

Introduction

Special Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) have a key role in English schools in ensuring appropriate support for an access to the curriculum for pupils with Additional Educational Needs and /or Disabilities. This role has been formally established since The 1994 Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE1994) and in 1998 the government drew up a list of National Standards (TTA, 1998) outlining the range of professional competencies that SENCO post-holders should have, including key management and leadership roles. These were reiterated in the Revised SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001)

The considerable demands of the SENCO role have prompted the development of training courses, both within Local Authority (LA) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) since the 1990s. However, there has been, until recently, no nationally recognised award for SENCOs .

A key development came in 2006, with government commissioning the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) to develop proposals for a nationally accredited training for SENCOs, reflecting the TTA SENCO Standards (HMSO, 2006).

This idea has been developed by the TDA into the NASENCO award, an accredited course of study , government funded, to be developed and delivered locally (either through collaborative HEI-LA partnerships or through private providers), at Masters level.

Government legislation (OPSI, 2009) confirmed that, not only should a SENCO have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) but that newly-appointed SENCOs in state schools

would be required to undertake the NASENCO training within 3 years of their appointment.

The first NASENCO training courses began to be rolled out from September 2009 and were aimed primarily at newly qualified SENCOs, though providers are obliged to make NASENCO training available to aspiring and/or experienced SENCOs.

The current researchers have been involved in designing and delivering the NASENCO training with LA and university colleagues; both for HEI-LA collaborative courses and also for a university ‘campus-based’ course for aspirant and experienced SENCOs.

With the recent completion of both routes to NASENCO training by the first cohorts, the question of the impact of such training needs to be considered. This evaluation of impact seeks to measure the success of such training in terms of its effects upon both participant SENCOs and their schools in the context of changing government policy.

In order to evaluate this impact, it is important to have an understanding of the realities of the SENCO role and context in English schools.

Using a horticultural analogy to frame the role and context of the SENCO might facilitate deeper evaluation: The day to day management skills of SEN might be compared to ‘gardening’ and whereas the deeper and broader leadership vision for developing inclusive policies practice and cultures could be compared to ‘landscaping’.

Researching the SENCO Role

Research in the last decade on the SENCO role has reflected considerable variation in SENCOs’ status and influence within schools (.e.g. NUT 2004; Szwed, 2007). In

particular, it has flagged up SENCOs' frustration at not being able to develop practice at whole-school level (opportunities for landscaping). This is sometimes because of colleagues' and managements' perceptions of them as 'ground level' managers (gardeners) rather than as leaders (Layton, 2005; Pearson and Ralph, 2007) or because of schools' actual (though often unspoken) resistance to the development of inclusive practice (Cole, 2005).

Pearson (2008), found that SENCOs reported that the sheer weight of the day-to-day demands of the job often prevented them from being able to get to grips with more strategic development.

More recent studies have sought to engage with this challenge by considering the SENCO's role in different possible models of leadership in schools. Norwich (2010), concludes that the SENCO role, as currently conceived, is probably too extensive for one person and that inclusive practice is best fostered in school by the SENCO retaining a core function for managing SEN , whilst the wider development of inclusive practice is shared amongst all staff. Hallett and Hallett (2010) suggest that the SENCO's role as leader might be a stepping stone to a more 'distributed' leadership model, where all senior management are committed to developing inclusive practice;. Ogden and Radford (2011) conclude that stark choices need to be made between formalising the SENCOs' leadership role through legislation or reducing it to the managing just of specialist support.

As Hallett and Hallett (2010) note, despite supportive standards frameworks and supportive codes of practice, 'it is ...clear that the SENCO is not always placed at the centre of school development'.

Researching the training of SENCOs

Whilst there is an extensive literature on the continuing professional development of

teachers (e.g. Day 1999; Day and Sachs, 2004), there is a real scarcity of studies concerning the training of SENCOs.

