Article 7

‘Superteachers’, saints and solitaires: an investigation into Advanced Skills Teachers of Drama

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Abstract

Since the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) grade was introduced over 4000 have been registered. However, there is no central record of the subject specialism of ASTs. This paper reports on an investigation which sought to identify drama specialists with AST status. The concepts of the ‘expert’ and ‘veteran’ teacher are reviewed by way of establishing a lens through which to explore the professional profile of ASTs. The skills ASTs felt were needed to execute their role effectively, and what aspects of the job they perceived as most worthwhile and enjoyable are discussed as is the way ASTs are regarded by colleagues, what support they are afforded, and what tensions they have experienced while trying to satisfy their own and others’ perceptions of what the role entails. The paper concludes that, in order to utilise their considerable knowledge and skills base to the full, more needs to be done by way of supporting ASTs in drama.
Introduction

Described as,

‘excellent teachers who achieve the very highest standards of classroom practice and who are paid to share their skills and experiences with other teachers’ (Taylor and Jennings 2004: 6),

Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) were first proposed in England in 1997 (DfEE 1997). The scheme immediately drew furious responses from all the teacher and headteacher unions on the grounds that they (ASTs) would prove

‘divisive in terms of inter-staff relationships and be no more than a tokenistic gesture towards rewarding good classroom practice’ (Blake, Hanley, Jennings and Lloyd 2000: 48).

Nonetheless, by 2003, 3900 ASTs were in post though by 2010 this figure had risen only slightly to 4090 (DfE 2010). Although this increase seems small, a recent survey of ASTs’ experiences and perspectives of the role revealed that early hostility towards the AST initiative had largely abated and attitudes towards them had become far more positive (Fuller et al 2010). However, while a great deal is expected of them and respect for the support they give to others has grown, the amount of support ASTs receive themselves is highly variable and, in many cases, falls short of what they perceive they need. Furthermore, ASTs can experience tensions within their schools owing to how they are perceived by both those they wish to support and the management structures they serve.

What appears to be missing from the literature concerning ASTs is research into how they are regarded and manage their roles in specific subjects. While it is still possible to apply for AST status, there is anecdotal evidence that posts are being frozen or lost. Acquiring a subject specific view of what ASTs may offer and what support they themselves need may prove helpful in the establishment of new networks in which knowledge and experience may be shared and developed.

This paper reports on a survey conducted in 2010 among ASTs who identified themselves as being specialists in, or having responsibility for, the subject of drama. The survey endeavoured to explore the professional backgrounds and experiences of these ASTs and gain insights into what they enjoyed about the role. It was especially concerned to address the following questions:

1. What general skills do ASTs in drama think they need to possess?
2. What subject specific knowledge and skills do they feel are needed to satisfy the demands of their role?

In addition, insights were sought into what training and support had been afforded them, how they regarded themselves and were regarded by others in the role.
Drama ASTs in Context

The identification of highly skilled teachers is not a practice confined to England though the requirement that they spend 20% of their time on outreach work is unique and it is this that distinguishes it from the Excellent Teacher (ET) Scheme that was introduced in 2004. Australia introduced a scheme similar to the English ET one in 1990 as a way of recognising and rewarding highly skilled teachers wanting to stay in classroom but not tied to a specific post or particular duties. In the USA a National Board of Certified Teachers (NBCTs) was introduced in 1987 while Scotland introduced a Chartered Teacher scheme in 2003 with Wales following suit in 2010. However, while this kind of recognition may have an impact on both the morale of those teachers who are recognised by such schemes and the performance of their students, there is no clear delineation of how their expertise should be transmitted to others. Indeed, many headteachers in Scotland reported that they were unclear as to the remit of the Chartered Teacher as were many of the Chartered Teachers themselves (DCSF 2009: 23).

In England, those applying for the AST grade have their performance assessed against the following seven standards by an independent agency contracted by the government:

- high level skills in teaching, classroom management and maintaining discipline;
- quality of planning, assessment and evaluation;
- command of subject knowledge;
- understanding of pupils;
- high expectations of themselves and their pupils;
- excellent progress by pupils;
- ability to give high-quality advice and support to other teachers.

