Mission Impossible? Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and the re-conceptualisation of the role of the SENCO in England and Wales,

Introduction

'Inclusion', like the proverbial motherhood and apple-pie, would seem to be a 'good thing', but like them it is a somewhat nebulous term, open to a variety of meanings and interpretations within a multitude of contexts. It is difficult to deny it as an egalitarian principle, a basic human right, an important feature of a democratic society. Yet identifying a 'coherent theory which puts these feelings and concepts into some rational and defensible shape' (Wilson, 2000: 297) is far from easy. Translating any such theory into practice would seem to be even more problematic.

This article starts from the belief that inclusion is a 'process' (Booth et *al*., 2000), an essential element in the ongoing struggle for human rights and equity and that an important part of this process emanates from what Wilson refers to as 'passionate intuitions' amongst practitioners (although he argues that these are 'translated uncritically into practice', a point which some practitioners might wish to challenge). In this article I consider the nature of the role of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), a group of educational practitioners who are directly involved in the inclusion of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities in mainstream schools in England and Wales. The article focuses on this role through

policy, research and the voices of the SENCOs themselves. While the role of the SENCO is at present perceived as largely operational, often powerless and of lowly status (e.g. Davies et *al*., 1998), the article argues for the re-conceptualisation and re-'professionalisation' of this group of teachers as powerful and reflective practitioners who could be in a position to take on the mantle of inclusion within mainstream schools. I argue that the role could be one significant way of ensuring that every mainstream school in England and Wales has a 'powerful' and 'professional' advocate for the inclusion of potentially vulnerable children.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Education Policy Analysis (2003) states that:

> Meeting the educational needs of students is part of the development
> of equitable provision in an inclusive society where individual rights
> are recognised and protected. Failure to provide education and create
> the conditions for individual progress may be seen as a denial of a
> child's rights (SENCO Update, 2004: 8).

The role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator is, therefore, an important role for through current statutory policy the SENCO has responsibility for the day-to-day implementation of legislation supporting children identified as having special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream schools in England and Wales.

Educational inclusion/exclusion are closely linked with social inclusion/exclusion (Macrae et *al*. 2003). Macrae et *al*. consider two versions of social exclusion; (i) a

'weak' version in which the 'justification' for exclusion pathologises the individual child, and (ii) a 'stronger' version which identifies the powerful role of the individual professional within interpretations of policy by which certain groups of students such as 'boys, young people of Afro-Caribbean origin, looked-after children and those with special educational needs' are 'disproportionately' excluded (2003: 94). Macrae et *al*. maintain that:

> a fundamental factor in the decision to exclude is the ethos of the
>
> school, the discipline policies of individual schools and the degree of
>
> tolerance maintained by different head teachers (2003:95).

It is clear from my own research (Cole, 2004; Cole 2005; Cole and Johnson, 2004), that the ethos of the school and the values of individual head teachers impact directly on the position, work and ultimately power of the SENCO to encourage and support an inclusive culture within the school. Without such support SENCOs can face an incredibly heavy workload with vulnerable children in potentially hostile conditions created by contradictory policies. It seems like a mission impossible!

The research base

This paper is written from a particular 'position' in relation to inclusion and SEN and it draws on recent empirical research by researchers from the University of Sheffield and Keele University for support. The research, funded by the University of Sheffield, was carried out from March to September 2004 with SENCOs in two unitary authorities in the north of England and involved questionnaires and interviews. 59 SENCOs responded to the questionnaires (46 primary and 12

secondary [one did not state phase]). The school sample is therefore skewed towards

the primary phase. It is self selecting and not necessarily representative of all

SENCOs in either LEA. Nor is the sample balanced in terms of gender (13% male,

87% female) a possible reflection of the fact that the majority of SENCOs in the UK

are female. The SENCOs represented a range of age and experience (74% were over

the age of 40 and 71% had more than 10 years teaching experience). 71% were in

full-time employment, 29% were in senior management positions and a further 15%

in middle management posts (head of department/year). (See Table 1 Section A for

respondent details).

