



Six Inclusion Talking Points for Senior Leaders

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ABOUT INCLUSION EXPERT

Inclusion Expert has helped over 1,000 schools achieve outstanding inclusion practice with targeted training, consultancy and resources. Daniel and the team regularly appear in *The Guardian*, *TES*, *Headteacher Update*, *SecEd* and *Academy Magazine*.

Our Team



Daniel Sobel is Inclusion Expert's founder and lead consultant. An internationally respected leader in inclusive education, he has advised the DfE, the EU and governments abroad. Daniel is author of the *Narrowing the Attainment Gap* and writes regularly for *Headteacher Update* and *The Guardian*.



Jon Gibson has worked in both mainstream and special school settings and has advised Downing Street and the DfE on curriculum. As the Swindon Project Lead he visits all the schools regularly and provides oversight to the Virtual School.



Nathan Atkinson makes regular TV appearances for the innovative work he has done as head of three schools. Recently named a 'top 50 teacher in the world', Nathan leads our development of QFT.



Sue Allingham holds a EdD in EYFS and is one of the country's leading practitioners in early years education. A columnist and consultant editor for *Early Years Educator* magazine, Sue leads our team in EYFS Training.



Wendy Knott is one of the UK's leading experts in differentiation and personalised learning. She pioneered an approach that has been heralded in *Headteacher Update*.



Michael Purches has nearly two decades of experience heading special needs schools and has led numerous multi-school projects. Michael heads Inclusion Expert's Northern Region team.



Jill O'Connell is Inclusion Expert's Director of Consultancy. She is an authority on targeted school support and is a seasoned trainer of school improvement partners.

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Daniel Sobel's approach to how to meet the needs of children who struggle in school, for whatever reason, makes perfect sense. Working with Daniel is one of the few times in my career that I've not only had a lightbulb moment but an experience that changed my perceptions of learning forever. The results for my school were dramatic.

Sarah Conant MSc, Consultant Headteacher

IMPRESS OFSTED WITH YOUR PUPIL PREMIUM WEBSITE

The Pupil Premium section of your school’s website is an opportunity to communicate directly with Ofsted about your work to narrow the gap. So what should you say—and what should you leave out? In this extract from his recent book *Narrowing the Attainment Gap*, Daniel Sobel explains how to impress.

There’s no mandatory format for information on school websites. According to the Department for Education in the UK, in relation to the Pupil Premium grant, school websites should at least contain:

- the school’s funding allocation for the year
- details of how the school intends to spend the allocation
- how the school spent the previous year’s allocation
- the impact of this spending on attainment for the pupils to whom the funding was allocated

Websites can include much more than this, though. Providing, obviously, that it is line with Data Protection regulations, the more detail the better. The following table suggests information you could include and the order to arrange it in.

AVAILABLE NOW!

Daniel Sobel’s latest book – ‘Narrowing the Attainment Gap’ A Handbook for Schools

DANIEL SOBEL

NARROWING THE ATTAINMENT GAP

A HANDBOOK FOR SCHOOLS

...one of the few times in my career that I’ve had not only a lightbulb moment but an experience that changed my perceptions of learning forever... The results for my school were dramatic. Sarah Conant, MSc Consultant Headteacher

- 1

Hard data on the attainment gap in your school (number of students, comparisons to regional and national averages, etc.)
- 2

The nature of impoverishment in your school setting: what the key factors of the gap are (this shows that you don’t work in a bubble and recognise that the attainment gap is both a whole-school and, in a sense, a whole-area issue)
- 3

Summary of your local community stakeholders meeting (demonstrate that you listened to your stakeholders and that you are responding to meet the needs of your students)
- 4

Summary of your Governors meeting about the attainment gap (this shows good governance and leadership)
- 5

Celebrate: in this section highlight individual cases (anonymously), interventions and approaches you have taken which have had outstanding results
- 6

Parental Engagement: in this section explain how fundamental home-school liaison is to you and what you do to promote engagement of all parents – especially those where there is an attainment gap
- 7

Hard data showing where both the gaps and the successes are, drawn from whole-school and out-of-school data (e.g. RAISEonline). Highlight the key challenges and account for your approach to-date and why you may or may not have been successful. Be brave and honest
- 8

Bring together the first 5 steps into a summary that narrates the specific challenges in your area, the data, your approach until now and the lessons you have learned that will guide your approach in the future

- 9

List examples of individual students (anonymise names!) and list their barriers, motivators and your plan to meet their needs

Student	A	B	C	D
Their top three presenting needs to make progress in the curriculum	☐ X ☐ Y ☐ Z	☐ Runs out of class ☐ Y ☐ Z	☐ X ☐ Y ☐ Z	☐ X ☐ Y ☐ Z
2-3 simple ideas to help them access the curriculum	Arrive on time	Appropriate differentiation	Etc.	Etc.
What are their motivators?	Loves Football Club 'X'	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.
How you can use their motivators to incentivise their progress	If arrive on time for half term will buy them a football ticket	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

- 10

A list of identified needs, what your actions and interventions are to meet those needs, how much those interventions cost and their expected and actual impact

Identified Issue	Action	Expected Impact	Actual Impact	Cost £
e.g. language acquisition	Pre- and over-learning	Higher engagement in the curriculum	To be measured after 4 weeks	£1000 (staff training)

- 11

Intervention reports that bring together both hard and soft data:

Date	Intervention Title	Staff	Relates to SIP:
Entry criteria	A		
Identified Issue	Small paragraph		
Identified Issue	B		
Hard Data Measure of Impact	☐ X ☐ Y		
Soft Data Measure of Impact	☐ X ☐ Y		
Student Voice	☐ X ☐ Y		

Schools are encouraged to publish this information on their website because it is meant to be read. Make sure that it is easy to find, concise, and in a format which is easy to understand. This increases awareness of the issue in this way and shows that it is something the school cares about, which will not only look good to parents and inspectors, but motivate staff and stakeholders to continue their hard work.

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The Pupil Premium Review

The Inclusion Expert Pupil Premium Review process has been honed across more than 1000 schools. We have quite literally written the book on how to do it. Our narrowing the gap successes have been broadly published in the press both in England and abroad.

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TAs: GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR BIGGEST HR EXPENSE

With a deep understanding of individual students and close links to the local community, teaching assistants can be heroes of inclusion. But in too many schools their potential is untapped. TAs aren't allowed to build relationships with parents and outside agencies and are rarely asked about the students they know best.

Under-trained and poorly utilised TAs drain school budgets. TAs who take a velcro approach, sticking to one student and doing their work for them, can even be a barrier to inclusion. Schools often spend hundreds of thousands of pounds a year on TAs they don't need or can't afford to train and support.

In the following article adapted from The Guardian, Daniel Sobel explores what happens when TAs are supported to fulfil their potential.



