

Is the 'inclusive SENCo' still a possibility?

A personal perspective

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This article examines some of the issues emerging with regard to the SENCo skill set and does so in the context of the current rapidly changing educational climate. The SENCo role has to evolve and adapt in order to meet ever-changing requirements. This involves a collective effort, in which a strong SENCo network and a collaborative approach have never been more important.

Key words: SENCo, inclusion, roles.

Introduction

Since the installation of a Coalition Government in England there have been, and continue to be, significant educational changes – all of which have had some impact on the way that special educational needs co-ordinators (SENcos) function. Included among them are:

- OFSTED SEN Review: *A Statement is Not Enough* (OFSTED, 2010);
- Education Bill (2011);
- SEND Green Paper: *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability* (DfE, 2011);
- Pupil Premium (from 2011, with online reporting from 2012);
- changing education climate (EBacc., exam changes, linear exams, etc.);
- New Inspection Framework (OFSTED, 2012);
- New Teachers' Standards (Sept. 2012).

This article considers the changing climate highlighted by the above initiatives, but does so in the context of the core principles of inclusive education. The latter has been the overarching conceptual orientation in special educational needs (SEN) in England for over 20 years and has significant relevance for the work undertaken by all SENcos. In doing this I draw on my own professional experiences, having been a SENCo in a large secondary school, where SEND provision was deemed to be 'outstanding' by OFSTED in 2004, 2008 and 2011. I adopt a reflective approach to this, drawing upon my own personal perspectives of the challenges and opportunities that present in a new era of educational development in England.

The SENCo role

The role of the SENCo in English schools has evolved considerably since its inception in 1994. However, even before the role was formalised through the *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (DfEE, 1994), many schools had a designated member of staff who co-ordinated this provision for those with specific additional needs.

The Code of Practice formalised this approach by placing a statutory duty on them to identify a specialist teacher to co-ordinate provision. After the initial 'establishment' of a specific role within school organisations for meeting the needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), a range of observations were recorded in relation to the quality of provision and staff undertaking the role (Parker and Bowell, 1998).

In 1998, the Teacher Training Agency published *National Standards* (TTA, 1998), which committed all schools to audit their provision and SENCo skill set for students with special educational needs and disabilities. This was 'sold' as an opportunity for SENcos to identify areas and opportunities for professional development; however, the variety of status with regard to the SENCo, in different establishments, provided a very varied response.

'The status of the Code is unusual in law in that "all those to whom the Code of Practice applies have a statutory duty to have regard to it; they must not ignore it"' (DfEE, 1994).

'This novel status has resulted in a wide-ranging response in practice at school and LEA level across England and Wales since 1994' (Parker and Bowell, 1998, p. 230).

As the role and its assessment developed, every mainstream school in England and Wales came to have a SENCo, who may be an individual member of the teaching staff or share responsibility with a team in the school (Lewis *et al.*, 1996). In the 1998 TTA *National Standards* four areas were identified:

- strategic direction and development of special educational needs provision in the school;

- teaching and learning;
- leading and managing staff;
- efficient and effective deployment of staff and resources.

Notwithstanding the assumption that the SENCo would be the ‘agent of change’, something I would argue is still appropriate today (Morewood, 2008), it was not intended that SENCos would have sole responsibility for students with special educational needs, although historically this was often the case in practice.

Much has been written about the SENCo role and its evolution; however I am more concerned about a perceived loss of a strong inclusive positioning afforded the role through whole-child thinking; for example the *Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills Framework* (<http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/skills/plts/index.aspx>) that provided a different curriculum focus, one which I embraced as a SENCo and which was promoted across the whole school.

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities were afforded unprecedented access to more appropriate skill development as part of the daily diet of ‘learning and participation’. This, combined with the new ‘focus’ on the SENCo, through the National Award and the developing ideas emerging from recent reviews and inquiries (*the Bercow Review*, www.dcsf.gov.uk/slcnaaction; *the Rose Review*, www.dcsf.gov.uk/jimroseanddyslexia; *the Lamb Inquiry*, www.dcsf.gov.uk/lambinquiry; *the Salt Review*, <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/saltreview>), set an exciting developmental scene against which SENCos operated. Vulnerable young people (including those with special educational needs and disabilities) were provided with a really inclusive foundation for the SENCo to build upon when the personalised perspectives highlighted by these various reviews were combined with the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda (DfES, 2003), summarised in the following thematic areas:

- being healthy;
- staying safe;
- enjoying and achieving;
- making a positive contribution;
- economic well-being.

A key element of the SENCo role as contributing to a whole-school approach is demonstrated by these five outcomes; they form the basis for our whole school reward system, for instance. For our school, the ECM agenda was most certainly a whole school priority and still is.

