice more generally.

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