Conducting a teaching assistant audit

by Daniel Sobel

Before we step any further, I don't want to be accused of being anti-TA, especially when I have vociferously spoken out quite publicly about the benefits of teaching assistants for a school.

The teaching assistant debate, sparked by research into their effectiveness, gave schools the false impression that teaching assistants were not worth much. My argument, both then and now, is that it has nothing to do with TAs themselves and everything to do with how they are trained, strategically deployed and line managed.

Their varying quality and positive or negative impact on student outcomes is only usually as good as the extent to which they are managed and the quality of the person thinking about how best to use them – which is nearly always the SENCO.

I know from first-hand experience and strongly advocate that teaching assistants can be the best financial investment for a school. What I want to see is the role of TA elevated in respect, where the essential teaching assistants are of fantastic value and significant to every school.

However, the wrong/ineffective deployment of teaching assistants can be a serious impediment to a student's progress. When a teaching assistant is

deployed without sufficient training, without weekly line management support and with no regular measure of impact, then the research has shown, and we all know from personal experience, that the teaching assistant is likely to be getting in the way of learning, let alone promoting curriculum engagement.

The discussion in this article need not be a rehash of the qualities of the teaching assistant and the inherent problems with mismanaging them, as this is now well established. The issue we need to address is just how many teaching assistants you need in your school and how can you accurately make that calculation? This equation is not straightforward as it comes with its own set of myths and hurdles. I hope to lay out a set of guidelines for you to think about your own school. I shall not put my head in the sand and ignore the fact that the obvious starting point for nearly every school is going to be financial. However, I don't think that a pre-emptive calculation about how many teaching assistants you need is fair to the students or the teaching assistants because you will simply get it wrong. Furthermore, why go through all of the effort of changing job descriptions and making redundancies when you are not certain that you are going to get the best outcomes anyway?

My team and I have now carried out a spate of urgent teaching assistant reviews, clearly in response to the growing crisis in school budgets. In every school where we have reviewed the deployment of teaching assistants, we have found the school was spending at least £120,000 more than necessary.

So there are significant savings to be made. However, if you do this right, it is an opportunity to rethink your strategy for the outcomes of your most vulnerable students and that is where you should be looking to gain the most.

Two myths to bust about TA deployment

Let's quickly put to rest the most common myth that heads ask me: *"But don't we need to allocate teaching assistants according to the hours on the Education, Health and Care Plan?"* The answer is an emphatic "no" – with one exception: unless the EHCP explicitly states "in-class teaching assistant support of X hours". Even then, it is nearly always inappropriate to "Velcro" support to a student in the mainstream.

So, just to clarify, unless it explicitly states the teaching assistant hours are to be used for one-to-one in-class support, then no, you don't need to allocate teaching assistants per hour. This myth is a left-over of the old system of Statements which allocated support per student. What changed on paper (as opposed to in the minds of most heads) is that EHCPs are meant to be constructed around "outcomes", which should mean the need to adapt diverse types of support over time.

The teaching assistant allocation should nearly always be generic and this implies lots of different types of use of a teaching assistant and most often it is simply the availability of a TA in a class to draw on (rather than rely on). Theoretically then, you could have five students in the same class with an allocation of 20-plus hours of teaching assistant support and it would be fine to use one teaching assistant to meet their needs in class. Of course, this is only possible with the proper teaching assistant training, management and support.

TAs should not be used to enable teachers to focus on everyone else but the SEN students – this is demeaning to them both.

Which brings us squarely to our second myth: *"teaching assistants should only deliver support for SEN students"*. No they absolutely should not! The new Teaching Standards, Ofsted inspection framework and SEND Code of Practice think of teachers as "teachers of all students" and this means, when you observe a teacher, you want to see them actively engaging with and leading the teaching for SEN students.

An uncaredful management of teaching assistants actually eclipses this role for the teacher and consequently the student. Most of what I find on EHCPs can actually be delivered by classroom teachers – and I don't mean in a burdensome time management problem way, I mean just by good ol' quality first teaching. Teaching assistants should not be used to enable teachers to focus on everyone else but the SEN students – this is demeaning to them both.

A simple goal

There are three questions your audit should answer for you:

- Is the current form of teaching assistant deployment effective?
- What strategy would maximise the impact of the teaching assistants?
- Therefore, how many teaching assistants are needed to meet the needs of the students?

Some schools use the findings of their audit to dissolve their current teaching assistant roles and re-establish a new job description more in keeping with what is required by the SEND Code of Practice, Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE). In order to do this with confidence, you will need details about how the role isn't working presently versus what would work. The aim of the audit then is to provide

you with sufficient evidence to be able to take such action, be confident in your expenditure and ensure you have value for money while maximising the impact on student outcomes.

Surely, we must work out all the needs of the students, work out which classes they are in and then divvy up support. Easy, right? End of article?

The trap to avoid

In one school where we carried out this audit, we found 37 TAs to meet the needs of 42 SEN students (with 11 EHCPs). We found that:

- The guidance in the Individual Support Plans (ISPs – advice to teachers) did not always support the outcomes in the EHCP.
- The teaching assistants were not actively line-managed, and there was a lack of clarity around what they were doing in the classroom.
- There was no evidence that the teaching assistants are trained sufficiently to meet the specific needs of students.
- There was no consistent gathering of impact data for student progress which partly explained why the SEN students did not make sufficient progress.
- The strategy of teaching assistant deployment had evolved organically rather than being planned and carefully executed.
- There was a strict adherence to matching "hours" stated on EHCPs to providing one-to-one support, which tied up valuable and scarce resource (and is in opposition to the findings of the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff report of 2009).
- The teaching assistant was left to "get on" according to how they thought the student best needed supporting (this tied in with the lack of useful written and management guidance for them, their lack of training and lack of impact measures).

What is common about the above findings and precisely what you need to avoid is that the most challenging and vulnerable students in the school



“I know from first-hand experience and strongly advocate that teaching assistants can be the best financial investment for a school. What I want to see is the role of TA elevated in respect, where the essential teaching assistants are of fantastic value and significant to every school.

are left to the teaching assistant, who are forced to make untrained, unmeasured and ill-informed decisions about these students' educational needs.

However, the trap you will fall into if you don't tackle this carefully is not addressing the above key concerns and being left with even fewer teaching assistants to do whatever it is they think best for the most complicated students. At its heart, the teaching assistant audit has much less to do with teaching assistants and more to do with student needs and how they can be best met. Here now follows some guidelines for your TA Audit.

