

# A critical review of a senco



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A critical review on the role of the SENCO and dyslexia: how this role has been affected and impacted upon by recent legislation Introduction The BDA Dyslexia Friendly Schools Pack for Teachers (2009) provides an overall guide of what dyslexia is and how a dyslexia friendly school should be delivering education to the dyslexic learner. The writers begin with a definition of dyslexia stating that “ dyslexia is a learning difference, a combination of strengths and weaknesses”.

This is an informative definition as opposed to the recommendation of Norwich et al (2005) that exemplary schools should promote an inclusive school system whereby dyslexia is considered but not in isolation. The BDA (2009) state that importance ought to be placed on acknowledging dyslexia as “ a specific learning difficulty” as a specific learning difference” so that teaching is inclusive and focuses on all learners rather than just the dyslexic learner who may already feel something is wrong with them.

However, I stress that this general definition is simplistic and I agree with Reid that there should be a working/operational definition. Reid’s definition of dyslexia is more informative: There may be visual and phonological difficulties and there is usually some discrepancy in performances in different areas of learning. It is important that the individual differences and learning styles are acknowledged since these will affect outcomes of assessment and learning. (p. 4-5, Reid, 2003).

The BDA (2009) conclude to achieve BDA Quality Mark status, LEAs and their associated schools must encourage and identify outstanding practice in following and improving access to education for all learners. I feel that planning a dyslexia friendly school has the effect of improving the learning of

not just the dyslexic learner but other pupils as well. According to Snowling et al (2011), dyslexia is seen to be a “ deficit in phonological skills which, in turn, compromises the ability to learn the grapheme–phoneme mappings that underpin competence in an alphabetic system”.

Snowling et al’s (2011) research underpins the classic definition of dyslexia that it is a specific reading difficulty whereby literacy under achievement is apparent and falls below the accepted level given the intelligence of the learner. This study is important: it goes beyond recounting dyslexia at the behavioural level (i. e. incorrect spelling and reading) to taking into consideration weaknesses at the cognitive level that explicate the practical problems (Morton & Frith, 1995).

Dyslexic learners have deficits in three linked but dissimilar areas of phonological processing: “ phonological awareness (the ability to attend to and manipulate sounds in words); phonological memory (memory for speech-based information – also referred to as verbal memory); and naming (providing the spoken label for a visual referent)”. (Vellutino et al. , 2004). Consequently, recent definitions of dyslexia have discarded the need for literacy to be appreciably below general aptitude, and have taken a widely accepted view of dyslexia with “ phonological processing as a core deficit” (Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2003).

## **Context**

The context in which I am employed is a small mainstream one-form entry Church of England voluntary aided primary school. The school is situated in a deprived inner city area in the London borough of Lewisham where 25% of the 225 children on roll from Nursery through to Year 6 are eligible for Free

School Meals. This is significantly higher than 2006 national figures of 16% of all primary school children receiving Free School Meals (FSM). The number of children currently identified as having a Special Educational Need is 47, or 20.8% of the total school population which is slightly higher than 2005 national figures of 18%.

The figure of 1.7% is the number of SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) children who have a Statement of Special Educational Need - lower than national figures of 3% - and the remainder of the SEND population comprises overwhelmingly of children on School Action Plus (78% - 67.5% represented by boys and 32.5% represented by girls) and approximately 8% of SEND children on School Action. The largest identified area of special need in the school falls under SLCN (Speech, Language and Communication Need) as set out in the SEN Code of Practice 2001 where 61% of SEND children have a medical diagnosis of receptive and/or expressive language difficulty, followed by 21% of SEND children with a medical diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Other types of need are Down's Syndrome (2%), Apert's Syndrome (2%), Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties SEBD (6%), Dyslexia (2%) and more generally literacy difficulties which are under investigation for potential specific causes (6%). These needs are justifiable as they have been recognised and identified as such by relevantly qualified and external agencies or are in the process of being more specifically identified.