Cowne (2000) examined the impact of a pre-NASENCO training course, finding that, for participants, there was widespread increase in confidence in (what we would term) their 'gardening skills': dealing with staff and parents, carrying out the SENCO role; contributing to the day-to-day management of the school (including deploying teaching assistants, running meetings, increased awareness of roles and responsibilities in the school, the importance of parental involvement and general SEN policy development). They also reported increased reflexivity on their own role and practice and finally reported the benefits knowing how to carry out small scale research and translate those results into practice.

What they felt they needed more of were skills in identification and assessment of learning difficulties and effective teaching strategies for these. They also wanted more landscaping skills: skills in counselling and leadership, in changing staff attitudes to inclusion as well as supporting curriculum development.

In Ireland, where there are no exact equivalents of SENCOs, but where SEN teachers have a key role in supporting SEN in schools, O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) found that there was a tension between SEN teachers' preference for pupil-focussed tips and strategies (gardening), rather than curriculum or collaborative focussed training and on the other hand the belief amongst HEI training providers that developing more reflective, critical approaches, including action research, would furnish a deeper understanding; moving beyond mere 'recipe application' to an approach more focussed on 'landscaping'.

Pearson, Scott & Sugden, (2011) used 'before' and 'after' concept maps for participant SENCOs to show their understanding of their role. The study

acknowledges the complementary role of more academic training alongside more experiential ‘apprenticeship’ elements in the SENCOs’ development of their professional roles.

Pearson et al’s work is useful in drawing attention to the challenges in identifying what impact can be attributed directly to the training and the rather fuzzy overlaps with what SENCOs are picking up ‘on the job’.

An early study of the impact of the new NASENCO training by Pearson and Gathercole (2011) stresses the interactive nature of the SENCOs’ practice at various contextual levels of practice.

Pearson & Gathercole, in interviewing SENCOs ($n=6$), their head teacher, another member of staff and LA staff, found that (at the personal level) SENCOs across all levels of SEN experience had gained in terms of knowledge and skills, reporting increased awareness of the broader issues affecting their working lives.

There was widespread reporting of increased confidence in the role and feelings of increased status and perceived status in the eyes of colleagues.

One strong theme that emerged was the value SENCOs found in the networking opportunities and the mutual support benefits that studying together provided.

Academically, SENCOs reported that engagement with the research and policy Literature, as well as their own practitioner research, had deepened understandings of their own practice and its rationale. However, the academic workload of the course, particularly the writing of lengthy assignments, was perceived as onerous and something that had a negative impact on their personal lives.

Nevertheless, SENCOs reported that the course had provoked a more whole school (landscaping) approach to SEN, actively involving their colleagues. This was underpinned by a more proactive approach to policy and practice, felt to have been

fostered by their NASENCO training. In particular, transformations were reported in use of Individual Education Programmes, school-wide provision-mapping of SEN support and enhanced deployment of teaching assistants. This also involved better use of data and greater encouragement of a wider range of stakeholders, including parents. So, despite concerns over workload issues, the reported impact of the NASENCO was generally very positive.

The research reported in the present article was undertaken at the same time as Pearson and Gathercole's and may be seen as complementary, adding to the broader picture of the impact of the NASENCO around the country. Like that study, it examines the impact of the NASENCO, answering some of the 'what' and 'how' questions relating to training impact. This study also aims to add two new dimensions. Firstly, the study aims to take forward Pearson and Gathercole's (2011) emphasis on the SENCO's interaction with context by attempting to anatomise the nature of the 'enhancing' and or 'moderating' factors to make some tentative explorations of the more explanatory 'why' factors in variations of the NASENCO training's impact. Secondly, the study makes use of these data to discuss their implications for future NASENCO course (re)design.

The following two research questions were therefore examined in this study.

- **What impact has the NASENCO training had upon participant SENCOs and their schools?**
- **What personal and contextual factors can be identified in enhancing or moderating the impact of the NASENCO training?**

Methodology

A framework for evaluating impact of training

There has been a tradition of using 'level' models to evaluate the impact of

professional training, which track impact from the personal up to the organisational levels and beyond (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 1994; Guskey, 2005; TDA, 2009).

Other frameworks have aimed at a more ‘ecological’ emphasis on the interactions between training and contextual factors (e.g. Harland and Kinder, 1997; King, 2010, Pearson and Gathercole, 2011).