The Questionnaire focuses on SENCOs perceptions in the following broad areas:

- the extent to which the work as SENCO is enjoyed
- the quality of schooling
- the support provided for the SENCO by senior management
- the quality of teaching and learning
- the support provided by the school for pupils with SEN
- the partnership with parents
- the responsibilities of the SENCO
- the professional experiences of the SENCO
- the impact of the Revised Code of Practice
- the priorities given to the "key responsibilities" identified in the Code of Practice.

(See Table 1 Section B for summary of survey questions and analysis of responses).

The SENCOs 'voices' in this paper are taken from free text comments in the

questionnaires (see Table 1 Section C for questions) and from the recorded

interviews. 12 SENCOs were interviewed (8 primary and 4 secondary). The

individual recorded open interviews were led by the SENCOs themselves around

issues arising from the analysis of the survey data which formed the basis for the discussion.

The aim of the research was to consider the views of SENCOs around issues emerging from the revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) and to consider the changing role of the SENCO in the light of new policies and Government legislation. The article considers insights into the nature of the role of the SENCO beneath formal role descriptions. It examines some of the less visible aspects of the job and considers some of the issues raised in relation to both the operational and the more strategic aspects of SEN and inclusion. It raises questions as to whether, given the volume of work and the nature of the role, SENCOs are suitably placed to act as advocates of inclusion for children with special educational needs and what changes might be needed if they are to have such a role.

The article is in three parts: Part One considers the changing education policy context within which SENCOs currently operate. Part Two explores the role of the SENCO through the voices of SENCOs. Part Three examines the role of the SENCO within policies of inclusion and considers their position as advocates and agents of change for children with special educational needs within mainstream schools.

Part One: Background - Contradictions of Policy

The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (DfE, 1994) introduced the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) into mainstream primary and secondary schools in England and Wales.

The SENCO was to be a named person who had 'responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the SEN policy' (DfE, 1994: section 2.10:1). The role was described in section 2.14 (p9) and focussed on the implementation of SEN policy, liaison with other staff, parents and other agencies, and 'co-ordinating the provision for children with special educational needs' (ibid). It also included the administration of SEN within the school and 'contributing to the in-service training of staff'.

In 2001, after consultation, the DfES published a revised Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) which made considerable changes to the implementation, assessment and funding of SEN and changed and made explicit the roles and responsibilities of others within the SEN process (e.g. the governing body, the head teacher, all teaching and non teaching staff as well as the SENCO or SEN team [DfES, 2001: section 1.39]).

The revised Code of Practice was introduced in January 2002 with a view to setting out:

> a framework for effective school based support with less paper work for teachers and an emphasis on monitoring the progress of children with special educational needs towards identified goals. It covers the special educational needs provisions of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 and provides a framework for developing the strong partnerships between parents, schools, Local Education Authorities, health and social services and voluntary organisations that are crucial to success in removing barriers to participation and learning.

(DfES, 2001: preface).

In both documents it is suggested that in small schools the role of the SENCO may well be taken by the head teacher or member of the senior management team. The revised code states that the SENCO should 'work closely' with the head teacher and senior management as well as with 'fellow teachers' (section 1.39). It also makes clear that the SENCO should be 'closely involved in the strategic development of the SEN policy' (ibid) as well as for co-ordinating provision for pupils with SEN.

The years between the two Codes of Practice have seen a great deal written about the evolving, complex and demanding role of the SENCO (e.g. Dyson and Gains, 1995; Garner, 1996; University of Warwick, 1996; DfEE, 1997a; Davies et al., 1998; TTA, 1998; Clough, 1998). The literature focused on three main areas: (i) the operational role in relation to the extensive and demanding range of the tasks, lack of power (and often lack of support from the senior management team), funding and resources etc.; (ii) issues related to training, professional development and professional status; (iii) the strategic aspect of the role which demanded support for policies of inclusion (even if this was not overtly stated in some schools) in a culture which was increasingly being described as a 'quasi-market' (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Barton, 1997; Davies et al., 1998). It was argued that this competitive culture was supported and encouraged by the development of policies (emanating originally from the 1988 Education Reform Act) from both Conservative and Labour governments. These policies sought to raise standards through parental choice and performance indicators such as standardised attainment targets (SATs) and published league tables. Critics, such as Gewirtz et al., (1995), Barton, (1997), and Davies et al., (1998), maintained that these policies were

incompatible with policies aimed at the inclusion of all children in mainstream schools. Davies et *al.,* describe SENCOs as 'powerful advocates … caught within the web of this debate' who find themselves 'operating in the context of zero tolerance' (Davies et *al*., 1998: 9-10). Within this contentious context, the role of the SENCO was never going to be an easy one.

