

# The issues facing heads and senco education essay



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During the new Labour party politics of the 1990's and into the beginning of the twenty first century revolutionary educational legislation emerged, with a broader emphasis on child welfare and interdependent philosophies relating to joined-up learning and knowledge sharing. Much of this new thinking was exemplified within the 2004 national framework document Every Child Matters: Change for Children. This focused its attention on building new reforms around the recently secured Children Act of the same year and responded to the green paper of the same name published two years previously. The green paper highlights the Government's integration of young people with Special Education Needs and disabilities into mainstream schools, (DfES, 2003: 33) which it achieved through the provisions of the 2001 Special Education Needs and Disability Act. During 2001 the Special Education Needs Code of Practice was also drafted and outlined the role of the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO). In mainstream secondary schools responsibility was assigned to new staff that would work in collaboration with head teachers and governing bodies to assist with raising attainment levels of pupils with special education needs. Essentially it is the remit of the secondary school SENCO to:

oversee the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy

liaise with and advise fellow teachers

manage the SEN team of teachers and learning support assistants

coordinate provision for pupils with special educational needs

oversee the records on all pupils with special educational needs

liaise with parents of pupils with special educational needs

contribute to the in-service training of staff

liaise with external agencies including the LEA's support and educational

work with psychology services, the Connexions PA, health and social services and voluntary bodies

(DfES, 2001: 71)

Similarly the head teacher of a school now has to work alongside governing bodies to decide the schools general policy and the way the school approaches meeting the needs of SEN pupils as well as recruiting appropriate staff and allocating sufficient funding for this area. The head teacher is also responsible for ensuring that all statements issued by LEA's of individual pupils are fully communicated to all those working with them.

Unlike the SEN Co-ordinator the Head teacher has overall responsibility for delivering and maintaining the school's SEN policy and liaising closely with the SENCO and governing bodies (DfES, 2001: 16-24)

This paper will investigate the two roles in greater detail within the context of mainstream Secondary School learning, in an attempt to rationalise their individual responsibilities and levels of difficulty where integrating school systems within the new holistic remit for the sector is concerned.

A 2004 Ofsted report analysing the impact on mainstream schools following new legislation, reveals the inability for many schools to embed SEN provision.

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Special Education needs and disability: Towards inclusive schools also illustrates the effective work undertaken by SENCO's to develop staff awareness through training and by way of instigating new classroom strategies. The report draws attention to the fact that SENCO's have the ability to encourage an overall ethos across schools for embracing inclusivity by developing programmes and events that involve both staff and pupils. (Ofsted, 2004: 9) Nonetheless Ofsted also identify a number of difficulties expressed by SENCO staff who find it difficult persuading their co-workers to adopt the principles needed to adhere to inclusive best practice. The consequences of this in the longer-term can leave SENCO's feeling disempowered and lacking in confidence, which impacts on inadequate provision being made. One of the more typical repercussions of the inability of SENCO's to fulfill their job descriptions is related to the fact that despite having considerable experience of teaching pupils with a range of learning difficulties, they are limited in their ability to manage these problems practically. Previous Schools' pastoral systems and senior management teams have traditionally met these responsibilities which can generate even greater tensions amongst staff who feel their positions are threatened by newly appointed SENCO's. (Ofsted, 2004: 12)

In comparison Head teachers are responsible for allocating funding towards integrating the school as a whole. As each statemented pupil is received into the school with funding attached, their departure can disrupt the balance of finances, making it harder to retain permanent contracted staff.

Consequently this has become a major recruitment issue for many schools having to employ part-time casual workers. Head teachers also need to

ensure schools are made fully accessible, which generates enormous complications where providing suitable physical accommodation for specific needs is concerned (Ofsted, 2004: 25)

SENCO's have a tremendous administrative burden due to the extent of the bureaucratic statutory requirements involved with deploying SEN across mainstream schools. This has resulted in a number of SENCO's having their time limited when working directly with pupils and teaching staff as well as leaving gaps in their training to enable them to effectively manage and monitor SEN pupils learning in secondary schools. (DfES 2004: 24-57)

In contrast head teachers need to demonstrate strong leadership skills as well as commitment to building the school's specialist resources. They also have to be the first point of contact for local authority liaison and ensure that they maintain excellent partnership links within the borough generally. This involves a degree of profile raising and for head teachers to actively encourage and work towards holistic inclusivity. Their role is to be self-evaluative and to take ownership of the school's position where ensuring inclusion is concerned. (DfES, 2004: 80)

It is evident that the move by many mainstream schools towards addressing the SEN assimilation remains a difficult one, which lacks cohesion and has resulted in new pressures on the sector at a time when it already faces criticism for failing attainment levels. Baroness Mary Warnock introduced the concept of special education needs and her committee leadership into subsequent inquiries during the 1970's has heralded her an expert in the field. (House of Commons, 2006a: 147)

Warnock's 2005 report *Special education Needs: A New Look* takes a retrospective approach to mainstream school integration which criticises many of the attempts currently being applied. In particular she addresses the 'gradations of need' which have not specifically been accounted for within schools. (2005: 13)

Warnock emphasises the implications of over-burdening schools with trying to cater to too many special needs and states that these should also continue to be provided in designated SEN schools. Her comments draw attention to the wider issues and justify many of the key concerns for both head teachers and SENCO's working in this field.