A critical review of the role of the SENCO The role of the SENCO has developed through government policy and undergone significant changes in the past decade with the introduction of the statutory SEN Code of Practice

2001 which states that the role of the SENCo includes identifying and placing pupils in need of special educational provision on a graduated system, liaising with parents and other professionals in regards to children with SEND and advising and supporting other practitioners in the field amongst other responsibilities.

This was largely interpreted as a co-ordinating role whereby Teaching Assistants ( in at least 36% of schools ) were employed in this capacity and contributed to disparities in provision nationally as well as a divergence of roles. In 2009 new government regulations and amendments to the SEN Code of Practice 2001 required SENCos to be qualified teachers and for those teachers new to the role to undergo compulsory training in the form of the National Award of SEN Coordination.

The 2006 House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee Report on SEN clearly defines the role of the SENCo as a strategic leader, and recommended that SENCos “ should in all cases be qualified teachers and in a senior management position in the school as recommended in the SEN Code of Practice”. (Recommendation 84) Statutory and regulatory frameworks and relevant developments at national and local level The SEN Code of Practice 2001 remains the statutory legislation governing SEN practice and provision.

The 2001 Code of Practice replaces the 1994 Code of Practice, although it retains much of the original guidance, but takes into account developments in education since 1994 and includes new obligations introduced by the SEN and Disability Act 2001. The 2001 Code of Practice promotes a more consistent approach to meeting the needs of children with SEN and focuses

on preventative work and early identification as well as developing strong partnerships between parents, schools, local authorities, health and social services and voluntary organisations.

The school Special Educational Needs and Disability policy is largely based on the SEN Code of Practice 2001 and incorporates elements of the statutory Disability Discrimination Act 2005, as well as local authority guidance of national policy, such as the Lewisham school action & school action plus guidance 2010. The school policy clearly states: “ A child is deemed to have special educational needs when they are seen to have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of their age group, or have a disability which significantly hinders their use of educational facilities.

When such difficulties or disabilities persistently demand the planning of educational provision different from that of the rest of the class, the child is placed on the Special Needs and Disabilities Profile. This is a confidential list of children for whom extra support may be necessary and whose progress will be monitored by the class teacher and Inclusion Manager. ” ( Rose & Lyle, 2011, p1) Some elements of the SEN Code of Practice 2001 framework are guidance, whilst others must be observed.

This includes ensuring liaison with parents and other professionals in respect to children with SEN, ensuring that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are in place and that relevant information about individual children with SEN is collated, recorded and updated. The Code ensures that schools and local authorities must examine their practice and provision for children with SEN and that they are accountable by law – e. g. offering full access to a broad, balanced and relevant education.

The Code of Practice emphasises the right of a child with SEN to access mainstream education through the development of provision in such settings to meet “ a wide spectrum of SEN” (COP 2001, 7: 52-7: 63) that may overlap in the categories of communication and interaction, cognition and learning, behaviour, emotional and social development and sensory and/or physical needs. The provision provided may involve well-differentiated Quality First teaching (Edwards 2010), intervention programmes including withdrawal from class, specialist teaching or therapy or attendance ( full or part time ) at a specialist setting. Children are to be identified as early as possible and their needs met through a graduated approach within the school’s own resources ( School Action), additional support from external agencies ( School Action Plus ), or if progress is inadequate and further support from the Local authority is required, a Statement of Special Educational Needs may be issued.

As I prepared this essay, I have identified a number of key tensions in my particular school: Whilst class teachers in my school accept, in accordance with the National Curriculum Inclusion Statement 1999, that they must respond to children’s diverse learning needs and overcome potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils, including those with SEND, there has been a lack of clarity over the meaning of the term “ inclusion” and with whom the overall responsibility of children on the SEND register lies.