Step 1: A view of all the relevant documents

- EHCPs and any other SEN files or information, all advice to teachers and teaching assistants regarding students – ask yourself if they are aligned. Do the outcomes on the EHCPs match the advice to teachers? Is the advice to teachers meaningful and useful or, as we find often, vague?
- Tracking or logging information about student progress in or outside of the classroom (e.g. interventions or social skills) – ask yourself how detailed and useful the tracking information is. Does it actually give you what you need to make decisions about interventions and support?
- An outline of the current teaching assistant structure and roles, their training handbook, their line management and/or observation results. Any information that shows how teaching assistants are guided, who by and the structure for liaison with classroom teachers or the SENCO in support of student outcomes. Any log or detail about teaching assistant CPD and how it may meet the needs of student outcomes – are your teaching assistants trained to meet the needs of your students and are they line managed every other week with very specific SMART targets?

Ultimately, you should be able to clearly see what the “student need” is and judge how equipped the teaching assistants are to actually support that need.

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At its heart, the teaching assistant audit has much less to do with TAs and more to do with student needs and how they can best be met.

Step 2: Pause and consider two broad questions

First, consider the management aspects of the teaching assistants. A useful exercise can be to imagine that you are a new teaching assistant to the school. Ask the SENCO or teaching assistant manager to explain in detail your initiation, how you get your training and guidance and look at the information you are provided with. Now you should be able to answer the question about whether you would have enough detailed guidance and support to drive student progress. How often are you to be line managed, have targets set, and engage in CPD? Is the school really getting the very most of you? How often are you liaising with teachers and are they working with you in a respectful and collaborative way to maximise the outcomes of the students? As a teaching assistant, are you clear what “student outcomes” mean, specifically what they are per student and how you can support them?

Second, consider you are an EHCP or SEN student in your school – what is your ideal level of support? What do you really need to progress? In trying to answer this, draw on your best source of understanding – your training and experience. Shut out parent, student and teacher voice – the question is looking for an expert pedagogical response. What does this student need?

Most times you will come back to the same simple pedagogic principles of fostering independence and maximising participation in class. The obvious next question then is what sort of support does a student need to attain that? Do not do this exercise for every student, especially those with mild learning difficulties, without consulting specialist advice.

The value for you is:

- You get to think about what your most vulnerable students need.
- You can really draw on your experience and think about what outstanding pedagogy is without the pressures from agencies, parents and staff.
- You can pause and consider whether your current teaching assistant deployment is set to meet your standards and what shape outstanding teaching assistant support needs to take.

Step 3: Re-read the EHCPs and consider the most effective way the outcomes can be met

Consider the following excerpt from one teaching assistant audit report:

“There are currently two teaching assistants across two classes and it is not clear which students they support. In addition, there are two teaching assistants individually assigned to two EHCP students: one for 25 hours the other 20 hours. Both these students are in the same class. ISPs are used by the SENCO to distribute information to the teaching assistants and teachers following reviews. The current strategies are inconsistent and ineffective because they are not specific, measurable and are not personalised. The teachers do not effectively liaise with and guide the teaching assistants and consequently the teaching assistant is used in an unspecified way to help with no sense of whether this is positive in outcome or otherwise.”

The above is an example of deployment that makes no use of the EHCP outcomes. This is what outcome-led thinking could look like:

- EHCP outcome states: Communication and interaction – to be able to hold a conversation. In this case, the speech and language therapist could advise the teacher about how they are able to best interact with the student. This will be useful CPD for the teacher, will not take long to arrange and is something the teacher can use in every lesson without any preparation.
- nEHCP outcome states: Cognition and learning – to use alternative methods of recording work. In this case a teaching assistant could be used to help the teacher prepare chunked work and mind maps. The teacher knows what is happening with their student and the strategies and interventions match the curriculum.

This is an opportunity for you to consider all EHCP outcomes and you should find that the vast majority can be delivered in simple, easy, non-burdensome ways by the classroom teacher and the teaching assistant's role is then simply to support the teacher in organising this.

Step 4: Write your investigation into an audit report

The report is based around the findings of a forensic exploration and covers:

1. Whether the SEN admin staff are having a positive impact on student outcomes.
2. If classroom-based teaching assistants are having a positive impact on student outcomes.
3. A comparison of current teaching assistant deployment against required teaching assistant deployment for one or two year groups in as much detail as is available.
4. An impact comparison of current teaching assistant deployment with two random students against the required deployment for those two students.
5. Recommendation of teaching assistant numbers required for back office.
6. Recommendation of teaching assistant numbers in the classroom.

General points

Teaching assistants in EYFS through to year 1 should be deployed in ratio to students. Going forward, your teaching assistant deployment should be based on:

- A careful selection process, effective training and line management every other week with SMART targets.
- Teachers who are supported in understanding how to implement strategies in their classrooms and work together closely with the TA.
- Impact measures (tracked and logged weekly and reviewed regularly).

And after carrying out a review, the school should consider:

- Rewriting the teaching assistant job description.
- A reselection process of teaching assistants.
- A training programme for both learning support assistants and teachers.
- Rewriting advice to staff around maximising student outcomes.

A final word

The most valuable result of the above is reviewing what the students really need and how the current support system is meeting those needs.

This simple formula can be applied across all issues in all inclusion groups: what is the need and what are we doing effectively to meet that need?



Daniel Sobel explains how there is one intervention that all schools could be doing that costs minimum of time and money and maximises outcomes.

I've mentioned Pre and Over Learning a few times in previous articles. I once conducted a very unscientific poll amongst the Inclusion Expert team, asking the question: 'If you could choose one intervention to supplement teaching all over the country, which would it be?'

I was unsurprised when the answer came back: all those questioned agreed on one clear, simple idea - do pre-and over- learning. When I mentioned this response to a group of headteachers, I was interested to see that they also agreed that this would be the intervention of choice. They noted the simplicity of this intervention, and that it requires neither specialist technology nor equipment. Simply, it involves exposing the student to words and ideas that are about to come up in the lesson, and going over them again after the lesson. Clever and straight-forward, you'd think. However, getting it to really work for the student takes some consideration. The purpose of this article is to explain some of the science of how this works, the conditions for its best use and why it's so darn good.

Before I kick off, it's important for me to emphasise the one thing that gets in the way of any good idea for a school: initiative-itis. This is a crippling disease which thrives off senior leaders and indeed policy makers coming up with a fanciful plan and not getting the buy-in of the teachers. Pretty much all of those big DfE ideas that launch and fizzle are victims of this type of problem. Acknowledging that this really requires it's own article, I'm going to proceed under the assumption that you have done a fantastic job of getting your teachers on board with this.

When I was at school, the idea of an additional intervention was something like 'quiet reading in the corner with a local volunteer grandma'. There was no baseline assessment or meeting of targets, just good ol' reading practice. Since that time, we have evolved an entire industry of computer-based, visually stunning, psychologically inventive and pedagogically magical off-the-shelf interventions that have all been tried, tested and proven to rapidly develop some aspect of student learning. My explanation why these interventions rarely boost

curriculum attainment is because they don't stick to my golden rules of good pedagogy:

- It is based in the actual classroom and on the curriculum material
- It is measurable in terms of engagement with the curriculum and participation in the classroom
- It doesn't distract from the curriculum but directly fosters a more positive engagement with the class material
- It boosts self-esteem and motivation to learn the curriculum amongst peers in the classroom

Imagine: the students are studying volcanoes and an identified student is removed from this lesson to practice reading about Billy the Goat. After a term, the teacher notices that the student's reading-comprehension age has risen, yet he knows nothing about the difference between magma and lava like his peers and he still doesn't volunteer to read because he is only confident when studying in the corridor with his teaching assistant. Pre-and over-learning adhere to my golden rules.