It is this last standard that requires ASTs to move out of their own classrooms and engage in outreach work with colleagues that may be seen as distinguishing the AST from teachers otherwise recognised as being expert in their subject. It is also this standard that attracted most comment in the research reported on in this paper. While five of the seven standards ASTs are assessed against concern an ability to work effectively with pupils, Taylor and Jennings (2004: 10) found that ‘the ability to encourage others to perform to their best ability’ outranked nine other ‘competencies’ in their survey. However, beyond having some experience of working with trainees and newly qualified teachers (NQTs), few had worked directly with colleagues in other schools or weak teachers in their own school. Strategies for working with colleagues was ranked 1st of the 14 most important training needs for ASTs, yet 40% of respondents had received no such training. Respondents also
suggested that induction and training should draw attention to recent research and inspection findings, and indicate how such knowledge can be used. Yet while ASTs said they would value being allowed to use a proportion of their time to read and research issues, a number reported that they rarely had

‘sufficient time for reading or adequate access to appropriate literature’ (Taylor and Jennings 2004: 9).

Overall, 30% of respondents to the Taylor and Jennings survey said the training was deficient in quantity, quality or both. A tension apparent here is that the deployment of ASTs in a supportive role tends to reflect a ‘social-market’ view of continuing professional development (CPD) in which a school identifies each teacher’s training needs in relation to its own development plan. Such a strategy may sometimes be at odds with the hermeneutic view of CPD in which teachers develop situational understanding through reflective practice and action research (Elliot 1993). Taylor and Jennings (2004: 10) noted that

‘HEIs could support ASTs more actively by providing access, disseminating research and collaborating with ASTs on research projects.’

The in-service training of teachers has been seen as involving three foci: re-orientating, for example, through introduction to new teaching methods; initiating, such as induction into new roles, ideas and practices; and refining, as in strengthening and extending current practices (Logan and Sachs 1988). If ASTs are expected to be able to support colleagues in these strands it would not be unreasonable for them to expect training and ongoing development in the same vein. However, this raises the question of who might offer such professional development without a clearly defined funding stream.

Another tension apparent in the way some ASTs are managed and deployed lies in how the way they are perceived by those they are supporting may be affected by the structures in which such support takes place. Day (1999: 101–102) notes how a skilled and trusted critical friend can help decrease isolation and increase learning. Ideally,

‘It is preferable from the user’s point of view to learn from a peer far enough from home so that:
  i) asking for help can’t be interpreted as a self-indictment;
  ii) invidious competition and comparison is reduced;
  iii) the ideas can be challenged with impunity;
  iv) they can be credited to their new user’ (Hopkins in Day 1999: 101–102).

Such a view would suggest that ASTs operating in an outreach role could be especially effective. However, ASTs may also be required to spend a good deal of their time working ‘in-house’. When their involvement with colleagues is imposed by the senior management team (SMT), or they are required to undertake assessment of colleagues on behalf of SMT, it may be that, from the user’s point of view, it is
impossible to see them as the critical friend as described above. Researching into teachers’ preferences regarding professional development, Harland and Kinder (1997) noted that the greatest influences were perceived to be their own experiences, beliefs and convictions along with those of their colleagues. This is cognate with Bruner’s argument (1996) that successful collaborative working is contingent when a more expert ‘other’ assists a colleague’s performance through mediation and scaffolding rather than assessment and directive. In this, the role of AST may have a part to play in counteracting some aspects of school culture that can have a negative impact on teachers’ work. Hargreaves (1994: 208) has identified three of these aspects as, ‘individualism’, ‘Balkanization’ and ‘contrived collegiality’. The habitual pattern of teaching alone behind closed doors tends to insulate teachers from direct criticism but may also lead to stagnation and silent suffering which could be alleviated by sharing practice and engaging in dialogue with a critical friend such as an AST. By Balkanization, Hargreaves is referring to the way some teachers identify and lend their loyalty to particular groups rather than the school as a whole. For the AST, this may mean hammering at the gates of staff cliques or having their attempts to be supportive rejected on purely ideological grounds. While genuine collaboration is

‘an essential ingredient of teacher development and thus school improvement’ (Day 1999: 80),