Coldwell and Simkins’ (2011) framework manages to capture the benefits of the level model structure and the interactivity of more ‘ecological’ models. The framework provides a good vehicle for teasing out the ‘*why*’ questions by acknowledging both the ‘antecedents’ of SENCO participants’ motivations and expectations as well as the moderating factors of their professional contexts (see Figure 1, below.)

Figure 1: Coldwell and Simkins’ (2011) framework

The current researchers have adapted the framework for the present study, adding a more explicit frame for participants’ comments on changes that might be made to future NASENCO training and removing the ‘Final Outcomes1’ frame. They agree with Coombs, Lewis and Denning (2007), among others, that attempting to make direct causal links between teacher professional development of a generic nature and demonstrably improved pupil performance would be ‘difficult (and probably intractable)’ (Muigs, Day and Lindsay, 2004).

Instead, any improved outcomes for pupils (direct and indirect) are reported under the more general ‘Final Outcomes’ frame. Furthermore, the time frame of our project was too short to be able to measure impact on career development; so that box was

eliminated. Additionally, the current researchers feel that there is more bi-directional influence than is demonstrable in Coldwell and Simpkins' model: thus our adaptation of their extremely useful original; shown in Figure 2, below:

Figure 2: Modification of Coldwell and Simkins' framework for the present study.

Design of the study

Six SENCOs were selected from those who had completed the NASENCO training in one LA in partnership with a local university provider, using convenience sampling (Robson, 2011), which offered some comparisons between primary and secondary SENCOs and between new SENCOs and a more experienced SENCO who had opted to undertake the NASENCO.

Each SENCO's head teacher was also interviewed, as well as another member of staff line managed by that SENCO (in all cases, a teaching assistant). These interviews aimed to offer some triangulation (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to data gathered from the SENCOs. Because one of the present researchers (DG) had been involved in the delivery of the training, RD conducted SENCO interviews and DG the others, to avoid problems of 'reactivity' (Robson, 2011). All interviews were semi-structured in design and data collected by audio-taping.

The NASENCO programme

The outline of the NASENCO was determined by Learning Outcomes set out by the TDA (2009) in a course to be studied at Master's level. These learning outcomes were assigned to 3 taught units on the course, designed by the university provider.

There was also a one day SENCO conference for course members, held at the

university. Each SENCO was assigned an LA mentor, with university staff providing tutorial support.

The assessment for the course consisted of:

- A Professional Development Portfolio containing evidence of engagement with all the TDA Learning Outcomes
- A Reflective Journal and Critical Review focussed upon the Unit 1 learning outcomes
- Two unit assignments, focussing upon Units 2 and 3, one or both of which had to be in traditional ‘essay’ form, whilst one of them could alternatively take the form of a presentation accompanied by a critical, literature based review of the topic.

The teaching of the NASENCO course was shared between university staff and LA advisors.

SENCo profiles

Table 1 shows the background information on each of the six SENCOs selected for the present study.

School	Phase	Location	Pupils on Roll	Experience as teacher	Experience as SENCO
1	Primary	Urban	409	22 years	7.5 years
2	Primary	Small town	220	5.5 years	1.5 years
3	Primary	Urban	469	4 years	1.5 years
4	Primary	Small town	128	7 years	1.5 years
5	Secondary	Urban	1056	18 years	1.5 years
6	Primary	Urban	218	10 years	1.5 years

Table 1: Background data on participant SENCOs

Results 1: The Impact of NASENCO Training on Participant SENCOs and their Schools

Expectations of the NASENCO course

Generally, the interviewed SENCOs expected the NASENCO training to be very practically (gardening) focussed: ‘paperwork and processes’ as one put it. Two reflected that they saw the training as potentially helping them ‘cover their backs’ in case of any SEN-linked legal problems arising in their schools. Two of the SENCOs had been worried over the workload implications of the studying, with one (SENCO 3) admitting she had been unsure of the course’s value. The more experienced SENCO (1) expressed a desire to use the course to develop her network of contacts with other SENCOs.

