



Department  
for Education

# **Leadership of Special Schools: Issues and challenges**

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# 1. Introduction

This paper is based on a literature review commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (now the National College for Teaching and Leadership). It is intended to provide a brief overview of the issues and challenges for special school leadership.

The paper is structured as follows:

In section two we briefly describe the history of special education policy in England and the changing role of special schools in the context of an increasing emphasis on inclusion.

In section three we start with a summary of the main types of school leadership in general, then explore what the literature tells us about the lessons for leadership in meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs in both mainstream and special schools.

In section four, we consider the leadership issues and challenges that are specific to leaders of special schools, and we address the question 'what makes a special school special?' We draw particularly on what is known about those special schools which have been designated 'outstanding' by Ofsted.

## Search terms used

- Adaptations of the following search strings were used:
- Special school/ special educational needs (SEN)/ inclusive education/ Special education/ 'Schools for the deaf'/ 'schools for the blind' AND Head\*/ Leader\*/ Principal/ Governors
- Deaf/ Blind/ Deaf-blind/ autism/ PMLD/ EBD AND school/ education
- Succession/ Inclusion/ Policy/ Exclusion/ Recruitment/ Instructional leadership/ CPD AND Special school/ Education

## Limits

Literature in English published since 2000. Our focus was on the English context, but we included literature from other countries, such as Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Australia and the USA, particularly where they are referring to common issues in special education. However there is a lack of comparative research and it is not generally clear how strictly comparable the different contexts are.

### **Databases searched:**

- ProQuest Education Journals: includes International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
- ProQuest Dialog – includes Australian Education Index, British Education Index, ERIC)
- Scopus (covers nearly 20,500 titles from over 5,000 international publishers)
- LexisLibrary – includes Times Educational Supplement, Times Higher Education Supplement
- British Library catalogue
- Amazon.co.uk

### **Websites searched for grey literature<sup>1</sup>**

- National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
- Federation of Leaders in Special Education (FLSE)
- Ofsted
- Department for Education
- National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS)
- SWALSS - The association for leaders in special education
- Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- International Confederation of Principals
- European School Heads Association (ESHA)
- The Girls' School Association (GSA)
- School Leaders Scotland (resources for members only)
- National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN)
- SEN Teacher
- Sensite.co.uk

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<sup>1</sup> Material which has been informally published

- British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD)
- Council of Schools for the Blind (COSB) (US/Canada)

The sources identified were then reviewed for relevant evidence or background information on the issues and challenges for the leadership of special schools.

Our searches uncovered relatively little research evidence in this field. There are few specific studies of leadership in special schools and they tend to be based on very small samples of schools and respondents. There are only slightly more studies of the educational issues for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D) and how schools of any type and their leaders can best respond to these. The research that does exist tends to focus on the role of the head teacher rather than broader corporate leadership. Hence there is very little on the role of governing bodies, for example. This review therefore draws on a variety of other sources as well as research, in particular summaries from Ofsted inspections.

This paper is therefore not intended to be viewed as an evidence review of ‘what works’ in special school leadership – the research is simply not strong enough for that. However, it does highlight some of the common themes in the literature and can therefore be used to prompt thinking and discussion about the issues that a leader in a special school will need to consider.

## 2. Special Education and Inclusion in England

### 2.1 A brief policy history

Policy and practice approaches to the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D) have undergone major changes over the past sixty years, reflected in changes in the terminology used. The 1944 Education Act categorised children and young people in medical terms according to their disabilities (or 'defects of body or mind'). Those described as being 'severely subnormal' were considered 'ineducable' and deemed the responsibility of the Department of Health, and provided for in hospitals or 'junior training centres'. It was not until 1970, that the Education (Handicapped Children) Act, transferred responsibility to local education authorities, thus giving all children a right to some form of education, including those considered to be 'severely subnormal'. These children are now described as having severe learning difficulties (SLD).

The 1978 Warnock Report and the subsequent 1981 Education Act, radically changed ideas and policies about special education. Categories of 'handicap' were abolished and the concept of special educational needs (SEN) was introduced alongside a stronger emphasis on the 'integration' (later termed 'inclusion') of children with SEN into mainstream schooling.

Warnock can be seen as a watershed in changing thinking about children with SEN/D. It can be seen as the start of a transition from an understanding of SEN/D based on a 'medical model', whereby a child's needs are defined by their diagnosis, requiring specialist expertise or 'treatment', towards a 'social model' which views disability (and learning difficulties) as socially constructed. Advocates of a social disability model place emphasis on the disabling aspects of society and, in relation to SEN, on the dominant attitudes of the education system, rather than on the deficits inherent in the individual (Tomlinson, 1982). However, Warnock can also be viewed as supporting an 'educational needs model' whereby a child's difficulties are viewed against age-related developmental norms, and needs are then identified along a spectrum of severity (Norwich, 1997). There are echoes of the medical model here, but the educational needs model presumes that there is a responsibility to teach all children utilising specialist expertise matched to the child's needs (Rayner, 2007). Whilst social model principles can be viewed as underpinning the ideals of inclusion, it is the educational needs model which has remained largely dominant in SEN policy.