This is hardly surprising as there is little consensus on the precise meaning of ‘ inclusion’ at national levels – OFSTED tend to view inclusion as minimising inequalities for groups of children – eg. including those with

SEND, on FSM, gender, race or attainment – whilst teachers primarily regard inclusion chiefly in terms of individuals with SEND ( NASUWT Report 2008, p. 17 ) and their “ right” to be included in a mainstream classroom and how to best achieve this.

Increasingly, I favour a model which allows individual children – whether SEND, English as an Additional Language (EAL) or non-SEND – to access an education which best meets their needs based as much as possible within the mainstream classroom but through withdrawing children for specialist 1: 1 or small group teaching depending on their needs and the gaps in their knowledge relative to their peers and age-related expectations.

The non-statutory Removing Barriers for Achievement (2004) highlights that all teachers – not just the SENCO or Inclusion Manager – are responsible for teaching children with SEND. This also includes communicating the message to class teachers that they are often best placed to initially notice difficulties a child may be having and by making certain referral forms available to them, thereby actively engaging them in jointly taking responsibility for SEND or potential SEND children in their classes.

The Every Child Matters (2004) agenda is currently not statutory and is now being re-drafted as Every Child Achieves in a new White Paper, although the five original outcomes remain. The 5 outcomes are: to stay safe, to be healthy, to enjoy and achieve, to make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. The focus for schools not only has to be upon ensuring that all staff are aware of the 5 outcomes, but also on the impact and progress made towards the 5 outcomes by all pupils and individuals within vulnerable groups, such as children with Special Educational Needs.



Such agendas which sit alongside other requirements on class teachers to also focus on group outcomes such as groups of children attaining age – related expectations hence creates pulls in opposing directions as to the levels of attainment a child is achieving and the best outcome for that child – or “ competing rather than complementary agendas. There is a lack of clarity as to whether educational policy is concerned with ‘ normalisation’ and conformity, or genuinely values diversity and difference (NASUWT Report 2008, p. 18 ). This tension is a theme which continues in the form of ‘ narrowing the gaps’ between groups and ‘ accelerated progress’.

In the case of children with Speech and Language difficulties or dyslexic tendencies, these terms appear contradictory and oxymoronic – as typically such children need reinforcement and over learning compared to their peers operating at age-related expectations. It is hard to see how such children can make the requisite amount of progress as measured by national age-related attainment standards ( and making a minimum of 2 sub levels progress a year ) as opposed to progress as measured against their individual areas of weakness and specific difficulties.

Measured this latter way, their progress may well be excellent although a system of levels and sub-levels may fail to be sensitive enough to chart this progress. I am therefore examining ways such as building in pre- and post intervention screening for relevant children and considering using Assessing Pupils’ Progress (APP) Speaking and Listening levels in addition to National Curriculum levels in Reading, Writing and Maths to more sensitively measure progress.

The contribution of extended services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Educational Psychology, Family Services, and Early Intervention Services to improve outcomes for children as set out in ECM(2004) is welcomed, although it is hard to measure the impact and the progress that this may have for a number of reasons: in changing times, it is at times difficult to keep abreast of developments and changes to services offered and their accessibility; various services may have a varying level of impact on different children and their families; not all parents are receptive – and some positively resistant – to accepting referrals to certain services; there can be a diffusion of responsibility once various agencies are involved. As a SENCo, one would encounter all of these barriers and find that developing good working, collaborative and supportive relationships with all representatives of extended services that a SENCo works closely with as well as parents is the best way forward and ensuring that communication channels are maintained.

This has to be carefully weighed against issues of data protection and confidentiality by ensuring for example that Common Assessment Frameworks (CAFs) are raised before information is shared between agencies and that all sensitive information is stored in a safe location to which only a SENCo and the Headteacher have access. However, to enable class teachers to better understand the needs of children that a SENCo teaches on a daily basis, the SENCo would ensure that all class teachers are provided with relevant reports from external agencies and that these are used appropriately to inform planning and provision for a child within both a classroom and wider school setting.

