

Although the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) role has always been carried out in a context of policy flux and change since it was formally introduced in the 1994 SEN Code of Practice, it now appears to be operationalised in a climate of extreme uncertainty and significant new demands. Of course, many SENCos are more than used to working in such a policy context, and with the enhanced status given to the role and the introduction of important training initiatives including the *National Award for SEN Co-ordination* and the nasen-led *A Whole School Approach to Participation and Achievement* professional development programme – both supported with government funding – they are arguably well equipped to do so. However, the breadth and depth of changes on the educational horizon is daunting, both in relation to special educational needs and disability (SEND) policy and education policy as a whole, including, most notably, radical moves towards marketised schooling through the direct command and control steer given by the secretary of state for education, Michael Gove. Any doubts that this is the direction of travel are confounded by taking a cursory glance at the Department for Education website where the flagship academy and free school policies are brazenly advertised as *the way forward*.

This may or may not be the case, but our interest and concern as guest editors of this edition of the journal is to foreground issues that will, first and foremost, help SENCos, schools and educational professionals working with them to make sense of what is happening around them, and support children, young people, families and professional colleagues as well as possible.

Christopher Robertson looks in detail at recent policy changes in the field of inclusive and special education, arguing that some very positive developments have impacted directly on the role and status of SENCos in the past five years. He then discusses more recent policy changes outlined in *Support and Aspiration*, the government's Green Paper (DfE, 2011) published a year ago with a promise to overhaul radically the SEN system in England. In doing this, he considers some of its most striking proposals and how they might affect the role of the SENCo and its conceptualisation.

Expanding on direct themes around the SENCo role itself, Gareth Morewood then considers the tensions between what might be termed a SENCo 'skills set' – together with an underpinning stance characterised by a commitment to developing mainstream schools that are effective for a diverse range of pupils – with what could appear to be an opposing government policy characterised by its commitment to removing the bias towards inclusion. This new policy direction also distances itself from *Every Child Matters* and *Personalised Learning* frameworks, relics of

the previous government that arguably sought to recognise important wider achievements and outcomes for all children and young people, but particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities.

It is in this context, perhaps more than ever, that SENCos need advice and support and opportunities to problem solve with their peers. Klaus Wedell summarises the significant role that the SENCo Forum e-discussion group, running for over 16 years, plays in this regard. The Forum is a compelling example of informal and successful professional development led by SENCos themselves and with a reach that extends beyond England and the UK, and also to a wider audience of professionals involved in inclusive and special education.

It is important, while focusing on the SENCo role itself, to consider other key education professionals, and particularly other teachers. Simon Ellis and Janet Tod discuss key aspects of a large-scale study of teachers' day-to-day *experiences* of inclusion and special education, and identify some of the most significant challenges facing class and subject teachers in a policy context – and there is some continuity here with education policy of the previous government – that is so resolutely wedded to a standards and attainment agenda. There are important messages for SENCos, school leaders and policy makers in this article, most notably those that emphasise the importance of supporting teachers to be able to respond to diversity in busy classrooms where group-based rather than individual teaching is the reality.

Gareth Morewood and Caroline Bond discuss a developing parent/carer confidence measure, currently being trialled/piloted with a view to producing a clear and useful benchmarking tool for assessing levels of confidence in special educational needs and disability provision of different kinds, including mainstream and special schools and specialist resource bases or units. With the recent introduction of the National Inspectorate for Education in England's Parent View website (OFSTED, 2011) which encourages parents to offer their opinions on 12 aspects of their child's school, the development of this confidence measure is timely.

Finally, Jo Rose explores the key role that special schools can play in ensuring that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities are well supported through collaborative professional practice involving a range of schools and services, implicitly highlighting the importance of proactive co-ordination. At the same time, Rose identifies difficulties that need to be overcome if collaboration is not to remain at a fairly basic level. In doing this, she implicitly raises issues

about how key personnel in special schools might work with SENCOs in mainstream settings and vice versa.

The SENCO role will, and indeed has to, evolve (Morewood, 2011) but we are clear that both politicians and policy makers should engage with and learn from this key group of professionals on a routine and regular basis. This will enable them to learn from ‘real world’ practice, but also help SENCOs to fulfil their roles as strategic leaders who can develop and sustain effective whole school approaches to SEND in the way that *Support and Aspiration*, the government’s special educational needs and disability Green Paper, envisages (DfE, 2011, p. 63, paras 3.24–3.25). Failure to engage in this way will be wasteful for policy makers in particular, and could also consign many SENCOs to the Sisyphean task of rolling a stone to the top of a hill, from which it always rolls down again. We do not want this

to happen and hope the articles in this themed edition of *Support for Learning* make a contribution to ensuring that it is not the case.

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Guest Editors

References

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- OFSTED (2011) *Parent View*. [Online at <http://www.parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/>]. Accessed 01/03/12.