

Case Study

Making optimum use of SENCO time

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When I was appointed as special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) at Priestnall School in September 2002, it was a non-teaching role. Having previously been a mainscale maths teacher at a school serving a community with significant socio-economic factors, it was quite a challenge for me, and a 'leap of faith' for the school itself.

My first task was to bring together different strands of provision to provide a more cohesive approach to support across the whole school. In doing this, I immediately removed all explicit references to 'SEN' from documentation and rhetoric. It was important for me to remove the historical 'stigma' associated with the 'SEN-child' and the notion, as provision developed, that students with 'SEN' were treated less favourably than other learners, often receiving 'remedial' support in a cupboard and the like. So we became the Curriculum Support Faculty, supporting the academic, social and hidden curriculum through a variety of direct and indirect support systems that have now evolved into a sophisticated model for support and training.

When I was appointed, it was without a teaching commitment. Over the last few years I have picked up odd classes here and there and supported other teachers. But time and flexibility are important when being a SENCO. While review meetings and other parts of the job can be planned and booked into timetabled slots, there is always a need to be able to respond to events as they arise, and the SENCO role overall does not equate to compartmentalised time slots.

The main part of my role is to provide the strategic overview of support, ensuring provision, including teaching strategies and support, is appropriate and linking agencies, parents/carers and students with professional advice.

New positions for staff

This year, I have developed the systems and structures of support within the faculty. We have created positions of strand managers to take a lead in each of the four strands: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and behavioural and sensory; medical and physical needs.

These positions went to advertisement and we interviewed a number of candidates. All positions were filled by existing members of my staff, testament to the manner in which they took on board the professional development offered within the faculty, but also from the whole-school perspective.

Each strand manager is line-managed by the curriculum support manager. This position is, in effect, the most senior non-teaching member of the faculty. The role is to deploy the day-to-day support and take a lead on personnel issues and the practical daily tasks associated with supporting need, such as the personal care rota, lunchtime supervision and clubs, transport liaison and so on. Another part of the curriculum support manager's role is administering special arrangements for exams. The curriculum support manager is then line-managed by myself, the Director of Curriculum Support.

Intervention programmes

Having a manager for each strand means we can ensure continuing provision with regard to therapeutic interventions throughout the school

year, as opposed to waiting for rare visits from speech and language and occupational therapists, for example.

So, for example, under this system, the Communication and Interaction Strand Manager has developed bespoke speech and language programmes, delivered each term to selected groups of students. This starts with initial in-class observations of students and assessment by the strand manager, then 12 sessions of half an hour each over a six-week period working on the specific needs of the group, for example reciprocal language, understanding how to hold and develop a conversation and so on. On completion of the groupwork, students are then assessed again and a report is written by the strand manager highlighting the work done during the sessions and indicating further strategies and targets for development at home and in lessons. These then feed into the annual review process for the individual as part of the review of provision and needs as required by the Code of Practice. From this process, targets and further work is set for individual education plans (IEPs) and parents/carers to support at home.

Similar work will be undertaken by the Sensory, Medical and Physical Strand Manager, based on the Motor Skills United programme devised by the Local Authority Occupational Therapy and Learning Support Services (see: www.specialdirect.com/Product.aspx?cref=TTSPR1103487), and so on for the other two strands.

These interventions are then backed up

School context

Priestnall is an 11–16 secondary school situated in Heaton Mersey, Stockport, with approximately 1,300 students. We have a truly comprehensive intake: students from a range of backgrounds and a good mix of young people with a variety of additional needs, which adds to the character and community feel that the school enjoys.

Last year, we achieved our best ever GCSE results: 75% A*–Cs, something that we quite rightly celebrated. This year saw us become a specialist sports college, again testimony to the comprehensive nature of the school. In December 2008, we had an Ofsted equalities inspection, looking specifically at the outcomes of vulnerable groups of learners, including those with SEN, looked-after children (LAC) and those on free school meals (FSM). As a result of this inspection, we were judged 'outstanding' for the support and guidance offered to these vulnerable learners, reflecting the manner by which we combine academic rigour alongside supportive and practical skills acquisition. Currently, we have 48 students with statements of SEN, covering all four strands of need. Four of the students have 'dual-roll' status, as part of our partnership with a local specialist provider for students with autistic spectrum conditions (ASC). As a school designed for young people with physical disabilities we have been privileged to have a number of student wheelchair users who have been positive role-models during my time as SENCO.