It is now ten years since the role of SENCO was established in most mainstream schools. Has the context changed at all? In his inaugural Lecture at the Institute of Education in London, Professor Len Barton (Barton, 2003) suggests that the tensions between 'the standards and inclusion agendas' have not abated.

> In the relentless drive to improve standards and discipline we have witnessed the introduction of new funding systems, more accountability procedures through new forms of inspection, the creation of public league tables, priority being given to instrumental values in relation to teaching and learning, increasing forms of competition, selection and specialisation within and between schools, increasing emphasis on narrow conceptions of performance and new forms of management discourse and procedures and a culture of 'shame and blame' (Barton, 2003: 15).

Barton goes on to quote Quicke (1999: 3), who maintains that the education system in England and Wales is characterised by:

The selection and differentiation of pupils leading to the reproduction

of inequalities; a form of teaching and learning which is competitive

and hierarchical; and the embrace of instrumentalism which harnesses

education to the economic goals of society.

Such comments highlight the difficult context within which SENCOs still have to

work. This has been further complicated by the raft of government legislation around

SEN and inclusion which has emerged since 1994 and it is hardly surprising that

SENCOs generally appear to have little time left for what Sachs refers to as 'activist

teaching' (Sachs 2003).

Part Two: Insights into the role of the SENCO

The role of the SENCO lies at the crossroads of these competing policies, creating

inevitable tensions for the people within the role. SENCOs often find themselves

with the joint responsibility for both SEN and inclusion but with little management

power, usually no control over funding for SEN and an immense amount of

bureaucracy and administration to deal with. There is general acceptance that the

SENCO's administrative workload can be considerable; indeed recent policy from the

DfES (2004: section 1.21), acknowledges that there are, 'significant concerns about

the volume of 'bureaucracy' related to the statutory framework on SEN'.

During the last years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first

century more and more legislation has impacted on the life of the SENCO. The

Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) now requires all schools to 'take

reasonable steps' to ensure that children with disabilities are not 'placed at a

substantial disadvantage in relation to education'. The Act cannot be ignored.

SENCO Update (Feb 2004 issue 52) carries an article on the front page with the headline, 'Disability rights legislation starts to bite – but at a cost', which is about the potential for parental litigation. Such headlines bring to the fore the concern that many SENCOs in our survey expressed in their free text comments about parental litigation should they, as SENCOs, not comply with the new duties placed on them and their schools. 83% of them felt that liaison with parents was a high priority but 84% were unsure as to whether the revised Code of Practice would reduce possible contention with parents. The reality of their concern can be seen when the sheer volume of legislation is considered, (e.g. DfEE 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001; 2004, covering a range of issues of which SENCOs must have cognisance). 88% of the SENCOs in our survey felt that the revised Code of Practice did not reduce the bureaucracy in the job and in the interviews concern was expressed about the increased workload as a result of this growing legislation. One SENCO put her fears most succinctly:

> The number of children who have special needs has increased and
> their needs are often complex. The amount of time given to SENCOs
> to deliver the amount of support to these children has not increased – I
> fear that one day something important is going to be missed.

Another free text comment highlighted some of the main concerns and fears including that of litigation:

The one thing I don't like about my job is the need to be constantly thinking about ways to access the money to support the needs of the SEN children – either through making a strong case, or appealing over statements of SEN, or collecting evidence for the annual audit. It is a great worry and responsibility, especially as children's needs and support staff jobs depend on it. The other worry, which can keep a SENCO awake at night, is the fear of litigation.

Another felt that it might take some time before the impact was felt:

The new SEN strategy with 'Every Child Matters', the Audit Commission Report on statements and the new Children's Bill will have an enormous impact, but it will take a little while to filter through.

