Following a decade of growing concern about the role and status of SENCOs in mainstream schools in England, the government has reviewed its policy and now plans to introduce regulations and training to ensure that SEN support in schools is as effective as possible. Christopher Robertson summarises some of the policy milestones that have influenced practice in schools and local authorities and the important changes about to take place.
A decade of uncertainty for the role of SENCO: the first years

The years 1997-2004 saw advances for the status of SENCO but many issues remained unresolved.

In 1997 the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) published The SENCO Guide, a booklet that drew upon research findings about how the SENCO role was carried out in practice, how individual educational plans (IEPs) were being used by teachers, and how SEN policies were being developed in schools.

The ‘little red book’ made a number of practical recommendations, and also implicitly acknowledged that the first Code of Practice, published in 1994, had been cumbersome and failed to provide clear enough guidance about the role of SENCOs. This had led, in many schools, to SENCOs taking on sole responsibility for all aspects of SEN provision and, in some instances, to horrendous workloads (eg writing lengthy IEPs for colleagues), something that a number of research projects identified in the mid-1990s.

The revised code

Some of the suggestions detailed in The SENCO Guide were incorporated into the revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, published in 2001, and this document continues to serve as the benchmark for SEN practice (until it is superseded by new guidance).

The 2001 code included a number of important statements regarding the role of SENCOs. For example, in Chapter 1:

Provision for pupils with special educational needs is a matter for the school as a whole. In addition to the governing body, the school’s head teacher, the SENCO or SEN team and all other members of staff have important responsibilities. In practice the division of day-to-day responsibilities is a matter for individual schools, to be decided in the light of a school’s circumstances and size, priorities and ethos. (p13, para 1.31)

The code did not provide a formal definition of the SENCO but included the following description in a glossary (p206):

SEN coordinator (SENCO): member of staff of a school or early education setting who has responsibility for coordinating SEN provision within that school. In a small school the headteacher or deputy may take on this role. In larger schools there may be an SEN coordinating team.

This description may have assumed that a SENCO would be a qualified teacher but did not make it explicit. The authors probably did not fully recognise changes that were taking place in the nature of the school workforce (between 1997 and 2008, the number of non-teachers in England doubled and now stands at more than 300,000) or the possibility that SENCOs without a teaching qualification would be appointed in schools.

The code also gave detailed guidance on the role of the SENCO in mainstream primary and secondary schools (and in early education settings), acknowledging that aspects of practice need to take account of organisational and other differences specific to phases of schooling. Arguably, it underemphasised leadership aspects of the SENCO’s role, but did state that:

The SEN Coordinator (SENCO) in collaboration with the head teacher and governing body, plays a key role in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and provision in the school in order to raise the achievement of children with SEN. (p50, para 5.30 [primary] and p65, para 6.32 [secondary])

In other words, it envisaged that the SENCO’s work should influence both day-to-day practice and broader and longer-term SEN planning at the whole-school level.

Finally, the code made clear (pp29-30, paras 5.33 to 5.36 and p42, paras 6.36 to 6.40) that SENCOs in both primary and secondary schools needed significant non-contact time to carry out their duties. Of note here is that this key recommendation has still not been taken up by government even though concerns about lack of non-contact time have been widely reported. Politically, the DCSF stance appears to be that headteachers and governing bodies should determine the availability of non-contact time.

Updating SEN strategy

In Removing Barriers to Achievement: The Government’s Strategy for SEN, published in 2004, the DfES outlined current and future policies and plans for SEN provision in England, commenting explicitly on the importance of ensuring that school leadership teams should include SENCOs. SENCOs play a pivotal role, co-ordinating provision across the school and linking class and subject teachers with SEN specialists to improve the quality of teaching and learning. We want schools to see the SENCO as a key member of the senior leadership team, able to influence the development of policies for whole school improvement. (p58, para 3.14)

Despite this assertion, concerns about the role of SENCOs in schools continued to be noted and were picked up by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (see following article).

The SENCO Update Guides

The SENCO Update Guides are an occasional series of special supplements sent free to subscribers of Senco Update. This guide has been written and edited by Christopher Robertson, editor of Senco Update and lecturer in inclusive and special education in the school of education, University of Birmingham.