The current legal definition of SEN is very broad. The Education Act, 1996 (section 312) (H.M. Government, 1996) states that 'a child has special educational needs

(SEN) if s/he has a learning difficulty which needs special educational provision to be made'. This Act, and subsequent amendments, sets out the legal responsibilities of local authorities and schools towards children with SEN, with guidance set out in the statutory Code of practice on the assessment and identification of special educational needs, 2001 (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). This Code of practice recognises a continuum of SEN which may require increasing action by schools. The Code assumes that the SEN needs of the great majority of children will be met within mainstream settings through School Action or School Action Plus. In some cases, however, the local education authority will need to make a statutory assessment and consider whether or not to issue a statement of SEN, describing the child's needs and the special provision needed.

Inclusion policies implemented during the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in substantial changes in special education landscape in England. Male and Rayner (2007) note that between 1986 and 1991, the number of pupils with Statements of SEN placed in mainstream schools doubled (from 35,800 to 70,900).

This trend was supported by the UN statement on Special Needs Education 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) which called on governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education. In 1997, the then new Labour government published the green paper 'Excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs' (DfEE, 1997), leading to the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (H.M. Government, 2001). This strengthened parents' rights to seek a mainstream school for their child as well as preserving their right to ask for a place in a special school. From September 2002, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (H.M Government, 1995) was extended to cover education, obliging schools to take reasonable steps to ensure that disabled pupils are not disadvantaged in any area of school life. Admissions, exclusions and access to the full and extended curriculum are all included under this amendment. In 2004, the Government set out its vision on SEN in 'Removing Barriers to Achievement' (DfES, 2004) which included the view that, 'the proportion of children educated in special schools should fall over time' (2004: 37).

This general trend towards inclusion did not go undisputed. One strand of the debate was concerned with whether the needs of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) were met better in mainstream or in special schools. The 2006 Ofsted report 'Inclusion: does it matter where pupils are taught?', examined the factors that promote good outcomes across a range of different provision. It found effective provision was distributed equally between mainstream and special schools, when certain factors were securely in place, although more good or outstanding provision existed in resourced mainstream schools. However, SEN covers many disparate conditions and some specific evidence points to different conclusions in

relation to certain groups of children. For example, a comparative study of the impact of mainstream and special school placement on the behaviour of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Reed et al, 2012) found that those children in specialist provisions made greater improvements in conduct and socialisation.

Concerns about whether the needs of children can always be met in mainstream settings have not gone away. Parents can be understandably anxious about their children being more vulnerable in mainstream schools and schools themselves may lack the resources (including the specialist expertise) to meet an increasingly complex range of needs. A second strand to the inclusion debate focused on whether the inclusion of children with SEN/D was detrimental to the education of other children (Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse, 2007). Although such an argument may now seem outmoded, concerns have not entirely evaporated in the context of schools' performance being assessed by levels of attainment and league tables (Ainscow et al, 2004; Dyson and Millward, 2000).

The SEN assessment process has come in for some criticism in recent years. In July 2006, the Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families highlighted strong concerns about parents' confidence in the SEN system. This led to the commissioning of an inquiry by Brian Lamb, the chair of the Special Educational Consortium, into how parental confidence in the SEN assessment process might be improved. The Lamb Inquiry (2009) reported that 'educational achievement for children with SEN/D is too low and the gap with their peers too wide.'(2009:2). The report argued that a key reason for this was an education system and a society that places insufficient value on 'achieving good outcomes for disabled children and children with SEN'.

Concurrent with the Lamb report was an Ofsted review of SEN, 'Special educational needs and disability review – a statement is not enough', published in September 2010. This review evaluated how well the legislative framework had served children with SEN, and reported on a range of concerns about the current system. The Ofsted review emphasised that providing an SEN statement did not mean that a child's current needs were being met. The key implication of the review's findings was that any further changes to the system should focus on: improving the quality of assessment and ensuring that where additional support is provided, it is effective; improving teaching and pastoral support; developing strategy for specialist provision and services; simplifying legislation so that the system is clearer for parents, schools and other providers; ensuring that schools do not identify pupils as having special educational needs when they simply need better teaching, and ensuring that those providing services focus on the outcomes for children and young people.

In March 2011, a new green paper on SEN, 'Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability' was published. Proposals included:

- A new approach to identifying SEN through a single early years setting-based category and school-based category of SEN;
- A new single assessment process and an Education, Health and Care Plan by 2014;
- Local authorities and other services to set out a local offer of all services available;
- The option of a personal budget by 2014 for all families with children with a statement of SEN or an Education, Health and Care Plan;
- Strengthening parental choice of school, for either a mainstream or special school;
- Changing the assessment process to make it more independent.

It is anticipated that the Children and Families Bill including the proposed SEN reforms will be given Royal Assent in 2013.