Pre-and over-learning seem to directly address the full range of SEN needs very well, from preparing dyslexic students in advance in how to make sense of the letters to students with ADHD who will struggle less to follow what is going on in the class. More significantly, though, is the practising of language acquisition and recall, which is the predominant assessment in SATS and GCSEs, and arguably the biggest deficit in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Nothing can replace effective Quality First Teaching using the eight teaching standards. But pre- and over-learning is a very clear example of the application of these: establishing an effective learning environment, quality assessment, differentiated planning and effective deployment of support staff.

So why and how does it work?

Studies of over-learning go back to the 19th century, but, until recently, the neural mechanisms underpinning over-learning remained unclear. In a recent paper in Nature

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Neuroscience, researchers found that even brief periods (up to 20 minutes) of over-learning after a task led to improved performance. This occurred because the over-learning resulted in a more stable neural state, which was less prone to disruption by the arrival of new information. In other words, putting new stuff in your brain can lead to dumping other information to make space, but over-learning helps it feel more at home. An implication of this is that simply coming back to a task a few times later on can enable the teacher to be sure that what could have been an initially errorless performance by the learner was genuinely the result of mastery, and not just a one-off. In addition, as information fades after a month or so, over-learning needs to be combined with semi-regular spaced practice for the optimal retention of skills and knowledge; in other words, teachers should revisit topics every month, rather than revise it only prior to tests or exams at the end of the year.

Pre-learning can set up the condition where the main lesson actually becomes a period of over-learning. The same cognitive and neural mechanisms that support over-learning during a lesson therefore also support the efficacy of pre-learning. This may be especially useful for learners with low prior knowledge, students with poor working memory or those with any SEN.

Together with Nathan Atkinson, a Global Top 50 teacher and author of Teaching Mastery, I have noted here the best ways to maximise your use of pre- and over-learning:

1. Measure, assess and evaluate: start by carefully assessing a baseline – how easily students pick up language and engage. Then trial pre- and over-learning over 3 weeks and assess the impact. Make sure you understand what is working and what isn't, and why.
2. Do it in the classroom, rather than outside the classroom.
3. Focus on skills and ideas rather than just keywords. Get students to draw or source a picture of the new word or relate it to a story. Abstract words are tough for anyone. Some students may benefit from creating their own visual dictionary.
4. Use each task as a framework for teacher-TA liaison; include structures of forthcoming lessons and details about how identified students are acquiring new language and engaging with the topic.
5. Use pre-learning as a hook for a new topic, and to motivate them to want to discover more. Motivation and engagement go together. Fun, excitement and mystery and linking to favourite icons and heroes can help.
6. You don't have to, but try using technology: record sentences on devices that can be used during lesson time. Videos and audio can all help with language acquisition. If you are brave enough, get them to compose a rap song using the key words.

7. Homework is an over-learning opportunity if designed properly. This is another topic in itself, but be careful about introducing new ideas in just because you are desperately trying to finish the topic in time.
8. Initial pre-learning should ideally be done twice – once a couple of weeks in advance and again just prior to the lesson.
9. Over-learning should be done after the lesson and again every few weeks. Keep coming back to the learning; don't let it drop until 2 weeks before the end-of-year assessments.
10. Pre- and over-learning can be used for many types of student but EAL is the most obvious. During the delivery of over 1,000 Inclusion Expert Pupil Premium Reviews, we always recommend this intervention to schools as a means to narrow the gap.

With the right conditions and using some of the latest neuroscience as a guide, your students will get a huge amount out of pre- and over-learning, and their results will improve. The newest bit for most schools will be the idea that the curriculum studied in September is not something you can leave until March to revisit, it's something you need to keep coming back to every month. I'm excited when the schools that my team and I support save an enormous amount of time and money by removing interventions which don't build the direct engagement with the curriculum and they are surprised when they see the simply but powerful results of pre and over learning on both the students – but also the teachers.



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“Pre- and over-learning seem to directly address the full range of SEN needs very well, from preparing dyslexic students in advance in how to make sense of the letters to students with ADHD who will struggle less to follow what is going on in the class.”

AVAILABLE NOW!

Daniel Sobel's latest book –
'Narrowing the Attainment
Gap' A Handbook for Schools

Narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is a top priority for governments and policymakers, and an issue that all schools must tackle. In his new book, Daniel Sobel, leading international expert in the field of inclusion, takes a unique approach that enables school leaders to develop their own bespoke solutions to meet the needs of their community and drive change at an individual, cohort and whole-school level.

DANIEL SOBEL NARROWING THE ATTAINMENT

GAP

A HANDBOOK FOR SCHOOLS

BLOOMSBURY

“

A well-researched thought-provoking and, above all, practical guide to narrowing the attainment gap. Thoroughly recommended!

Steve Higgins
Professor of Education,
Durham University

Read an excerpt...

'The stubborn persistence of the attainment gap, across time and nations, presents a fundamental moral difficulty for modern societies. By and large, the developed world aspires towards meritocratic ideals, and their states are what philosopher Philip Bobbitt has termed market states. Unlike the nation states that preceded them, market states do not seek to maximise the welfare of the individual but to provide the opportunity for each individual to maximise their own welfare. In essence, equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome,

is the goal. How then can a market state accept an attainment gap? How can it square its promise of equality of opportunity with a game of education that seems to be rigged in favour of the privileged before it even begins? Simply put, it can't. The gap has been a significant concern of policymakers for decades, and renewed focus on the issue led to the introduction of the pupil premium.

The process of schools trying to fit the round peg of a 'universal solution' into the square hole of their unique problems is one I see frequently. [...] 'Off-the-shelf' solutions are inviting because they appear a safe and inexpensive choice, but they constitute a false economy. Any savings in time or money that are made initially are almost inevitably lost. Such solutions rarely solve the attainment issues because they do not seek to address their underlying causes. The 'buying of a solution' is just an echo of the material, consumer-led-society approach we take with most other things in our lives. Surely, we can buy our way out of the attainment gap? In fact, most governments around the world throw money at this problem but in no way does the quantity of spending really impact the quality of the outcome. The process of narrowing the attainment gap must start with an understanding of the problems of the individuals in question and then, based on this, bespoke plans must be devised.