Contact: christopher.robertson@optimuseducation.co.uk
The changing role of the SENCO

The select committee’s review of the role of the SENCO: July 2006

In its 2006 report on SEN the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee noted its concerns about the support given to SENCOs and made recommendations for bringing about improvements.

Overview

The Education and Skills Committee report on SEN, published in July 2006, included a brief but important analysis of the role of the SENCO, basing this on a wide range of oral and written evidence as well as relevant research. It highlighted a policy/practice gap, noting that the DfES (now DCSF) had placed a great many responsibilities on the shoulders of SENCOs, but had not ensured

… that SENCOs are always given the appropriate training – or the appropriate authority – to be able to undertake these significant responsibilities. Despite the recommendation in the Code of Practice that SENCOs should be part of a Senior Management Team this is often not the case … (p73, para 319)

The report cited evidence given by Baroness Warnock to emphasise this concern:

They were at the beginning senior teachers, but […] there is now a very large number of schools where the SENCO is actually a teaching assistant and not a teacher at all, with no experience and they are no longer a member of the senior management team but someone with peripheral duties to see how many children there are in that school who are getting this, that and the other. (p74, para 319)

The point made here was not that teaching assistants are unimportant – they clearly do significant and very effective work in supporting pupils, administering and organising SEN provision – but that the strategic leadership role of SENCOs had become marginalised, and that this problem was possibly being exacerbated by the impact of planning, preparation and assessment time (PPA) and teaching and learning responsibilities (TLR). There was, at the time of the publication of the report, a growing body of anecdotal evidence that some SENCOs were losing time that they needed to spend carrying out aspects of their role because of a ‘requirement’ to cover PPA time for colleagues. There was also evidence indicating that the role of SENCO was being downgraded as a result of introduction of TLR payments.

Recommendations

Both of the above problems – which may still be apparent in schools – pointed to a lack of clarity about the nature of the SENCO’s role. The report was very clear in its response to these, and related concerns, and it made specific recommendations to the government.

The two major recommendations made by the select committee about the role of the SENCO were:

Special educational needs co-ordinators (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. Firmer guidelines are required rather than Government asking schools to “have regard” to the SEN Code of Practice. The role of the SENCO must reflect the central priority that SEN should hold within schools. (Recommendation 84)

Special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) should be given ongoing training to enable them to keep their knowledge up to date as well as sufficient non-teaching time to reflect the number of children with SEN in their school. These baseline standards for SENCOs to be given training both on and off the job should apply to all schools, including academies and trust schools. Schools should set out in their SEN policy action to ensure that all SENCOs are adequately monitored and supported in their vital roles. (Recommendation 85)

When examined more closely these recommendations call for the following key actions:

● SENCOs should in all cases be qualified teachers.
● SENCOs should be in a senior management position in the school they work in as recommended in the SEN Code of Practice.
● Firmer guidelines are required rather than the government asking schools to ‘have regard’ to the SEN Code of Practice.
● The role of the SENCO must reflect the central priority that SEN should hold within schools.
● SENCOs should be given ongoing training to enable them to keep their knowledge up to date. This should involve both on and off the job training.
● SENCOs should have sufficient non-teaching time to reflect the number of children with SEN in their school.
● These baseline standards for SENCOs to be given training both on and off the job should apply to all schools, including academies and trust schools.
● Schools should set out in their SEN policy action to ensure that all SENCOs are adequately monitored and supported in their vital roles.

Special Educational Needs, Volume I: Report together with formal minutes (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, Third Report of Session 2005-2006) was published on 6 July 2006 (Ref HC478-I). It can be accessed at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/csf/reports_publications.cfm
The government’s response to the select committee: October 2006

The government’s reply to the select committee report contained some welcome commitments aimed at strengthening the role of the SENCO.

The government’s response to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee’s report on Special Educational Needs, published on 10 October 2006, included an important and welcome commitment to enhancing the role of the SENCO. This was made clear in the following statement:

Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) play a key role in building schools’ capacity and skills in meeting children’s SEN because of their crucial role in advising other members of staff on SEN matters and linking with parents. Each school is required, by regulations, to publish the name of the person with the role of coordinating the provision of education for children with SEN. In making the appointment, we would expect the head and governing body to take into account factors such as:

- the skills and experience required in connection with the role, and extent to which the candidate has demonstrated these or could acquire them
- the range and complexity of SEN represented within the school; and
- practical issues such as authority (credibility) in relation to members of the teaching staff, parents and external parties.