‘contrived collegiality’ is imposed and may result in teachers participating in body though not mind or spirit and so, consequently, gaining little from the experience. The barrier ‘contrived collegiality’ raises is something ASTs may well be aware of and feel they have to tackle. The idea of identifying teachers who are expert in their field and also capable of supporting others on the grounds that because they were a part of the staff room they would be respected and trusted as colleagues, could be a dangerously faulty syllogism. In fact, with the popular press referring to them as ‘superteachers’, many ASTs initially experienced a good deal of resentment from those with whom they worked while it was not uncommon for local authority (LA) advisers to see them as a threat to their own work (Taylor and Jennings 2004). In drama, the almost total extinction of specialist drama advisers pre-dated the inception of the AST. This being the case, ASTs have become, in many areas, the only source of subject specialist support and guidance.

Veterans and Experts in Drama Education

Schonmann (2009) considers ‘veteran drama teachers’ as those who identify themselves as such She divides these into those who remain enthusiastic about their work, and those who are worn out and only stay with teaching because they can’t get another job. She argues that in the 1960s it was possible to discern totally dedicated drama teachers who willingly attended drama courses to explore emerging ideas and notes that one effect of such commitment was the development of drama in the school curriculum. However, while there was a concomitant increase in the number of what Schonmann refers to as ‘star teachers’ in the subject, their
ideas and methods were not necessarily incorporated into what, in England at any rate, became a more centralised national curriculum following the Education Reform Act, 1988. Schonmann suggests that debates around drama as method / drama as subject may still underpin uncertainties about the precise identity of the drama teacher and suggests the current manifestation of this may be seen in the predominance of the instrumental function of drama as it is expressed in process and applied drama. However, it may be the case that ASTs, who one might assume to have a depth of theoretical knowledge and the skill to transform the ideas of seminal practitioners and theorists into curriculum models and effective classroom practice, experience a different kind of identity crisis as they attempt to steer between the sometimes contradictory expectations of management and colleagues. Schonmann’s study suggests that what veteran teachers get better at is handling the impositions and demands of authority and management. Those who remain dedicated to and excited by teaching emphasise that the ‘business’ of teaching drama is serious just as the subject itself is serious. In this way they become more adept at finding a workable modus vivendi even though this may be at the expense of engaging aesthetically and philosophically with the subject for which they have responsibility. She quotes one teacher as saying:

‘I spent the majority of my time focusing on practical concerns with teaching drama rather than grappling with my notions of what it means to be a drama teacher. Due to the numerous practical concerns surrounding drama education in high schools, developing a philosophical approach to drama education is often overlooked.’ (2009: 525)

From such evidence Schonmann concludes that craft knowledge, based on a collection of experiences, has taken precedence over theoretical principles in terms of professional practice for the veteran drama teacher. However, while she argues that the importance of experience is in making sense of the way principles can or may not be helpful in practice, this pre-supposes that teachers are at least cognisant of the principles.

Writing about teachers in general, Sternberg and Horvath (1995) identified three key characteristics which distinguished the ‘expert’ teacher from the ‘experienced’ or ‘veteran’ teacher regardless of age or stage in their career. The expert teacher, they posited, had ‘domain knowledge’ allowing them to apply different aspects of their knowledge to particular contexts. Experts were efficient, spent time trying to understand the problem to be solved, and were able to employ automated routines. Experts had insight which allowed them to not only solve the problem in hand, but redefine it so that information acquired in different contexts could be applied to it. Without the time to engage with their subject at a theoretical level or through their own research, it may be supposed that ASTs are challenged in terms of developing their own expertise and thus limited in their capacity to support others in becoming expert teachers.
The Research Project

In order to investigate what general and subject specific skills and expertise drama ASTs thought they needed data was gathered through an on-line survey and telephone interviews. The on-line survey included both closed and open-ended questions and a number of nominal questions designed to gather information on perceptions of what was important to the work of the AST. Analysis of the responses involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. These will be clarified in the discussion on findings below. The survey invited respondents to submit a contact e-mail address should they be willing to take part in a semi-structured telephone interview aimed at following up issues arising from the on-line survey. Direct quotations from those interviews are used in this paper to illustrate both typical and idiosyncratic views on the work of the drama specialist AST.

