

# The developing role of the SENCo during times of great change: A personal perspective

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AS I ENTER my tenth year as SENCo, a year of great change awaits. With the 2,378 responses to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Green Paper currently being analysed by the Department for Education, we expect the White Paper towards the end of this calendar year. However, during my 10 years there have been some rapid developments in the SENCo role and SEND provision in schools; much of which has improved outcomes for students with SEND and other vulnerable groups. As I think back to starting as SENCo in 2002, a 26-year-old with five years' teaching experience, suddenly a 'lead practitioner' in a large secondary school, it was a very daunting position. However, as my role developed I considered key skill areas of the SENCo role: a lead professional, an advocate and knowledge/information manager, a commissioner and broker, a resource manager, a partnership manager, a quality assessor, a facilitator and a solution assembler (Cheminais, 2005). These areas aligned themselves well with my own position and I started evolving the role into a positive solution-finding one, as opposed to an assessment-driven, criteria-based administrative one (Morewood, 2008), which I saw all too often as I engaged with more and more colleagues across the UK.

An essential part of my developing role was having key staff take responsibility for different areas of provision: for example, communication and interaction, and physical, medical and sensory needs (see Morewood, 2009a & 2009b). Even though my own re-organisation and creative structures allowed me, as SENCo, to be more strategic and less 'administrative and statutory', elements that sometimes threaten to take over the SENCo role, it was also important for me to consider the professional status that my role should encompass. For the SENCo to be able to fulfil a more strategic approach to inclusion as a whole-school issue, there needs to be 'professional status' for the role itself, not only within that institution, but also for the person in the role. Attfield and Williams (2003) argue that this wider inclusive role 'must be seen as a key component of school improvement' (p. 30). Therein lies an important element of the developing SENCo role; the SEND priorities of the school must be 'whole-school'. Key elements of the whole-school approach that I have developed over the past decade are being delivered as part of a national project *A Whole School Approach to Improving Access, Participation and Achievement*, funded by the DfE and developed by Nasen and The Schools Network. The project aims to offer free training for every SENCo and provide them, and therefore all schools, with a training pack for developing their own inclusive classrooms and practices.

It is, however, important to re-consider the professional standing of the SENCo as an 'agent of change' (Cole, 2005), an advocate for the inclusion of children who are perceived as 'different', and as an advocate for parents/carers and other stakeholders as well (Morewood, 2008). This is exemplified in our work with students who have autism (see Morewood et al., 2011). If as SENCo you don't have the desire to embrace change and to develop the skills to affect it, the year ahead will be extremely challenging. It is

important to maintain a positive outlook, continuing to explore the balance between the SENCo's discourse of professionalism in which 'the expert knows best' (Fulcher, 1999, p.150), and the need for strategic, whole-school leadership for SEND and inclusion, an area that will develop considerably as other systems change during the year ahead. Challenging the idea that 'learning has a beginning and an end' (Wenger, 1998, p.3), and demonstrating that an effective SENCo is a constantly evolving professional, situated within a transient position in a complex mesh of specific legislation (including DDA, SEND, Green Paper, White Paper), educational structures, expectations (i.e. league tables and performance measures) and political influence are vital in helping to define the future SENCo, amongst the current developments and evolution of the role.

Almost all current research indicates that SENCos are a group of educational professionals who are completely committed to the most vulnerable children with whom they work (Cole, 2005). Great progress was made in making the SENCo role of high value, with the National Award (TDA, 2009). However, with funding to support this limping on, and issues of inspection compliance being dismissed by Ofsted, the future of this qualification may be in doubt, which would be a real shame. Any qualification that supports the professional status of the role increases impact from a personal perspective and whole-school one. Time to reflect and develop is limited in schools and undertaking a professional qualification allows you the time and support to develop this work, which is an essential part of the modern SENCo role. As Statements of SEN are, potentially, to be replaced with Education, Health and Care Plans, with Key Workers commissioning and, possibly, advocating for vulnerable groups and their families, the SENCo role has to evolve. The National Award may be seen as an essential support for new SENCos at these times of great change. I would suggest that all SENCos would welcome support and further professional development and training, especially in light of the proposals and policy changes ahead. It is important that SENCos continue to have support such as the DfE-hosted 'senco-forum', which is a free e-mail-based members list, in which SENCos and other professionals can share questions/problems and answers/solutions for mutual support.

Ultimately, since I first wrote about my perspective of the 21st Century SENCo in 2008, key principles of my perception of the role still underpin the requirements today. However, with the changes ahead in national systems and provision, the role will have to evolve further in order to ensure that vulnerable young people do not 'fall through the cracks'. After all, despite the rhetoric of the current administration, for me, *Every Child Does Still Matter*. I am lucky enough to be immersed in my role, but I don't forget my starting point. I think back to 2002, and consider how I would have managed if I had been starting now. The support of online forums, continuing professional development and training (NASENCO, for example) and face-to-face training from which I had ready-to-go materials for use in school ([www.nasentraining.org.uk](http://www.nasentraining.org.uk)) would be essential. I also consider my first thoughts, and that some elements have not changed; the effective SENCo does need a strong philosophical base from which to develop, and needs to find that balance between being able to lead and innovate, but also advocate and support. SENCo skills are as important as qualifications and leadership. I would argue, however, that there is some excellent work being done, which may be in danger of being lost. It is time to embrace change, but also to support and defend things that are working well. The SENCo cannot be effective in isolation and I hope that the impending White Paper supports the collaborative approaches to being a SENCo that have resulted in some excellent provision across the UK. Maintaining the SENCo status is an essential part of being able to work within the continually changing landscape.

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