Developing Inclusive Practice

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The SENCO's Role in Managing Change

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Foreword

This book provides a timely contribution to the further professional development of SENCOs. Their new role has become more specific and focused on teaching and learning, rather than largely administrative. With the National Curriculum Inclusion Principles, teachers are expected to give every pupil the chance to experience success in learning and to provide equality of opportunity through teaching approaches. This places the emphasis firmly on pedagogy as an area that requires the support and skills of the SENCO.

Elizabeth Cowne has established herself as an author and practitioner who is deeply committed to supporting SENCOs. Her book, *The SENCO Handbook* (David Fulton Publishers) is widely used as both a valuable source of background knowledge and a practical guide to useful strategies. Her writing style is always clear, accessible and respectful of practitioners. In this new book, she recognises the key role that SENCOs play in staff development and the sharing of teaching and assessment skills. Her focus is on inclusive practices and the exchange of innovative and positive ideas by skilled SENCOs working in a variety of contexts.

It is a supportive book in several different respects. The support for the work of SENCOs is evident throughout in the extensive use of examples of their work. It supports LEAs in offering a valuable model of in-service training. The book will be most useful in postgraduate teacher training courses, illustrating the nature of the role of SENCOs to trainees. It is relatively rare in the wide academic area of inclusive education and special educational needs to meet such positive support for practitioners and a genuine recognition of the complex nature of their work. In the preface, Elizabeth Cowne states that she hopes SENCOs will gain support for their work from reading the book – I can assure her, they will!

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Acknowledgements

Preface

The aim of writing this book was to help special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), and those working with them either in schools or in training, to consider some of the issues related to putting inclusive principles into practice. Having run training courses for SENCOs since 1983, I know how much we can learn from the efforts of teachers who have each, in their own way, contributed to our knowledge of how to build inclusive schools. It is for this reason that I have included in this book summaries of work carried out by participants on the various courses I have taught or been responsible for during the last few years. Each shows one or more elements of how SENCOs can change practice by working collaboratively in their schools. None of these ideas is startling, but they demonstrate how ideas can be tried out by working on one area of policy or practice, or with only a few pupils or members of staff. When shared, these ideas may help others to plan their own work.

Teachers on courses are required to read published texts which help them to debate the issues of inclusion. Therefore, another aim of this book is to provide a dialogue about aspects of inclusion which brings together published research, advice provided by government circulars and theoretical arguments. There are discussion points throughout the chapters to help the reader to stop and think about these issues – preferably in the company of others. At the end of each chapter a few key texts are listed to help those studying to extend their knowledge of the topic.

The first three chapters introduce the book's main theme, that of the SENCO's role in managing change. The remaining chapters look at key aspects of special educational needs coordination: working with pupils and parents, managing individual education plans (IEPs) and reviews, advising and supporting colleagues on aspects of teaching and learning, managing learning support assistants (LSAs) and reviewing SEN policy. All chapters have case studies adapted from students' projects that illustrate issues related to each topic. At the end of the book there are activities for staff development sessions and Appendix 1 provides a list of further reading and useful addresses.

There are some areas of SEN coordination and inclusive practice that are not represented because the book covers specifically those aspects which SENCOs

regard as most central to their role. I hope that SENCOs will be able to gain support for their work from reading this book – either in its entirety or from selected chapters. I also hope that those training SENCOs will find the book a useful resource.

1 The developing role of the SENCO

Since 1994 all schools in England and Wales have been required to have a teacher designated to the role of special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). But many schools had SENCOs before that date, as the role had been developing since the mid-1980s when training of SENCOs had begun in most LEAs. Training grants have been available from central government since 1983 through what is now called the Standards Fund (money specifically allocated for training or other initiatives.

The 1994 Code of Practice (DFE 1994a) detailed the tasks that should be covered in this role, i.e. to:

- manage the day-to-day operation of the school's special educational needs (SEN) policy;
- liaise with and advise fellow teachers;
- coordinate provision for children with special educational needs;
- maintain the school's SEN register and oversee the records on all pupils with special educational needs;
- liaise with parents of children with special educational needs;
- contribute to the in-service training of staff;
- liaise with external agencies including the educational psychology service and other support agencies, medical and social services and voluntary bodies (DFE 1994a: para. 2.14).

The revised Code of Practice (DfES) 2001) adds (for secondary schools only) managing the SEN team of teachers and (for both primary and secondary schools) managing learning support assistants (LSAs). Maintaining the school's SEN register for both primary and secondary SENCOs is no longer a requirement (DfES 2001: paras 5.32–6.35).

The revised Code of Practice explains the new role of SENCO for early years settings. Their responsibilities are listed as:

- ensuring liaison with parents and other professionals in respect of children with special educational needs;
- advising and supporting other practitioners in the setting;
- ensuring that individual education plans (IEPs) are in place;

- ensuring that relevant background information about individual children with special educational needs is collected, recorded and updated (DfES 2001: para. 4.15).