Members of the Fuller team (2010) trialled the on-line survey. Prior to commencing the study ethical clearance was sought from the author’s University Ethics Committee. All ethical procedures were complied with in the conduct of the research.

Using a national database of 1,400 ASTs as a sampling frame, Fuller et al’s survey (2010) attracted 829 responses to their questionnaire. 18 of these identified themselves as being drama specialists. National Drama, the UK’s premier professional association for drama teachers, and drama_UK@yahoogroups.com, a popular on-line forum for drama teachers with over 2,700 subscribers, were used to invite ASTs who identified themselves as being specialists in, or having responsibility for, the subject of drama to take part in a subject specific on-line survey. In the absence of any comprehensive, subject based database of ASTs, these avenues were believed to be the most effective means of contacting a significant proportion of drama specialist ASTs. The appeal attracted 27 viewers with 25 (92.6%) of these completing the survey and 7 agreeing to be interviewed by telephone.

60% of the respondents to the survey were female. 63% were under the age of 40, 25% being between 25 – 30 years of age. The greatest concentration of respondents came from South East England (29%) and London (21%) with North East England and the West Midlands each returning 12.5% of the total sample.

The sample represented an even spread of years’ experience in the AST role from less than one year to more than five years. In terms of an academic background in drama, 65% had either an O Level or GCSE in the subject. Similarly, 65% had taken drama / theatre studies at A Level. 83% held a first degree in drama/theatre and 17% a BEd. 84% had been trained to teach in the 11 -19 age range. All except one respondent reported that drama was either the sole or key component of their initial teacher training. 26% of respondents held a MA.
Findings

The online survey elicited responses in six key areas:

- Why become an AST in drama?
- What general skills should an AST in drama possess?
- What subject specific knowledge and skills are needed to satisfy the demands of their role?
- What do drama specialists particularly enjoy about being an AST?
- What training and support is afforded ASTs in drama?
- How do Drama ASTs regard themselves and how are they regarded by others?

**Why become an AST in drama?**

60% of respondents stated explicitly that they wanted to be in a position whereby they could share their practice and help others. Others commented that they were involved in mentoring and saw the AST role as a kind of formal recognition of that. The second most prevalent comment, made by 36% of respondents, concerned achieving career progression in a way that did not involve moving out of the classroom. 32% of respondents explicitly commented on their desire to avoid moving into a senior leadership role within their school. While ASTs are paid on a separate pay scale to main scale teachers (DfE 2009 section 2 para. 65) only two respondents cited financial reward as a reason for becoming an AST.

**What general skills should an AST in drama possess?**

Responses to this question in the on-line survey were coded by identifying key words and sorting comments into affinity groups. So, for example, while some respondents specified ‘communication’, other mentioned ‘interpersonal skills’, or ‘tact and diplomacy’. In this way, seven areas of skill were identified. With a total of 16 comments, the need to be able to communicate with others was clearly the most widely valued attribute with the following comments giving examples of why this is such a necessity:

‘Communication skills and organisational skills are a must, and so is a high level of emotional intelligence. You need to be accepted as a mentor and coach by the staff you support. I think my role is not to judge - others do that, but become the support a teacher turns to find solutions to issues others have raised.’

‘One of the most important skills of an AST I have found is to be a good listener and respond to the needs of teachers you are working with. ASTs should not be "the sage on the stage but the guide by the side" otherwise they can disempower people quite quickly.’

‘I think the biggest quality that an AST needs is be seen as supportive rather than a tool of the senior management team to work with failing colleagues therefore being approachable is vital.’
‘I think that being an AST is not about the subject at all. It is about your generic Learning and Teaching and the related pedagogy and application. You have to be able to relate this to all subjects- it is about big picture views and concepts not the individual subjects. It is essential to have that foundation or actually you are not an AST at all. You are just an outstanding drama teacher.’

Being a good practitioner and innovator in the subject was commented on by 12 respondents. Being organised, reflective and adaptable were each mentioned by seven respondents. Being able to inspire was mentioned four times, and having good presentational skills three.