High incidence of SEN and dyslexia – how they can affect pupils’ participation and learning and strategies to remove barriers to learning Baroness Warnock is quoted: “ SEN has come to be the name of a single category, and the government uses it as if it is the same problem to include a child in a wheelchair and a child with Asperger’s, and that is conspicuously untrue” (The Guardian, Tuesday January 31, 2006). Indeed, the 2006 House of Commons Select Committee Report on Special Educational Needs acknowledges that “ children exist on a broad continuum of needs and learning styles but do not fit into neat categories of different sorts of children – those with and without SEN.

The category of “ SEN” is an arbitrary distinction that leads to false classifications and, it can be argued that, this is what is causing the high levels of conflict and frustration with all those involved. ” (p. 36) This has often been my experience when discussing the progress of various pupils on the SEND register with senior leadership who frequently use the terminology “ SEND” and “ non-SEND”. I am of the opinion that this is a blanket term which does little to understand the true nature of individual children’s difficulties and how best to address these. OFSTED comparison of groups engenders such an approach and is not sensitive enough to the variation between individuals.

In the case of my school, it appears that the group most at risk of underachieving is higher ability girls – with no SEN! With an emphasis on the social context of special educational needs, Removing Barriers to Achievement (2004, p. 8,) states: “ Difficulties in learning often arise from an unsuitable environment- inappropriate grouping of pupils, inflexible teaching

styles, or inaccessible curriculum - as much from individual children's physical, sensory or cognitive impairments. Children' emotional and mental health needs may also have a significant impact on their ability to make the most of the opportunities in school, as may family circumstances. "

These considerations, combined with evidence that there is a link between social deprivation and SEN nationally - as well as underachievement nationally and social deprivation, can make identification of SEN problematic in my school, especially at School Action Level - for example, is a child making poor progress in reading and writing because of difficulties such as potential dyslexia, or through poor parenting and a lack of exposure to books at home? Or both? Should the child be on the SEND register and is he/she underachieving? In such cases, assessment and targeted intervention at the specific area of weakness can help differentiate between a range of possible factors, but it may not always be so clear cut. What is clear is that these difficulties need to be addressed to minimise the longer term effects on such a child's development and to help them succeed in the future.

This can involve working very closely, and in partnership with parents in order to create a sustainable and longer term solution. The OFSTED Special Educational Needs and Disability Review 2010 found that the term ' Special Educational Needs' was too widely used with up 50% of schools visited using low attainment and slow progress as the key indicators of a special educational need, with in some cases, very little further assessment. According to the report, 50% of all pupils identified for School Action would not be identified as such if, " schools focussed on improving teaching and learning for all, with individualgoalsfor improvement" (p. 3). This suggested

acultureof underachievement due to low pupil expectations and poor mainstream teaching provision.

It also found that pupils identified as having special educational needs were disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds and achieved less well than their peers in terms of attainment and progress over time. Parents were keen to have their children formally recognised as having special educational needs in order to ensure additional support for their child. The quality of the additional support from within or outside the school was not found to be good by inspectors. Provision was often not appropriate or of good enough quality and did not lead to better outcomes for the child. The review found that no one model or setting of special needs provision worked better than another.

The key findings included improving the quality of assessment, improving teaching at an early stage to avoid additional provision at a later stage, ensuring that schools do not over-identify children as having special educational needs when better Quality First Teaching was required, ensuring that additional support was effective and developing specialist provision and services. A result of such findings and the implications for my school have been: 1. A reduction in the number of children placed on School Action – either by not being placed on the SEND register, or by being removed from it. In many cases, identified labels were “ behavioural”.

There is evidence that good class teacher behaviour management, combined with weekly visits from a pupil referral unit outreach worker, as well as a Learning Mentor, has helped to remove some emotional barriers to some children’s learning. However, definitions of ‘ behavioural difficulty’ can still

remain unclear as this can be a fluid and relative term dependent on the setting of a class and the nature and frequency of behavioural challenge - and hence vary nationally as well as within a school. Children remaining on school action are largely children with ongoing literacy difficulties, whose difficulties are being examined more specifically as suspected dyslexia.

