

Code of Practice: The Northern Ireland Context

The role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator, as described in the Code of Practice for England and Wales, is somewhat removed from the actual role practised by similar teachers in Northern Ireland. With the imminent introduction of the Code there, significant changes will have to be made if the requirements specified by the Code are to be met.

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SPECIAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

Special Education in Northern Ireland has developed over many years. There have been some considerable challenges following the Warnock Report on Special Needs (1978), the Education (NI) Order, 1986, and the more recent Education (NI) Order, 1989. The 1994 introduction of the Code of Practice (Department for Education) in England and Wales has given rise to a range of research and comment on its impact on mainstream schools. Little attention, however, has been given to the introduction of the Code in Northern Ireland proposed from September 1998 and the potential impact it may have on schools.

INTRODUCTION

How to support pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classes is a major question for schools in Northern Ireland. The findings presented here are taken from a cross jurisdictional study comparing the professional practices of special needs resource teachers in Ontario, Canada with the practices by their counterparts in Northern Ireland - SENCOs. This outline article discusses the role of the Northern Ireland participants only as it relates to the SENCO role outlined in the Code of Practice.

METHODOLOGY

A two-phase design combining both qualitative and quantitative data was used in the study (Reichardt & Cook, 1979; Cresswell, 1994). The first phase involved in-depth interviews with fifteen SENCOs. These qualitative data were analyzed and used to inform a second phase quantitative survey distributed to an additional seventy-five incumbents of the SENCO role. In the survey phase of the study, a response rate of over seventy percent was recorded (70.6%). The sample represented both primary and secondary level SENCOs. More than three-quarters of the total group (76.5%) were full time in the position. On average, they supported just over eight percent of the school population (8.4%). Both the interviews and the questionnaires dealt with a wide range of key issues concerned with supporting SEN pupils in the mainstream.

THE CODE OF PRACTICE

Any current discussion of special educational needs involving Northern Ireland must include reference to the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (Department for Education, 1994). The 1993 Education Act required the Secretary of State to issue a Code of Practice which would give practical guidance to local education authorities (LEAs) on their responsibilities regarding students with special educational needs. This Code of Practice came into effect in England and Wales in September, 1994. The guidance given is intended to help schools make effective decisions on how to identify and assess special educational needs. Although the Code reportedly will not become official practice in Northern Ireland until September 1998, the current document provides insights into three main areas: policy, roles and procedures, and practice.

The major principle underlying the Code is one which enables "Pupils with special educational needs to benefit as fully as possible from their education" (1:1). It is based on the premise that all students have the right to a broad and well-balanced education. The purpose of the Code is to "give practical guidance to LEAs and the governing bodies of all maintained schools" (1:1). The intent is that special needs pupils, where appropriate, should be educated in mainstream classes with their peers.

The Code recommends that schools should identify children's needs and take action to ensure that those needs are being met. It is important to note that schools must have regard for guidelines in the Code of Practice when they develop their special needs policies (Sec. 157). Although the Code does not tell schools what

to do in individual cases, it must not be ignored when teachers are making professional judgements regarding the needs of special students. The Code sets out a five stage process for identifying and responding to pupils with special educational needs. Although the Code does not mandate the use of all five stages, it does suggest that schools and LEAs should recognize "the various levels of need, the different responsibilities to assess and meet those needs, and the associated variations in provision [which] will best reflect and promote common recognition of the continuum of special educational needs" (1:5).

THE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS CO-ORDINATOR (SENCO)

In addition to setting out guidelines as to what constitutes special educational needs, the Code attempts to clarify roles and responsibilities as a pupil's special needs are identified. One of the key roles identified in the Code is that of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). The Code of Practice has required all schools to appoint a member of staff who has the responsibility for co-ordinating special needs within the school. The co-ordinator is expected to work closely with teachers as they strive to meet the special needs of students in their classes. The co-ordinator, according to Simmons (1994), is in a pivotal role in the school. However, Simmons contends that the role would be unattractive without remuneration, training and time away from teaching duties. Simmons also poses an extremely important question "...how many of those who do consent will be able to fulfill the role adequately, without the training, resources, and time needed to do the job properly?" (p. 57). This is the co-ordinator whose role, even prior to the Code of Practice, was one of uncertainty, ambiguity, and considerable contradiction (Bines, 1986; Dyson, 1990).

The Code of Practice purports to provide guidance that "is designed to help schools make effective decisions" (Forward:5) In an effort to do this, the Code has set out the responsibilities of the SENCO. However, Dyson and Gains (1995) state that in delineating these responsibilities, the Code imposes an "enormous - perhaps overwhelming - burden on co-ordinators threatening to reduce secondary co-ordinators to bureaucratic administrators and to require primary co-ordinators to carry out duties for which they have neither the time or resources" (p. 50). Given this type of observation, it is important to look at the description of the co-ordinator's role and at the role as it is currently being practiced in Northern Ireland. Dyson and Gains (1995) further extend their commentary by suggesting that the role is one of major contradictions which have resulted in a role that is impossible to fulfill. They assert that the tasks assigned to the co-ordinator "fail to engage in the full realities of the situation faced by co-ordinators" (p. 51). The

following sets out the responsibilities assigned to the co-ordinator in the Code of Practice.