Although the Code of Practice is not a statutory legal document (it has a 'have regard to' status), most schools and LEAs treated it as such. What *was* a legal requirement for schools was to implement an SEN policy with a named teacher to take responsibility for SEN coordination. A SENCO may also have other roles – indeed almost all primary SENCOs do have several other roles varying from class teacher to deputy head, head teacher or subject coordinator. In secondary schools, the SENCO was often the teacher in charge of learning support (previously called the remedial department). The time allocated to carry out the duties of SENCO varies from very little to full time; even when it appears to be generous, this is because the allocation includes time to be a support teacher.

The 'official' view

The SENCO's role has therefore had over 18 years to develop. In the early 1990s a few papers were published that discussed the role, but the official view of the role of the SENCO did not become apparent until the publication of *The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (DFE 1994a), followed by *The SENCO Guide* (DfEE 1997a), and last of all the *National Standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators* (Teacher Training Agency (TTA) 1998). This last publication identifies the SENCO's core purpose as providing professional guidance in the area of SEN in order to secure high quality teaching. The SENCO manages the day-to-day operation of provision made by the school for pupils with SEN and keeps the head teacher informed. The key outcomes of SEN coordination are listed in this document, as are the competencies and skills required to carry out the role.

Further changes took place at the end of the 1990s when government documents and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reports began to indicate that the SENCO could be expected to take a lead on developing inclusive practice in their schools. *Excellence for All Children* (DfEE 1997b) provided official recognition that inclusion was a guiding principle of government policy.

Variety is the spice of life

It is very clear from research carried out on the SENCO's role that the job varies tremendously from school to school. The size of the school is a determining factor as to who can carry out this role: in very small primary schools, head teachers have to cover many other roles including that of the SENCO, while in large secondary schools the SENCO is likely to be a member of senior management with a large budget to manage. In other schools the SENCO may be part-time with little or no power to influence policy or resources. In many primary

schools SENCOs are also full-time class teachers, taking responsibility for SEN coordination in their own time.

The Code of Practice and the National Standards document both try to standardise good practice, but as Garner (2001: 120) states, 'the work that teachers engage in with pupils categorised as having special educational needs cannot be summarised, let alone reduced to a set of bullet points in a policy document or inspection framework'.

Research into the role of the SENCO

Following the publication of the 1994 Code of Practice, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) commissioned Warwick University to carry out a national survey (Lewis *et al*. 1996). Questionnaires were sent to all schools in England and Wales and 1500 replies from primary schools and 500 from secondary schools were returned. Factual information was requested about the school, the pupils, the SENCO's role, staffing, salaries and non-contact time for SENCOs. Opinions were sought on the school's response to the Code of Practice and the SENCO's view of procedures was also requested.

The findings showed that there were marked differences between primary and secondary schools in the way the responsibilities were allocated. In primary schools, the role of SENCO was usually in addition to other roles already carried out by the teacher. It was confirmed that the roles of head teacher, deputy head and class teacher combined with that of SENCO, as did that of a learning support teacher. One in five were part-time. There was 'an association between size of school, SENCO position and numbers identified as having SEN' (Lewis *et al*. 1996).

At this time, SENCOs in primary schools were less likely to have their responsibilities reflected in their salary structure than those in secondary schools. The survey showed that secondary school SENCOs were often SEN specialists with other SEN duties. A significant number held other responsibilities, but very few were head teachers, deputy heads or part-time employees.

Time allocations

The survey highlighted considerable concern about the lack of time allocation for SEN duties, which were also reflected in other studies carried out in that year. The perceived expectations of the SENCO's role in the light of the Code of Practice and the actual resources available led to increasing dissatisfaction for all concerned. Much of the research demonstrated that SENCOs found the bureaucracy to be a problem – they lacked the strategy and resources to implement the requirements, which in turn led to overloading and stress. The Warwick study pointed out that either the scope of the role or the level of resourcing needed to change. In secondary schools, SENCOs were increasingly taking on non-teaching management roles related to SEN with the result that

some teaching was delegated to 'periphery' workers who were either part-time or who lacked specialist training. Some primary schools even employed non-resident SENCOs.

Management support

A notable feature of the replies from secondary schools was the weakness of support from senior management. In many instances, SENCOs were not members of the senior management team, which made it difficult for them to implement policy decisions. In contrast, in primary schools the situation was more varied. If the SENCO was also the head teacher or deputy head there was a greater likelihood of SEN issues being included in whole-school policy.

Training

A need for training of class and support teachers, SENCOs and school governors was indicated. SENCOs, who were leading training for their staff from within the school, expressed their concerns about how they could develop their own expertise on specialist topics and also be more effective trainers.

The following case study demonstrates that training can take place while working alongside a colleague and may be seen as a type of support and practice-based development.

