



The role of the SENCO

Special educational needs

Current issues

Up until the early 1990s, the teaching of students with special educational needs (SEN) was isolated from mainstream schooling. Most students identified as having SEN were withdrawn from their classrooms to be taught specific, basic skills by an SEN teacher. Much of the work they did had little connection to the curriculum that was taught to the other students in their classroom, and, when the students returned to work alongside their peers, they were often given holding work rather than being included in the wider classroom activities.

Under the 1993 Education Act, all children were granted the opportunity to access their education in a mainstream school and this was supported in 1994 by the introduction of the *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (Department for Education, 1994). This document gave schools guidance on how to make provision for students with SEN.

The growing impetus of the inclusion agenda meant that if schools were to be able to meet the needs of all students in an effective way there needed to be a managerial post in every school to lead and support teachers in this process. The special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) was to be the key person with responsibility for implementing the Code of Practice. The role of the SENCO has never been easy to define and has always been open to interpretation. It has evolved differently within each school based on its needs.

The current Department for Education statistics indicate that 20% of our school and academy population are identified as having an SEN and/or disability and the majority of these are in mainstream. To be able to offer an inclusive education system we have to ensure that academies can meet the needs of all students irrespective of their individual or additional need.

The role of the SENCO is key to this development. Recent research carried out by nasen (formerly the National Association for Special Educational Needs) and the University of Leeds indicated that over half of current SENCOs would retire in the next five to 10 years. It also highlighted the fact that the SENCO role has never been a clear career pathway for many who are currently in post. These issues needed to be addressed and, in September 2008, when the SENCO regulations (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) came into force, we began to see a shift in the role of the 21st century SENCO.

Organisational response

The SENCO regulations not only made it mandatory for the SENCO to be a qualified teacher, but also gave a clear message to governing bodies that they must define the role of the SENCO in relation to the leadership and management of the school or academy and monitor the actions of the SENCO in relation to key areas of the role. There was also a requirement that from September 2008 all new-to-role SENCOs must undergo the National Award for SEN coordination training.

Many schools and academies have already acknowledged that they need to give the SENCO the status, training and resources they need to manage their SEN provision effectively and efficiently. In this time of reducing budgets and severe financial constraints it is even more important that academies acknowledge the vital role that this individual must play in the leadership and management of this provision.

Every academy needs to understand that every teacher is a teacher of students with SEN and disabilities. The SEN provision is a whole academy issue that demands whole academy support, BUT there needs to be one person that coordinates that provision working alongside the leadership team, the governing body, staff, students and parents to enable the needs of every student to be met through effective policy and practice.

Practice implications

The National Award for SENCO Accreditation defines a very clear set of roles and responsibilities expected from SENCOs in our academies today. SENCOs need to have knowledge of:

- statutory and regulatory frameworks and relevant developments at national and local level
- high incidence SEN and disabilities and how they can affect students' participation and learning
- how to use evidence about learning, teaching and assessment in relation to students with SEN to inform practice.

SENCOs need to be able to:

- work strategically with senior colleagues and governors
- undertake strategic financial planning, budget management and use of resources in line with best value principles
- embed strategies for improving outcomes for students with SEN and disabilities
- develop, use, monitor and evaluate systems
- use tools for collecting, analysing and using data.

SENCOs should have responsibility for:

- deploying staff and managing resources
- providing professional direction to the work of others
- providing leadership, development and training of all staff.

SENCOs need to have the skills and knowledge to be able to:

- draw on external sources of support and expertise
- consult, engage and communicate with colleagues, parents and carers and students to enhance students' learning and achievement.

In recent years, there has been a plethora of reports, research projects and professional development initiatives that have raised the profile of SEN and had an impact on practice in schools and academies. Many of these have had a direct impact on the role and work-load of the SENCO.

For example, the Lamb Report (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009) had 51 recommendations, many of which impact on the role of the SENCO and offer opportunities to provide better provision for all students. It included recommendations that:

- The principles of *Achievement for All* should be embedded within all schools and academies.
- SENCOs will need to be aware of the good practice examples from the 10 local authority pilot projects and begin to embed them within their academy practice.
- SENCOs should be able to access specialist support and advice from specialist dyslexia teachers.
- New specialist SEN and disability resources should be introduced to support initial teacher training.
- The SENCO will need to be able to guide, direct and support new teachers in their academies.
- SENCOs should be required to play a crucial role in leading teaching and learning of students with SEN and advising other staff within the school or academy on effective approaches and interventions.
- New guidance issued on the effective deployment of teaching assistants should directly impact on the work and support that SENCO give to their support staff.
- New governor training should give high profile to governor responsibility for SEN and disability.

Future considerations

Many of these initiatives were put on hold with the change of government, but it is expected that many of these recommendations will be taken into consideration.

It is very important that academies do not relinquish the impetus that was started with the introduction of the SENCO regulations. Now, more than ever, we need academies to embed excellent SEN practice throughout their establishments as future challenges begin to impact on teaching and learning.

The voice of both parents and students will be strengthened resulting in a need to develop even stronger links between all the professionals working with families. Academies will need to encourage good behaviour, strong discipline and safety whilst providing a personalised curriculum that will meet the needs of all students.

Clusters of schools and academies will need to take their expertise, experience and good practice and share collaboratively with each other with special schools and academies becoming centres of excellence at the hub of these clusters.

With changes to the way funding is delegated and the potential cuts in the total education budget, the SENCO must take responsibility for the SEN funding allocated to their academy. They must work with the leadership team and governing body to ensure that the most vulnerable students in their academy receive not only the resources allocated to them, but also additional provision if necessary.

The SENCO must also ensure that children and young people with a statement of special educational needs receive the full provision highlighted within their statement. There is a legal responsibility to ensure that the individual has adequate support to meet the needs of the statement. This is another challenge for the SENCO if the funding that supports this is hidden within the academy budget.

With the developments in modern medical science, enhanced assessment techniques and raised awareness, we have increasing numbers of students with more complex needs entering our academies daily. We need to ensure that we have well-trained and experienced teachers to be able to identify, assess and develop the pedagogy to enable all these students to be able to access an educational experience that will meet their diverse and complex needs.

The SENCO will be pivotal to meeting this challenge. We need well-trained, flexible and experienced leaders who are able to challenge, support and collaborate to ensure that the teaching and learning in every academy is meeting the needs of all children.