

Special extra

the essential information for today's SENCO

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Expect the inspectors by Gareth D Morewood

Some advice on how best to prepare for that Ofsted team visit

In June 2011 Priestnall School in Stockport, a large comprehensive secondary school in the north west of England, was awarded an 'outstanding' judgement by Ofsted. Throughout the nine years I have been SENCO at the school we have always been judged as outstanding for the provision for vulnerable learners, but we are extremely proud of our recent whole-school judgement, and here I hope to pass on some thoughts about how we, as a community, have developed provision as part of a whole-school model and subsequently enjoyed a very positive inspection experience.

'...outstanding support is provided for those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, as well as for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school's inclusive ethos is reflected in the outstanding promotion of equality of opportunity.' (Priestnall's Ofsted report, 2011)

It is important to understand that provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is a whole-school responsibility; it cannot be truly effective as a 'bolt-on' element or as something that doesn't have real value in the goals and ethos of the school.

Don't wait until you get 'the call'

My advice is to do as much 'as you go' – when you do something, write about it/produce a report/get it documented. When you develop the habit of documenting things as you go, you'll soon build up a surprising amount of 'evidence'. Publishers are always really keen to receive articles written by practitioners; what better evidence is there for an inspection than something that has been published?

Whatever you do, whether it's an intervention or establishing a new provision such as a nurture group, or changing the structure of your department or faculty, always try to evidence outcomes in your report/document. Show how students have improved. As you get into a routine of evidencing interventions and so on, this will strengthen your ability to demonstrate (without any debate) why it is worthwhile.

'Inclusion is outstanding. All students are encouraged to take an active part in all activities and vulnerable students are fully included in the life and work of the school.' (HMI, December 2008)

So my first advice point is – don't just 'do it', 'do it and evidence it'.

Have your 'evidence' in order

Always file your reports or documents as you go, then there is less to do when you get 'the call'. Be prepared. It is very simple to build up evidence folders as you go, but very stressful trying to get everything sorted within a few days!

My inspection folders (I had three copies: one for the inspection team, one for our headteacher and one for me. The head gave the inspection team her copy so that they had two copies to refer to) had the following sections:

- > Faculty structure, information and policy,
- > Training and development – a selection of the training we offered to staff and a selection of materials.
- > Data analysis and tracking – reports of this and the training I had delivered on how to do this, including the most recent analysis and intervention documentation,
- > Selection of published articles – anything that I have written about went in this section, allowing for ease of reference in my meeting and enabling the inspectors to take away the information and read it in

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more detail, if they wished.

- > Two detailed reports on our nurture group and our therapeutic provision.
- > Case study 1.
- > Case study 2.
- > Case study 3.
- > Case study 4.
- > Summary sheets – basically what was 'the register', showing all students with whom we work and their primary needs.

Case studies

The inspection team will ask for case studies showing the 'story' of a student – this is often widely misinterpreted, so this is what we did.

We prepared four well-documented case studies – I chose students with special educational needs and disabilities at risk of permanent exclusion. As our fixed-term exclusion figures are quite high and the head knew that this was part of the focus from her pre-inspection briefing, these case studies showed our proactive, inclusive methodology. It also allowed me to demonstrate how we had worked hard at keeping these students in education, often against some staggering odds!

'The outstanding care, guidance and support for students, delivered through the college system, play a pivotal role in the outstanding education provided for its students.'
(Priestnall's Ofsted report, 2011)

I got copies of all documents – consultant letters, meeting minutes, individual education plans, letters to parents/carers, basically everything we do, be it a phone call or meeting – and I just printed it all off, put it in chronological order and provided a 'summary' cover sheet to lead the inspector through the information. We started getting these ready weeks before, adding additional information as we went along. It's a good

idea to do this as it saves any last-minute rush and allows staff to concentrate on other things in the days before the inspection.

In my inspection meeting I was able to talk about these case studies, discussing the strategies and simply flicking to the page that evidenced them in seconds – a powerful argument if ever there was one!

To support these 'challenging' case studies, I also sent emails to some parents/carers with whom we have extremely positive relationships. These parents and carers then sent in some testimonies that extolled our virtues. This allowed me to point out in my meeting with the inspector that we could have included these as case studies but as our fixed-term exclusions had risen slightly, I chose to include the more challenging cases – a powerful and 'open' argument. Providing a handful of really positive printouts also helped to showcase the excellent work we do – you need to sell yourself while providing documents and evidence!

Pre-inspection information

It is vital to make sure that you have the 'pre-inspection' information from the headteacher; the lead inspector will send through some questions he or she wishes to 'explore' – make sure you know what they are, especially those relating to your areas of work. I had a meeting with our head and she informed me that there was a focus on lower attainment last year for students with statements of SEN. That evening I prepared a short paper highlighting reasons for this; out of the nine students, one was in hospital for most of the year having a transplant, one was at real risk of permanent exclusion (supported by our case studies) and another was a non-attender (lots of evidence available here, such as involvement of education welfare officers). As it happens, in my meeting with the inspector this was not

followed up, but if you are prepared for such questions you are in a very strong position.