ROLE OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS CO-ORDINATOR

The Code of Practice has required all mainstream schools to appoint a designated teacher whose responsibilities are as follows:

- the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy
- liaising with and advising fellow teachers
- co-ordinating provision for children with special educational needs
- maintaining the school's SEN register and overseeing the records on all pupils with special educational needs
- liaising with parents of children with special educational needs
- contributing to the in-service training of staff
- liaising with external agencies including the educational psychology service and other support agencies, medical and social services, and voluntary bodies. (Code of Practice 2:14)

This list of responsibilities attempts, according to Dyson and Gains (1995), to bring some order to the role "by delineating it in terms of a list of tasks to be performed" (p. 51). They further suggest that, on the surface, this list of tasks would appear to be relatively straightforward. A closer inspection of the Code, however, reveals that there are many more complex activities and expectations of the co-ordinator that are embedded in the various stages. The Code indicates that the first three stages are essentially school-based and that the co-ordinator has major responsibilities associated with each of these stages. These are as follows:

RESPONSIBILITIES OF SEN CO-ORDINATOR

STAGE 1

- co-ordinator advises class teacher (2:72)
- co-ordinator records child on register (2:74)
- co-ordinator helps to assess child's needs (2:74)
- co-ordinator advises and supports teachers (2:74)
- co-ordinator assists with record keeping (2:75)
- co-ordinator consults with teachers (2:77; 2:80)

STAGE 2

- co-ordinator leads the assessment, planning, monitoring, and reviewing of special provisions (2:85; 2:87)
- co-ordinator liaises with other agencies (2:88)
- co-ordinator collects information (2:89)
- co-ordinator decides about further advice or an individual education plan (2:91)
- co-ordinator ensures that the plan is drawn up and that teachers liaise (2:93)
- co-ordinator reviews progress and plan (2:96)
- co-ordinator decides on the next steps (2:97)

STAGE 3

- co-ordinator takes a leading role (2:101)
- co-ordinator decides on additional support or a new plan (2:104; 2:105)
- co-ordinator continues to record keep (2:107)
- co-ordinator ensures collaboration between all relevant parties regarding the educational plan (2:108; 2:110)
- co-ordinator advises regarding a statutory assessment (2:115)

All of the above actions on the part of the co-ordinator are critical in the process of identifying and programming for a special needs child. The decision as to whether to move ahead towards a statutory assessment or to continue to programme for the child at the school level is absolutely crucial and falls very largely and squarely on the shoulders of the SENCO. In total, that individual has to be an assessor, leader, adviser, programme planner, consultant, liaison officer, record-keeper, decision-maker, in-service trainer and many more things rolled into one. It is essential, therefore, that the SENCO in each school is a person with the knowledge and skills necessary to be all of those things. One major item of note is that although the responsibilities have apparently shifted away from direct contact with the students, there is no specific training for the co-ordinators described or mandated in the Code of Practice. Indeed, many of the responsibilities outlined are ones for which teachers have traditionally received little or no training.

PRACTICE

Given the responsibilities assigned to the co-ordinators in the Code of Practice, it is important to review the top five practices at which the Northern Ireland co-ordinators reported spending their time.

ACTIVITIES OF SEN CO-ORDINATORS

Rank	Activity
1	Teaching remedial class(es)
2	Teaching individuals or small groups
3	Adapting core curriculum
4	Assessing student needs
5	Developing materials

As a group, the Northern Ireland SENCOs reported spending approximately fifty percent of their time in a teaching role. There was a clear indication that the secondary school co-ordinators were spending more time with remedial classes than their primary counterparts. The primary people were spending more time with individuals or small groups of students. Regardless of their school context, it would appear that all of these co-ordinators will have to make some considerable changes in their practices if they are to develop the role as it is presented in the Code of Practice. A review of the top five practices that the co-ordinators considered to be the most important showed the following:

PERCEPTIONS: MOST IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES

Rank	Activity
1	Assessing student needs
2	Consulting with teachers
3	Teaching small groups
4	Explaining student needs to teachers
5	Adapting core curriculum

It would appear from these rankings, that many of the co-ordinators do recognize that the role should be shifting away from remedial teaching towards one of more

consultation and support. The activities ranked in the top five show some similarity to the role responsibilities outlined in the Code of Practice. This suggests that, given the appropriate opportunity, many of the co-ordinators might prefer to operate in a rather different way within their schools.