The amount and nature of change was evidenced in this comment:

More form filling, more battling with Ed. Psychs. and LEAs to prove a child's needs. More time spent with parents who 'know their rights' but can't get what they want. More counselling of children/parents – wider remit to include for example the Index for Inclusion, 'Excellence' etc. There are just too many changes.

However, many of the SENCOs in our survey were cautiously positive about the changes in the revised Code of Practice. They cited possible improvements such as

the greater involvement of both child and parents in decision-making; including the children in their reviews; a more positive outlook towards children with SEN; the ways in which agencies can work together for the benefit of the children. They also said there were serious challenges within the new legislation for example, making inclusion work, including children with a wide range of difficulties, keeping staff positively motivated around these issues when resources are limited.

There has been considerable interest in the role of the SENCO following the revised Code of Practice. The National Union of Teachers (NUT, 2004) recently completed a survey of their members around issues related to the role of the SENCO. Klaus Wedell offered a 'Life as a SENCO' drawn from the extensive comments which have appeared over recent months on the on-line BECTA SENCO-Forum (Wedell, 2004). Both these reports and our own survey (Cole and Johnson, 2004) present the role of the SENCO as demanding and challenging on many levels, stressful in terms of meeting various needs (children, other staff, parents and other professionals), and all with usually limited resources in relation to time, staffing and funding. Many SENCOs also have responsibility for the implementation of policies of inclusion. Not surprisingly, the majority of SENCOs appear overworked and often stressed, but above all completely committed to their struggle on behalf of children with special educational needs.

Clearly the amount of research attention being focused on the SENCO illustrates the important nature of the role within mainstream schools. Yet this apparent significance does not prevent it being generally perceived as low status and operational, rather than as a senior, strategic management role. Only 17% of the

SENCOs in our study felt that they were in a sufficiently senior role to influence SEN policy although 58% felt that the revised Code of Practice ensured that they are perceived as the 'lead professional' on SEN in their schools, and a number commented that they act as a 'consultant' on matters related to SEN with a broader staff development role than previously. Their free text and interview comments strongly suggest that they perceive their role to be expanding under recent legislation to cover a broader remit around issues of inclusion and disability. This free text comment was indicative of the increasing volume of work experienced:

> Initiatives surrounding inclusion, child protection, disability and
> looked-after children all now seem to come the way of the SENCO.
> Also initiatives to increase the number of teaching assistants have
> made a big impact on my job. It is now my job to manage the training
> and much of the day to day work of my primary school's fourteen
> teaching assistants.

One SENCO noted that her 'most difficult challenge is ensuring that the changes are wholly embraced by all class teachers including the head teacher'. This responsibility for whole school approaches to inclusion and children with SEN was viewed with concern by a number of other SENCOs. While 66% agreed that staff were 'supportive' of including pupils with SEN, 67% were concerned about the skills of other staff to meet the needs of such pupils and 83% expressed concern about the school being able to meet the needs of pupils with EBD (emotional and behavioural difficulties). While 42% of the SENCOs felt that they were sufficiently senior to influence SEN policy, many of the SENCOs maintained that although they are

perceived as the teacher with lead responsibility for SEN, they need more time, status,

leadership and financial power to make this effective (See Table 1 Section B

questions 26-45). The importance of management support for the role was noted in

the OECD report (2003) which claims that where SENCOs are part of the

management team and have input into the general life of the school, such as staff

development or appraisal and assessment of student's progress, they are 'highly

regarded, much sought after', and the role can be seen as a 'stepping stone to school

leadership positions' (SENCO Update, 2004: 1). One thing which emerges from the

research is that where there is senior management support for the SENCO they are

generally given more time, more support, more space and more status, as the

following comments indicate:

> The new Code and a new head teacher with a very positive approach
>
> towards inclusion are enabling me to structure my role in a very new
>
> and innovative way.

> I receive one day per week non-contact time to carry out the role. This
>
> means I can do the job properly

> The head teacher believes in having a SENCO dedicated to SEN
>
> without other responsibilities.

> Now it is more high profile in school, particularly advising other
>
> teachers and informing the head teacher about the revised Code of
>
> Practice. It is now easier to justify in-service training for class

teachers. I am now actively involved in deployment decisions

regarding classroom assistants.

