



'Sussing' Out The SENCO

Adam Twyman examines different conceptions of the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators and outlines the implications for the professional development of staff through a description of his own school's practice.

■■■ The SENCO modeling best practice

The role of the SENCO is one grounded in an old government policy that has, in recent times, been reexamined and rethought as schools and leaders strive to meet the new challenges and demands of twenty first century learners. The SENCO as a strategic leader who will be able to support and lead the professional development of others is increasingly being held up as an example of best practice.

As a new SENCO, and through undertaking the new National Award for SEN Coordination, I have spent time examining and reflecting on how the role has developed between policy, literature and practice.

These reflections have led me to identify key ways of thinking about the practice of being a SENCO, which I have conceptualised into 4 paradigms:

- 'The Operational Manager Paradigm' - the SENCO as a middle manager of processes, bureaucracy and paperwork,
- 'The Strategic Leader Paradigm' - the SENCO as a leader of provision and school level policy,
- The 'Participator Coach Paradigm' - the SENCO as a point of focus in the school, around which practice can be challenged and developed and finally
- The 'Observant Shepherd Paradigm' - the SENCO

as someone who notices and draws together the frustrations of staff to formulate enquiry led teams and projects whose aim is to improve a particular element of practice.

■■■ The Operational Manager Paradigm

The role of SENCO, defined as it is in the main body of the Code of Practice (DFES 2001) text, is evidently an operational one. The COP lists administrative and bureaucratic tasks that have been identified in other parts of the document as being of importance and designates that someone must be made responsible for them. It is a model concerned with meeting the needs of special needs children and staff in a responsive manner.

In my own experience, my SENCO time is easily filled each week with completing needs analyses, collating IEPs, reading reports, making referrals, giving advice, replying to an apparently endless stream of emails and being called to support the distressed autistic pupil who everyone else feels unable to deal with. This type of responsive practice has led Robertson (2012) to describe this model of work as ‘firefighting’ and it often feels like exactly that.

The implications for this approach for Special Needs Co-ordination are profound. By concerning themselves with operational tasks such as those listed in the COP, the achievements of the dedicated and hard working SENCO will be exactly that, operational. Paperwork will be completed, advice will be given and relevant information will be collected.

Two assumptions challenge this point of view. First, that completing these tasks will impact on the learning of children and second that this approach to Special Needs Coordination is the most effective or efficient and therefore, by extension, the tasks are necessary and a worthwhile use of time.

In many ways, one could consider this to be the end of the story. We could accept the premise that the Code of Practice identifies operational tasks that best impact upon the learning of children and that it is necessary to appoint someone to complete these tasks. However, the picture is far less clear than that. Tucked away in a paragraph detailing the minutia of roles of the local

authority, governors and non-conventional settings, the Code of Practice contradicts itself; “The SENCO (or team), working closely with the headteacher, senior management and fellow teachers, should be closely involved in the strategic development of the SEN policy and provision.” DFES (2001)

■■■ The Strategic Leader Paradigm

This statement paints an entirely different picture of the role of the SENCO and provides an example of the inherent lack of clarity of the policy about the role. This lack of clarity also dismantles our earlier acceptance of the idea that the operational tasks listed in the Code of Practice are worthwhile, effective and impact upon the learning of children. The implication of this is that the SENCO becomes responsible not for the completion of operational tasks but for the development of staff, whose role requires sound knowledge and practice in the field of meeting the needs of pupils with SEN.

This ‘strategic leader paradigm’ is a popular position adopted in literature and is certainly the Government’s preferred model. (DFES 2001; House of Commons 2006) Reasons for adopting this position tend to relate to the SENCO’s ability to enact change and influence at a strategic level. (Ekins 2012) However this belief is founded on unjustifiable assumptions about the leadership structures of schools. It purports that seniority is required to enact change. This is most certainly not the case.

■■■ The Seniority Paradox

In a recent edition of Professional Development Today, Harris and Jones discuss the impact of continual professional development (CPD). They note that; “It is an interesting observation that much of what teachers experience in the name of professional development makes little, if any, real difference to their practice.” (Harris and Jones 2012) They emphasise the importance of CPD being context specific and enquiry led if it is to have an ultimate impact on progress of pupils and propose at professional learning communities (PLC) as a framework to achieve this.

The interesting point from that article is the comparing and contrasting of PLCs with working

groups, specifically their observation that; “an interest group or working party may not have enquiry at its core; it may comprise of individuals working co-operatively rather than collaboratively and often is asked to address a need or an issue that has been delegated or dictated by someone else.” (Harris and Jones 2012)

It does not require much of an imaginative leap to suppose that the ‘someone else’ they refer to is a likely to be a senior leader. By delegating or dictating change, the senior leader prevents ownership of the developmental need and indirectly, inhibits the change.