(p23-24, para 20)

The response commented more specifically on the following:

Importance of the SENCO
We have reflected carefully on the Select Committee’s comments on SENCOs. We share their view as to their importance and believe that the person taking on the lead responsibility should be a teacher and a member of the senior leadership team in the school.

(p24, para 21)

Strengthening the role
We will be introducing an amendment to the Education and Inspections Bill to require governing bodies to make such an appointment for the purpose of coordinating the provision of education for children with SEN and to give the Secretary of State a power to make regulations relating to the role, responsibilities, experience and training required.

(p24, para 21)

Training and accreditation
We have commissioned TDA to develop, in conjunction with interested parties, an accreditation system for SENCOs which will have at its heart an agreed training curriculum for coordinating staff covering both generic aspects such as implementing an SEN policy and securing help for pupils from external agencies, and knowledge of key areas such as autistic spectrum disorders. We will require all new SENCOs to undertake nationally accredited training.

(p22, para 22)

As a first stage of this commission and to inform the Regulations, TDA will be establishing a clear statement of the key components of the role, knowledge, skills and experience required of those leading and developing SEN and disability provision in schools. We will be involving a wide range of interested parties, including SENCOs currently in post in developing the system and will take account of a study currently being undertaken into school leadership.

(p23, para 23)

The actions noted here were reinforced in a paper that was published by the DfES in December 2006. This paper made it clear that the government’s expectation was that SENCOs should be members of school senior leadership teams:

This will help ensure that the particular needs of pupils with SEN (both those with statements and those without) are taken into account when key policy decisions are being taken. Membership of the senior leadership team will mean that the SENCO can contribute to strategic policy development where SEN provision is concerned.

These proposed actions – with the exception of the one about membership of the senior leadership team – have directly informed the DCSF’s proposals to introduce new regulations to ensure that SENCOs are qualified teachers with appropriate training that equips them to carry out a clearly defined role in the leadership and management of the school. Further information about consultations to support the implementation of these proposals is outlined on the following pages.

Note
1. Government Response to the Select Committee Report on Special Educational Needs (October 2006), Ref: Cm 694, is published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and costs £12.50. www.tsoshop.co.uk. It can also be downloaded from Teachernet at: www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=10429.
2. Details of this were published in SENCO Update, 82, (February 2007), 1-2.
Moving forward: proposals on SENCO role and status

The DCSF’s plans will ensure that all SENCOs have qualified teacher status

DCSF consultation on proposals for all SENCOs to be qualified and accredited teachers: March 2008

This consultation sought views on proposals for new regulations to ensure that SENCOs are qualified teachers with a defined role in the leadership and management of the school. It also outlined progress towards developing nationally accredited training for newly appointed SENCOs – work being undertaken by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA).

The proposals were developed in response to the Education and Skills Select Committee report on SEN in July 2006 (see page 3), which recorded a number of concerns in relation to SENCOs.

Regulations proposed in the consultation document would require a SENCO to be either:

● a qualified teacher, who has satisfactorily completed an induction period

● the headteacher or appointed acting headteacher, some of whom carry out the SENCO function, alongside other duties or

● a person carrying out the role for at least six months prior to the regulations coming into force, who has shown reasonable prospect of becoming a qualified teacher and completing their induction within a period of two years from the date of the regulations.

For practical reasons, the proposals do not take forward the select committee’s recommendation that SENCOs should be members of senior leadership teams in schools – this represents a change of view (see article opposite). Instead, the proposals indicate that SENCOs should be designated as champions of SEN and disability in their schools and benefit from enhanced SEN governance.

The proposed timetable for implementing the new regulations, subject to amendments following the consultation (which concluded in June 2008) is:

● September 2008, regulations made

● September 2009, regulations come into force

● September 2011, cut-off point by which time any person carrying out the SENCO role at the point when the regulations were made (ie doing the job for at least six months prior to September 2009) has to be qualified under the regulations.

TDA consultation on nationally accredited training for new SENCOs: June 2008

In June 2008 the TDA launched a consultation on nationally accredited training for new SENCOs. The consultation, which closes in October 2008, focuses on issues that are important to current and potential training providers and includes an outline of draft minimum outcomes for teachers successfully completing an accredited training programme, which we summarise below.