A major issue which emerges from the OECD report (2003), the NUT survey (2004), and our own study is the fact that nearly all the SENCOs believe that there is insufficient funding available for SEN. Whilst our survey suggests that the majority of schools are actively making the most of the funding coming into schools for children with special needs (84%), there is almost unanimous agreement (90%) that this is insufficient. There is a great deal of consensus that without proper funding it is difficult to 'close the huge gap between policy and practice' and 'to turn policy into practice'. Attfield and Williams maintain that 'positive attitudes to inclusive education are directly linked to the resources which are attached to policies' (2003: 31, citing Clough, 1998). If this is the case then it is hardly surprising that given this generally perceived shortfall in funding the gap between policy and practice is difficult to close and the status of practitioners working to support inclusive practice is low.

The majority of the SENCOs suggest that the foci of the role are the operational functions such as the administration and paper work for LEA audits, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and reviews for teaching assistants, for liaison with external agencies and generally for overseeing the statutory requirements of the job. While the revised Code of Practice does state that the role is 'operational' (DfES, 2001: section 1.39) it also states in the same paragraph that the SENCO should be 'closely involved in the strategic development of the SEN policy and provision'. There is a clear commitment within the Code that, 'maintained schools and local education authorities

… have regard to guidance on the statutory framework for inclusion'. The separate guidance 'Inclusive Schooling – Children with Special Educational Needs' gives examples of:

> the reasonable steps that maintained schools and LEAs could consider taking to ensure that the inclusion of a child with a statement of special educational needs in a mainstream school is not incompatible with the efficient education of other children (DfES, 2001: v).

Given the contradictory nature of competing policies such a remit can place SENCOs in a very sensitive and difficult position within mainstream schools struggling to maintain their positions within the performance league tables.

The Code also draws attention to the Disability Rights Code of Practice for Schools and discusses the meaning of 'reasonable adjustments' in relation to the provision for children with disabilities (DfES, 2001: v). The fears expressed by many SENCOs around responsibility, accountability, SEN, inclusion and litigation, are very real when seen in the light of the debate around these issues. While SENCOs express their concern about their already heavy *operational* workload, there is clearly a sense in which they are also seen as advocates for the inclusion for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The focus on a more strategic 'inclusive' role for the SENCO needs to be examined more carefully.

Part Three: Powerful Professionals, the SENCO and Inclusion.

In this section, I want to consider the role of the SENCO as an agent of change for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities; as an advocate for the inclusion of children who are perceived as 'different'.

The OECD report (2003) suggests that the proportion of UK pupils with SEN educated in mainstream schools is, on average, higher than in most of the other OECD countries. The report makes explicit the connection between equity and educational inclusion in relation to policy and practice, and it highlights a number of conditions which are seen to be significant in the development of inclusive schools, particularly for pupils with disabilities. These are:

- the recognition of diversity within the pupil population and the need to plan for it

- the need for accountability which takes into account 'value added', the starting point of the child on entry to the school and acknowledges the difference teachers and schools are making

- professional development of staff, which includes the forming of inclusive attitudes through initial teacher training and continuing professional development through team work, problem solving and discussion

- support from a wide range of external agencies and professionals

- network of within-school support for teachers

- cooperation between schools, especially around transition across phases

- parent involvement and community support

- school organisation and management, in which it was stressed that under the system of whole school approach within the UK, the commitment of the head

teacher and the senior management team was essential in developing a

supportive and inclusive school culture and ethos

- curriculum development in which the UK was highlighted along with Canada, where a standard curriculum was offered to all pupils and where teachers were expected to make 'necessary adjustment' through differentiated teaching

- classroom organisation and the involvement of teaching assistants.

It is significant for this article that within the UK the SENCO plays a central role in the effective implementation and organisation of every one of these conditions. Where there is head teacher or SMT support for policies of inclusion, the SENCO's role, in both carrying out their statutory duties in relation to SEN and in implementing policies of inclusion is made very much easier as the quotes above suggest. Yet this still relates to their perceived ability or rather, *opportunity* to complete the *operational* aspects of the role. There are few comments in relation to the strategic or visionary elements of the job in relation to values and notions of social justice and equity.