The one activity which appears to be solidly rooted in their everyday activities, however, is direct teaching whether it be with individual students or with small groups. Both the secondary school and the primary school co-ordinators rated small group and individual teaching as either important or very important in their practice (secondary school 88%, primary school 75%). The tenacity with which both groups hold on to their tried and tested practice may give a clear starting point for staff developers and in-service providers. It would seem to be somewhat futile to provide in-service on the responsibilities associated with their role if the co-ordinators return to their schools and continue with their previous practices. It may be that the conditions in the schools do not support the expected changes or that the co-ordinators opt to ignore the new role. Some may even try to fulfill the new role while still maintaining a considerable teaching component. It is not, therefore, surprising that many co-ordinators felt that they did not have the time to do their job effectively. Over sixty percent (62.3%) identified lack of time as the major barrier to the successful implementation of their role.

ADMINISTRATION IN THE SENCO ROLE

The Code also puts a considerable emphasis on record keeping. The Northern Ireland co-ordinators reported spending in the region of 60-105 minutes per day on paperwork. In terms of time spent, this activity ranked ahead of both consulting with teachers and explaining student needs to teachers. If the time required to keep records increases then it is possible that some co-ordinators could spend about half their day teaching remedial or small group sessions, possibly two hours at paper work, leaving only about 30 minutes of school time to do all the other activities that have been assigned to the role. This again highlights the need for some rethinking of the role at the school level. The school day needs to be structured in a way that allows these individuals to do their job. The whole school needs to be involved in special needs issues.

SUPPORT ROLE FOR SEN CO-ORDINATOR

It is interesting to note that one of the co-ordinators interviewed in the first phase appeared to have conceptualized the role along the lines of the Code of Practice. This individual was Head of Special Needs in a secondary school where the

students had always been integrated. She expressed considerable frustration with the role as it existed previously in her school. She desired a much greater breadth to her work and a greater opportunity to support teachers and students alike. She expressed the following:

"I have never done any withdrawal; once I was in a position to stop it, it was stopped."

"They [teachers] now approach me for help and assistance."

"I would like to be in a position to help and advise in the planning of lessons for the children who do experience problems."

"I hope to broaden my role... I think that could be very exciting."

The individual showed an excitement for the potential of her role and had a vision of what she wanted to do in the future. She also suggested that staff development and in-service could be crucial, if appropriate, in the development of the co-ordinator role in Northern Ireland. This person contrasted sharply with another secondary school co-ordinator who said:

"I'm here as a class teacher of the remedial children and that's how I want to keep it."

"Yes, I am definitely remedial, not a resource - as a resource, no-one ever came near me..."

"You get your skills through working with the children, not on a course."

These two individuals currently hold the same job with the same title in two different secondary schools in Northern Ireland. Their comments illustrate very clearly, the need for some common ground for special needs co-ordinators.

NEW ROLE FOR SEN CO-ORDINATORS

Indeed, a considerable re-thinking would appear to be necessary if the second co-ordinator is to meet the requirements outlined in the Code of Practice. A complete re-conceptualization of the role may be required if it is to develop consistently across Northern Ireland for it seems that a common vision is lacking. This process, however, needs to take place not only at the school level but also at the Department

for Education level. There needs to be clear direction from the Department regarding the role, the expectations associated with the role, and most importantly, how the role will be implemented at the school. Education and Library Boards need to develop implementation plans in conjunction with the schools. The co-ordinator's responsibilities outlined in the Code represent a change in practice for many individuals. This change will not come about solely as a result of the Code of Practice itself. Fullan (1993) states, "you can't mandate what matters" (p. 22). The changes will come about through top-down support and bottom-up influence. This suggests that these front line practitioners must be heard, understood, and involved in the change process. They, in turn, must be willing to commit to and support the changes that are designed to make education a successful experience for all children. As Fullan (1993) suggests, "new ideas of any worth to be effective require an in-depth understanding, and the development of skill and commitment to make them work" (p. 23).

SUMMARY

Overall, the participants in this study reacted positively to the Code of Practice in terms of having some guidelines for dealing with special needs issues in the schools. Putting the Code into practice, however, appears likely to present these practitioners with some considerable challenges on a daily basis. This is consistent with Lewis, Neill and Campbell's (1997) findings in England and Wales that implementing the Code's recommendations would be difficult for SENCOs. The clearcut differences between the primary and secondary level SENCOs in terms of their perceptions and organization of the role found by Lewis et al.(1997), and the Roehampton Institute (1995) were also evident in Northern Ireland.

The mandatory nature of the designated teacher role has thrust a group of teachers into important leadership roles in mainstream schools. Individuals who have undertaken special needs leadership roles have considerable potential to bring about change within their schools. According to Wasley (1991), their current practice and its everyday, messy reality has great potential to inform and to strengthen the ongoing discussion of teacher leadership and educational improvement (p. 7). The inclusion of special needs students in mainstream classes places considerable pressure on teachers and support personnel. The role of the Special Needs Co-ordinator is crucial if both students and teachers are to be successful in the mainstream. In spite of the daily pressures related to their role, the SENCOs who participated in this study were overwhelmingly positive in their support for students with special needs. This suggests that there is a need for an adequate conceptualization of this important role in Northern Ireland.

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