As reported in the September issue of SENCO Update, the TDA’s proposals are based on teachers demonstrating, through completing locally developed training modules and/or gaining credit for prior learning and experience, a minimum level of knowledge, understanding and skills set out in a national specification.

Under the proposals, the TDA would invite applications from training providers to offer SENCO training courses according to a national specification. Courses that met the requirements of the national specification would be approved or nationally accredited.

The specification does not prescribe the content of SENCO courses. It sets out the professional attributes, knowledge, understanding and skills of teachers undertaking the lead SENCO role would be expected to have by the end of the course and requires providers to demonstrate that their courses would:

● have an impact on raising the achievement and improving the well-being of children and young people in relation to all five Every Child Matters outcomes

● respond to participants’ training and development needs

● offer flexible provision

● be informed by stakeholders’ needs

● be of high quality and subject to rigorous quality assurance procedures

● include academic accreditation from a higher education institution; and

● reflect the features of effective CPD in terms of action research, practical activity in school, collaborative working and reflection.

The training outcomes

The national minimum outcomes summarised below reflect the professional attributes, knowledge, understanding and skills required to work as a SENCO. They are included in the draft specification for nationally accredited training for teachers
new to the role of leading coordination of provision for pupils with SEN (Annex 3) published as part of the TDA consultation that closes in October 2008. They are subject to modification.

To successfully complete a nationally accredited training programme for special educational needs coordinators, teachers must show that they have the following professional attributes, knowledge and understanding, and skills.

**Professional attributes:**
- establish fair, respectful, supportive and constructive relationships with pupils with SEN and/or disabilities and with their parents or carers
- gain the commitment of colleagues, including the headteacher and senior leaders, to improving the outcomes achieved by pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
- prioritise work, manage their time effectively and delegate responsibilities and tasks appropriately, making sure they are carried out effectively
- anticipate and resolve problems, make well founded decisions and exercise sound judgement on provision for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
- express themselves clearly in speech and in writing, and listen to and understand the views of others
- draw on research evidence and other external sources of advice to improve their own and their colleagues’ practice
- keep up to date on developments and take responsibility for their own continuing professional development (CPD) on SEN and disability matters.

**Professional knowledge and understanding:**
- know and understand relevant laws and associated guidance on SEN, including the policies and procedures set out in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, as well as their implication for the school, the SENCO and others, and how to put them into practice
- know and understand the principles and outcomes of Every Child Matters and how the SENCO can help children to achieve those outcomes
- know and understand the relevant laws on disability equality and the actions these laws require to support pupils with disabilities, and how they might best be carried out
- know and understand how children develop and how their development can be affected by a range of factors, including SEN and/or disabilities and the physical and social environment for learning
- know and understand the most common types of SEN and disabilities – including behavioural, emotional and social needs, specific learning difficulties (including dyslexia), speech, language and communication needs, autistic spectrum disorders and moderate learning difficulties – and how they can affect children’s learning
- have a critical understanding of a range of approaches, strategies and resources for assessment, planning, teaching and learning, including ICT, and know how to use them effectively to remove barriers to learning and personalise provision for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
- know and understand the principles of school self-evaluation and improvement and how they relate to improving outcomes for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
- know about best practice and the outcomes of research in meeting children’s special educational needs
- know and understand the scope and role of external agencies, and how to get specialist support and resources for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities.

**Professional skills:**
- working closely with senior colleagues and governors, advise on and influence the strategic development of an inclusive ethos, policies and priorities for developing the school and curriculum, and for using resources – so that all pupils have access to the curriculum, can make good progress and take part in the wider life of the school
- identify pupils who may have SEN and/or disabilities (using classroom observation, data, assessment and other forms of monitoring), set appropriately challenging targets for their learning, plan interventions to meet their needs, geared to removing or minimising barriers to learning, and review their progress:
  * use assessments from a range of professionals to help develop appropriate teaching and learning approaches for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
  * use summative assessments, including national tests, to track pupils’ progress and change programmes appropriately
  * encourage other teachers to develop formative assessment for all pupils, with specific consideration of approaches for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
  * identify in good time any special arrangements pupils need for national tests and examinations, and work with colleagues to put them in place (in classroom practice and in the tests and examinations themselves)
  * use tools such as provision mapping and management to plan provision for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities, and identify ineffective or missing provision
  * deploy and manage staff effectively to support pupils with SEN and/or disabilities
  * support the professional development of colleagues in meeting the needs of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities – by observing learning and teaching and providing advice and feedback, direct teaching and modelling effective practice, coaching and mentoring, and delivering or arranging training and professional development
  * review and evaluate, with other staff, the effectiveness of provision for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities – to inform the school’s self-evaluation and improvement planning
  * ensure that pupils with SEN and/or disabilities are involved, whenever appropriate, in planning, agreeing, reviewing and evaluating provision made for them, by helping colleagues to achieve constructive working relationships with them and promoting a culture where pupils with SEN and/or disabilities are engaged in their own learning and achieve success
  * liaise effectively with parents and carers of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities to promote their learning and development
  * work in partnership with professionals in other services and agencies, including voluntary organisations, to develop a coherent and coordinated approach to supporting pupils with SEN and/or disabilities.