“The state turns to you and me, to teachers, to fix the [attainment gap] problem. Perhaps it places too heavy a burden on our shoulders... but we have to do our best, and it's clear to me from my work with more than 800 schools in the UK, Europe and around the world, that we can do better than we are doing today.



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MAXIMISE OUTCOMES AND MINIMISE EXPENSE ON YOUR FIVE TOUGHEST BEHAVIOUR CASES



Daniel Sobel reflects on the challenges often presented by our more difficult students, and how as a whole-school team we might be able to overcome these problems before it is too late.

In many schools you will find the head and deputy and possibly other senior leaders fire-fighting the most challenging student cases, spending up to 80 per cent of their time on the same five to 10 students.

This article draws on a recent conversation I had with Michael Purches, who is a former headteacher of a special school (for 19 years) and a real expert on supporting schools to manage their toughest cases. This article lays out some of the principles of good and bad practice when dealing with the hardest student cases in your school.

Common challenges and frustrations

In many cases that I have seen as an expert witness in tribunals and court cases about students who are permanently excluded, I notice the same unfortunate patterns:

There was a lack of early identification – if only they had picked the challenges up sooner and planned meaningfully, all this could have been prevented. There were one or two teachers with whom the student was successful – if only they had shared the good practice with the teachers that struggled.

There was a moment in time, a specific occurrence that tipped the balance, and instead of it being treated as a one-off it became the excuse for the ultimate fall – if only everyone had taken a breath and worked out how to prevent this extreme, one-off event from happening again.

Referral times to support services such as CAMHS are woefully inadequate and social services change their key person seemingly regularly. As a result, you resent sitting at yet another team-around-the-child table playing pass the buck and blame. If only there were an acknowledgment by everyone that we all have a role to play and if we pull together we could achieve something.

On top of this, the same teachers who don't seem to "get" a challenging student provoke this child into

responding with anger and then you have to deal with the consequences, coaching the student to see their role in this while knowing that the teacher is equally to blame.

I doubt there is a head or principal in the country that hasn't encountered most of the above problems. Of course, the real challenge is getting all the key players in your team to be coordinated and consistent in implementing the clearly outlined plan. This means: whole-staff buy-in, attitude shifts, quality first teaching, helping teachers to breathe, and hitting the refresh button with the same students that are causing them grief.

Here follows some specific actions to address these problems. None of them will replace the need for good ol' outstanding teaching but, if you can get that up and running as well, this will absolutely help.

Two reams of paperwork

You need the paperwork for the referrals, for building a case and for ensuring that you have everything tracked in case something happens. Don't fault on this, be thorough and record everything. Get an HLTA or someone in the office to ready your file for as and when you need it.

Two tips: use folder dividers so that you can quickly reference which agency has said what, and get someone from your pastoral team or the SENCO to write a summary page at the front which looks like a timeline of incidents, support and impact of that support. Having this ready and in order means that if you suddenly need to take action you are ready.

The other type of paperwork you need is exactly the opposite: it is one page, it is bullet-pointed and as succinct as can be. This is "the one page" all of your staff are going to be on and features three columns: Identified Issue, Action, Impact.

Focus on just three specific issues – not all 50 that the student has. Be specific and limit the challenges to just those that with some concerted effort you could solve, which would then allow you to move on to the next level

of problems. An example would be starting with helping a student to positively settle in the class. Or it could be getting a student to stop swearing at staff.

Be brave and think first about what the teachers can do rather than the student, because you can probably bet that the student isn't going to do anything different unless you and your staff do. The actions need to be simple and clear and, most importantly, consistent. The impact measure needs to be evaluated most lessons and you need to review them at the end of each week to ensure they are beginning to work.



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Stop looking at the student to change

Think of the student as a simple mechanism of action-reaction. Ask not how you can change the student, but rather what you (and staff) can do that will initiate change in the student.

"Insisting", "forceful persuasion" and "appearing cross" are all strategies that have, until now, failed. You and your staff's actions are the ways of rewriting the rules of the game. Here are two examples:

Instead of calling home to complain about the latest incident, pre-emptively call home to praise the student for something wonderful they did. Do this repeatedly. Your action is changing the game. Instead of the teacher expressing frustration at the student in front of the class, the teacher should go over to the student during break and have a gentle chat with them. They should ask about something they really like (a computer game, football) and express genuine fascination. The dividends of this will become clear.

Shift the attitudes of staff

Staff opinions make and break students. For example, instead of not choosing them for a class role or responsibility, they could actually promote their engagement in positive leadership. One of the best examples I have seen was with a boy who was on the verge of permanent exclusion. He was given an opportunity to raise some money for a boy in the community who could not walk and had other significant disabilities. He organised football competitions in the school and also went around the form rooms seeking donations. After three months he raised money to buy a special chair for the student. Aside from the obvious

dynamics that contributed to the student feeling wanted, worthy and that he had something positive to give the world, it was the sheer quantity of staff who went up to him throughout the three months saying how impressed they were. He was showered with praise, but most importantly it changed what the teachers thought of him.

Success breeds success

One approach is to reduce the student's timetable in order to hit the refresh button and start again with just a few school-based activities. A starting point as low as simply coming in to do an activity with a teaching assistant could be a good first step (from which to build one successful step after another).

The purpose of doing this is to help the student re-imagine school from being a place that is out of control and a consecutive series of failures to one that is built up slowly, each step being understood and clearly accomplished before adding the next – and it becoming a place where a sense of achievement happens.

Failures, mistakes and stumbling blocks should be expected to arise and these can then be tackled in isolation and amid a process that is full of "well dones" rather than trying to eke out a candle flame of positive achievement in a never-ending thunderstorm of failures.

There is always one

There is always one teacher who seems to have absolutely no problems whatsoever with the student. Of course, they are an outstanding teacher who knows their craft exceptionally well. They rely on that good ol' outstanding teaching, replete with personalised, differentiated and intelligently adapted learning in a background of firm but very positive language. They – more than any educational psychologist, specialist or CAMHS expert – are your source to support your other teachers.

'Us' not 'me'

Years of school leadership can take its toll and the teaching profession does nothing to recognise the drip-drip effect of exposure to the painful circumstances of vulnerable children on your stress and, ultimately, your mental health. I have met way too many stressed out school leaders who are burdened with the personal stories of children in distress.

There are two key problems when it comes to trauma management in a school: first, psychological trauma is contagious and can spread through a staffroom. Second, stressed and emotionally challenged people are not in a position to manage the emotional pain of others in a healthy way.

The elegant solution is simply to work as a group. This makes sense particularly in larger settings which can benefit from a range of personalities and experiences around the table. Simply talking in terms of what "we" are going to do



removes the burden from any one individual. This group is best made up of those who know the students differently, including a teaching assistant, SENCO, teacher, counsellor, social worker, educational psychologist and even CAMHS experts.