## **2.2 The current context**

The most recent figures (DfE, 2012) show that after a rise between 2007/08 and 2009/10, the number of pupils with special educational needs in England decreased from around 1.70 million (21.1 per cent of pupils) in 2009/10 to 1.62 million (19.8 per cent of pupils) in 2011/12. The number of pupils with statements of special educational need increased slightly from around 224,000 pupils in 2009/10 to 226,000 pupils in 2011/12.

In terms of pupil characteristics, in 2011/12 boys were two and a half times more likely to have statements of special educational needs at primary schools and were nearly three times more likely to have statements at secondary schools compared to girls. Pupils with special educational needs were much more likely to be eligible for free school meals compared with those without special educational needs. Black pupils were more likely and Chinese pupils were least likely to have statements of special educational needs than pupils of other ethnic groups.

Of the 213,385 pupils with statements attending state-funded primary, secondary and all special schools (both maintained and non-maintained) in 2011/12, the most common type of primary need was autistic spectrum disorder (20.8 per cent) and the least common was multi-sensory impairment (0.2 per cent). Of the 475,995 School Action Plus pupils, the most common types of need were behaviour, emotional and

social difficulties (25.4 per cent) and moderate learning difficulty (24.1 per cent) and the least common were multi-sensory impairment (0.1 per cent) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (0.2 per cent).

Whilst the increased emphasis on inclusion over the past thirty years has led to more children with SEN being educated within mainstream schools, special schools have continued to play an important role. Following a decline in the number of special schools in the 1980's and 1990's, both the number of special schools and the proportion of pupils placed in them has gradually levelled out. Since 2002, there has even been a slight rise in the overall number of special schools as well as changes in the numbers of different kinds of special schools (e.g. a drop in state-funded and a rise in independent schools). There has also been an increase in the number of Pupil Referral Units (from 312 in 2002 to 403 in 2012). As Cole et al (2003) note, despite national pressure to move towards the inclusion of all pupils, LEAs continue to find it impossible to educate a small percentage of pupils with behavioural difficulties on mainstream sites. Furthermore, inclusion policies have been inconsistently implemented in different parts of the country. For example, a 2005 Times Educational Supplement article (Lepkowska, 2005) noted that children with special needs were 24 times more likely to be segregated at school if they lived in parts of the North-east of England than they were in London's East End. Overall, the number of pupils in different kinds of schools has remained more or less constant over the past decade: in 2002, the number of pupils in state-funded special schools was 91,440; in 2012 it was 91,590.

**Table 1 Numbers of special schools (all types)**

	<b>2002</b>	<b>2012</b>
State-funded special schools	1,098	967
Non-maintained special schools	63	72
Independent special schools	2,190	2,420
Free special Schools	-	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>3351</b>	<b>3462</b>

Source: DfE, 2012b

Ofsted (2009) describe special schools as part of the continuum of provision for education. The schools provide for very vulnerable children and young people, either because they have complex special educational needs or because they are sick or have been excluded from full-time mainstream education. Children and young

people can experience a spectrum of difficulties which make it hard for them to make progress in a mainstream maintained school and special schools therefore provide for a spectrum of needs. The range of maintained school provision is supplemented by independent or charitable schools, some with publicly funded places. Other provision is offered by units attached to mainstream schools. Special provision also includes hospital schools and pupil referral units catering for particular educational needs, even though the children and young people they provide for do not necessarily have statements of special educational needs.

State-maintained special schools are known by a variety of names but the majority are designated as catering for children with severe learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties or emotional and behavioural difficulties. A minority are designated as catering for children with physical difficulties, hearing impairments, visual impairments or autism. Increasingly, more generic designations are being cited (e.g. 'mixed needs' or 'complex needs') to reflect a trend towards an ever more diverse and complex special school population (Male, 1996). Age ranges catered for in these special schools include nursery and primary (2–11 years); primary only (5–11 years); secondary (11–19 years); and all ages (2–19 years or 5–19 years). These schools tend to be small (some with fewer than 100 pupils) and they include residential schools.

A number of observers note that special schools are continuing to go through a period of significant change. The nature of pupil needs is changing and becoming more severe and complex, with a significant increase in pupils identified as having autistic spectrum disorders, challenging behaviour and mental disorders (Baker, 2009). Male and Rayner's (2007) survey of head teachers of SLD schools<sup>2</sup> found that such schools were being required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse pupil population, including relatively large – and increasing – numbers of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. Also of note was the small – but growing – number of pupils with a life-limiting condition (Male and Rayner, 2007).

In this context, inclusion does not simply refer to ensuring that children with SEN have the opportunity to be educated in mainstream schools, where appropriate, but to ensuring inclusivity for children with severe, multiple and diverse needs within special schools themselves. In addition to providing for the school's own pupils, today's special school is also likely to be playing a role in offering support and expertise to other schools in their area. There has been an increasing trend towards co-location whereby a special school shares the same site as a mainstream school.

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<sup>2</sup> Findings based on responses from 167 schools (of 321 surveyed).

The continuing emphasis on parental choice and an increased awareness of the importance of pupil involvement are also key factors in the life of the modern special school. A recent development is the option for special schools to apply for Academy status. All these add challenges for the special school leader and we return to these in section 4.