Improved training for Teaching Assistants who are often the staff working closely with children identified with SEND. This has included in-house training and attendance on specific courses as well as reaching a minimum standard in Maths and English. Time factors and competing demands on Teaching Assistants' time however are considerable constraints and hinder the impact that this training may have. The school now employs a NumbersCounts maths specialist. The impact of this specialist teaching needs greater time to develop to measure its effectiveness - although I do not feel that curriculum sub-levels may necessarily be the best way to measure this impact for certain children. 3.

A focus on Quality First teaching so that all staff educate, share and promote practical and achievable ways for every class teacher to adopt strategies as a matter of daily routine that are inclusive to children with Speech and Language difficulties and dyslexic tendencies - to embed this in a culture of good general practice and reduce the potential for children to be classified as 'SEN' when underachievement is the issue and provide a good learning environment for all children - including those with SEN. The Code of Practice (2001) outlines four main areas of need - cognition and learning, behaviour, emotional and social development needs, communication and interaction and sensory and/or physical needs. Compared to national 2006 figures

( DfES Special Educational Needs in England, January 2006. SFR23/2006), our school has a far higher incidence of Speech and Language difficulties including dyslexia ( 61% of the SEND register ) ASD ( 21%) than the national figures ( 14. 3% and 2. 4% respectively ) but a much lower incidence of BESD ( 6% to 26. 5% nationally ). Part of the reason may be recent school investment in enhanced Speech and Language Service from the NHS, where the school together with 4 other local schools, funds weekly Speech and Language therapist time. This has led to a high rate of referrals, which has led to a higher rate of detection. This picture is not evenly spread however – the investment in Speech and Language, although justifiable as such difficulties impede access to many parts of the curriculum, comes at a cost to other categories of SEND as identified by the Code of Practice.

Other children's needs are not always met quickly ( sometimes more than 2 terms ) despite early identification due to lengthy waiting times for assessments with ' low level, high incidence' learning difficulties such as dyslexia having low priority in the hierarchy of urgency . There are only 2 Specialist Teachers qualified to formally diagnose dyslexia provided by the Lewisham Inclusion Service to support the needs of children in mainstream settings whose time is shared between 92 schools in the borough. This means that specialist provision increasingly needs to be provided within the school setting and is dependent of current staff levels of expertise.

This can create variability in the quality of provision for children with SEN across schools in the same locality. In accordance with the Equalities Act 2010 and Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), schools must make reasonable adjustments for children with SEN and disabilities to access

testing that does not discriminate against them on the basis of their disability or special need. A learner with a Statement of Special Educational Needs automatically qualifies for up to 25% additional time in order to complete testing in Reading, Writing and Mathematics at the end of KS2 – however changes in the criteria for awarding Statements of SEN in Lewisham have amounted to fewer statements being issued and financial savings for the authority.

A diagnosis of dyslexia would not however result in additional time if the learner does not have a Statement unless considerable additional documentation is provided. The use of a scribe, transcript, technology such as a laptop or reader however for a dyslexic learner is discretionary upon a school's assessment of the learner's need in order to access the tests and can be easily arranged. It is at least reasonable for Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCA) guidelines to permit such measures as scribes or laptops to remove potential barriers to performance for children with certain types of need under formal examination conditions to access the knowledge held by children who may not best be able to demonstrate in written form.

In conclusion, whilst various governmental policies have aimed to improve the outcomes for children with SEND, there are difficulties – some unforeseen – between the principles set out and the translation of these into practice, with gaps and variations on local and national levels. We await the forthcoming new legislation around SEND and the implications that this will have on the ever-developing role of the SENCo forging a strategic path to



best meet the needs - Special Educational and otherwise - of families and children within a tighter resource framework.

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