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Advanced Skills Teachers: A Review of the Current Workforce

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Background

In recognition of the need for schools to attract and retain excellent classroom teachers as well as raise student attainment by broadening the skills and knowledge base of schools, the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) role was introduced in 1998. Established now for just over 10 years, the current estimate is that there are around 4,500 serving ASTs. An OfSTED survey of the initial development of the role in 2001, a follow up study in 2003 and a more thorough review undertaken by CfBT in 2004 were all largely positive about the value of the role. However, they also expressed some uncertainty over its long term value and raised a number of questions, for example over the ways that some ASTs are managed and deployed and lack opportunities for training to support their professional development. It is therefore most timely to review the current AST role.

Research Questions

This paper will present the main findings from a study that focuses on the experiences of the current AST workforce. Key questions to be considered relate to the experience of being an AST; the assessment process; AST management and deployment as well as professional development within the role. Barriers to AST long term development and effectiveness will also be considered.

Methods

The research methods for this study are a large scale, on-line survey of all ASTs in each of the 150 LAs in England, as well as interviews with a sub-sample of these. Interviews with LA-coordinators and head teachers are also included in the research design. We use a national ASTs and LA co-ordinators database as our sampling frame and aim to achieve a response rate of 50%. All data collection is scheduled to be completed by June 2010.

A pilot of the on-line survey was completed in November 2009 and the results of this were used to inform the main survey. Data collected via the main survey investigates current ASTs attitudes and experiences of their AST role. In addition, motivations to become an AST, the process of assessment as well as on-going support and development are also considered. Data from the on-line survey will be analysed using SPSS, allowing us to explore for differences, for example, across LAs, subject specialism and length of time as an AST. All interviews will be carried out via telephone and, once transcribed, will be analysed using a content analysis to permit an exploration of patterns and themes within the data.

Frame

This study is framed using a grounded theoretical approach where, through the process of analytic induction, the key concepts and ideas that help improve our understanding of the experiences of ASTs will emerge from our data and inform the discussion of our findings. A more deductive approach, linking concepts presented with theoretical ideas will also be utilised to add greater depth. In this study, notions of expertise in teaching, for example, will be helpful in exploring motivations for becoming an AST (Goodwyn, forthcoming 2010).

Research findings

The McKinsey Report (2007) identified the teacher as the key variable in high performing systems. Research about the role of ASTs is therefore significant as it allows us to improve our understanding of teaching more broadly and consequently construct better teacher preparation courses and staff development programs. It is anticipated that the findings from this research, the first of its kind on this scale, will offer policy makers concerned with professional development opportunities for expert teachers an opportunity to review how well existing policies develop or hinder current ASTs, in terms of their deployment, support and professional development. This research is likely therefore to have national relevance, in terms of potential to impact on policy and practice as well as addressing a significant gap in the research and literature in this area.