The importance of these outcomes – and those included in a final version – that will underpin future CPD for all new SENCOs (probably from September 2009), cannot be overestimated. SENCO National Standards were originally introduced in 1998, but unfortunately they never had a mandatory status, and therefore were never used in a systematic way to support continuing professional development or to influence school SEN policy and practice.

The introduction of new outcomes linked to a clear national framework of CPD, and an appropriate career structure, has the potential to bring about a step-change in the quality of SEN provision in mainstream schools.
Where you can find resources, support and further information

The resources and information sources listed here are aimed at aspiring and new SENCos, but also at more experienced practitioners who are engaged in accredited professional development programmes.

**Books**
**The role of the SENCO**
- For anyone in a hurry!

**Leadership and Management**

**SEN and inclusion: the wider picture**

**SEN Budgets in Schools**

**Research reports and reviews**

**Government policy**

**Thinkpieces**

**Ofsted surveys**
Journals, magazines and newsletters

The following publications regularly feature articles about SEN provision in mainstream schools and the role of SENCOs:
- British Journal of Special Education
- European Journal of Special Education
- International Journal of Inclusive Education
- SENCO Update
- Special Children
- Support for Learning

A special edition of Support for Learning includes an editorial and the following five articles, all of which focus on key aspects of the role of the SENCO:

Other recently published articles that will be of interest to SENCOs include:

Weekly information for SENCOs

- An e-newsletter, SENCO Week can be subscribed to at: www.sen-for-schools.co.uk/ezine/senadwordpure.html
- SENCO Forum: is an email discussion group. Membership of SENCO Forum comprises mainly of SENCOs but also includes a range of education professionals and other interested parties. It aims to provide an opportunity to discuss issues and provide practical advice which will help SENCOs carry out their roles. To find out more go to: http://lists.becta.org.uk/mailman/listinfo/senco-forum
- Each issue of the British Journal of Special Education features an article on key points raised on the SENCO-Forum.
- The DCSF publishes a termly newsletter called Special Educational Needs Update, which reports on key developments in SEN. Details of how to download the newsletter or to subscribe to e-copies or paper copies can be found at: www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/SENUpdates
- The National Strategies team publish the Special Educational Needs/Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Newsletter, which highlights a number of developing and emerging initiatives that SENCOs and SEN staff working for local authorities will want to be aware of. Copies of this newsletter may be found at www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications. They can also be downloaded from: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/inclusion/senidd_news.

In addition to the ‘keeping up-to-date’ information included here, many local authorities publish SEN newsletters for schools, and perhaps more importantly, run face-to-face SENCO networks to facilitate the dissemination of information and the sharing of practice that is so valued by practitioners.

Online resources

Inclusion Development Programme (IDP)
The IDP has published an online resource focusing on dyslexia and speech, language and communication needs. It is aimed and trying to increase the confidence of primary and secondary teachers when seeking to identify and address SEN. www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/features/inclusion/sen/idp

Teacher Training Resource Bank: SEN portal
The SEN portal – updated on a regular basis – is supported by the TDA and provides a wealth of information for anyone involved in initial teacher training (ITT) or those supporting beginning teachers. www.sen.ttrb.ac.uk

General Teaching Council for England (GTCE)
The GTCE has developed a network for teachers with an interest in SEN issues and an online professional development resource. The resource can be accessed at: www.gtce.org.uk/networks/connect/resources/sen