Behaviour management and the subsequent impact on the development of literacy skills in a disaffected Year 8 class

This report describes how support was provided by a middle school SENCO to a colleague. This teacher had been in post for a year having previously worked in industry. Although he specialised in design technology, he was also asked to take a bottom set of Year 8 pupils for a reading lesson. He had no formal training in the teaching of reading and was having difficulties controlling a disruptive Year 8 class in this lesson. The pupils also had low reading and learning abilities. However, when this teacher taught the same class for design and technology, he had fewer problems.

It was decided to use classroom observation to establish a clearer idea of the exact problem in an objective and systematic way. Initially, the focus of observation was movement around the room and noise levels. The initial observations of the whole class were carried out by student teachers on placement. As a result the class was regrouped and three pupils seen to be causing some of the disruption were separated. To involve the pupils they were asked about changes they would like to see. Some basic rules for behaviour were drawn up and displayed on the wall of the classroom.

In design and technology, work could be presented using a variety of styles including diagrams or flow charts. The reading lesson was split into four short sections using a mixture of whole-class, individual, group work and plenary similar to that used in the Literacy Hour.

The teacher gained control and increased his confidence. The pupils' behaviour and learning improved. The SENCO realised that by adopting a problem-solving approach her collaborative support could be effective. Lessons learnt from the project were:

- Groups should be organised taking into account personalities and strengths as well as ability levels.
- Pupils with low self-esteem need help about feeling safe within their group.
- Room layout can impact on learning outcomes.
- Involving pupils in changes means they take more responsibility for their behaviour and learning.
- Allowing different modes of presentation, e.g. oral and visual using diagrams, pictures, tapes, etc. can be effective ways to change pedagogy.
- The teacher realised that working collaboratively and taking a problem-solving approach was more positive than complaining about the class in the staff room.

Adapted from a project by Thalia Grant

Collaborative work which provides advice and support while working alongside teachers is illustrated in many of the later case studies included in this book.

Further research into the role of the SENCO

Research by Derrington (1997) confirmed that the demands of the role had increased substantially since 1994. Interviews with LEA officers and staff were carried out together with case study work in 20 primary and secondary schools. The findings from the school interviews showed the variety of responses to the Code of Practice. The SENCO's role was usually perceived to be an important one. In primary schools, the position was sometimes held by the deputy head, while in secondary schools there was invariably one experienced teacher already able to take on the responsibilities of a SENCO, although there were doubts about whether s/he had the specific skills required for the new role. This study again shows the variety of responses across schools in terms of timetable commitments. For example, of the ten primary schools, three SENCOs were deputy heads with class teaching responsibilities; three were deputies and non-class-based; two were full-time class teachers with other responsibilities and the remaining two were part-time employees.

Dyson and Millward (2000) examined in detail the decision-making responsibilities of SENCOs with regard to the placement of pupils with SEN on the school-based stages of the Code of Practice. They define the SENCO as the teacher given the task of coordinating the school's response to those pupils regarded as having SEN, and see it as a management rather than a teaching role, involving coordinating provision, liaison with others and keeping records. Decision-making about levels of provision related to the stages was seen as

important, using the Code of Practice to provide protocols to help in the decision-making process.

The authors conclude from their research that the decision-making process is a complex one which SENCOs find difficult to explain. Teacher concerns and consultations with colleagues mean that pupils perceived as having SEN may just be children who have come to the notice of teachers, but who may not necessarily have the highest level of need. Parental involvement was also mentioned as important as was the advice of outside agents at Stage 3 (now *School Action Plus*), who at this stage shared in the decision-making process.

It could be argued that this view of the SENCO's role is limiting, particularly in relation to developing inclusive practice. Focusing on IEP reviews and decision-making in terms of individually resourced provision contrasts with another way of conceptualising the role of the SENCO as someone who advises on strategies for teaching and learning and helps manage change.

The SENCO as a change agent

If we conceptualise a pupil with SEN as a child who earns the school more resources, then it might be argued that the SENCO should focus on the protocols and procedures to achieve this. The question is: do we see the SENCO's main role as that of making bureaucratic decisions about staged placement and resource levels or do we think that pupils with diverse needs, requiring diverse provision, lead us to redefine of the SENCO's role as an agent of change? This would involve supporting improvement in the teaching and learning for all pupils, but in particular those with diverse and different needs. It would also involve managing the important changes in staff attitude and staff competence in planning for those with SEN.

What do SENCOs think they do?

But, what do SENCOs themselves see as important? What supports their role and what constrains it? What types of training will develop the wide range of competencies needed and identified by the *National Standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators* (TTA 1998)? These were the questions asked by the research on the outreach SENCO training organised through the Institute of Education between 1999 and 2002. These courses were originally based on the competencies outlined in the TTA National Standards document and were held in the professional development centres of 12 London and Home County LEAs. Research was carried out which asked those who had taken part in this training about the contexts in which they worked, and about the effect of the course on their competency levels. Some groups were also asked to discuss what they thought were their constant and emerging roles.

This research confirmed earlier findings that there was still a huge variety in the time allocated to the role of the SENCO. In primary schools this ranged from a few staff who had no allocated time to some who were full-time SENCOs, a