

The 21st-century SENCO

Gareth Morewood looks at the evolution of the role of the SENCO. He argues the importance of having a clear philosophy and acting as an advocate for students with special educational needs

With the advent of *Every Child Matters* (2003) and the new Key Stage 3 curriculum (2008) the role of the SENCO has changed. The 21st-century SENCO is required to do much more, have a wider range of skills, and deal with an immense range of tasks on a regular basis.

Modern school populations are now far more diverse. There are more young people with mental health needs; we are now better at including students with needs on the autistic spectrum and we have a better understanding of how to create truly inclusive arenas for learning and participation, to highlight but a few issues facing the modern SENCO.

Before I consider the skills and specifics of the modern SENCO, I think it is important to frame an educational philosophy; to set out the parameters from which my role as SENCO is undertaken.

The Salamanca Statement

My journey starts with the Salamanca Statement¹. More than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organisations met in Salamanca, Spain, from 7 to 10 June 1994 to further the objective of 'Education for All', by considering the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs.

Problems with the curriculum

Throughout my teaching career, and subsequently, my last six years as a SENCO, I have been trying to find a resolution to the biggest barrier to effective learning and participation for young people – the National Curriculum. In trying to uphold the principles that I believe in, which stem from the Salamanca Statement, I found it more and more frustrating that the language-based curriculum presented a barrier, irrespective of any specific needs.

The new curriculum and PLTS

As a result of the Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) framework, which has been developed by QCA², all students will now benefit from a much higher importance being placed on the role of skills.

It is designed to increase flexibility and offer greater opportunities for personalising learning, as opposed to ploughing through curricula targets and schemes of work.

As with all good strategies for students with SEN, it benefits every student. The PLTS framework allows us to create learning opportunities that were not possible with the old curriculum – an exciting time for SENCOs.

A good example of this is the development of a 'nurture group' from September 2008³ at my school. This group has developed from research and historical, need and is a developing provision specific to the school setting in which I work. It is based upon ideas first identified by the somewhat controversial Dr Bruno

The PLTS framework

The framework comprises six groups of skills:

- independent enquirers
- creative thinkers
- reflective learners
- team workers
- self-managers
- effective participators.

Bettelheim⁴ of a 'therapeutic milieu', in conjunction with bespoke teaching methods developed as a hybrid of the TEACCH⁵ method for students with autism spectrum conditions, also incorporating the flexibility of the new curriculum and the PLTS. I have developed an intervention to be followed by up to 14 Year 7 and Year 8 students from September.

This is a developing provision, but one that we hope will support students in transition, allowing them to gain skills that will serve them better with regard to the demands of the academic curriculum further into their school careers.

The role

Apart from the curriculum, what does a 21st century SENCO do? It is difficult to sum-up the precise nature of the role, mainly due to the different environments that schools are in – some serving catchment areas with specific socio-economic needs, some with increased needs with regard to different cultures and also the variety of expectations

from the senior leadership teams within schools themselves.

Whatever the differences between schools, educational settings and areas, one thing remains certain, the modern SENCO needs to be able to balance a huge range of tasks and activities, while keeping the needs of individual children at the forefront of their thinking. In the words of Rita Cheminais (2005), the 21st-century SENCO needs to be:

- a lead professional
- an advocate and knowledge/information manager
- a commissioner and broker
- a resource manager
- a partnership manager
- a quality assurer
- a facilitator
- a solution assembler.

There has been significant debate recently as to the position of the SENCO: should they be a teacher or not, should they be part of the senior leadership team, do they have to have QTS – the list goes on and on. But the reality for me is more straightforward. I am there to ensure equality for those students who need an advocate. To provide clarity on process and support for parents and carers and staff who don't have as much experience. I am there to try to ensure greater equality.

I often have to consider my position with regard to conflicts of interest and being a true advocate for the students. It is sometimes 'awkward' backing parent/carers views and being opposed to the 'official LA view'. However, as a professional I always think that the needs of the child must come first, not any loyalties to specific organisations or friends. The individual child for whom the SENCO is the advocate *must* come first.

To be an advocate in these situations require high levels of skills with regard to separating emotion from fact and statute. These skills cannot be taught, but need to be learned and most certainly don't come easily. However, being fair and consistent is an important starting point.

