

# Advance Skills Teachers must survive

One of the few really good initiatives of the last government was the creation of the Advanced Skills Teachers. It was part of the push to keep quality practitioners in the classroom rather than forcing ambitious and able professionals into management. After the disastrous early retirement scandal of the 90's when the profession lost a whole cohort of experienced teachers at 50-years-old...and even younger we desperately needed to re-equip the profession with doers rather than the managers.

The medical model of professional education was also beginning to take hold amongst the writers on school improvement. Practicing professionals needed to be involved not just in professional development, but in the training of young recruits into the profession, in situ, in school.

Of course, it goes without saying that the adoption of the medical model would be done in a fudging, skimping sort of way. In the creation of the new Teaching Schools Gove and his policy makers failed to recognise that the medical model of training occurs around teaching hospitals linked to universities, where there is serious academic and research capacity and where doctors study for a minimum of five years before specialising... not a shallow 1 year PGCE.

Accepted that students have often done a degree in a more or less related subject, but in no way could these be seen as equivalent to 3 years of medical school. Such degrees themselves are not professionally orientated, are often

poorly taught and are so often so far removed from the modern world of practical work that graduate employers need to spend the first year just making them fit for their new environment.

The Govists have also failed to recognise that part of the key apparatus of medical professional training is a consultant led career structure which allowed highly qualified practicing professionals to induct the new intake into hospitals and to continue their professional advancement in a work environment.

If these exist at all in schools they are the ASTs. They are experienced teachers who had passed a rigorous externally monitored assessment and had won additional sources of revenue to back their status within schools as coaches, mentors and professional trainers.

It's quite clear from recent AST conferences that they have largely taken over the role of CPD coordinators as CPD budgets have been squeezed and the validity of one-day courses and the use of expensive consultants have been more rigorously scrutinised. But ASTs have always offered a more potentially transformational role than CPD coordinators and where used properly, with SLT support, have had a profound impact on both teaching and student performance in a school.

But ASTs as we know them are under threat. The government review suggests that both AST and Excellent Teacher grades go and are replaced by one new designation called Master Teacher. At what level of pay, and at what level of national funding allocated to them, is

unclear, as is whether such funding will be ring-fenced or not. In the general context of education cuts and budget stringency, it doesn't look good. But the stress on teaching and learning in the new Ofsted Framework, the creation of teaching schools and the fact that Master Teachers are arriving as ASTs are going, suggests some of the lessons might have been learned.

Just how far we have to go though was made perfectly clear by Steven Hillier, the head of the TDA. He told a recent AST conference that: 'In Singapore 80 per cent of pupils achieve the equivalent of five good GCSEs, including English and mathematics. In England, our floor target is 35 per cent, rising to 50 per cent in 2015.'

He also showed a diagram that illustrated how Singapore had three streams of career progression for teachers, one for management, one for subject experts, up to Chief Specialist level and one for teaching experts, up to Principle Master Teacher. Our ASTs generally are operating three levels below this.

The expertise of teaching...the 'craft' of teaching as Steven Hillier described it, is finally moving centre stage, but the culture of professional development that he rightly said was necessary to create a self-improving education system, on par with our national competitors, is still just a distant hope.

Download Steven Hillier's presentation from the AST conference:  
<http://www.teachingtimes.com/articles/advanced-skills-teachers.htm>