The Strategic SENCo

How to lead whole school inclusion with vision and purpose

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1 Let's start with a vision…

Whether you are a new SENCo or an experienced, long-serving SENCo, it is really important for you and the people you work alongside and those you lead to understand what all your efforts and hard work are going to contribute towards and achieve in the longer term. Working in the world of SEND can be all-consuming, with a scarcity of resources, staff and time. There is no doubt you are going to be busy, and that you will be drawn and pulled in several directions, so you need to be clear about the direction you are heading in, rather than just operating in the here and now. There is a risk that we get stuck into the work we feel is the most urgent and important, or which others present as the most urgent and important, but we need to have absolute clarity about what we are doing and how it will lead to long-term strategic change.

Spending time thinking about the longer term helps us come up with a vision that will inspire and motivate people to want to do well and fully commit to our cause. This vision needs to be about the greater good and show that through the culmination of all our efforts we can make a real positive difference to the most vulnerable learners in our setting. The clear vision also provides us with an anchor which we can constantly refer back to when considering what work we need to undertake. If what we are doing or being asked to do is not going to progress us towards our vision, then we can quite rightly say no. We can push back on having more layers or work added to our systems when they aren't going to add value to what we are doing, and may in some cases distract us from our overall vision.

Invest the time in coming up with a clear, meaningful vision that you and your team believe in passionately and you will have a powerful tool to drive change in the long term. You will have something to refer back to when you are asked: 'Why are we doing this?'. Quite simply your response will refer back to your vision, linking in the 'why' behind what you are asking others to do. This is a great opportunity to create a 'We, Us, Together' culture; it is not about individuals, it is about your team making a positive difference through collaboration and commitment. Together, we can achieve great things for the benefit of all learners but especially for those who struggle to engage or access the curriculum and often the wider learning environment.

Changing the status quo

Another consideration is that we may encounter a situation in which people think that the SEND provision and practices are OK so why change things? 'We've always done it like this!' is an oft-heard statement. This doesn't make it right nor does it mean we have to settle for someone else's standards or systems that were put in place some time ago!

We know the profile and needs of learners is different to what they were a decade ago. We also have the (what seems to be enduring) issue of the legacy from Covid-19 and lockdown during which learners may not have interacted so much socially, may have experienced trauma or may not have engaged fully with learning, so we are dealing with different needs. Different needs, different issues accessing the curriculum and different characteristics requires different thinking, so we have to have some clarity around what we are actually going to do differently.

Resources are scarcer and staff cutbacks have happened, so in some respects we are being challenged to do more with less. Recruitment is also challenging, meaning that even if we do have funding for new staff, finding them is becoming increasingly challenging. Part of our different approach needs to start with thinking about the classroom environment. Rather than have an additional provision- and intervention-led approach we need to consider what happens in the classroom in the first instance. If we get it right in the classroom then there is going to be less need for catch-up and keep-up, boosters. Our different approach therefore needs to be more creative but draw on the resources we do have, which are: great teachers, great teaching assistants, great school staff full stop. We need to think about what we can do differently to better meet the needs of a more complex cohort of learners.

Every year we get data informing us that outcomes for learners with SEND are not as positive as those for learners without SEND. What we are doing doesn't seem to be making a difference. If we continue what we are currently doing, then we are surely going to continue the cycle where learners are simply not suitably prepared or ready for the next stage of education, training or employment. This can't continue to be a tragic and damning indictment on the current education system: we need a new vision, new behaviours, new thinking and different practices leading to different outcomes.

That cursed hamster wheel

It is easy to get drawn into the annual school cycle, in which year on year the same activities and events play out just like clockwork. Even though they happen every year, it feels as if we still sometimes get caught out by events and are surprised when they come round again. Our efforts are very much focused on maintaining operational aspects of the role. It is in no way a criticism if this is the situation you find yourself in, but what is going to change if you are working like this from week to week and term to term? It is at this point we need to allow ourselves time to think about the longer-term goal(s) we are hoping to achieve. This then brings us back to the importance of having a vision to drive longer-term, more strategic thinking and actions.

We need to give ourselves permission to stop what we are doing and think about the longer term strategic goals we want to achieve. If we don't give ourselves permission, then we are condemning ourselves to the same discussions year on year. The same hard slog before public assessments where we bolster performance but exhaust ourselves and our staff with layer upon layer of interventions and additional support. In many cases we don't even know the scale of difference some of the additional support is making because we either feel or are told it just needs to be put in place. How do we objectively measure the difference our exam boosters are having on our learners?