However, current Coalition rhetoric seems to be moving quite overtly away from such whole child positioning (<http://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/1021116/Government-clarifies-ban-Every-Child-Matters>) and is being refocused on academic attainment and literacy skills. I would agree that ensuring exam success (in whatever format and at whatever level) is substantially important as one indicator of

‘achievement’ for all students, and it is appropriate that literacy skills are high on any educational agenda. But I am fearful about the perceived threats to ‘whole child values’, outlined previously, if this is not a central part of our approach to meeting educational need.

The current backdrop aside, I have always been a keen advocate for exploring the balance between the SENCo’s discourse of professionalism, in which ‘the expert knows best’ (Fulcher, 1999), and the need for strategic, whole school leadership for SEND and inclusion. It is therefore important to challenge the idea that ‘learning has a beginning and an end’ (Wenger, 1998). We need to demonstrate in our practices that an effective SENCo is a fluid, organic and constantly evolving professional, situated within an ever-changing position in a complex mesh of specific legislation, educational structures and expectations (i.e., league tables, value added, levels of progress and performance measures, etc.). Such a way of thinking is vital in helping to define the future role of the SENCo.

Can SENCos maintain an ethical responsibility?

‘Inclusion, then, is an ethical project of responsibility to ourselves and others, which is driven by an insatiable desire for more’ (Allan, 1999, p. 126). The responsibility to which Allan refers forms an important part of the position from which I have developed as a SENCo (Morewood, 2008, 2009a, b). Yet the apparent threats outlined previously, in conjunction with the uncertainty currently surrounding outcomes from the SEND Green Paper (2011) consultation, combine to present SENCos with a confusing and uncertain future.

The Coalition Government’s desire to ‘remove the bias towards inclusion’ does feel somewhat at odds with my ‘ethical responsibility’ to the role. There have been challenges to this change in stance: Professor Richard Rose and nine other leading academics wrote to *The Guardian* newspaper (Rose *et al.*, 2011) challenging this ‘failure to understand the meaning of the term [inclusion]’. The letter continues:

‘While we acknowledge the substantial contributions to the education of children with SEN made by special schools, many who would previously have been placed in such schools have, over the last 30 years, benefited from an education alongside their peers. The Green Paper infers that “inclusion” is a privilege to be earned, as opposed to a socially just and fair approach to schooling with benefits for all. For many, these proposals signal their likely exclusion not only from mainstream education, but also from whatever “big society” this government intends to create’.

I have been a strong advocate of inclusive schooling throughout my teaching career and during my decade as a

SENCo. This has been demonstrated effectively through the pioneering work we have undertaken in our school in supporting the inclusion of students with hidden disabilities, specifically autism within our mainstream setting (Morewood *et al.*, 2011), principally through our bespoke, personalised ‘saturation model’. However, for the modern SENCo to pick up the baton of ‘ethical responsibility’, and maintain a position advocating strongly for students with special educational needs and disabilities, the system, per se, needs to continue to support the methodology, not work against it; therein lies the conflict.

SENCo skills

I feel it important to frame this political backdrop against a theoretical perspective. Considering Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault, 1998) helps me try to understand what skills are required, despite these external influences. Foucault interprets this as a question; where are we in our actuality? This defined position – what are we today? – allows us to frame understandings within a context. This is something that is vital considering the rapidly changing landscape and shifting political bias within the arenas of SEN and disability, as outlined previously.

In trying to make sense of the skills of the SENCo, I consider the views of the young people with whom SENCos work directly; challenges facing students with special educational needs and disabilities have parallels to the current SENCo position. Allan discusses the voices of six young people who have special educational needs and their journeys to ‘challenge the identities and experiences which had been constructed for them within formal school regimes and the informal discourses of teachers and pupils’ (Allan, 1999, p. 46). These are, in effect, the ‘technologies of the self’ that Foucault describes as a developing, deeper framework.

In order to ensure clarity, it is important to understand the framework from Foucault’s perspective, as used by Allan. Allan interprets these ‘acts of resistance’ as things that are not invented by the individual themselves, but patterns that are found in their culture which are proposed, suggested or imposed on them by their culture, their society and their social group; or in this case the political landscape.

Allan continues, providing a key summary for her work and the emerging methodology for my own:

‘Technologies of the self are transgressive and involve, not direct confrontation or antagonism, but a much more agonistic kind of struggle against those who attempt to label them as disabled or restrict their participation within mainstream classrooms’ (Allan, 1999, p. 46).

This summary supports initial views that the Coalition’s ‘removal of the bias towards inclusion’ is a harmful one; not only with regard to the wider inclusive agenda and the ideals about ‘inclusion’ being a right and ‘socially just’, but also in

terms of this ‘transformation’ from one kind of self to another. The empowerment of young people with regard to them’selves’ will be eroded further, with political changes to the ‘basis’, which I would argue previously (ECM/PLTS, etc.) provided a better balance.