## **3. Meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs: lessons for leaders**

### **3.1 Leadership and excellence**

The link between leadership and the overall success of schools has been recognised for some time. Indeed it is nearly a quarter of century since Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1989) stated:

Outstanding leadership has invariably emerged as a key characteristic of outstanding schools. There can no longer be doubt that those seeking quality in education must ensure its presence and that the development of potential leaders must be given high priority (Beare, Caldwell and Millikan 1989:99).

Since then there have been numerous studies into the impact of effective school leadership and evidence from a range of sources has highlighted the significant role that leaders play in increasing school effectiveness (e.g. Matthews and McLaughlin 2010, Matthews 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

Day, Sammons et al. (2009) found that effective school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as a school influence on pupil learning. In particular, the head teacher's leadership is potentially critical in influencing improvement in the school's organisation and the teaching and learning environment. Similarly, Robinson et al's (2009) meta-analysis of data and evidence found that leaders made the greatest impact through their ability to influence the instruction in their school.

Jensen, Hunter et al (2012) found that leaders played a key role in setting the conditions to promote improvements in teaching and learning through performance management, removing distractions from staff and focusing on the key organisational priorities. Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (2012) go so far as to state that: 'To date, we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.' (2012:8)

There is also a growing evidence base on the day-to-day practice of effective school leadership. In 2009, Ofsted published a series of three reports which explored the nature of outstanding schools and school leadership in primary, secondary and special settings (Matthews, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). Collectively these studies identified a number of consistent leadership themes, which included the need for a clear purpose, vision and values; the importance of displaying high expectations and aspirations; and the need to lead by example.

In their three year review of leadership in schools, Day et al (2010) identified ten strong claims for successful school leadership.

**Figure 1 10 strong claims for successful school leadership**

1. Head teachers are the main source of leadership in their schools.
2. There are eight key dimensions of successful leadership, which comprise:
  - a. Defining their values and vision to raise expectations, setting direction and build trust
  - b. reshaping the conditions for teaching and learning
  - c. restructuring parts of the organisation and redesigning leadership roles and responsibilities
  - d. enriching the curriculum
  - e. enhancing teacher quality
  - f. enhancing the quality of teaching and learning
  - g. building collaboration internally
  - h. building strong relationships outside the school community
3. Head teachers' values are key components in their success.
4. Successful heads use the same basic leadership practices, but there is no single model for achieving success.
5. Differences in context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions.
6. Heads contribute to student learning and achievement through a combination and accumulation of strategies and actions.
7. There are three broad phases of leadership success.
8. Heads grow and secure success by layering leadership strategies and actions.
9. Successful heads distribute leadership progressively.
10. The successful distribution of leadership depends on the establishment of trust.

Day et al.,2010

Day et al's 'strong claims' offer pointers for the day to day leadership practice required to promote the overall effectiveness of the school. However, they also highlight the need for every leader to operationalise their leadership practice in ways which are sensitive to their school's specific set of circumstances. Dimmock and Walker (2000) warn that policies and practices should not be simply transferred

between schools without 'due consideration of cultural and contextual appropriateness' (2000:14).

School leadership operates across a number of dimensions. Bush and Glover (2003) summarise these and point out that most effective school leaders combine most of these dimensions depending on context and circumstance. Key dimensions of school leadership include:

- **Moral leadership** whereby leaders are guided by and actively promote a set of beliefs and values. Several studies have shown the significance of values to successful school leaders. West-Burnham (2009) reported on a survey of 313 head teachers from schools graded as outstanding by Ofsted on what factors they rated as important in influencing their careers. Thirty-one per cent said that personal philosophy and vocation was the single most important factor. Gold's (2003) study of 10 'outstanding' school principals in England also revealed the importance of values-led leadership. These values included inclusivity, equal opportunities and equity or justice, high expectations, stakeholder engagement, cooperation, teamwork, commitment and understanding. Similar findings are reported by Campbell, Gold and Lunt (2003) and Gurr et al (2005). In meeting the needs of pupils with SEN, evidence from research and inspections also highlights the importance of leaders promoting a school culture and ethos that emphasises respect and positive response to diversity as well as a shared sense of purpose to promote the learning of every individual (Chapman et al, 2011).
- **Transformational leadership** which is concerned with the construction of a strong connection between leader and followers, which in turn raises the motivation and ability of the follower to achieve more than would otherwise have been anticipated (Northouse 2007). A number of studies have highlighted the transformational abilities of successful school leaders in achieving excellence, and the importance of this has similarly been noted in reports on the factors important for high performing special schools (e.g. Ofsted, 2009).
- **Distributive leadership** whereby leaders encourage teamwork, collaborative problem solving and the distribution of responsibilities. Again, a number of reports on excellence in special education have highlighted the importance of leaders building and developing strong collaborative teams. (Ainscow et al, 2003; Ofsted, 2009). Distributive approaches to leadership can also be viewed as particularly compatible with principles of inclusion (Dyson et al, 2004) and the fostering of schools as 'learning communities' whereby all stakeholders

(leaders, staff, pupils, parents and the wider community) share a commitment to learning (Rayner, 2007).