■■■ The Participator Coach Paradigm

The implications of this ought to be plain. The SENCO must be a participator in the development of practice, not a director of it. Rather than identifying problems in practice from ‘on high’, perhaps drawn from data analysis or lesson observations, the SENCO exists as an invigorator in the school drawing together the throwaway comments that reveal the things that aren’t working, analysing the unnoticed assumptions in the habits of practice and asking questions about them. The SENCO is the single point of focus that can draw together from across the school, people who might not typically work together but are trying to overcome similar problems and coordinate and coach the teams and individuals that seek to resolve them.

■■■ Implications for the Professional Development of SENCOs

Under this model there are profound implications for the professional development of SENCOs and indeed the positioning of a SENCO within the staffing structure of a school.

This model evokes the popular idea of the SENCO as an, ‘agent of change’ (Morewood 2012) (Hallett and Hallett 2010). It paints a picture of a SENCO that must be equipped with the professional skills to develop the teacher’s ability to reflect and make changes to their practice that may prove successful or otherwise, but either way engage the professional in a continual cycle of improvement.

One model that can be used for this is the growing area of ‘professional coaching’ sometimes known



as ‘executive coaching’ - although this is somewhat of a misnomer, since there is no requirement for the subject to be in an executive role. Professional coaching is a relatively new area and as such, definitions remain the subject of discussion. However it can be broadly considered a collaborative process between a professional and a coach, that builds on the individual’s ability to achieve short and longer term organisational goals, through practical on the job reflections by the development of results focused strategic thinking and tactical problem solving. (The Executive Coaching Forum 2008)

The SENCO as a coach totally removes the idea put forward in the COP of someone concerned with paperwork and advice, and undermines the idea of a strategic leader supplying answers to problems from on high over which the teacher has no ownership.

The National Award for SEN Coordination certainly goes some way to encouraging new and prospective SENCOs to consider this outlook on a role that was never clearly defined in the first place. However, it

delivers only the most minimal introduction to the topic of coaching. Including more thorough training on coaching would be one way of achieving genuine impact for pupils in classrooms through SENCOs who were focused not on operational tasks or arbitrary measures of school success such as RAISEonline or value added, but with the development of staff in solving the questions about why individuals in their class are not accessing learning.

■■■ A Culture of Excuses

In 2010, Ofsted prepared a report into special educational needs that condemned the culture in some schools of labeling children with special educational needs, when in reality they simply required better teaching. (Ofsted 2010) They went so far as to say that as many as half the children at the 'school action' level of need "would not be identified as having special educational needs if schools focused on improving teaching and learning for all, with individual goals for improvement." (Ofsted 2010) The report also found that "expectations of pupils were too low" (Ofsted 2010) and that children "were underachieving but this was sometimes simply because the school's mainstream teaching provision was not good enough" (Ofsted 2010)

It is hard not to read this report without developing a sense that the teaching profession as a whole (and certainly not the individuals of which it is comprised) has developed a culture of making excuses about why

pupils are not making progress.

However, this damning indictment was balanced with the statement that, "The best learning occurred in all types of provision when teachers or other lead adults had a thorough and detailed knowledge of the children and young people; a thorough knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning strategies and techniques, as well as the subject or areas of learning being taught; and a sound understanding of child development and how different learning difficulties and disabilities influence this." (Ofsted 2010)

Herein lies a clear directive about the developments that must take place in teaching practice to actually make an impact on pupils. The SENCO could be well positioned to facilitate this change, as indeed could other members of the school community concerned with raising standards such as a deputy head.

When considering this approach we begin to see a blurring between the role of the deputy headteacher and SENCO. This is a discussion that is explored in literature by Hallett and Hallett (2010) who ask how the role of the SENCO is or should be positioned in relation to the role of an individual such as the deputy head, who would typically have responsibility for developing teaching and learning across the school as a whole. Positioning the SENCO in the leadership team makes a statement that it is the role of one person to develop teaching and learning across the school, and the role of someone else to strategically develop the provision for children identified as having special or additional needs.

In fact what is required, is one coherent and consistent approach to developing teaching and learning in any given context. The SENCO as someone whose role it is to dish out advice or information about 'special needs' becomes a parody of the training courses criticised by Harris and Jones (2012) earlier, and is likely to be just as ineffective at creating impact for learners.



