

## Leadership in Special Education Settings

### Distinctive features beyond the commonalities

This is a discussion paper around those features which are either distinct in *character* or distinct by *degree* in schools and settings for pupils with statements of special educational needs. Its purpose in respect of these settings is to identify a few important things which might help to:

- Outline thinking about the nature of leadership
- Underline the particular succession planning and professional learning issues
- Recognise the inter-agency working and the leadership of and within these teams
- Identify some challenges in respect of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment
- Identify some issues in respect of national agendas and bodies
- Make some suggestions about the way forward

#### 1 Special features about the nature of leadership

##### *Leading for engagement and attitudinal disposition*

- **Recognising that the cognitive and behavioural domains can only be addressed if the affective domain is also**
  - Forming relationships, looking for the hooks
  - Designing the provision around the child
  - Judging the behaviour, not the person
  - Looking to praise, not to condemn
  - Preparedness to lose face in the face of unconventional and challenging communication and behaviour

##### *Ensuring it's not learning vs. care*

- **Teachers are the minority staff group and this can have leadership implications for**
  - Ethos and the drive for standards
  - Common understanding
  - Support staff influence on the most academically able
  - Professional learning needs
  - Demonstrating the valuing of people equally
  - Keeping staff in touch with mainstream performance and norms
  - Inter-agency understanding and co-operation
- **Parents may either have unrealistic educational expectations or see the medical and care side as a priority**
  - Parents may feel anxious, guilty or burdened by the enduring and endless commitment to intransigent need. They may see the school as the one body they can safely 'attack'.

### *Half the time*

- **There is often competition and rationalisation around time because:**

For students:

- Basic physical, medical and behavioural needs may have to be addressed first in order to provide the platform for learning. Even the most cognitively able may be significantly slowed down by reduced curriculum time and their own slow production of work
- There are more frequent absences both for medical and professional meeting reasons
- The national age benchmarks do not recognise the quart into a pint pot syndrome

For staff:

- Staff training needs of both renewable and innovative types require more than five training days and standards fund related activity, especially as they take on a broader range of roles delegated by other agencies and in response to the growing complexity of children within schools
- The specialist roles of many schools (that they value greatly) generally require schools to both send out and receive staff as part of their outward – facing role. This involves a three and four fold higher percentage than would be the case in a mainstream school, increasing the risk of reducing the quality of the school's own provision.

For senior staff:

- Fewer people to delegate to in respect of leadership and specialist roles, safeguarding, parental concerns
- Greater need and requirement to attend a variety of cross-phase and LA meetings

### *Optimism tempered by realism*

- **Pupil attainments may be few but their achievements many**

- Dignifying and capturing how far pupils move forward rather than how high they jump; affirming those who make sideways movements only in their learning; celebrating the small but triumphant; not patronising the most dependent, making the most of the moment, recognising those who are in decline yet not making their 'conditions' an excuse
- Leading for *teaching* because so many are dependent learners
- Convincing teachers they are doing a good job when challenged by apparent repetitive failure
- Preparing many students for a lifetime of sheltered and assisted living

### *Championing awareness and social inclusion*

- **Raising awareness without proslytising**
- **Advocacy of the least productive - those who the economy values least**

### *Being the right leader for the right type of SEN*

- **Different types of resilience, different types of pedagogy**
  - SEN is a generic and highly variably applied term. It refers to 20% of the population from time-to-time and to at least 2% permanently. Within that 2% are very different groups of children in both aetiology and performance. There is no reason per se why a leader in a school for children with complex learning difficulties would be as effective in a school for physical disabilities or specific learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties any more than a head of a day school would automatically fair well in a residential one. The processes, outcomes, ethos and staff teams will be markedly different in character even if 98% of the DNA is the same.
  - Schools are likely to have more idiosyncratic compounding effects as the result of local authority arrangements i.e. some 'types' of school will exist in one LA and not in another
  - Children's needs and performance are recorded differently in different places
  - The main presenting need may tell you little about the young person's learning needs e.g. two children may have cerebral palsy but one may have ten GCSEs and the other be developmentally aged 18 months. You may, on balance, decide the child aged 18 months developmentally is making better progress i.e. the label can tell you nothing at all.