I am not arguing that SENCOs do not see themselves as agents of change for children with SEN. As I noted earlier, all the research quoted here (e.g. Cole, 2004; 2005; Cole and Johnson, 2004; NUT 2004; Wedell 2004) highlights the total commitment of SENCOs to children with special educational needs. It demonstrates that these teachers are unquestionably committed to their education and 'care' (as in Corbett, 1992). But amidst the daily operational tasks expected of the SENCO how much space is there for them to consider strategic approaches to SEN and inclusion? How

difficult is it for the SENCO to take on the role of agent of change for children still categorised as 'special' and therefore 'different'? If as Barton argues:

> a major motivation for the pursuit of inclusive education is an
> informed conviction of the irrelevance, discriminatory and
> exclusionary features of current policy provision and practice in
> education (2003: 12-13),

how much space is there for the SENCO to be Sach's (2003) 'activist teacher'? How far can SENCOs, immersed in the day-to-day *operation* of special educational needs through the implementation of specific national and local policies and in fear of litigation from parents, challenge the perception of SEN as 'discriminatory and 'exclusionary'? Given their stated position within statutory policy, how far are they able to raise questions of *values* within the whole school as opposed to *requirements*? How far can they influence staff development towards more *inclusive* practices within the context of policies of competition? How much of an impact can they have on whole school policies which challenge exclusion?

In their article on leadership within a special school context, Attfield and Williams (2003: 30) argue that inclusion must be seen as 'a key component of school improvement'. They claim that there needs to be more discussion around how concerns about 'value added' could be 'addressed adequately and speedily for pupils with significant learning needs'. Echoing the view expressed in the OECD report (2003), they argue for the need to:

revisit definitions of inclusion and develop a shared picture of what

inclusion looks like in different contexts, possibly recognising that the

introduction of the concept of social inclusion in education may have

widened the agenda with corresponding impact on understanding of

terms (Attfield and Williams, 2003: 30).

During the last five years there have been a number of articles which have raised

issues in relation to both the meanings of inclusion and the debates around

distinctions between rights and efficacy in relation to children with special

educational needs (e.g. Wilson, 2000; Hornby and Kidd, 2001; Thomas and Glenny,

2002; Lindsay, 2003). There is a call for, on the one hand, 'rigorous substantial

research projects demonstrating effectiveness' in order to establish children's rights

(Lindsay, 2003: 3); and on the other, 'to put more reliance on ideals about equity,

human rights, social justice and opportunity for all' (Thomas and Glenny, 2000: 367).

Thomas and Glenny invite practitioners and researchers to:

accept rather then deny the insights which emerge by virtue of human

experience – insights which emerge from our own knowledge of

learning, our own knowledge of failure, success, acceptance or

rejection. There is nothing to be lost in doing so, for the evidence is

that there are no magic fixes or startling insights to emerge from the

traditional knowledge base of special education (2002:367).

In developing the theory of connectivity between 'feeling', emotions, thinking and

learning, Billington (2003) argues that because 'the quality of our learning and

thinking … are … inextricably linked to our emotional health and well-being',
practitioners need to:

- remain aware of the complexities in children's feeling and thinking processes

- find better ways of representing learning processes as being essentially within the affective domain

- remain aware of the implications for the child of our own choice of theory

- consider imaginatively links between psychological thinking about children and other domains of knowledge.

Perhaps there is a place here for professionals to draw on Wilson's somewhat discarded 'passionate intuitions' to inform their practice and think outside the box.

Certainly the place of the emotions and personal and professional experience to inform constructions of knowledge in teaching have been the focus of a growing research base (e.g. Goodson, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Nias, 1996; Sikes, 1997). My own research (Cole, 2004) offers insights into educational inclusion from the perspective of mothers of children with SEN who are also teachers of children with SEN. The stories reveal how the perspectives of the mother-teachers change on having their own children with special needs and what they now value as 'inclusion'. What is valued differs depending on the particular circumstances, but in all cases it does not reflect the implementation of national policies, but emerges as a result of their experiences, reflecting their own values and beliefs. They value the small and 'caring' things that professionals do to further the 'feelings' of inclusion for their children and themselves as parents. They value teachers who 'try' and it is the 'good faith and effort' (Cole 2005) which ultimately matters to them. The demonstrable outcomes they seek differ but they all reflect the desire to see their children as part of

the community. Social inclusion is a very important part of their agenda. These mother-teachers take their role as agents of change for their own children and the children in their 'care' very seriously.