Allan comments on Foucault’s descriptions of transgression: ‘an individual is a disciplined object formed by a policy of coercions that act upon the body’ (Foucault, 1977a, p. 47). I interpret this as that we, working within structures and institutions that have clear, evolved social processes, intentionally engage in that ‘mirroring’ behaviour; that is, we become ‘constrained’ by the evolved expectation of the system. Perhaps more so presently, considering the new inspection framework and other legislative changes? We are in effect, in a SENCo straitjacket.

Transgression would, to me, echo Allan’s (1999) interpretation of Foucault: ‘[transgression] appears to offer scope for a kind of creativity which does not promise complete freedom, but enables alternative versions of constraint’ (Foucault, 1977a, p. 47); perhaps we can loosen the constraints and free our arms from our restraints?

As a SENCo I am ‘constrained’ by regulations and legislation, in addition to the direction and emphasis that ‘inclusion’, per se, has within the setting in which I work. However, that does not mean that ‘transgression’ cannot occur, or be forced through the philosophy of my discharging of the role. To this end, while Allan’s work looked at the ‘struggle’ for young people within their settings, I see these themes as direct comparators to my SENCo struggle, in a bid to develop the wider agenda and provision, from my skill set and bedrock of a personal definition of inclusion, maintained in spite of different influences nationally and within schools themselves.

As I develop ideas around ‘alternative versions of constraint’, I consider further Foucault’s view that transgression is a ‘spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust’ (Foucault, 1977b, p. 35); this is perhaps identified more clearly for me through Allan’s interpretation that it is a continuum ‘which seeks to laugh in the face of those who have imposed limits’ (Allan, 1999, p. 48). This is one of the key elements of my perceived SENCo skill set: being able to work outside ‘normal’ constraints and ‘laugh’ (although perhaps I should use that language advisedly) at those constraints and imposed limits. The SENCo does not necessarily transcend limits and, in effect, ‘rewrite’ structures and ‘rules’ per se but, as Foucault describes, ‘provides an unstable space where limits are freed’ (Foucault, 1977b, pp. 35–36).

Pickett (1996, p. 445) argues, however, that the strength of Foucault’s work (the strong sense that power is ubiquitous and all-encompassing, for example) is in fact a weakness, alleging that Foucault ‘presents a bleak view of disciplinary society that he ultimately paralyses, rather than promote resistance’. These ideas around resistance are interesting, especially in light of the SENCo role, and myself. Pickett

argues that Foucaultian resistance does not set limits on the boundaries or types of activity that resistance can take. Foucault's argument for rejecting the placing of limits is that those who are engaged become trapped in the very system of power they are trying to overcome, therefore taking the 'form of a spiral' (Foucault, 1977b) or, perhaps, a self-fulfilling helix entrapping the SENCo in their own world.

Bourdieu, writing at a similar time, suggests that individuals become 'either dominant or subservient' (Bourdieu, 1977, in Rose, 2010) within society according to the distribution of resources. Rose continues to consider how Bourdieu identified four forms of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – and that these impact upon those in both positions of dominance and (self-perceived) positions of weakness. In addressing marginalisation Rose explains that Bourdieu saw it 'necessary to empower those individuals whose capital is currently low' (Rose, 2010, p. 4). One may argue that the current SENCo 'capital' is in recession.

I see the SENCo role as one of empowerment. The SENCo needs to transcend and resist, and therefore be empowered in raising the capital of those who are in positions (often, self-perceived) of alleged weakness. This echoes my long-standing view that being a strong advocate is a key skill set for the 21st-century SENCo (Morewood, 2008).

An evolving SENCo skill set, a way forward . . . final thoughts

The tensions currently surrounding national policy and provision are causing a great deal of uncertainty (a glance at SENCo Forum messages and debates from early 2012, for example, will confirm this). With a change in inspection focus (OFSTED, 2012) and increased pressure with regard to results, we are in danger of forgetting that we once thought Every Child Matters; for some, alas, this is already a historical reference.

We need to find ways of increasing the SENCo capital and support growth; this has to be a collective task. Never has it been more important to have a strong SENCo network and a collective approach.

The basis of this article is to raise questions and set the scene for considering the future skills of the modern SENCo. It is important to remember that the SENCo role has to evolve (Morewood, 2011a, b) and simply standing still may see a fall into deficit that may prove too difficult to reverse. So, as I consider the political and theoretical tensions surrounding the SENCo role, I will continue to explore my own skill set, and strive to ensure that the new central messages do not make colleagues lose sight of the fact that *Every Child* should still *Matter*.

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