The on-line survey asked participants to rate, on a four point Likert scale, how important different aspects of education were to them as specialist drama ASTs. The percentage responses are shown in Table 1 below, with 1 representing very important and 4 not important at all. Overall positive and negative values are also shown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Education</th>
<th>1 Very Important</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 Not important</th>
<th>% +</th>
<th>% -</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching other areas of the curriculum</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing literacy</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing speaking and listening skills</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing creativity</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing cultural understanding</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing critical awareness</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating the art form of drama</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing skills in drama</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The importance of different aspects of education to the drama AST

Research skills were not listed in the Lickert table yet 24% of respondents made comments relating to their importance. For example, ‘You need to keep yourself aware of current developments in education and drama in education research in particular.’

**What subject specific knowledge and skills are needed to satisfy the demands of their role?**

As an art form, drama has its own canon of substantive and propositional knowledge and encompasses an array of practical skills. As a curriculum subject it has also been
posited that drama involves developing a number of key skills such as communication, working with others, improving own learning and performance, problem solving, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking, and evaluation (Clipson-Boyles, 1998). Burgess and Gaudry (1985) thus saw drama teachers as necessarily being able to operate as workshop leaders, playwrights, directors and actors. The online survey asked participants to rate, on a four point Likert scale, the importance of a number of aspects of knowledge to their work as an AST. The percentage responses are shown in Table 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 Very Important</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 Not Important</th>
<th>% +</th>
<th>% -</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plays and playwrights</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre practitioners</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre history</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama from other cultures</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama pedagogy</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Curriculum</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination specifications</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The importance of different aspects of subject specific knowledge to the drama AST

Eleven of the respondents elaborated on the need for ASTs to hold good general subject specialist knowledge making specific mention of, for example, theatre traditions from a range of cultures, the work and theories of notable practitioners and directors and knowing a range of plays. Skills such as directing, designing, acting, improvising and being able to use the voice effectively appeared in six of the comments. ‘Technical skills’ was mentioned once. Being able to model drama conventions and techniques was mentioned by eight respondents while having the ability to reflect and analyse was mentioned five times. ‘Research’ was mentioned once.

While knowing the requirements of examination specifications outranked all other categories in this field, this was not commented on at all. Perhaps the requirement to hold this kind of knowledge was taken for granted or seen as being of a perfunctory nature. What seemed more worthy of comment was the way in which these drama specialists worked which was not covered directly by the on-line survey:

‘One of the most important skills is to be creatively inspiring, to get students and teachers to look at different approaches and new ideas to be able to facilitate for the gifted through challenging subject matters and styles and to engage the disaffected through motivation. One of the skills that I think a Drama AST should have is not to be afraid but embrace risk.’
‘You need an understanding of how to teach skills though not necessarily be able to do them yourself i.e. you don’t need to be a great actor yourself.’

‘The ability to draw the best out of students, sense of fun and occasion, experience and most important of all the ability to continue learning and to be scared each time you walk into a classroom.’

**What do drama specialists particularly enjoy about being an AST?**

According to the survey by Fuller et al (2010) around a fifth of all ASTs feel they are not currently doing enough outreach work with 41% reporting that they would like to do more. In the on-line survey of drama specialists, 14 of the respondents (56%) mentioned aspects of outreach work in their comments on what they had found particularly enjoyable and rewarding in their AST role. Mention was made of setting up local conferences for drama colleagues, establishing a study group, founding a theatre-in-education company and bringing abled and disabled bodied performers together in a festival for the first time. The breadth of drama’s contribution to education and the need for the drama specialist AST to hold subject specific knowledge and be an expert in drama pedagogy as well as an effective organiser and communicator may be seen in this comment:

‘I have set up a training network for drama teachers which are subject knowledge related workshops and establish strong relationships with primary schools introducing drama as a formal subject rather than just a teaching method.’

In secondary schools it is not uncommon for the drama specialist to either work alone in teaching the subject or be supported on a part time basis by other teachers who are not specialists. One telephone interviewee recognised this, saying that the existence and purpose of ASTs should

‘be better promoted as a free resource especially in drama when things can feel quite lonely.’