Examples of interventions that make up our graduated response

- Lunchtime clubs for supporting homework and providing a 'safe haven' for vulnerable students
- Educational visits that support the wider learning needs of students with, for example, needs on the autistic spectrum
- In-class support and adaptation of materials to support individual needs
- Soundfield systems (see: www.soundfield.info) in more than 20 classrooms, supporting the needs of students with hearing impairments primarily, but benefiting all
- Providing regular 'pro-active' groups to support language and communication needs as well as sessions to develop fine and gross motor skills, to support the associated needs of our learners that sometimes result in challenging behaviour and an inability to interact in lessons – these groups allow them instead to work at academic levels appropriate to their attainment

by specialist work from the therapists attached to the school (such as more bespoke individual therapy).

We also have a range of interventions and support strategies to provide a well-established graduated response now stipulated by the *SEN Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001) to the specific needs of our pupils — for examples, see the box above.

Role of proactive groups

It has always been important for me to be proactive in providing support when it is needed, not waiting for criteria to be fulfilled and panels to agree levels of support and interventions. The evolution of proactive groups is still developing, but communication and interaction and fine and gross motor skill development groups are now well established.

Overseen, managed and run by the strand managers, the ownership of the provision in these specific areas is a key part of their success. The managers link directly with specialist services and agencies, speech and language therapy (SALT), occupational therapy (OT) and so on, and complement existing provision.

The core remit of these groups is to provide a proactive response to underlying areas of need ensuring early intervention, with a view that as they are more routinely established, fewer students will present behavioural difficulties and become unable to access the curriculum as they progress through the school.

Legal issues

I have a good understanding of the legal implications of SEN legislation and the impact of the Code of Practice on provision, developed from my work providing voluntary support for parents and carers for the Independent Panel for Special Education Advice (IPSEA) (see:

www.ipsea.org.uk) in preparation for special educational needs and disability tribunals (SENDIST) (see: www.sendist.gov.uk). When I first volunteered four years ago, I completed the initial training tasks at home and via the internet and then attended a legal firm in London for two days' intensive training. This 'deep knowledge' has improved my ability to undertake the SENCO role, and I have also benefited from seeing examples of provision from all over the UK through the cases I support.

Inclusive approach

As guidance, the *SEN Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001) supports the processes of the SENCO role, but it needs to be used with a clear philosophy on inclusion and the rights of the pupil and implemented with a good team. It is important that as part of this philosophy the team includes all staff at the school, as all teachers are teachers of SEN.

My job has evolved from an inclusive stance from the outset. As a member of the Alliance for Inclusive Education (see: www.allfie.org.uk) for all my teaching career, I have always looked for ways of removing barriers to participation and learning. It has never really occurred to me that we cannot find a solution; sometimes we just need to think more creatively. The Alliance's website includes the principles of inclusive education that I strive towards achieving for pupils at Priestnall.

Training and collaborating

This year, I have established a regular training schedule on Monday evenings each half-term. These sessions are offered to all our staff, and to our feeder primary schools. Sessions are delivered by me with specialists with whom we work – such as the educational psychologist,

and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) specialist nurse. Sessions so far have been on how to: include students with specific learning needs in the mainstream classroom; support ASC pupils; support ADHD pupils; and support young people with attachment needs. These sessions have been well attended and follow a clear blueprint: background and context, followed by practical and realistic strategies for the classroom.

Over the last few years, the training element that we have delivered, either directly or indirectly, through external agencies and visiting staff, has grown substantially. Taking the lead on training and development for staff in supporting young people with specific additional needs is an important part of the modern SENCO role. Those who are expected to 'deliver' need ongoing opportunities to develop skills that support the specific needs of the students at the school. This feeds directly into our whole-school curriculum support policy and 'inclusive ethos'.

Whole-team approach

I am conscious there are certain elements of the SENCO job at which I am particularly good, and others which I am not. That is why a positive team approach is key. As a SENCO in a large secondary school, you cannot do everything on your own. You need to have a clear distributed leadership model that allows everyone to develop their own skills but also provides the most effective support for the young people and their parents/carers.

The modern SENCO needs a range of skills and attributes to be effective – see the box on page 9. That is alongside the ability to negotiate an appropriate line between provision and need and the school context in which the provision is to be implemented. It is always difficult trying to do all aspects of the role, and to meet the needs of all stakeholders. This is where distribution of leadership and delegation of provision is key.

A SENCO needs to be able to broker, advocate, commission, find solutions and so on – but they cannot do this in isolation. Support from the head is essential, but also support from a good staff team. While the SENCO role is one person, provision for students with SEN is a shared responsibility and this must be seen by all those involved for provision to be most effective.