Head teachers’ expectations were also practically focussed on the day-to-day skills of managing SEN provision in their schools (gardening). But in addition, two of them had hoped that the NASENCO course would equip their SENCOs to take a lead in supporting and training colleagues (landscaping).

Immediate reactions to the NASENCO course

The SENCOs widely reported the course teaching sessions as stimulating and thought-provoking and found the quality of tutor support very good. One (SENCO5) reported that she was still making regular reference to resources issued during the training.

Many mentioned the benefits of the networking and exchange of ideas with their fellow SENCO trainees during the course; Two SENCOs reporting that they had visited each others’ schools in following up a shared interest in supporting children with Down’s Syndrome.

The SENCOs were unanimous, however, (echoing Gathercole and Pearson’s 2011 findings) in reporting struggling to cope with the extra work of compulsory studying

on top of, in all but one case, a full time job; with many mentioning a negative impact upon their family lives.

Head teachers echoed these concerns, with 5 of the 6 reporting that they had had to give their SENCOs additional time off timetable to get on top of their studies. Whilst most reported the Professional Development Portfolio as practical and relatively simple to compile, the assignments were reported as the most onerous component to prepare and write up. Despite this, most SENCOs reported having really enjoyed the research into the literature of their chosen topics.

Impact on SENCOs' learning and personal development

An overriding response from the new SENCOs was huge gain in personal and professional confidence; an impact also noted by their head teachers and TAs. Additionally, SENCOs 2 and 4, whilst reporting gains in knowledge and understanding, felt more relaxed, as they both believed that the training had signposted them towards sources of information including the expertise of outside agencies such as their own LA specialist teams.

Four SENCOs made direct reference to feeling, in particular, more confident working with those they managed, as well as with fellow teachers and senior managers. Two attributed their increased confidence directly to the depth of knowledge gained through their academic studies.

*“Doing the assignments, I know it sounds corny!, but doing the assignments has given me a deeper understanding of the role. Now I know **why** I’m doing the tasks in my role.” (SENCO2)*

“Familiarity with the key research and literature supports the role and your decisions. They’ve been feeding some of the work I’ve been doing.” (SENCO 5)

Interestingly, group perceptions differed on this last point. Whilst most SENCOs

acknowledged how important the depth of learning on the course had been to their professional development (an increased knowledge noted by many of the TAs), some head teachers were less enthusiastic. Head teacher 3 was clear in her acknowledgement of how her SENCO attending the course had increased her knowledge, especially in identification of SEN; on the other hand, head teachers 1, 4 and 6 all felt that the important basic learning could have been gained simply ‘on the job’.

“I know she’s gained some personal knowledge but I don’t know how transferable it is to the school.” (Head teacher 6)

This scepticism was only echoed by her own SENCO, who felt that she could have ‘learned the practicals’ from her predecessor (now deputy head).

From the SENCO perspective, not only was a depth of knowledge and understanding gained but a breadth, as well. Two SENCO described the NASENCO training as giving them, ‘the bigger picture’ of the role.

“We covered all the areas of SEN as well as some areas that weren’t SEN but obviously impact upon it.”

For three of the SENCOs the training broadened their understanding of the relationship between the SENCO as manager and SENCO as leader. As SENCO 2 (by this point a confirmed landscaper) put it, “I realise that the SENCO needs to be a leader, not just a manager.”

SENCO actions and Final Outcomes

Coldwell and Simkins’ framework reflects clearly the interactive nature of the actions as a result of training and modifying/ enhancing individual and contextual factors to

produce final outcomes in the trainees' settings. However, in reporting the results of the present study we have deliberately separated actions and final outcomes from these modifiers in order to explicitly tease out and explore the explanatory 'why' questions which are outlined in the next section.

In terms of actions it is clear that the NASENCO training had both concrete practical impact on SENCOs' practice and that of their schools.