So what is the point I am making here about the role of the SENCO? The creation of the 'special' educator as a professional or 'expert' is still under construction. Who will decide what this professionalism will contain; policy makers, the Government, SENCOs, LEAs, teachers, parents, the children, the community at large, commerce and industry? What will the priorities be for SENCOs and what will count as success? Will the expected outcomes of the role relate to 'effective' assessable outcomes or to educational and/or social inclusion, whatever these may mean within any given set of circumstances? How will the performance of SENCOs be judged in the future, and by whom? And perhaps the most significant question for inclusion, will SEN continue to develop as a separate part of professional knowledge creating 'SEN experts' or will it be immersed, subsumed and embedded within the teaching and learning culture of the 'inclusive school'?

The revised Code of Practice has certainly not diminished the role of the SENCO. Indeed, along with other legislation it appears to have increased the legal responsibilities of the role. But how does this aid inclusion? The whole area of SEN appears likely to be more, rather than less, pressured and contentious. The inclusion of children with certain special needs such as Autism and Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) may come to dominate the political agenda as both parents and teachers fight for or against their inclusion in the mainstream classroom. In both the

United States and Australia, policies of inclusion have already been severely tested over the question of children with EBD (Kauffman and Hallahan, 1995; Slee, 1996).

Fulcher argues that the discourse of professionalism in which 'the expert knows best' is the key discourse in the struggle for the control of a profession or occupational group (Fulcher, 1999: 150). The 'voice' of this growing 'professionalisation' of the role of the SENCO is audible within the quotes offered here in which many SENCOs comment that they are seen as the leading 'expert' on SEN. On what grounds is this claim made? Such a view could potentially reflect the abrogation of responsibility for SEN and inclusion by other teachers. While this 'professionalisation' of SEN and inclusion may appear to offer 'special' status, it remains questionable as to the nature and desirability of such status (Corbett, 1996). If the SENCO is to act as an agent of change bringing inclusion into the mainstream discourse of school improvement then the role needs to be closely interrogated now. Appropriate support needs to be given to SENCOs before they become totally swamped by legal responsibilities, accountability and technicalities relating to the implementation of SEN and disability legislation. As Attfield and Williams (2003: 31, citing Clough, 1998) remind us, there is a 'fundamental contradiction between support as a strategy for change and support as a means of protection'.

And so …

All current research points to SENCOs as a group of educational professionals who are completely committed to children with special educational needs; who work tirelessly to promote their learning and inclusion sometimes within what can only be

described as 'hostile' environments. The majority of SENCOs in our survey were very experienced teachers. Yet without the power and support of the head teacher and the senior management team (SMT) it is clear that, at best, they are working in difficult circumstances. Where the SENCO is given support, status and power the role is potentially one which could change the lives of an increasing number of children as well as offering a 'different' dimension within notions of school improvement. The SENCO should be a member of the senior management team, preferably a deputy head with responsibility (shared or otherwise depending on the size of the school) for inclusion, and with access to and input into financial decision-making within the school. This can only be achieved through national policy which makes this position a statutory requirement, recognising the status of the role through appropriate remuneration.

If inclusion is to be brought into the realm of school improvement, 'value added' needs to be seen as a vital element in the evaluation of school improvement and success. The inclusion of all children, including those with special educational needs, has to be placed at the very heart of school policies and the role of the SENCO recognised as being central to this, not just operationally, but in relation to vision, values, experience and 'careful' teaching (Corbett, 1992).

To have within every primary and secondary mainstream school at least one individual committed to the principles suggested by Billington, with the status and 'power' to be Sach's 'activist teacher' (2003), the inclusive practitioner in Macrae's 'stronger version' of inclusion (2003: 94), would mean thousands of advocates and agents of change for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities across

England and Wales. For this reason alone, the role of the SENCO needs to be re-

visited, re-conceptualised and re-defined. Then the mission may be possible.

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