■■■ Example of Practice – The Inclusion Resource

In my own context, a small under subscribed one form entry primary school in a severely deprived ward of inner London, it is our vision to meet the needs of all learners through consistently high quality teaching and learning for all. A wide range of strategies are being used to achieve this, but as SENCO, it has been the focus of my team and I, to develop the elements of high quality teaching and learning specifically for the benefit of pupils labeled as having special educational needs.



What was apparent, almost immediately was that, although the staff broadly profess to be in favour of inclusion, their knowledge of meeting the needs of children with SEN were insufficient to do so effectively. It is a sad reflection that of the 7 teachers, 4 are in their first or second year of teaching and have left their ITT courses with plenty of rhetoric about differentiation, but few practical strategies or real understanding of common needs in modern schools. It is apparent that this is something that they each find frustrating as they work hard to meet the needs of the pupils they find in their classes.

The SEN team, made up of myself a senior inclusion assistant, a special needs teacher and 2 learning mentors have long been asking questions about how best to develop this knowledge and skills in our teaching staff and have been disappointed in the past at the ineffectiveness of training, as described by Harris and Jones above.

The team decided to build a self-sustaining resource to promote knowledge of practical strategies to support

teachers in meeting the needs of their classes and this presented an ideal opportunity for the professional development of some teaching staff, with a clear and replicable structure for SENCOs, and indeed all concerned with issues developing the skills of professionals.

■■■ The Observant Shepherd Paradigm

The development of this resource has become an important part of professional development for teaching staff both 'qualified' teachers and our 'non-qualified' colleagues at the school. The first stage of the project was noticing and attempting to bring together the frustrations of staff that felt ill equipped to meet the needs of the pupils in their class and capitalising on the focus the school has on meeting the needs of all with high quality teaching and learning. I drew together the members of staff who had expressed the frustration and either their own lack of knowledge and understanding about needs, or the ineffectiveness of training on the matter, as well as those who most vocally subscribed to the notion of inclusion. The wandering and unfocused frustrations and ideas were corralled together and put together with a highly capable team of people who have between them, the professional knowledge and understanding and the desire, ownership and crucially, motivation to solve them.

■■■ The Catalyst of Purpose

The second phase of the project, and the phase in which we are currently working, has been the creation of an internal website that briefly introduces the most common needs in our school and provides very simple strategies for effectively meeting those needs in day to day practice. The value of this exercise is evidently two fold, as it has developed the knowledge and skills of those involved in the project, but from the outset, had the purpose of being shared across the school and has been created with this consideration at the forefront of our minds.

This phase of the project sees the shorter-term developments of practice. Initially, there has been a broadening of knowledge and understanding of the

contributors own knowledge. One member of the team commented that:

“Researching the implications for teaching and learning of children with speech and language difficulties has enabled both to be able to better meet (the needs of a particular pupil in her class), specifically, visual needs and the use of tone when speaking to him which has indirectly supported and developed his Learning Support Assistant who has picked up on my new learning and included it in her own practice.”

In the longer term, the internal website will be launched to the staff as a whole. Since it has been designed to be simple, accessible and the answer to problems identified by staff themselves, we expect to see teachers incorporate it into the strategies into their planning the impact of which will benefit all pupils. Further into the long-term, we envision that the website will be in a constant state of development with new teams working on and developing sections as the picture in our school develops and changes over the years. Again, this will provide the two-folded benefit of the short-term improvements in the practice of those participating in the project, and the longer-term impact on its use across the school.

■ ■ ■ Better professional preparation

It seems clear to me, having spent time working as a SENCO alongside many newly and recently qualified teachers as well as students from a range of well regarded teacher training facilities, that not enough is

done to prepare new teachers with the understanding of common needs and the pedagogies that support them in modern classrooms. It is a sad inadequacy of the professionalism of teaching that it does not encompass the same degree of professional learning as other professions. Doctors and lawyers may specialise in to particular areas in the same way as teachers specialise in subjects or age groups but you would expect a doctor to have a thorough underlying knowledge of anatomy and physiology, and a lawyer to have a thorough understanding of the law. Teachers are rarely prepared with a thorough understanding of common needs and the different pedagogies that are required to successfully educate them. This must be addressed the university and ITT provider level if we are to create a genuinely inclusive system for all.

In the meantime, and for those already qualified, the model my team and I have begun to develop is similar to the cycle of school level, action based research. So there is a continual cycle of making changes and improvements that are reviewed and re-examined, but crucially, done by teachers, for teachers with the mechanism for sharing with other practitioners and the catalyst of a real purpose. School staff must be given the space and opportunity to participate in this type of project and SENCOs, through the National Award, must be prepared for the job of coordinating these projects and coaching those that participate in them with a thorough understanding of policy literature and a clear understanding of the realities of practice.

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