Principles of inclusive education

In striving for this equalisation of provision, and the importance of taking account of

individual needs, I have developed further my philosophy on inclusion and rights of the child. Building upon the Salamanca Statement it is worth considering the principles of inclusive education:⁶

- a person's worth is independent of their abilities or achievements
- every human being is able to feel and think
- every human being has a right to communicate and be heard
- all human beings need each other
- real education can only happen in the context of real relationships
- all people need support and friendship from people of their own age
- progress for all learners is achieved by building on things people can do rather than what they can't
- diversity brings strength to all living systems
- collaboration is more important than competition.

This supports the ideas around the personalisation of learning and the PLTS discussed earlier. The modern SENCO must consider individual needs among a wealth of data and legislation. Balancing this is not an easy task.

Integration is not inclusion

In order to have a clear vision of the role of the modern SENCO, it is important to understand that integration is not inclusion.

Integration is when young people with special educational needs are placed in mainstream provision with some adaptations and resources but on condition that the young person can fit in with pre-existing structures, attitudes and an unaltered environment.

Integration is a necessary pre-condition of inclusion but is not a final solution.

Inclusion is about young people with special educational needs being placed in mainstream provision, where there is a commitment to removing all barriers to the full participation of each child as a valued, unique individual.

It is very important that all students are seen and valued as individuals. To create a truly inclusive model of support, positive attitudes are key.

Overcoming bureaucracy

I have spent a lot of time over the last six years looking at ways I can develop the capacity of my faculty to overcome the inertia of bureaucracy and respond to the

needs of students as and when they arise.

In line with expectations and guidance (Code of Practice, 2001) there should be a graduated response to provision. This is best supported with a 'multi-tiered' support model, whereby a variety of interventions and provision are readily accessible for young people, without complex referrals or lengthy delays.

A good provision and access map is an important element of the modern SENCO's provision. My map addresses four key areas of need:

- cognition and learning
- communication and interaction
- behaviour, emotional and social development
- sensory and/or physical medical conditions.

In building this capacity to respond, and being able to provide for this personalisation of learning, I appointed senior members of my support staff to manage each 'strand' of the provision. We will then have a lead in strand areas and also be able to develop specific staff skills in these areas, to provide swifter responses to individual needs, as and when they arise.

Negotiations in developing this new model were lengthy, but the positive support of my headteacher in establishing a structure with truly distributed leadership throughout the school has been invaluable. Our newly appointed headteacher fully embraces the 'distributed leadership model' so championed by the NCSL. This affords me complete flexibility with regard to provision, but also absolute accountability.

As a SENCO in the 21st century you can feel lonely and isolated. Having networks where you can seek advice⁷ and creating supportive systems within your own team are important. Whilst ultimate responsibility lies with you as SENCO, all the school staff have a shared, corporate responsibility to all students.

Advocating for those students who need it and addressing staff directly who are not supporting the systems all form part of the 'commissioning and brokering' role outlined above.

Conclusion

To be a modern SENCO many skills are needed. Most importantly, in my view, is to have a solid philosophical base from which to start your work. From there you need to be able to advocate for students and parents/carers but also mediate and listen. It is important to be able to manage but also

lead and to provide critical evaluation of provision and intervention. This needs to be done with a good team of teaching and non-teaching staff. Remember, it is a whole-school responsibility, not just yours. And above all, you must maintain a good sense of humour!

About the author

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References

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- Pollak, R (1997) *The Creation of Dr B*, New York: Touchstone.

Notes

- 1 More detail can be found at www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF.
- 2 www.qca.org.uk/qca_13476.aspx
- 3 Further details and initial evaluation of this model will be available early 2009.
- 4 See biography by Pollak, also work by Bettelheim himself, for example 'The Empty Fortress' (1967).
- 5 Developed at the University of North Carolina, current director of Division TEACCH is Professor Gary Mesibov
- 6 From the 'Alliance for Inclusive Education' www.allfie.org.uk.
- 7 For example the Becta SENCO-Forum. The following link is a guide to using the 'Senco-forum' e-mailing list and the group's associated web area: <http://communities.becta.org.uk/inclusion/senco-forum>.