Certainly, working with other teachers was a strong feature of on-line comments and interviews though this pleasurable part of the job was perceived to be under threat:

‘When I first became an AST (7 years ago) it was all about sharing good practice. Teachers from other schools would come in and observe me teaching my lessons and we’d create schemes of work together. But now there is more emphasis on and more pressure to take on a leadership role within your own school.’

‘(I enjoy) showing people that there are different ways of doing things. For example, you don’t have to be a slave to the four part lesson and that sort of thing. It’s good to be able to encourage teachers to dare to be different and take risks. But I can see the role becoming more conventional and ASTs being asked to do more formal observations for one purpose or another.’
What training and support is afforded ASTs in drama?

There appears to be considerable variation in the ways local authorities (LAs) organise and monitor the work of ASTs. There is currently no centralised national register of ASTs though the National College for Leadership and Schools and Children’s Services holds an informal one that ASTs may opt to join. While Taylor and Jennings (2004: 13) found that

‘the AST co-ordinators in all consulted LEAs ran regular meetings for ASTs once or twice a term’,

one of those taking part in this research reported otherwise:

‘I have very little to do with the LA. No one knew I existed for the first year but they seem to be increasingly acknowledging our existence and more training is, apparently, being planned with more opportunities for networking.’

However, others reported that they were well managed and had regular, purposeful meetings usually on a termly basis. In terms of both initial and ongoing training though, interviews undertaken in this survey revealed a range of practices nationwide. Reflecting the finding of Fuller et al.’s survey (2010) drama ASTs reported that they enjoyed supporting other teachers but felt their own training and professional development was limited unless they created opportunities for themselves. Not all felt suitably ‘prepared’ or ‘trained’ to mentor adult colleagues and recognised that different skill sets are required for different learning relationships, one respondent commenting that,

‘I think we need training in how to spot priorities so that we are able to target our support ourselves.’

Funding is clearly an issue and something of a bone of contention for some ASTs who feel that they are valued in words only:

‘Only this week I had my one and only very modest request for a very cheap piece of training refused. This will mean no AST INSET at all for over three years. I have never in my many years been given a budget to develop my work. However, I am often told that my work is valued.’

At present, there is no national network for ASTs in drama though being in a position to share ideas and practice and learn from others was the focus of a number of comments. All of those interviewed by telephone warmly welcomed the idea of a national conference for Drama ASTs and the establishment of some kind of national network that might help ameliorate the prevailing feeling that they were largely sole agents.
How do Drama ASTs regard themselves, and how are they regarded by others?

The questionnaire survey asked respondents how they saw themselves in terms of a relationship between teaching and the art form of drama. The responses are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you see yourself as</th>
<th>Response %</th>
<th>Response count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a teacher whose art is drama</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a teacher whose art is teaching drama</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a dramatic artist who teaches</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results may reflect Schonmann’s findings that ‘veteran’ drama teachers take the business of teaching drama very seriously while also reflecting the number of comments made regarding the need for ASTs to have good subject knowledge and see themselves as effective classroom practitioners. As noted above, not wanting to ‘stray too far’ from the classroom while extending their brief for outreach work and mentoring, are common reasons for becoming an AST. Such reasons suggest ASTs have a belief in their ability and capacity to offer colleagues something worthwhile from their own knowledge, expertise and experience.

One respondent noted that becoming an AST had been

‘a nice recognition that you have learnt something. It’s a bit of an ego boost,’

while another said,

‘it does give you a sense of professional status. It’s certainly made me feel better about myself.’

Other comments suggested that the role was not universally understood or appreciated. Two particular perceptions were identified as being unhelpful. Firstly, the suspicion that ASTs were members of, or agents for, the senior management team, and the other that they were a race apart from the common or garden teacher:

‘People can be a bit intimidated by the term AST. They can be a bit scathing; if you’re so advanced you should know the answer sort of attitude. But the term is better than ‘super teacher’ which suggests you should dress up in some daft costume.’

‘I think I was one of the first (ASTs to be appointed). The ‘Daily Mail’ turned up with a Superman outfit wanting to take a picture of me in it. I declined!’