### **3.2 Leadership to promote the achievement of children with SEN and disabilities**

As Chapman et al (2011) note, there are some particular issues pertinent to an understanding of leadership of special education. These include: the changing nature of pupils with SEN/D, with an increased number of children with more severe and complex impairments; variations in local policy, practice and terminology mean that a child defined as having SEN in one school or local authority might not be in another; similar variations in how the concept of inclusion is interpreted and implemented; and difficulties in assessing the progress of children with complex needs.

However, Chapman et al also argue that ‘the distinction between ‘SEN/D’ and ‘non-SEN/D’ children is now rapidly becoming outmoded’ and that

*... responding to children with special educational needs should be seen as part of a wider set of issues relating to the education of all children who experience difficulties in school and, ultimately, of all children.*

Chapman et al., 2011:5

This argument is supported by research reviews indicating that there is little evidence to support a separate special needs pedagogy (Davis and Florian, 2004; Lewis and Norwich, 2005). Rather, as Chapman et al (2011) put it, the evidence suggests that ‘good teaching is good for everybody.’ Nevertheless, providing effective leadership which fosters inclusion and maximises the learning of children with SEN/D does involve some special consideration. Riehl (2000) argues that in this regard, school leaders have three core tasks: fostering new meanings about diversity; promoting inclusive practices within schools; and building connections between schools and communities.

Chapman et al’s review of the leadership factors important for promoting the achievement of pupils with SEN/D suggests that leaders need to build and sustain an inclusive culture, and pay particular attention to building consensus around inclusive values within school communities (Dyson et al, 2004). They argue that school leaders should be selected and trained in the light of their commitment to inclusive values, sensitivity to vulnerable groups and capacity to lead in a participatory manner. Central to this is viewing diversity as making a positive contribution to schools (Ainscow et al, 2004) with leaders challenging attitudes

towards certain types of students as 'lacking something' (Trent, Artiles and Englert, 1998). Leaders are critical for sustaining changes in beliefs, values and practice (Leo and Barton, 2006; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). Valuing diversity in special schools not only involves inclusion of pupils of diverse of abilities, but diversity of culture (Murtadha-Watts and Stoughton (2004).

Chapman et al point out that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and actions create the contexts in which children and young people are able to participate and learn. A key task for leaders is therefore to develop education systems within which teachers feel supported and challenged to explore effective ways of facilitating the learning of all students. They cite US research by Zollers et al (1999) which found seven common elements in schools with successful inclusive practices: visionary leadership; collaboration; refocused use of assessment; support for staff and students; funding; effective parental involvement; curricular adaptation and effective instructional practices. This is reflected in Ofsted's (2006) report which suggests that children with SEN/D make outstanding progress in schools which have: a strong ethos, specialist staff, focused professional development for all staff, the encouragement of high expectations, and a commitment by leaders to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed.

Based on a study of head teachers in three countries, Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) identified some common features among leaders who were successful in fostering these inclusive cultures and practices:

- an uncompromising commitment to inclusive education;
- clearly defined roles, responsibilities and boundaries;
- collaborative interpersonal style;
- problem-solving and conflict resolution skills;
- understanding and appreciation of the expertise of others;
- supportive relationships among staff.

In their study of 26 primary, secondary and special schools, Chapman et al (2011) identified a number of key factors:

- a common purpose among leaders and staff;
- classroom environments designed to be conducive to learning;
- a focus on children as individuals and their personal learning pathways;
- strong teamwork between staff;
- high levels of engagement by students including peer support;

- detailed tracking systems to monitor the progress of students.

Effective inclusive leadership also involved clear systems of support to staff by managers, including clarity of roles and responsibilities and performance management. Leaders' confidence in their staff was important for setting the tone of the school, along with being explicit about expectations and using clear lines of communication. Recruitment of skilled, committed staff was identified as a key issue by the head teachers involved in the study, who described approaches to 'growing their own' through CPD and talent-spotting within the school. These leaders were also outward looking and used external networks and partnerships to extend their capacity (Chapman et al, 2011).

## 4. Issues and challenges for leadership in special schools

Many of the issues and challenges faced by leaders of special schools are the same as for those leading any other school and include the issues described above. However, there are some issues which are particularly pertinent to special schools.

### 4.1 The changing function of special schools

Special schools continue to undergo change and their leaders need to be able to respond to a changing role and meet the needs of their current pupils (Male and Male, 2001; Burnett, 2003). A review of literature on leadership and management in special schools carried out by Ainscow et al (2003) highlighted the need for leadership to enable special schools to provide high quality education in existing circumstances, while at the same time developing new roles. Rayner et al (2005) similarly argue that the special school is a unique form of provision and that its place in the educational system is particularly vulnerable. They conclude that leaders need to meet the challenge not only of remodelling its workforce, but also of reforming its educational function (e.g. to spend more time supporting mainstream schools to meet the needs of their SEN pupils) or face being closed down.