Four SENCOs reported achieving more staff collaboration in developing Pupils' Individual Education Plans (IEPs). SENCO 3 led a whole staff workshop to launch this new more collaborative approach and reaction in the SENCOs' schools seems to have been positive:

"...cos before,, if someone else gives it [the IEP] to you who doesn't know that child and doesn't know what you're doing in class it just gets...filed. Whereas now, we're all writing it specifically for what they're doing in class. It's more of a working document now." (SENCO 4)

Even the experienced SENCO (School 1), who reported that, "Generally I'm doing what I was doing before", went on to explain that she had actually instigated new 'access to learning plans', encountered on the NASENCO, as an alternative to IEPs.

Two SENCOs (2 & 5) reported having re-designed their provision maps for SEN support to allow for a better balance of in-class support and withdrawal; moves welcomed by their TAs.

"...she's done my timetable differently. I'm in class a bit more, supporting the children I work with,...which has done me good. I know where they're at in class... so there's more continuity for the children." (TA 2)

Four SENCOs reported using learning from the NASENCO to improve their pupil tracking systems, based upon more finely-grained data, with data supplied by a wider

range of staff.

Only one school (6) reported no changes to protocols or practice. The SENCO stated this was because:

“all systems are in place , thanks to the old SENCO” (SENCO 6)

However, as well as the practical changes to systems in the SENCOs' schools, many reported a qualitative change in their schools' cultures.

The SENCOs' establishment of more collaborative approaches was reported in three schools (2, 4 and 5) as having the knock-on effect of a greater feeling of teamwork;

More 'joined up thinking and joined up provision' as TA 2 put it.

There was also a wider sense of the SENCO as 'leader' rather than just as manager.

“Her confidence has improved, especially when you see her in meetings... her knowledge has improved... she's helped us look at things another way.” (Head teacher 2)

SENCO 3 made the direct link back to the NASENCO training.

*“.... teachers have different sorts of beliefs. It's given me a bit more of an idea about how to approach that sort of thing. Through my essays and assignments... it gets you to think a bit more deeply about what you're doing and why and it helps you to realise what's working and what's not working and **why** that is. The background reading is definitely helpful in shaping your perspective.”* (SENCO3)

Another widely reported change in the school cultures was improved relationships with parents. Many respondents linked this improvement with the instigation of a model of pupil-centred review meetings, introduced on the NASENCO, where the input of the pupil and parent as 'experts' is given much higher priority than under older models.

“At our last review, we’ve just had a Year 6 review, and a parent came up to the head teacher and said “That’s the first time I’ve come out of my child’s review smiling”.” (SENCO 4).

Finally, in three schools (2, 4 and 5) SENCOs’ improved skills in leading TAs was noted by both parties.

“I think I’ve become more confident in the role, now..... and my staff have commented on that.” (SENCO 4)

“She’s a better leader now. She’s talking things through with us. I think she’s doing a tremendous job, for someone who’s come in with no background as a SENCO” (TA4)

Participants’ thoughts on future NASENCO course design

All SENCOs except one were agreed that the NASENCO training should remain compulsory. Four of the six felt that it should continue to be run at Master’s level.

“You want to ensure a high calibre of person taking the job.” (SENCO 1)

Head teachers were less convinced; with four feeling that it did not need to be:

“It could be just a participation-type thing, not a Master’s level thing.” (HT 6)

One head was concerned about some new SENCOs’ abilities to cope at that academic level:

“Not everyone will want that very academic course...Don’t get me wrong, it needs to remain compulsory, but not everyone is interested in getting a Master’s (HT3)

All respondents felt that the taught sessions should continue but there was much less agreement about the nature of the assessments. Head teachers were almost unanimously opposed to the writing of academic assignments, many citing the time-

consuming nature of the exercise. Time pressures specific to assignment writing were also flagged as a particular concern by 4 of the SENCOs.

Most SENCOs were happy enough developing their Portfolios, which they felt had sufficient practical focus; being therefore intrinsically useful.

“Through the portfolio, I realised ... ‘ooh I’m OK on that but I’m a bit shaky on this. I need to spend some more time on it’.I’m reflecting more.” (SENCO 2).

Lastly, returning to the issue of time-management, two SENCOs (5 and 6) felt that the NASENCO could have been completed over two years.