Meet at the same time each week and bring tea and biscuits and make it a sacrosanct time that is respected and even enjoyed. Each of your staff should be encouraged to talk about their experiences of your top 10 most challenging students and how you are all struggling and working together. This can turn the burden into a valuable and even enjoyable experience.

Learn what behaviours mean

The most common behaviours that staff misinterpret are either autistic spectrum, Attachment or hyperactivity. Yes, there are loads more behaviours you need to be savvy about, but you can bet that pretty much every state school in the country has students that present with these specific conditions and these students will be in their top 10 most challenging. You need to understand the behaviours and make sure your staff do.

However, it's difficult to persuade highly educated and experienced school leaders that their level of knowledge of child psychology and related behaviours is inadequate and, sometimes, ignorant. You are simply not given enough guidance and support or training about these matters. Please spend time and money on CPD around these issues as it will ultimately save you that time and money many times over elsewhere.

Be creative, be brave

Whatever you do, don't seek off-the-shelf solutions. They don't work – if they did, you would have heard about it by now. Similarly, don't wait around for whichever service to eventually see the student for 45 minutes and hope that this going to do something. Don't try and make up for a lack of good solid teaching when the experience of turbulent and badly managed classrooms has real damaging impact. A simple questioning of motivations and barriers can result in some insightful ideas and your own in-house solutions.

One boy I met in a school, who lived in the poorest area in the country, told me he loved gardening but that his housing estate didn't have any greenery. We worked out that the school would reward him with seeds, a trowel and an area of the field. It was linked to SMART targets including attendance, preparedness for learning and classroom engagement (and it did not cost much to implement). Long story short, the student ended up going to horticultural college as opposed to risking NEET status – the more bespoke your solutions, the more likely they are to work.



Don't try and make up for a lack of good solid teaching when the experience of turbulent and badly managed classrooms has real damaging impact.

Common success factors

Michael and I tried to answer the not so simple question: what do we know about the schools that are successful in managing really challenging students?

- First and foremost they “get” troubled young people. They appreciate that such young people “are distinguished by their regrettable ability to elicit from others exactly the opposite of what they really need” (L Tobin).
- They work hard at working with parents and families. Teachers reinforce consequences for the things young people get right as well as when they get it wrong. They help young people to understand their responsibilities, make the right decisions and not blame others.
- Their feedback is specific (e.g. you made the right choice there by walking away from that situation, I like the way you asked me for help with that first task in the lesson, etc). This also helps decision-making.
- Staff don't let troubled young people push their buttons – they maintain control and don't “lose it”. They maintain professional responses rather than emotional ones.
- Teachers use “time in” rather than “time out”. Banishing young people may only compound any sense of worthlessness. Imagine how being sent away might affect someone who has already been rejected and abandoned numerous times in their life. The message of keeping them close is that while their action is unacceptable they are not.
- During a crisis time staff remind them of when things went well to give them a broader perspective of the situation.

- Staff help young people express their emotions so they don't have to rely on negative “acting out” behaviour.
- Staff carefully watch and listen to the young people. By doing this schools can predict “flash points” and prevent them.
- Young people are prepared for change and transitions. This reduces stress and anxiety.
- Lessons are suitably differentiated so that learning is matched to needs, interests and aspirations.
- Teachers provide choices to young people. This is not of course whether to complete the task or not, but offering a choice of tasks or ways of doing it.
- Teachers develop and use peer support networks. This benefits all young people with regard to personal development.
- Schools that are successful with the most troubled young people are great at building relationships with them. Students are treated respectfully and are championed.

Final thoughts

I want to end with a final point: be guided by one key question, which you need to ask yourself, your colleagues and agencies – is this student a danger to themselves or others? When you meet with social services and especially CAMHS, ask this question and minute the answer, because this is the basis of your decision about whether to keep the student in your school or not.

This is not just your last resort and vital evidence you may need for exiting a student out of the mainstream, but also your legal duty to your staff and students. Don't use this nuclear option without fully exploring positive behaviour management and techniques for de-escalating challenging scenarios.



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EYFS: TACKLE THE ATTAINMENT GAP AT ITS ROOTS



It is well known at the attainment gap starts to develop long before children arrive at school. But what can we do in the EYFS to tackle the problem early on? Daniel Sobel offers his reflections

The notion that the attainment gap emerges during the early years has been proven by educational and sociological researchers the world over, and used for political point scoring and policy formation.

For example, the Berrow Review (2008) says that a large proportion of children start school with limited basic communication skills, which are vital for an effective start to schooling.

The report highlights that there is a direct link between young children's language and communication skills and their academic achievements down the line. Similarly, the Rose Review (2006) highlighted the importance of developing children's speaking and listening skills, which are essential for the acquisition of literacy.

The findings of these studies haven't yet translated into a narrowing of the attainment gap. But I believe we can identify the two biggest barriers that stand in the way of addressing the national challenge of narrowing the gap during the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). These are:

1. Leaders of primary and secondary schools who are trying to narrow the attainment gap in their own settings fail to communicate with their feeder EYFS settings and fail to offer any support. If you are a primary head and the attainment gap is already there when your pupils are at the EYFS feeder down the road

then surely you should get on the phone to them and work out how you can best support them. This doesn't happen nearly half as much as it needs to.

2. Most crucially, the leaders of multi-academy trusts (MAT), secondaries and even many primaries simply do not have a sufficiently sophisticated grasp of what help is necessary in the EYFS.

“At its heart, the teaching assistant audit has much less to do with TAs and more to do with student needs and how they can best be met.

As a result of these two fundamental (and easily addressable) flaws, the EYFS is left to face our country's most challenging problem alone without any significant support or investment from the broader educational fraternity. No wonder the gap continues year-on-year without much of a glimmer of hope on the horizon.

I must confess that I fall foul of these problems myself. While I have experience and expertise within secondary and primary, my knowledge of EYFS only extends to what I have gleaned from my own children's experience! I have aimed to remedy this by speaking with two of my colleagues who run the EYFS part of

my inclusion team in a bid to share some of their advice.

So the aim of this article is to furnish primary heads with a basic understanding of the problems that commonly foster the attainment gap in EYFS and to give them an idea of the kind of support they might be able to offer.

This is not an exhaustive list of all that is worth knowing about EYFS – rather I aim to offer a checklist of the common mistakes that have the biggest impact on the attainment gap.

In my conversation with experts Dr Sue Allingham and Hilary Solomon, we came up with the following areas:

1. Importance of parental engagement and participation.
2. Importance of quality interactions.
3. Need for well-informed staff.
4. Need for constructive environment to facilitate learning.
5. Outside environment versus the inside environment.
6. Need for simple planning based on learning, not activities.

Parental engagement and participation

I assume this is an obvious point for everybody although there are some nuances that we should focus on.

Home visits prior to the child starting their placement should be prioritised and can set a precedent for continuous positive and active communication. Parents should be encouraged to

regularly come in to the school, via activities like coffee mornings (apparently cake works).