### *Eccentricity*

- **Valuing the idiosyncratic**
  - Celebrating the unusual
  - Being the unusual!
  - Making a fool of oneself

## **2 Succession planning and professional learning issues**

### *Teachers and support staff learn on the job*

- **Very few staff have previously worked in a similar setting**
  - Whilst all schools will provide induction, special schools are likely to have
    - a) groups of children dissimilar to those teachers have taught before

- b) more processes involving more people
  - c) fewer teaching staff with a wider range of responsibilities than a secondary school
  - d) greater responsibility for a group of support staff
  - e) greater uncertainty about its future and possible closures and amalgamations
  - f) fewer new recruits and fresh blood but more stable
  - g) anyone specifically trained except in areas of specific need e.g. the deaf and dyslexia
- **Very few staff have had previous training**

*Leaders are hard to find*

- **There is a smaller pool of potential teacher leaders**
- **There are fewer schools in which to develop**
- **There are economic and familial barriers to movement**

*Headteachers are harder to find*

**As above plus**

- **Very few applications are made**
- **A high percentage are re-advertised**
- **There are very few schools within travelling distance of the 'type' that may be most suitable**
- **Long-standing SEN reviews around the country may have made people reluctant to enter the field**
- **NPQH requires the application for headship within 18 months from starting the programme. For the reasons above this may require people to move home when they may not be in a position to do so.**

**3 Inter-agency working and the leadership of and within these teams**

- **Teams may be teams or loose affiliations under one or more roofs**
  - Teams are likely not only to have teachers as a minority but significant groups of others which may include therapists, medical staff, residential workers, peripatetic teams and so forth.
- **These teams may or may not be actively managed by the headteacher**
  - Partnerships may not be productive and may not share protocols or common purpose
  - There are differing pay, conditions and accountabilities e.g. education and social care are employed by the council but health staff are not
- Leadership development in support teams is embryonic

#### **4 Some challenges in respect of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment**

- **Teaching can be both very rewarding and extremely frustrating**
  - Progress can be seen as dispiritingly slow or upliftingly small but significant
  - Access to learning, whether for social, physical, intellectual or emotional reasons is a demanding key feature
  - Adaptation of the curriculum into an engaging and meaningful experience is a challenge
  - Assessment data and benchmarking data is still in its infancy as a judgemental tool but improving as an informative one

#### **5 Some issues in respect of national agendas and bodies**

- **Initial teacher training and support staff training**
- **Induction and awareness raising**
- **Conflation of different types of SEN and disabilities into a generic group is misleading**
- **Confusion between SEN, disability and under-achievement is unhelpful**
- **Discrimination in the Ofsted cycle of inspections helps create an atmosphere of lack of trust and respect for the work of good and outstanding schools**
- **Disparagement of teaching assistants is unhelpful**
- **Although SIPs are trained by phase they will not necessarily know about specific aspects of certain schools such as outreach services, specialisms, residential**

#### **6 Some suggestions about the way forward**

Leadership Development practice

- a) National College, TDA and wider workforce programmes should include modules on SEN and special settings*
- b) NPQH requirements to apply within 18 months for aspiring special school headteachers should be reviewed*
- c) Regional arrangements should be made to allow appropriate internships or experience for aspiring leaders of special settings and different teams within those settings*
- d) Induction programmes in LAs should include SEN awareness for mainstream practitioners and officers of the LA*

## The climate for leadership development

- e) *DCSF, other national bodies, LAs and schools have a responsibility to uphold the dignity and integrity of learners and not to confuse this with expectation of outcomes. Conflation of under-achievement with SEND is insulting to learners and makes a mockery of the definitions under the DDA. Attempting to make a homogeneous group out of SEND is a contradiction in terms.*
- f) *DCSF and Ofsted need to exercise their professional judgement in respect of pupil progress, using new data guidance as indicators and parts of the picture, not the answer of a neat sum.*
- g) *We need leaders who value and create both a love of learning for its own sake and as an instrument for improving the individual's life chances and the country's economy. Today matters as well as tomorrow. If education is only about economic contribution then many children with SEND, including all the increasing numbers with complex difficulties, become second class citizens.*

## Leadership for improvement

- h) *SIPs should do additional modules to ensure they are current and knowledgeable about specific aspects of special settings in respect of their provision for SEND, phases, residential, specialisms and services*
- i) *ITT should include awareness of special settings and of P level assessment*
- j) *Training in the use of criterion and norm-referenced/benchmarked data in respect of children with SEND is required at all levels of professionalism*

## Leadership sustainability

- k) *School leaders, especially of smaller schools, need practical help to allow them to focus on their priorities. Apart from developments around business managers, consideration should be given to the management of negative HR issues and to leaders' own rights to lodge grievances against their employers. The system finds it easier to dismiss a head than a cleaner: this cannot be right.*
- l) *It is in the nature of leadership to be accountable. This does not mean they do not need encouragement. We need greater consistency in the system and should model climates for learning: we need to know not only what makes children thrive but also the adults who lead them. Whipping the galley slaves only produces a brief improvement in performance.*