The SENCO needs the support of the

school staff to ensure quality outcomes for the young people at the school. It is no good having excellent teaching and learning, highly skilled support and appropriate curricula content for young people on the autistic spectrum, for example, if at breaktime someone in the office fails to understand the specific nature of their needs and deals with a situation in a manner that causes upset to the students concerned. This may then adversely affect the ability of that young person to learn for the remainder of the day, or even longer.

Effective leadership and planning of provision

In January 2007, Chris Wells, then Head of Special Educational Needs and Disability Division in the DfES, wrote to all Directors of Children's Services highlighting the need for SENCOs to be part of senior leadership teams and proposing a mandatory qualification for all new SENCOs (access the letter 'Special educational needs – changes to the law' at: www.pwpsurrey.org/documents/LettertoCEOs-SENAmendmentRegsJanuary2007.doc; for draft specifications for the qualification, see: www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/s/national_senco_training_specification.pdf). Current information from Government says that if SENCOs are not part of the SLT, there needs to be a 'champion' who ensures provision for vulnerable learners is central to whole-school planning and decision-making.

The most effective and inclusive schools are those whose headteacher has a clear vision and understanding with regard to equality and SEN provision – rather than ones where it is left to the SENCO or 'champion' constantly having to remind school leadership teams about inclusivity and good practice. I am fortunate enough for this to be the case. Even though I am not a member of the SLT, I report directly to the head, who leaves the work to do with equality, inclusion and SEN provision entirely to me. However, with such autonomy comes great responsibility and I do not take lightly the fact that the provision and strategic planning for students with specific additional needs succeeds and fails by my hand. That is why as a SENCO you need to be prepared to work hard on developing a range of attributes and skills, not only being a 'lead' for students with specific needs but also

understanding the wider agenda, both in your own school, locally and nationally.

When young people leave Priestnall School at 16, I need to ensure that they have the best possible chance with regard to independence, understanding of social conventions and rules, knowledge of their own skills and attributes and ability to manage within a rapidly changing and evolving world.

To give young people the best opportunities and starts in life, not only does SEN legislation need to be adhered to but schools need to have a clear policy and ethos that supports this development and these outcomes. Leadership from the top of the school sets this agenda, and strong committed leadership, with regard to equality and promotion of inclusion has to be seen as a corporate responsibility.

There are many 'problems' and 'difficulties' that the SENCO encounters on a routine basis. Understanding the relationship between decisions made by the local authority (LA) with regard to funding and provision, and having the ability to shape and influence decisions relating to school ethos and provision is a key part of addressing individual barriers to learning and participation, as well as supporting the wider contexts.

Most valuable asset – time

The biggest asset to my effectiveness is having time. A large part of the SENCO job is meeting people; either students, parents/carers, professionals, LA officers, teachers or whoever, but having time to meet and pull together often quite disparate viewpoints is key. Historically, there have been 'formulas' to work out SENCO-time (see: www.teachers.org.uk/resources/pdf/SENCO_CHARTER_2_JE.pdf), based on number of statemented pupils, size of school and so on. But in reality, the SENCO job needs flexibility.

To work effectively, the SENCO needs time to chair planned meetings, but also the flexibility to respond to individual needs as and when they arise. That means having resources available and structures in place that allow the day-to-day running of the faculty to be maintained without my need for constant interventions.

At Priestnall, the development of the strand manager positions have allowed individual staff professional development opportunities; but also allowed us, as a faculty and as a school, to be much clearer about how we respond to need.

Staff perceptions

It is important that the SENCO is valued in a school, not only from the significance the role receives from the school leadership, but also from the other staff and students. Staff need to feel they have an 'on-hand' source of support, an 'in-house' consultant, if you like. This can only be achieved with considerable training and experience; but we all have to start somewhere. Even before becoming a SENCO, during my first five years teaching in a secondary school, I was always reading and researching specific needs and testing out and developing teaching strategies and approaches.

In strengthening your position as SENCO, you need to build up contacts with a range of stakeholders and providers. These links are essential, in supporting you, the young people with whom you work, but also the staff delivering lessons on a daily basis. If the staff feel confident in approaching you, and your team, the process of support develops in a cyclical manner. This constant 'identification-intervention-action-review' cycle ensures that the needs of the young people and the skills of the staff are constantly evaluated and developed. To maintain high standards of support and encourage greater participation, SENCOs need to be respected among the school staff, and to earn that respect SENCOs need time to gain experience, receive training and time to disseminate and train others.

Core challenges

The core challenge for me is staff training. To create an 'inclusive community' you need to have skilled and understanding staff. Around 50% of my time is spent training staff, including staff

Skills required by the 21st century SENCOs

The ability 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.