Reflecting on their own experience of the re-organisation of special schools in the mid 2000's, Ashdown and Darlington (2007) emphasise the importance of staff preparation, team-building and consultation with staff at every stage. Ainscow et al (2003) also identified collaboration as particularly important with the need to build cooperative teams and effective partnerships with professionals from different disciplines, and with parents. They observed that there is a need for shared leadership, with the headteacher seen as a leader of leaders rather than **the** leader. They also argued that those in leadership roles in special schools should seek to develop organisational cultures that encourage experimentation and collective problem-solving.

Baker (2009) drew on his small study with nine heads of special schools for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities to identify the main challenges of the current context. Constant change, relentless school improvement, funding concerns, bureaucracy and maintaining a balance between work and private life were all key issues cited by school leaders. Perceived opportunities included partnership links with other schools and outreach services to mainstream schools. Baker's suggested strategies for headteachers of special schools were as follows:

- Ensure you have a clear, personal vision for your school.
- Surround yourself with supportive colleagues and an effective leadership team.
- Use any other personal and professional support mechanisms that suit you.
- Provide the appropriate continuing professional developmental support for your staff to enable them to meet the special needs of your pupils.
- Work in partnership with local mainstream schools in helping them to meet the special needs of *their* pupils with special educational needs.
- Use the opportunities, whatever you perceive them to be, that are available to you and reflect your vision for your school and community.
- Maintain a positive work/life balance in order to avoid burn-out. (Baker, 2009:195)

The need for special school leaders to respond to changes in educational policy and practice has also been noted in other countries. For example, in Australia, O'Brien (2010) investigated the leadership skills, abilities, knowledge bases and overall capability required for successful leadership of special schools and compared the perspectives of the special school principals in his study with those of mainstream principals investigated by previous research. O'Brien noted that special school principals emphasised personal and interpersonal abilities more than the mainstream principals did. This point is echoed in a discussion paper by Bateson (undated) who suggests that one of the distinctive features of leadership in special schools is recognising that the cognitive and behavioural domains of pupils can only be addressed if the affective domain is also taken into account, by forming relationships, designing the provision around the child, judging the behaviour, not the person, looking to praise, not to condemn and being prepared to lose face in the face of unconventional and challenging communication and behaviour.

A recent challenge for special school leaders has been the decision over whether to apply for Academy status. This was made available to special schools in 2010 with the first special school academies created in 2011. The different funding arrangements of special schools and their relationships with local authorities makes this a more complex proposition than for most mainstream schools.

## 4.2 Inclusion and equality

Ashdown and Darlington (2007) point out that the push for inclusion that has led to many special schools serving a wider population with more variable difficulties can, for those with the most profound difficulties lead not to 'inclusion' but to 'double segregation', by being segregated in a special class within a special school (Ouvry, 1987). Avoiding this requires thoughtful planning and good resources, ensuring that all teachers and support staff have the knowledge, skills and resources that they require to meaningfully involve all pupils in all activities, groups or classes.

Male and Rayner's (2007) study involving headteachers of special schools catering for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) noted that the increasing diversity of the pupil population presented particular challenges in terms of providing a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum, including the National Curriculum. Inclusion opportunities for pupils with PMLD were noted to be particularly poor, with more than a third of headteachers in Male and Rayner's study reporting no inclusion opportunities for their pupils with PMLD and others reporting inclusion opportunities for a minority of their pupils. The researchers cite Evans and Lunt's (2002) conclusion that 'progress towards a fully inclusive educational system . . . will be slow, and . . . may never be achieved' (2002:12) and comment that the findings from their study in relation to pupils with PMLD appear to support this view. More positively, Ofsted (2009) provides examples from twelve schools rated as outstanding for their inclusion (see 4.7. below).

## 4.3 Special needs, special stresses

The increasingly diverse and challenging pupil population in special schools brings additional stresses for leaders and staff. These include dealing with challenging behaviour. Allen and Burnett (2006) discuss the contentious issue of physical intervention when dealing with dangerous or difficult behaviour in special schools, suggesting that in response to concerns about abuse allegations, there is a tendency to create simplistic policy to avoid physical intervention at all cost. They argue that this is not realistic in special schools and it is therefore particularly important to ensure staff have access to appropriate training. O'Brien's (2010) Australian study also found that challenging student behaviour was considered by special school principals to be one of the most influential factors in shaping their leadership behaviour, as well as the most challenging aspect of being a special school principal. Some observers have commented on higher levels of physical violence against staff in special schools. For example, a 2010 Times Educational Supplement article (Barker, 2010) cites GMB union concerns about the number of injuries inflicted on staff by pupils, with the problem being particularly pronounced in special schools.

Special schools with pupils with complex health needs have to manage pupils with complex medication regimes and protocols. Pupil absence is also often higher than average, and schools may need to support pupils in hospital or health care settings. The death of pupils, generally a rare event in mainstream schools, is more common in some special schools, requiring school leaders to be able to respond to loss and bereavement issues for both children and staff.