Having and understanding data and being able to evidence trends and progress are key parts of modern schooling, so it is vital to be able to produce data regarding exam performance. Have a 'story' prepared, including reasons why results were low or poorer than expected. Do this as a matter of course to inform provision, but write it up as a report, then put it in your evidence file and it is ready for the inspectors.

'Strong inter-agency partnerships extend the scope of help available and enable the school to develop its own in-house expertise, for example in supporting students on the autistic spectrum.'
(Priestnall's Ofsted report, 2011)

Also evidence/reference what you have done as a result of this analysis, as it adds further depth to your work as SENCO supporting students' achievements and outcomes. I was always cynical about this, but, basically, if you want to ensure that your evidence base is solid and you can demonstrate how individual students and vulnerable groups do at your school, you need to do some analysis; so why not ensure that it is as thorough as possible in preparation for any inspection?

The days before

It is important to ensure that staff meet with teaching assistants (TAs) and include them in their planning. To have an 'outstanding' observation, TAs and other support staff must be working effectively in partnership with teachers. For lesson observations, being able to show progress for each child is essential.

We all know that 'joint planning' isn't always possible as a matter of routine;

'It is important that your SENCO work dovetails with whole-school policy and practice'

however, for an inspection it is essential. If you are selling your house you tidy it up and put some fresh coffee on; similarly for an inspection you need to showcase yourself as best you can. Careful planning and ensuring that everyone understands their roles are key teaching outcomes. It is important that support staff know this and work with teaching staff effectively, so why not create some time for staff to meet in the days prior to the inspection itself?

During the inspection

It is vital to ensure that staff are well briefed on key points – but remember, don't overwhelm them. I printed off postcards with a motivational quote and key message.

Make sure everyone arrives early for lessons, knows when and where they are on duty and supporting individual students with personal care and support over lunch/break and so on. Make time to write everything down and give all the details to each member of your team to refer to during the inspection; it did take some time to provide a 'who does what' for everyone, but it was worth it – there was absolutely no uncertainty and my staff were amazing.

Meeting with the inspector

In your meeting with the inspector, bring your files (with a copy for them to retain). Make sure it shows everything you have done, and has evidence for everything you need, so when a question is asked you can simply refer to it in your file. Then let the inspector take it away afterwards to peruse further.

It is important that your SENCO work dovetails with whole-school policy and practice. Try to avoid anything but 'towing the party line'; showing a division publically will only provide evidence for a judgement that isn't good or outstanding – remember the advice about selling your house! Most of all, however, be


yourself, remember you cannot do everything and ensure that for things you can't do or any issues you have, you have provided evidence and a 'story' as to why this is the case.

As I mentioned previously, data is important for current inspections, so have some idea of how you track students with SEND and what you do to narrow the gap between their attainment and expected progress.

Also, it helps to have some positive stories to show off – for example, students who are going on to great things, those with Paralympics' aspirations or significant achievements in and out of the classroom. Collect information on ex-students and their recent successes.

'The nurture group, with its personalised approach to the needs of students in Years 7 and 8 whose circumstances make them vulnerable, is very effective in raising their confidence and integrating them into mainstream lessons.' (Priestnall's Ofsted report, 2011)

There was also a focus for our inspection on those who leave and are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Our figures for this were very low and were really useful in showing post-16 transition; however, until the inspection I didn't know these precise figures, and simply asking the relevant person in school, then having the details to hand allowed me to show a real depth of knowledge – a little preparation can go a long way!

Above all, I stressed our inclusive philosophy and evidenced how we did things clearly. I left nothing to chance, and had files of evidence 90% ready to go, as we felt an inspection was imminent. If you know that you may be inspected soon, start building up your evidence now – don't leave it until you know they are coming! 

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Further reading

'The 21st Century SENCO' by G D Morewood, Optimus Publishing, *SENCO Update*, 100: 8–9 (2008)

'Making Optimum Use of SENCO Time' by G D Morewood, Optimus Publishing, *Curriculum Management Update*, 95: 7–10 (2009)

'Seeing the big picture: organising effective whole-school deployment of support staff' by G D Morewood, Optimus Publishing, *Curriculum Briefing*, Vol 8, No 1: 8–13 (2009)

'Restructuring in light of budget restraints: optimise teaching assistants to maximise resources' by G D Morewood, *Assessment and Development Matters*, BPS Psychological Testing Centre, Vol 3, No 1, Spring 2011

The Role of the SENCO: an insider's guide, with practical tips and tools for inclusion by Gareth D Morewood (foreword by Professor Klaus Wedell CBE), Optimus Education eBooks (2010)