Source: Cheminais, R. (2005) Every Child Matters, a new role for SENCOs, David Fulton Publishers

from other schools for a fee, which helps support our students directly via the purchase of additional materials, games, and information and communications technology (ICT) programs.

As a SENCO, you need to be in a position to support and provide; to offer clarity and judgement. To do this, you need both in-school support and out-of-school support. The *senco-forum* (administered by Becta) is an invaluable form of support from SENCOs all over the UK, and abroad – see: <http://collaboration.becta.org.uk/community/inclusion/senco-forum>

But the support of your own school-based staff is also important. To have a maths teacher understanding how to deliver a lesson that has language that is supportive of students on the autistic spectrum is so empowering. To see a young student in Year 9 get out of her wheelchair and take part in a trampoline lesson (using supportive hoists) is amazing. But all this doesn't happen unless staff are trained, and are empowered in assisting the SENCO deliver quality outcomes for young people with additional needs.

Future SENCO challenges

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 qualified teacher status (QTS)?, and so on. The reality for me is more straightforward: I am there (as SENCO) to try and ensure equality for those students who need an advocate and to provide clarity on process and support for parents and carers and staff who do not have as much experience. I am there to try and ensure a more level playing field for all.

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/carer views and being opposed to the 'official LA view'. However, as a professional, I always think that the needs of the pupil must come first; not any loyalties to specific organisations or friends.

To be an advocate in these situations requires high levels of skills with regard to separating off emotion from fact and statute. These skills cannot be taught, but need to be learned and most certainly do not come easily. However, being fair and consistent is a key starting point.

With the introduction of the new SENCO qualification from September 2009, finding the right people for the job and for schools to then recruit effective future SENCOs is going to be a challenge. Gone are the days where a member of staff 'took on the role' in their approach to retirement; now the modern SENCO needs to have a range of skills and knowledge. As the number of prospective headteachers is dwindling, we need to guard against a similar decline in staff wanting to take on one of the most challenging, yet rewarding jobs in any school. A significant number of heads are approaching retirement, so school leadership will change. Providing for the next generation of students means developing new ways of supporting vulnerable learners, offering more 'joined-up' provision, with other agencies and providers, and ensuring everyone involved has a 'can-do' attitude to working together.

SENCOs of the future will be involved in meeting the needs of a much more complex learner. The better identification of mental health needs and the co-morbidity of some significant diagnosed needs presents new challenges. Political pressure and the 'inclusion' agenda all feed into a complex picture that means one thing: the SENCO has a lot that they are directly responsible for.

Taking stock

The modern SENCO role is a challenging one. It is now more varied and wideranging than ever. But without sufficient time, the SENCO is merely a glorified administrator; simply maintaining paperwork to meet statutory requirements. With time, the SENCO can plan strategically and develop whole-school systems that respond proactively to the needs of the young people of today. Top tips on how to make more effective use of SENCO time are given in the box right.

The modern SENCO needs to be able to plan support and intervention across the whole school and embed into systems and routines mechanisms that are always supporting the needs of the students and that mesh with existing provision and whole-school structures.

All teachers have a responsibility to support learners with SEN. At Priestnall, we have a range of 'in-house' expertise in areas that usually have low levels of

intervention in the secondary sector. We can provide early intervention in areas that are sometimes seen as non-educational and support individuals earlier, as opposed to providing reactive support after lengthy testing and applications for additional funding.

You can, as SENCO, work 70 hours a week and still not manage to do everything. You need a good team, confidence in distributing the leadership of key tasks and time during the school day to complete key parts of the job.

Future plans

The future for me is the further development of the therapeutic interventions as a routine part of our support packages. I also plan to increase the levels of whole-school training for all staff and develop a more sophisticated identification and assessment method for students in our feeder primary schools.

All of these aims feed into our strategic plan; one shared and developed by my entire faculty. Sharing the responsibility is important, but having a clear purpose and overview is also integral to a supportive whole-school approach to provision for those with SEN.

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Top tips for helping your SENCO be the most effective

- Allow your SENCO time to do the job
- Ensure the team that supports SEN has depth, not just the SENCO and lots of teaching assistants (TAs)
- Give some TAs lead opportunities to develop provision and 'specialise' in key areas of need and pay them accordingly
- Invest in training and experience – no SENCO can be a 'master of all', but with the right opportunities and support, their experience is vital in meeting the needs of the modern learner
- Ensure that all staff recognise that the provision for young people with SEN is a corporate responsibility and is a key part of whole-school inclusive practice
- The SENCO must have a clear line of communication to the headteacher to ensure whole-school ethos and leadership decisions support all young people, especially those with SEN