It is the curse of the hamster wheel: we get on it in September, blink and realise it is July! This is all the more reason to give ourselves permission to get off the wheel and consider our strategic intent. It also gives us the opportunity to take stock of what is happening across the academic year and identify when strategic actions need to take place. Essentially, across the weeks or months, we need to commit to focusing on the strategic so that longer term changes do take place and are not just pipe dreams.

One of the reflections we need to have when we go to work is whether we are going to lead purposefully or whether we are going to sleepwalk. Leading purposefully means we go in with intent, it means we are going to do something that will effect change in our setting. Sleepwalking happens, we all do it, but what it means is we aren't leading change. And if we aren't leading with purpose or intent, then what are all those staff in our team going to do?

We know the urgent and important tasks are always going to be there but that shouldn't be an excuse for accepting that it is OK to be working in this way. We have the power to change what is happening, we can influence how we and others operate in our setting. We just need to give ourselves some time to stop and think about what it is in the long term we are trying to achieve. Do we want to be known for our dedication to responding to emails or do we want to be known for influencing inclusive practices across our setting? If we can't articulate our vision, then how do we expect others to understand the rationale behind why we are asking them to undertake particular tasks or roles?

Clarity of vision

What is your vision for SEND? It is worth taking a step back and thinking about what you want SEND and whole school practices to look like in your setting. Yes, there may be a plethora of challenges we as SENCos currently face but how do we want things to look in the future? We need to explore the 'Why' behind what we are setting out to achieve and support our team and colleagues to consider what all the effort and hard work is going to lead to. This is a good opportunity to consider the moral purpose behind the work we and others are going to undertake over the course of an academic year and beyond. Through our small steps, we need to consider what our destination is in the longer term. This is not a naïve, overly optimistic exercise but one that declares our intent and high expectations we have for our school community. It is not just about achieving more for our learners but empowering staff, including stakeholders, and developing a more inclusive school setting.

Imagine being a staff member sitting in a meeting and you have a leader in front of you talking about everything you are going to do over an academic year, but they can't actually explain the purpose behind it all. That is going to be pretty frustrating. After all, there has got to be more to what we are doing than just hard work. There has to be an ultimate goal that will lead to a better future. If we have clarity about what we are working towards and the greater good it will do, then we won't just get people doing their job, we will make them passionate and engaged so they go the extra mile – because they understand how what they do makes a difference. We aren't just turning up and working with learners, we are shaping the future and giving learners a better chance in life.

It really is important that you have clarity behind what you are doing because that vision acts as an anchor. That vision makes the difference between saying yes or no to what may seem like competing priorities. It gives you a point to build justification behind changes and different approaches. It can stop staff going off on tangents because you have given them a clear direction which steers their work. Ultimately, it can help harness our collective efforts so we are not just working hard but more importantly we are working *effectively*, towards the same compelling vision and goals. It can also help ensure that you have the right people on your team, people who share your passion, commitment and determination to achieve a better future.

Thinking time

So, let's take some time to think about what it is you want to achieve with SEND in your setting. I don't think it really matters if you are an outstanding school or one in contrasting circumstances. However, I do think it is important to be clear about your intent for your most vulnerable learners, if not just for yourself, then for colleagues and the wider community (learners, parents, governors). What is it you are going to do to develop a clear sense of belonging in your setting and get commitment and support from all your stakeholders?

It might be helpful to be messy at this point and just jot down all the things you would like to achieve in the long term. I find it helpful to visualise what a better future will look like and involve. When I am walking around a school, what will I see, what will I hear and what will I feel? Rather than just being emotive or ephemeral we might also have some data references e.g. a reduction in NEET, suspensions or exclusions, or improved attendance and engagement in wider school life. All data points for better outcomes, through our high expectations and commitment to ensure a better future for all.

Outline what positive practices will be taking place and what learners will be able to do and achieve as a result of inclusive practices at the school. This might also include what relationships with various stakeholders will look like, e.g. parental engagement is positive with good attendance at various workshops or parent consultation meetings. It might be that instead of expecting parents to come to the school we meet in a neutral setting which leads to better engagement.