Balancing between the myths and realities of the role was a concern of all of those interviewed:
‘I can see the role becoming more conventional and ASTs being asked to do formal observations for one purpose or another. At the minute we have a ring fenced brief but I worry that the role could get more tied in with senior management structures. Generally, I feel pretty well valued. There are always a few cynics about that wonder what you are up to and what the point of you is, but generally speaking I think I have the respect and trust of the staffroom in my school and I get welcomed when I visit others.’

‘There are lots of myths about what we do and how much we get paid. I think the role does raise the status of the profession but there is a dark side to it. Because you are seen to have status you get used by the management. I worry about getting sucked into situations I don’t want to be in such as disciplining staff or when the SLT ask for reports on the progress being made by colleagues.’

**Discussion**

The introduction of the AST grade may be seen as coinciding with the rapid collapse of the advisory service in many local education authorities. Through the 1980s drama teachers across the country could call on the support of drama advisors who were often assisted by advisory teachers. Many local authorities had drama centres where courses and meeting could be held. Hampshire, for example, had a permanent drama advisor and boasted five regional drama centres, each having its own Theatre in Education (TIE)/Community Theatre company and two seconded advisory teachers. Pam Bowell, the first Chairperson of National Drama recalled how, when she was employed in Newham, she:

‘had a TIE brief but typically during the contact I had with teachers, I would work for four days a week with two schools per day, two teachers in each school. So, four teachers in a day, four days a week for half a term. Supporting them in the classroom, team teaching, observing, teaching. I was one of six advisory teachers working in this way. Teachers would come to our twilight INSET programmes which allowed us to pick up their skills and go with them. We ran a weekly drama teachers’ workshop. We had a residential centre so we ran two weekend course per term – Friday evening to Sunday tea time. These were intensive courses on all sorts of things. We ran a teachers’ theatre workshop and did performances and so on and then there were the TIE programmes, usually one or two a year. The other thing that is different from what ASTs do today is that we worked strategically under a specialist drama inspector. We met regularly on a Friday morning then spent the rest of the day preparing courses and programmes. It was wonderful.’

While the provision for advisory support varied from authority to authority, such work in drama could be shared through the auspices of the National Association for Drama Advisers and Teacher Educators (NADATE) which was formed in 1985.
NADATE was one of a small number of networks for drama educators that evolved into National Drama in 1989.

The situation today is very different from that described by Pam Bowell not simply because of the reduction in the level of support for drama teachers nationally but in the administration and strategic deployment of what support is still available. The funding of ASTs is complex. Some local authorities embraced the idea of ASTs when they were first introduced and so received funding. This funding continued for those that were involved and covers the extra salary cost and the loss of teaching time. In these circumstances, the LA has a role in the deployment of the ASTs for their outreach work. However, some ASTs are totally funded by their schools who have chosen to employ them in this role. In these cases, the AST’s outreach work may be limited or may not happen at all. In contrast, where Training Schools have chosen to create AST roles, they have often been used to fulfil an outreach function.

Those LAs who are involved with ASTs normally employ an AST co-ordinator though this may be just one dimension of a larger role for the officer. With regard to networking and national co-ordination, it is not clear just how many ASTs there are who are drama specialists. This is partly because not all ASTs are designated in terms of their subject specialism. Some, for example, may have a specific brief for developing PSHE of Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) programmes or supporting colleagues with behaviour management or creative approaches to teaching. According to the DfE’s statistics there are 4,090 ASTs yet VT, the company who assess applicants for the National Assessment Agency, report that nearly 10,000 applications have been processed (VT 2010). However, VT do not reveal how many of these applicants were actually awarded the grade and nor is it known how many teachers have continued in an AST role. What this situation suggests is that opportunities to register, further develop and effectively deploy the knowledge and expertise of ASTs with a background in drama are being missed simply because there is no overview of who the ASTs are, where they are, what they can already do and what they might be able to do if they themselves were better supported.