“I think I’d build in more study time...because we were given time..to go to the taught sessions... but not ... to just sit down and reflect and absorb it.” (SENCO 5)

Results 2: Reported Enhancers and Modifiers of Impact

Colwell and Simkins’ (2011) framework identifies two sources of enhancing and/or modifying influence upon the impact of training: the evident contextual factors reported by the respondents and the rather less overt, personal, antecedents that the NASENCO trainees brought to the course.

This section considers these enhancing and modifying factors, as well as those whose effects were more ambiguous.

Enhancers

Four of the SENCOs noted positive final outcome changes and stressed the significance of a supportive Senior Management Team (SMT) in enhancing their abilities to bring about these changes.

SENCO 4 also noted Governors’ sympathetic reception of her new ideas as helping to

embed good practice.

As noted previously, SENCO 6 noted no changes. SENCO 5 felt that, whilst her SMT were happy to lend token support to her ideas on developing inclusion, there was limited real commitment.

SENCO 5 had got her SMT to agree to appoint an SEN representative from each of the school's subject departments but these staff were only given one hour per week to use for this purpose. TA 5 echoed Cole's (2005) findings about the perceived tension between 'standards' and inclusion.

"We've got people in higher echelons... that make sure blocks are place. She wants it done her way.. other people want it done their way, even when it's done in a non-inclusive way..... because they want a high achieving academy." (TA5)

Whilst SENCOs 1, 2, 3 and 4 felt that being on the SMT had help them make an impact, SENCO 5, already on the SMT, felt that this status gave her no additional power to make a difference; a potential problem noted in Oldham and Radford's (2011) analysis of the secondary's SENCO's leadership role.

Only SENCOs 1 and 4 reported having access to administrative support in carrying out their roles. However, SENCOs 2, 3 and 4 all noted how joint planning of IEPs with staff had freed up time for them to develop other initiatives.

Similarly, all SENCOs reported that colleagues' well-developed areas of expertise and positive attitudes helped foster the inclusive practice that they had learned about on the NASENCO. In particular, SENCO 3 noted that, in her school, a commitment to CPD was part of the culture and had helped her establish a whole-staff training session on dyslexia.

Lastly, SENCOs 2, 3 and 5 noted how they were able to involve the expertise of

outside agencies, in particular LA specialists to support their practice and that of the school.

Moderators

SENCO 5's reporting of her SMT's perceived half-hearted support for her reforms have already been noted in this paper. Otherwise, the single biggest moderating factor to the impact of the NASENCO, reported by all but one SENCO, was lack of time; a symptom of the role generally, not just of executing post-training actions. Whilst SENCO 3 reported that she had every afternoon dedicated to the SENCO role, all the others reported having only one half day per week, including SENCO 5 at the large secondary school.

"I'm up 'til midnight doing paperwork 'cos I don't get time to do it at school."
(SENCO 5)

Ambiguities

One factor that seemed rather ambiguous in its enhancing and/ or moderating effect was staff's reported perception of the school as already functioning efficiently in SEN policy and practice. These were reported by SENCOs 1 and 6.

"...current systems are already effective so there's limited scope for practical improvements." (SENCO 6)

This is not to say that in the other schools' staff reported poor SEN/inclusion practice but the difference is that the other SENCOs saw the continuous potential for improvement.

Discussion

'Gardeners' and 'Landscapers'

A key theme in the results from the present study of the impact of the NASENCO training is that which we have referred to as the difference between 'gardening' and 'landscaping' constructions of the SENCO role.

All six SENCOs reported that the NASENCO training had helped them become competent and confident gardeners. For SENCOs 1 and 6, who emphasised the practical management issues in their reports on the NASENCO training, being a good gardener was enough. It may be significant, here, that both these SENCOs were being line-managed by ex-SENCOs and neither were on their school's SMT. It may well be that those colleagues' 'older' perceptions of the SENCO role had had more influence on these two SENCOs' perceptions of their own roles as managers, than had the more visionary leadership role emphasised in the NASENCO. SENCO 6 explicitly noted how important the ex-SENCO's role as her mentor had been.