You might even want to draw what your ideal SEND future at the school looks like. What will you see different groups doing in the future? You can sketch out different groups with the various activities they might be engaged in along with the emotions they are feeling at the time. It is absolutely fine to be messy and have lots written down because this is the starting point. From this point we can edit down what we have so that we end up with a couple of sentences, a paragraph or a visual for what we want to achieve. If you opt for the visual option it might still be worth having a few sentences which will help you succinctly describe what is going on and why it is so important to achieve.

Examples of your SEND vision might include something like having all learners in classrooms with teachers being able to adapt their approaches in order to engage individuals so they can better access the curriculum. It might also be less utilitarian and could focus on learners accessing the wider school curriculum and participating in activities alongside their peers. It could be the

whole community coming together, working in unison to support a better future for all.

Whatever you end up with, your vision needs to be compelling because this will influence whether people want to work towards it or not. The strength of your vision and how you articulate it will influence who wants to join you on your journey. This is not just about doing your jobs; it is about the commitment and dedication you demonstrate through your eternal optimism that things will be better in the future. This is a declaration of your leadership; people will want to do things for you not because they have to or feel they should but because they fully believe that what you are doing is inherently the right thing to do.

Sharing your messy vision

SEND and inclusion are not the sole responsibility of the SENCo, so you need to take your messy first draft and edited versions and talk them through with a trusted colleague. It might be worth exploring what they see as the most important things for learners to work towards or for staff to realise what their efforts are trying to achieve. This stage is important because you cannot be the only person in your setting holding the SEND megaphone to champion inclusion. We need to create a compelling vision so that others are willing and committed to sharing the megaphone so SEND and inclusion are on the agenda across the school. It is also worth checking how your vision links in with that of the whole school. Is there common language or is some editing necessary so that there is alignment?

The challenge here could be if your vision does not align with the school vision. This might necessitate discussions with senior leaders and governors to explore how both can be revised to give clear, up-to-date visions for the whole school and for the SEND/Inclusion team. What can we do as a group of professionals to ensure that every learner in our setting has the best possible educational experience? If there are groups who are not receiving that, then maybe we do need to re-think our whole school vision, so we have lived values and not laminated ones! Does every learner who attends the school believe that they can do well and does every member of staff believe that they can succeed?

So, involve others, listen, understand their views and consider what you might need to do to edit your vision so you will get buy-in from colleagues and support from wider stakeholders. As you refine your vision it will become clearer in your head; you should also feel more comfortable articulating it as it is refined and revised. Short and to the point is fine and probably essential. You don't want to be reciting *War and Peace* in front of colleagues because they are likely to switch off. In a succinct way, what are we aiming for?

Vision and leadership

In terms of leadership, having a vision is essential. If we can articulate what we are working towards, then we can help others understand what it is we are trying to achieve. This is not a one- or two-year goal or target but something we will work towards over time, and in doing so we will make experiences better for all in our setting. It can also outline the moral purpose behind what we want to achieve. We have to change the narrative around SEND and inclusion so we avoid the miserable annual datasets telling us yet again that outcomes are not good enough and we have yet again failed numerous learners who needed us to have done something differently. So, what is it we are going to do in order to make sure that all our learners are prepared for their next stage of education, employment or training?

The other reason why having a vision is important because we can use it for several purposes, such as meetings, training or to set targets, all of which will help us when leading SEND and inclusion.

Avoiding shiny objects

There are numerous initiatives in SEND: lots of projects to get involved with and lots of new interventions to roll out in your setting, all of which seem really great. The problem is, we already know we are busy and that any new commitment is going to impact on what we are already doing. The litmus test therefore is 'how does this new project, initiative or intervention link in with our vision?'. If there is no strong link to our vision, then as much as we might want to undertake the project or roll out the intervention, the answer simply has to be no. Part of the leadership side of being a SENCo is feeling comfortable saying no. Ultimately, there is an opportunity cost: if we are saying yes to X, what are we saying no to?