Providing continuity of cover for staff absence in special schools can be a further challenge. An article in the Times Educational Supplement (Maddern, 2009) highlights that the need for continuity of care by pupils in special schools, combined with shortages of specialist supply teachers and the fact that bringing in outsiders upsets children with SEN/D means that special school heads more frequently have to use other teachers in the school to cover classes or to cover themselves, despite this being contrary to national workload agreements.

#### **4.4 Recruiting, retaining and developing staff**

The recruitment and retention of good quality staff is a key challenge for any school leader and the recruitment of leaders themselves is a major issue. In the US a national shortage of certified special education teachers has been exacerbated by increases in special needs populations and high attrition rates of special education teachers (Kagler, 2011). In the UK, there have been longstanding concerns about the availability of appropriately trained specialist teachers and the lack of specialist training opportunities for those in special education (e.g., Mittler, 2000). Male and Rayner's 2007 study suggested that this was still the case, particularly for those working with pupils with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). Their findings indicated that an increased number of teaching assistants were being recruited to meet the individual needs of such students, but heads identified more support needed from specialist occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech and language therapists, in particular. There were relatively few teachers holding additional qualifications relevant to pupils with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties and a proportion of head teachers expressed concern about the lack of specialist initial training and high-quality professional development opportunities relevant to Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)/PMLD. Concern was also expressed about teacher recruitment and retention and the implications of a perceived 'ageing' staff population. Berry et al (2011) highlight the additional challenges of recruitment of specialist teachers in rural areas.

Bateson (undated) points out that in special schools teachers are often the minority staff group and this can have leadership implications for the school's ethos and the drive for standards, professional learning needs, keeping staff in touch with mainstream performance and norms and inter-agency understanding and co-operation. He argues that special school leaders need to ensure that they are not setting up a competition between the tasks of learning and care by demonstrating that they value both.

As well as recruiting and retaining specialist teachers and other staff, special school leaders also have the challenge of succession planning to ensure the development of future leaders. Attracting high quality people into headships can be a challenge across all educational settings. Two studies detail the declining attractiveness of headship in general. NCSL (2006) found almost one-third of primary and secondary headships were re-advertised because of no suitable candidate. It suggested demographic causes for this with nearly a quarter of head teachers aged over 55 and a lower than average number of teachers in the next generation, from which new school leaders would normally emerge. Smithers and Robinson (2007) suggested other significant factors making headships less attractive, including workload, too many Government initiatives, excessive accountability, vulnerability to dismissal through poor Ofsted reports and insufficient pay differentials.

A survey by Rhodes and Brundrett (2006) found little evidence of pro-activity in the identification of leadership talent early in a teacher's career. They identified personal and professional confidence as a barrier to leadership succession with middle teachers agreeing that there needed to be a balance between active preparation for the next role and patronage by a decision-maker, usually the head. The heads surveyed identified a number of effective mechanisms for in-house leadership development: a degree of empowerment, support, controlled risk-taking, accountability via project work, work shadowing and networking. Although head teachers were aware of the factors thought to assist in motivation and retention they were unclear as to the role of their leadership style and professional culture on encouraging leadership retention in their schools.

A key element of the National College's succession planning programme is encouraging heads and governing bodies to develop 'grow your own' strategies. Bush (2011) identified eight main factors undermining succession planning: capacity – especially lack of time; funding and budgets; the reputation or 'brand' of the LA; perceptions of headship – especially heavy workloads; the mandatory nature of the NPQH (though this is no longer mandatory); and resistance to new models of leadership in some local authorities.

The recruitment of senior staff (heads, deputies and assistant heads) may be particularly challenging for special schools because of the need for leaders to have both generic leadership competencies and the specialist knowledge and skills to lead within a special school setting. These factors mean that for special schools succession planning may be particularly important. However, the fact that deputy heads in special schools tend to be older than in mainstream schools and likely to retire at the same time as the head teacher is a particular issue.

Related to the issue of succession planning is the role of continuing professional development for both current and potential special school leaders. Shaw (2006) suggests that leadership development for special schools needs to include both generic as well as specialist development. His survey of special school leaders found that half of the respondents valued generic professional development over context specific programmes<sup>3</sup>. Leadership development was seen as more important in determining effective headship than management training and much more important than special needs training. However, Shaw's study concluded that context specific issues cannot be ignored and therefore participants from special schools on generic leadership programmes should be offered additional modules or experimental learning through mentoring, networking and peer learning groups as it is difficult to find common ground when all other participants are from mainstream schools.

The importance of mentoring and coaching has been identified as important for special school staff. For example, Bubb (2009) describes the experience of coaching in a special school and argues that this is a useful approach for making teachers and support staff develop their skills and feel more valued. Kagler's (2011) US study suggested that important factors were teacher induction programs, administrative support, and teacher mentors.