Most importantly, it is not just significantly increasing the engagement of hard-to-reach families that counts, but facilitating parents to understand and engage with their child's development and learning journey. Instead of just passively receiving reports, they should participate in the process.

A good learning journal should not just be full of photos, but should enable parents to understand the significant moments that inform their child's journey. This is the key: to recognise parents, and what goes on at home generally, as a critical element of the EYFS.

Importance of quality interactions

As Ofsted's 2015 report on narrowing the gap in the early years (Early Years Report 2015, Ofsted) says, teaching incorporates all of the ways in which adults help young children to learn. Effective EYFS leaders do not think of teaching and play as separate endeavours.

There are some mistakes which are seen on a regular basis. It is quite natural for adults to enable EYFS children to speak with simple, closed questions, and to fill the silences with their own speech. This closes down learning. A "quality interaction" has many facets but for the sake of this article, it means maximising (as opposed to actively minimising) the learning opportunity of every interaction.

Instead of asking "what does it do" or "what colour is this" which can only lead to simple answers, ask open questions.

Give time for children to respond rather than jumping in to fill silences. My team use the nine second rule: allow children nine seconds to do anything before you jump in. Wait, listen and be patient.



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Pepper the day with choices to promote thinking. We dominate children with the choices we make for them and this takes away thinking and articulating. Ask "What do you want to read?" rather than saying "Let's read this". "What do you want to wear?" rather than "let's all dress up as pirates". This is more of an attitude shift that facilitates teaching assistants and teachers listening to children and promoting reflection.

Adapt to the moment rather than getting stuck with what you have prescribed. EYFS children are constantly bringing in surprises to the setting about things they have discovered, want to know about or share.

One example of good practice I saw was an EYFS lead who, when a child came in with a patch on her eye to

address the not uncommon problem of lazy eye, adapted the lesson plan to make it pirate-themed.

The above pedagogical approaches are golden, impact-over-time things that cost no money. Interventions at the EYFS level look like this rather than "a this or that type of group" which is the hallmark of boosting learning throughout the key stages.

Well-informed staff (especially the SENCO)

Many SENCOs haven't got a clue about EYFS and just don't know where to start. It is a different way of understanding the relationship between curriculum and learning. The Statutory Requirements for the EYFS 2012 state exactly how teaching and learning must be approached, through the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Ofsted also expects to see this. Heads and SENCOs must be aware of this.

The pedagogical approach is that children should learn through experiences. Children need to develop aural skills before literacy; the Rose Review draws a direct link between language development and dyslexia. Consequently, the SENCO needs to develop an understanding of

EYFS development, in particular the difference between SEN and development. They should understand how the pedagogical approach necessitates an entirely different attitude and strategy for addressing needs, and how getting it right in the EYFS is going to have a massive impact on SEN throughout the rest of the primary school.

EYFS relies on a high ratio of teaching assistants, whose role is very important. However, like in all key stages, TA deployment is only as good as their management. Helping them understand the cognitive, neurological and physical development of young children is foundational in ensuring their hard work with their wards is meaningful and accurate.

Walk into a EYFS room, and teaching assistants and teachers should be indistinguishable in their action. Their differences should be seen not in who is washing up the paint pots but in who is leading planning.

Assessing children’s starting points should be based on constant reflection about what is deemed typical for each child given their chronological age in months, rather than years. Staff should frequently check and agree their judgements with one another and with other stakeholders. This should include the frequent sharing of information with and between parents and health visitors.



Constructive environment to facilitate learning

For those of us who are not trained in the art of EYFS pedagogy, this is one of the most different aspects of educational management. Environmental set-up is absolutely key to learning: who would have thought that where you put the chairs and tables could have such an impact on the attainment gap?

The aim is to set up areas of continuous provision such as a water area, sand area, discovery area (opportunities for children to mix things), creative area, writing and mark-making area using lots of different types of implements, stage area with puppets, etc. None of this costs a lot of money.

These areas facilitate learning through play and activity. Each area should come with lots of suggestions for staff to facilitate key questions and vocabulary. More importantly, ask the children to feedback and evaluate. The entire EYFS space is a learning opportunity and so this needs to be carefully strategised, evaluated and managed.

An important and common example of the impact of not maximising the environment can be seen at key stage 2 in boys’ writing. We know that boys are generally slower in their development than girls, but the EYFS

environmental set up can go against them. Most activities often tend to be on tables. However, in order to write you need core strength and shoulder stability. When boys sit on the floor, they use their arms and legs. Reception and nursery require sitting. But developmentally boys just don’t have it. Therefore they need floor-based activities that involve kneeling, leaning on arms, stretching up and so on, to develop this key core and shoulder stability.

The outside environment is completely different

Both EYFS experts emphasise this point most emphatically as being a classic, common mistake. The mistake? To think of the outside environment just like the inside and adopt the same pedagogical approaches and use the same items from the inside. It is common for staff to bring out the play materials from indoors and conduct the same type of learning. Actually, the outside environment is rich with opportunities for different language acquisition and use as well as types of thinking. Simple questions such as “where are those clouds going?” open up such rabbit holes.

Simple planning based on learning not activities

Teachers tend to look at the EYFS curriculum and plan accordingly. This certainly makes sense from a primary and secondary perspective. However, this is a significant error in EYFS delivery. Instead, staff should be looking at the children and then referring to the EYFS strategies to support their learning.

This upside-down way of thinking about planning is one of the harder aspects for the primary visitors to get their head around. However, without this child-led approach, the EYFS setting will not directly provide for the child’s needs which is at heart the attainment gap in development.



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FINDING THE PERFECT SENCO



Schools are finding it hard to recruit successful SENCOs. Daniel Sobel believes this is down to the changing requirements of this broad and vital position. He looks at the modern SENCO role and advises on recruiting effectively

A recent survey by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) found that only 14 per cent of SENCOs were recruited with ease, while 56 per cent recruited with difficulty and in 30 per cent of the cases, the school failed to recruit.

We have waltzed slap-bang into a national crisis and no-one seems to have woken up to this problem or is doing anything about it.

Since there is such a broad reach for the SENCO role, what sort of person are we looking for, what do we need to prioritise, and what can we get someone else to do?

The traditional SENCO

In the past, the stereotypical SENCO has been seen as the sensitive one, often slightly eccentric (yours truly) and happy to be based in that room under the stairs or down the quiet corridor away from the bustle of normal school happenings.

Students were removed to this special room, those who needed extra attention. That role required patience to work with socially awkward and frustrating students (and their parents), the ability to adapt resources for a broad spectrum of needs, and healthy bouts of resignation to the lengthy paperwork, the outside agencies that were forever lacking and unavailable and, of course, the teachers who would expect them to take all the responsibility for any student with an SEN label.

You could hire that SENCO – it was clear what you needed and there were plenty out there.