Linking work with our 'why'

Equally, it is helpful to use the vision when you are contemplating asking others to undertake tasks. Is what you are asking others to do going to help in making

progress towards the vision? It may be that you need to consider your systems or processes so that colleagues and other stakeholders can clearly see the purpose behind what you are asking them to do or are proposing that they do. In SEND there is sometimes the pressure to undertake tasks or activities because that is what we have been led to believe needs to be done. Interactions and conversations with SENCo colleagues can sometimes leave us feeling that we should be doing more because that is what others seem to be doing in their settings. Shining a light on practices, asking why we are doing something and how it will help us in the longer term can help remove unnecessary tasks. Bring it back to your vision: how will completing the task or activity help us in making progress towards your longer-term vision? Don't feel guilty about saying no or removing an activity which has previously been used if it doesn't align with the vision. Doing that doesn't mean you are changing things just for the sake of it, it just means you are focused on doing a few things well. From experience, don't feel guilty saying no and don't respond if someone accuses you of not being a team player.

Making clear our moral purpose

The other benefit of having a clear vision which is communicated across your team and setting is that it gives purpose to what you are doing or asking others to do. An example of this might be when you are in a staff meeting and are outlining what you want staff to do as part of whole school approaches to SEND. It is only natural for staff to perhaps question why they are being asked to undertake specific tasks when they have so much to do already. You can use your SEND vision to remind staff what it is you are striving for and how what you are asking will help make progress towards the vision. It may also be the case that you are asking staff to do X instead of Y so it is important to make clear that some work is not an extra layer but an alternative one.

Recruiting the right people and allowing others to leave

The vision also extends to future recruitment. Anyone who applies to work in your team needs to know what the vision is and needs to be committed to supporting the ongoing work to realise it. You can also explore how the individual's skills and qualities will help and how their values align with the vision. This can then help ensure you can build a team who are fully onboard and committed to supporting the team and colleagues in making progress.

Conversely, it may also mean that some staff feel that they do not align with how the team is progressing and that they will be better placed to work elsewhere. Whilst this is sad in some ways, it is better to have half a committed team than a full team who contradict and work against long-term goals. Having staff leave is not necessarily a bad reflection on your leadership. It may just be the case that the job they were doing is not going to be the same, so they want to move on because it is no longer for them. Your clear, passionate vision can help in recruiting replacements over time, individuals who are committed to the cause.

Highlighting positive urgency rather than just negative urgency

For decades we have been talking about the poor outcomes for learners with SEND. We have had government officials and national experts share worrying statistics about what happens in later life to individuals who have special educational needs. We have changed legislation, the curriculum, the Code of Practice and things aren't getting any better. It is not to say we don't share the harsh reality if we don't get better at supporting individuals and preparing them for adulthood. What we do need to do is share the positive urgency.

We need to focus on the positive urgency of engaging with more inclusive practices. We have to highlight the benefits to learners, families, colleagues and a wider range of stakeholders. If your stakeholders get onboard and join you on your journey you need to highlight what benefits they will see. For instance, high quality adaptive teaching could result in less time spent developing individual resources. Clearer scaffolding could enable more learners to access lessons as they feel better able to engage with content. It could even be the case that off task behaviour is reduced as more learners feel they can access and understand what they need to do. Take some time to think about the positives that will arise if others get onboard and support your vision.

Why would people follow you?

Finally, consider the vision as an advert for you as a leader. This is an opportunity for you to communicate your passion, commitment and dedication to improving

inclusive practices for all learners. The vision is a way for you to get more than people just doing their jobs. The right vision brings wholehearted commitment and engagement. Think about the difference between management and leadership. People do things for *managers* mainly because of the hierarchical aspect: you do something because your boss has asked you to. People do things for *leaders* because they believe in them. This is not a case of compliance; you are appealing to the intrinsic drive and motivation individuals have. They are going to do something because it is going to help all of you make progress on the fantastic journey towards your vision, which they believe in!

Reflection time

Take some time here to jot down a couple of sentences describing what you feel your vision is. Remember, this doesn't need to be perfect, but it does need to happen - you need to have something to edit, adjust and refine. It should however give you a sense of pride and a warm feeling inside that makes you think "Yes! This is what I want to work towards".

How does that feel? Does the statement encapsulate what you want to achieve in the long run? Leave it for a little while and then have another go at editing and refining your vision below:

What feedback are you getting from colleagues you have shared your messy vision with? What further adjustments do you think you need to make?

How does your vision align with that of your school? Is there anything you need to adjust before you share it with leaders?

What is your positive urgency? What positive message will you share to encourage colleagues and wider stakeholders to engage with your plans?