Hargreaves’ (1994: 208) identification of three aspects of school culture that can impact negatively on teachers (‘individualism’, ‘Balkanization’ and ‘contrived collegiality’) may be seen as particularly pertinent to any discussion on what skills ASTs in drama may possess and how these might be effectively utilised. It is clear from the results of this survey that ASTs in drama are more inclined to sharing what they have gained from, and continue to develop in, their own classrooms rather than hiding behind closed doors. With regard to ‘contrived collegiality’, respondents to this survey tended to be wary of being regarded as ‘agents’ acting on behalf of senior management, seeing such a role as being incompatible with their desire to work collaboratively with colleagues. This raises the question of the extent to which ASTs will be able to retain such a degree of independence and integrity as professionals who tend to regard themselves as artists whose art is the teaching of drama.

The possession of subject specific knowledge was rated highly by ASTs in this survey. Fuller et al (2010) noted that ASTs in general were more desirous of further training
which focused on broadening and deepening their knowledge of subject content than they were on courses focusing on generic methods of teaching. Other areas of training that may be perceived as being desired by respondents include negotiating productive relationships and being able to give high-quality advice and support to other teachers. While drama ASTs particularly enjoy and value working with colleagues in their own and other schools, there is no guarantee that they will be afforded any guidance on how best to manage this aspect of their work. As one respondent reported:

‘I’ve not done as much with the role as I would have liked. I was rather left to it in my first year as a result of which I think I spread myself too thinly without having a clear focus.’

Two questions that may be considered here as being inter-related and of great importance are

1) what might be the most effective means of providing training and support to ASTs? and

2) how, without some form of co-ordinated management of the role, can the quality of ASTs work be assured?

Comparing the current system of ASTs to the advisory teacher system it replaced, Pam Bowell has commented that:

‘I think making relationships with colleagues as an innovator is harder for ASTs than it was for old-style advisory teachers because they have less opportunity to practise it. It’s not just skill, it’s experience. I would have been involved with sixteen different teachers with sixteen different classes each week so the chance for ASTs to practise and hone their interpersonal skills is less and the learning curve is less steep. I don’t envy them. And where is the QA? As a body they are something of a curate’s egg. This may have its advantages; the ASTs may be perfectly good drama people but if they are being co-ordinated by a person in the local authority it is unlikely that person is a drama specialist so the whole experience may be more disparate and shallow in comparison to how the advisory teacher service was in its heyday.’

**Conclusion**

Day (1999 p 200) posits that,

‘Whether learning takes places inside or outside a school building, good teachers who are knowledgeable about learners and learning, who themselves are committed to learning, and who can provide the right frameworks for learning by knowing what questions to ask will always be needed.’

Article 7 ‘Superteachers’, saints and solitaires: an investigation into Advanced Skills Teachers of Drama
This paper has sought to investigate what knowledge and skills ASTs in drama felt they needed to fulfil their responsibilities. What has emerged is a picture of a group who see themselves, and have been formally identified, as being knowledgeable about learners and learning and are committed to furthering their knowledge and experience. However, the extent to which they know what questions to ask and how best to exploit their knowledge and understanding in order to help others is a concern they themselves recognise. Perhaps it is not so much a new set of skills that advanced skills teachers of drama need so much as a better network within which the group may recognise, share and so refine and develop existing skills. The sobriquet ‘superteacher’ is one that is rejected by ASTs in drama though they recognise that in order to attain AST status they have achieved a high standard and hold high expectations of the students and colleagues with whom they work. Similarly, while they actively seek to support others, share their knowledge and skills, and lay bare their practice, they are not saints in possession of unfailing faith in their capabilities. Rather, the term ‘solitaire’ may be a better description of the AST in drama given that the name pertains to both a game that is played alone and a gem set by itself.
References


Notes on Author

Dr Andy Kempe is Head of Initial Teacher Training at the University of Reading. He has written about may different aspects of drama teaching and continues to develop his own practice by regularly working in primary, secondary and special schools. His publications include Progression in Secondary Drama (with Marigold Ashwell), Learning to Teach Drama 11 – 18 (with Helen Nicholson), Speaking, Listening and Drama and the BBC Bitesize GCSE Drama Revision Guide. He is currently researching into the identity of the arts educator, and the contribution drama may make in increasing the social skills of young people on the autistic spectrum.