There are few national systems in place for measuring the success of SEN pupils in mainstream schools, this can be attributed to the fact that provision is supposed to be based on support rather than academic outcomes, despite the fact that SEN pupils need to obtain a certain level towards the end of their key stage assessments. This lack of guidance where SEN assessment is concerned has resulted in mainstream schools not being able to set themselves targets for overall improvement. All they can demonstrate are the improvements made against each individual pupil. As SEN provision is more operational than strategic in this way the pressures on head teachers are greater as many of them are trained in strategic management and consequently face anxieties about feeling de-skilled by its complexities and bureaucracy and subsequently pass the main proportion of responsibility down to the school's SENCO. (Gross and White, 2003: 2-3) What this equates to in the long-term is a lack of consolidated team work which will impact on

the school which ultimately is seen to be demonstrating an incoherent approach to inclusion.

The role of a SENCO is responding in many ways to the new systems, in part as a consequence of central government initiatives and the greater emphasis placed upon local education authorities. In many ways these new demands mean that SENCO's have neither the time nor resources with which to meet these national and local objectives. The effects on larger schools have made it necessary to begin recruiting more than one staff member responsible for SEN and it is now common to observe Assistant SENCO's, Inclusion Co-ordinator's (INCO) or learning managers employed in schools to make the task of integration more manageable. Inadequate funding and other regular barriers experienced by SENCO's can result in:

Difficulties with obtaining supply cover

The need to cover for staff absence at short notice

A lack of understanding among school staff of the demanding requirements of the post of SENCO

(Cheminais, 2005: 5)

This paper has demonstrated that a number of inquiries and reports reflect the current issues with determining the roles of both head teachers and SENCO's within the context of mainstream secondary schools. The Government have directly acknowledged the need to delegate more SEN resources to schools in the future which will enable head teachers and

SENCO's to better address the needs of individual pupils without having to  
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seek local authority permission. (House of Commons, 2006b: 56) For head teachers in particular they have ultimate responsibility for ensuring each individual need is catered for, as the former president of the Association of Head Teachers remonstrated during a 2006 Education and Skills Committee meeting:

‘...It is very difficult to continue to run a system that relies so heavily on tables, targets and tests and (then) say that every child matters and we want personalisation which fits in entirely with SEN’

(House of Commons, 2006b: 65)

Not only are head teachers accountable for raising attainment levels across schools nationally, but they are also answerable to satisfying the needs of a broad remit of SEN pupils.

However there also appears to be a need for head teachers to alter their traditional management styles from those that formerly gave instruction, towards a more open knowledge sharing set of practices. Similarly SENCO's may benefit in the future from having more of a role in the financial decision-making processes and be able to contribute to the evaluation of overall provision for pupils with SEN, which they currently have limited powers to do. (Ofsted, 2004: 14) They have a fundamental role where co-ordinating provision across the entire school is concerned linking class, subject and specialist teachers together to improve upon the quality of teaching and learning. This operational position remains in conflict with the leadership and strategic skills determined by head teachers.



This investigation of the areas of responsibility relating to SENCO's and head teachers and their work across secondary mainstream schools, has exposed difficulties and weaknesses in both arenas. From the perspective of head teachers this appears to revolve around their ability to maintain good working relationships as well as being answerable to both local and national stakeholders. Head teachers also have to juggle funding allocation to support SEN provision in a way that allows them to both recruit new staff and resources, within the context of shifting and unstable financial constraints. They are singularly liable for writing and developing the organisation's SEN policy and for being able to deliver a number of operational obligations outside of their known remit. Despite this level of care, the person ultimately co-ordinating the deployment of SEN within schools is the SENCO. It is apparent that their role often exceeds their abilities to full-fill the number of tasks required of them, coupled with the responsibility of taking up the bureaucratic work delegated to them by often uninformed head teachers.

Both these positions warrant changes that need to be implemented by national policymakers, although it is clear that the voice of SENCO staff have less of the influential powers of those bodies such as the Association of Head Teachers, with which to make those changes become a reality. As this paper has noted, the higher levels of management are often more concerned with strategic governance and this may be to the detriment of those staff like SENCO's working within a more operational remit. With this rationale in mind it could be argued that from the perspective of the number of resources and support they can offer internal staff and individual pupils combined with a continuously paper based commitment to satisfy their superiors, SENCO's

have the more important task of ensuring frontline and staple provision is exacted across schools. This builds upon the fundamental elements of inclusion that meet the overall objectives of the Every Child Matters philosophy.