The new SENCO

Thanks to Ofsted, the SEND Code of Practice and the Teachers' Standards, we have seen a significant attitude shift – from keeping those SEN students in that back room to making them a central measure of a successful lesson.

"Rapid and sustained progress of all groups" is interpreted to mean that the students beyond the edges of the average

need to be making significant progress in a teacher's class for it to be considered any good.

When SEN students do not make adequate progress then it can call into question the ability of that teacher, but also your broader school system and its capacity to accurately identify needs.

SEN is no longer something that happens in the room down that quiet corridor, rather it is taking centre stage as a top Ofsted priority. Our SENCO needs to get this to happen – but not from the quiet of their office where they are busy slaving over yet more local authority paperwork and babysitting those same students who have been excluded from class again.

That sensitivity, which was the hallmark of the SENCO, is no longer a top priority. The new SENCO is someone who can think in whole-school leadership terms, has great communication skills with staff and a deft ability to get your school into gear for the Ofsted challenge. That's a different SENCO altogether – a different job description requiring a different type of person.

What you need from your SENCO

The modern SENCO needs to be outstanding at the following aspects – but even more than that, outstanding at doing all of these concurrently...

1. Can not only get all the ridiculous paperwork done quickly but can actually manipulate the system to get what both the school and student need with tenacity, calm and a willingness to go the extra mile at every junction.
2. Can handle challenging parents, usefully share the burden, and support the senior leaders. They spend 90 per cent of their time managing the top 10 per cent of students and know how to stop a bad situation spiralling out of control.
3. Can provide bite-sized information to teachers about their students on a regular basis, are available as a go-to person for continuous teacher support, and can

even help nurture the relationship between teaching assistants and teachers.

4. Can read, use and feel at home with whole-school data such as RaiseOnline.
5. Can support whole-school planning in senior leadership meetings and contribute to both pastoral and curriculum development.
6. Someone you can rely on to ensure you are compliant with the SEND Code of Practice, Ofsted and the latest policies.
7. Can deploy resources intelligently and can accurately and dynamically meet needs with high impact and easily measurable provision.
8. Can lead on related issues such as looked-after children, narrowing the attainment gap, English as an additional language and so on.
9. Can deliver on being in and out of classrooms supporting teachers with their differentiation and personalised learning on a daily basis.

So, can you imagine advertising for such a candidate and managing to invite eight candidates to an interview day – all of whom could potentially do this job for you? I hear you laughing from here. Is it possible that if they are actually good enough to be taking on the duties described in the above list then they may as well be going for a headship? So what can we do?



Recruiting the right SENCO

It is a competitive market out there and your first gambit is simply to up the salary. Why should this job be saved from the normal market forces that end up in such practices? If you don't do it, the other schools will.

Think more in terms of a senior leader, possibly at the deputy head level. One headteacher told me they had advertised three times for an assistant head SENCO role with no success. I got her to reinvent the position to a deputy head level – it was filled quickly. This does have implications for getting governors on board and budget but needs must.

In line with the previous point, think more about someone for their generic leadership skills, their proven capacity to coach teachers in teaching and learning, and whether they can demonstrate any prior sensitivity to SEN or vulnerable students. This takes us off piste from the usual SENCO to someone who is more of a generic whole-school leader. I think SEN specifics can be learnt in the role, whereas it is much harder for someone with a Master's in SEN to learn the requisite leadership skills.

The point above will make more sense if you expand the role to more of an INCO (Inclusion Co-ordinator) with responsibility for all areas of inclusion without forgetting the stretch and challenge end as well. Lay out your expectations that this role will involve getting all staff up to scratch with SEN.

Expertise versus leadership

The above steps challenge the common misconception that you need to hire someone who knows the most about, for example, dyslexia. Let me compound that problem even further by saying that the SENCO training course is worse than useless for getting your SENCO up to scratch.

They can read a book about dyslexia and after six months of dealing with a range of needs and reading the specialist advice and education psychologist reports they will know enough. The hardest bits about being a SENCO is managing it all: the paperwork, the meetings, the staff development. It is precisely these things which are not SEN-based per se and cannot be read in a book. They fall under leadership.

I am suggesting that you could invest in a good leader who has a broad responsibility for inclusion with a strong focus on staff development.

The annual reviews

I have written and argued vociferously time and again that many of the traditional SENCO functions can be carried out by higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) under the guidance of the SENCO.

For example, one of my HLTAs prepared all of the annual review paperwork both pre and post-review and my role

was merely to check it and sign it off. We did a paperwork meeting once a week for two hours.

It is a waste of time for your SENCO to spend time on the phone trying to get through to CAMHS when one of the teaching assistants can do that. Timetabling of teaching assistants is another thing that the traditional SENCO did but which is better taken on by an HLTA. The traditional SENCO tasks have changed and many of these can be given to HLTAs.

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Concluding thoughts

I hope this gives you some pause for thought about this role. The relevance of this new type of deputy-head-whole-school-leader-SENCO that I describe will vary from setting to setting. There can't be a one-size-fits-all shape. Your SENCO should be someone who is able to facilitate and promote everyone else delivering SEN, rather than shouldering it all themselves.

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The SENCO job description

Summing all this up, the SENCO job description for me is now going to be an even longer one:

1. Can read and manipulate data (the reason I think this is your number one quality is because you need to rely on them to feel at home reading and interpreting RaiseOnline, whole-school attainment data, identifying cohorts, etc).
2. Can think whole-school and strategically about needs and matching them with interventions.
3. Will contribute to your senior leadership team.
4. Can manage themselves in meetings.
5. Can be efficient with the paperwork.
6. Can lead and support classroom teachers.
7. Is able to identify need and deal with complicated student situations.

Think less in terms of the traditional specialist teacher. The SENCO should be in and out of classes all-day, every day. You should be thinking about an INCO rather than a SENCO and stretching the role to other areas such as Pupil Premium, ethnic minorities and gifted and talented. It should be a leadership role, preferably a deputy head, and they should have both teaching and learning and pastoral strengths.

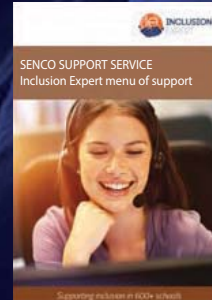
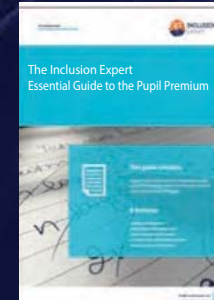
Recruit for a deputy or assistant head/principal with experience of whole-school leadership. Go for the leadership and organisational skills. It is easier to develop SEN knowledge skills with a fast learner than leadership skills with someone more inclined to working in an SEN department alone.

The INCO/SENCO has to be able to make their team of unqualified staff into an "SEN army" that is valuable to the school and they simply cannot do this without line management and leadership experience and expertise.



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