On the other hand SENCOs 2,3 and 4, members of their school's SMTs, seemed to see themselves as 'landscapers', working with colleagues on transformations at a whole-school level.

SENCO 5, also an SMT member, although realising that landscaping was what was needed, was restricted to gardening... in the gale force winds of insufficient time and an SMT experienced as obstructive. She has subsequently left her post. Her experiences highlight Oldham and Radford's (2011) key finding that membership of an SMT, in itself, is insufficient and perhaps underlines Hallett and Hallett's (2010) vision of the SENCO's SMT position as merely a staging post to a more distributed leadership, committed to inclusive practice. Equally, as Layton (2005) points out,

non-membership of an SMT need not restrict SENCOs' perceptions of their role to that of gardening, even if it restricts the strategic execution of their role.

In the light of these findings, the influence of powerful constantly proximate voices from an 'old' SENCO perspective on SENCOs 1 and 5, seems to be a crucial factor in outweighing the more strategic vision of the SENCO role offered on the NASENCO. This acted as a moderating factor, countering the more landscaper-oriented networking opportunities provided on the course.

Implications for future NASENCO course design

So what lesson can be drawn from the present study regarding the nature of future NASENCO training?

Certainly the majority of respondents felt not only that this training should be available to all newly appointed SENCOs but that it should be compulsory.

It seems that, despite the challenge of studying at Master's level, this depth offered SENCOs a firm theoretical base for their professional development in providing a research-based *rationale*. Such a depth of understanding of the basic principles underpinning inclusive education offers, as O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) found, a intellectual flexibility in allowing SENCOs to be proactive in approaching the constantly changing challenges of developing practice in their schools (landscaping) rather than mere recipe application (gardening tips).

The face-to-face teaching sessions were perceived as extremely useful, not least because of the opportunities offered for SENCOs to network with each other; perhaps these peer support elements could be developed within the course structure. However, given the difficulty of time management in producing the essay-based assignment elements of the course and the challenge they presented to the majority of

respondents, perhaps there may be options in this element of the course where school-based action research projects or case studies might be more encouraged and supported.

Finally, because of the perennial problems of time management for SENCOs, perhaps HEI providers might consider running the course across two years, rather than the current one year format. For the same reasons SMTs in schools need not only briefing on the workload implications for SENCOs embarking upon the course but also a constant open channel for communications between themselves and course providers to deal with any emerging time-management issues. An initial briefing might also make reference to the enhancers and modifiers identified in the present study so that SMTs can support SENCOs in maximising the impact of their NASENCO training.

Conclusions

Based upon the evidence emerging from Pearson and Gathercole's (2011) study and supported by the present study, the new NASENCO training is having a notable impact not only upon SENCOs' personal professional development but also upon practice in their schools. However, as the Coldwell and Simkins framework has helped us demonstrate, attitudinal and contextual factors will have a dynamic, interactive effect on the extent of this training's impact, in particular upon SENCOs' perceptions of their own roles and also in their ability to manage their time in completing the NASENCO.

Both schools and SENCOs need to seek to maximise favourable conditions, for example, by freeing up SENCO time through more effective collegial practice; including use of LA support. Equally, whilst the award remains compulsory at a national level, there are political and ethical issues in requiring SENCOs to engage in this training without sufficient facilitation. Already, SENCO turnover is a concern; if

the NASENCO provides additional skills, which may lead to additional demand for their skills, which are not then met with further support, logic suggests that turnover will continue to increase. Increased turnover of additionally trained staff continues to ramp up the cost of such loss, in both personal, strategic and financial terms.

This is accentuated by the current pace of change in the political context, for example the potential increased demands upon SENCOs within the action points outlined in the government's *Support and Aspiration* Green Paper (2011).

In the light of this awareness, future research might consider the longer-term impact of NASENCO training, both the SENCO and their school context. It might also compare the context effects on the NASENCO experience between primary and secondary settings. Additionally, it might consider the effects of continuing changes in policy context upon SENCOs' experiences of this important professional development opportunity.

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