Sector specific professional development may also be important to strengthen principles of inclusion. Male's (2011) evaluation of a Master's programme in Special and Inclusive Education indicated that participants had more positive attitudes towards inclusion at the end of the module, compared with at the beginning.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on a random sample of 50% of heads and deputy heads in English special schools surveyed by questionnaire in 2001 to seek their views on the value of NPQH, Headlamp, LPSH and other professional development opportunities, generating a 38% response.

## 4.5 Governors

Research on the role of governors in schools generally suggests that the quality of the governing body is an important influence on school improvement (Balarin et al, 2008; Ranson et al, 2005). The chair of the governing body has a particularly important role in both supporting and, where necessary offering challenge to, the head teacher (Ranson, 2011; James, 2011). Where the governing body has low levels of capacity and competence they have been shown to have a negative impact on outcomes (Balarin, 2008; James, 2011; Ofsted, 2011). Recruiting and developing an effective governing body, therefore, can be a challenge for many schools.

There is a dearth of evidence on the role of governors in special schools, but the additional challenges identified for special schools leaders are also likely to be pertinent to governors, having implications for their recruitment and skill development.

## 4.6 Partnership and inter-agency working

As the structure of state-funded education in England has changed in the past few years so has the range of actual and potential partnerships and collaborations in which schools may be involved. New partners have entered the educational arena and the role of local authorities has been reduced. In a report for the Department for Education, Parish et al explored how local authorities are evolving and adapting their role to meet the needs of a more autonomous education system (Parish et al, 2012). All nine participating authorities acknowledged the tensions inherent in maintaining their role as a maintaining authority and developing a new type of role as facilitator/enabler within a more diverse and devolved education system.

For many special schools, however, local authorities continue to be significant partners – in the past many have seen themselves as umbilically tied to their LA. Those ‘outstanding’ special schools that in 2011 were permitted to apply for Academy status have had to carefully weigh the costs and potential benefits of increased independence. Special schools also need to maintain relationships with a range of other partners to ensure that the needs of their students are met through, for example, other schools, health and social care. Many children in special schools will have social workers with whom schools need to liaise, statutory reviews may be carried out on school premises, health and other professionals may provide advice relevant to pupils’ care and teaching plans, and schools may themselves end up playing a mediation role between parents and some of these services. Given that some of these services are also undergoing major change, the challenge of maintaining partnerships is not insignificant. For many pupils in special schools,

partnership with parents is also more significant and continuous than would be the case for many mainstream students. Furthermore, special schools often play a big part in preparing their pupils to make the transition to work, further education or adult services to an extent that is probably unusual in mainstream. All of these factors are additional considerations for the special school leader.

## **4.7 So what makes a special school special?**

Ofsted's (2009) report on excellence in special schools observed that in all excellent schools visited, 'the importance of leadership shone through, particularly the example and vision of the headteacher. These school leaders set the highest standards for themselves and their schools and made a major contribution to the outstanding provision for pupils and their parents.'(2009:7).

Outstanding special schools shared the following key features:

- High expectations and aspirations and a profound and well-justified belief that every child and young person can learn and achieve;
- Refined skill in finding and applying the most effective approaches to communicating with, relating to and teaching children and young people with special needs and challenges;
- Exceptional expertise in assessing progress and recognising the smallest steps as well as large jumps in learning, and in using assessment to guide teaching directly;
- Highly effective and indispensable teamwork across the school workforce in which varied skills combine and best practice is readily shared;
- Strong partnerships with other professionals and providers, not least in reintegration and transition;
- The provision of ambitious and exciting opportunities through well-designed and individualised curriculum arrangements;
- Respect for individual children, young people and their parents, with the power to bring cheer and self-belief to children, and relief, optimism and support to parents;
- Unremittingly committed, inspirational and forward-looking leadership which believes that every professional challenge has a solution.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Our searches uncovered relatively little research evidence in this field. This may in part be due to the challenges of researching a field characterised by change and diversity. The studies that do exist tend to be very small and often conducted by practitioners as part of their professional development. Much of the writing in the field draws on individual practice experience. To find evidence from a broader perspective it is necessary to turn, not to research, but to inspection reports, based on information systematically collected from a larger number of schools.

However, from the evidence available there are some common themes relating to best practice in leading special schools. These are:

- Building an inclusive culture and ethos including having a strong personal commitment to inclusion and an ability to shape the attitudes and beliefs of others and achieve a sense of common purpose. Leaders play an important role in modelling inclusion by their own behaviour.
- Having and communicating high expectations including a strong commitment to the individual learning opportunities for every child in the school.
- A collaborative leadership style with skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and team-building.
- Ensuring staff have support and professional development, including cultivation of talent and providing opportunities for staff to develop specialist expertise.
- Developing classroom environments that are conducive to learning and inclusivity and supporting staff to adapt the curriculum to individuals.
- Encouraging engagement by students including the use of peer support.
- Effective individual assessment and tracking systems to monitor the progress of students.
- Building external networks and partnerships to share expertise and to maximise opportunities for students.
- Effective parental involvement.
- Personal resilience to manage the additional practical and emotional stresses involved in special school leadership. This includes an ability to deal with change and the diversity and increasing challenges posed by the pupil population.

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