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Supporting SEND leaders to drive inclusive practice: A train-the-trainer model for high quality teaching

What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

Project Focus

This initiative, developed through regional SEND networks, aimed to equip SENCOs and SEND Leaders with the pedagogical confidence and practical strategies needed to support pupils with a wide range of SEND needs. The project focused on scalable, universal teaching approaches that could be embedded across mainstream settings to improve outcomes for all learners.

Introduction

The project was led by an experienced SEND Leader with a background spanning mainstream, alternative provision, and special schools. As a Specialist Leader in Education for SEND, she recognised a growing challenge: while the National Award for SEN Coordination (NaSENCo) prepared colleagues for the legal and compliance aspects of the role, many felt underprepared to support increasingly complex needs in the classroom.

Through collaboration with regional SEND networks, the *High Quality Teaching: Train-the-Trainer* model was developed. The aim was to provide SENCOs with research-informed strategies across the four broad areas of need—Sensory & Physical, Cognition & Learning, Communication & Interaction, and Social, Emotional & Mental Health (SEMH)—and empower them to cascade this learning within their own schools.

Implementation

The implementation followed a structured and phased approach:

Explore

SEND Leaders and SENCOs were consulted through school-to-school support deployments and SEND reviews. These conversations revealed a consistent concern: despite formal qualifications, many felt ill-equipped to guide staff in developing inclusive pedagogy. The team identified 14 common diagnoses and conditions across the four broad areas of need and began mapping universal teaching strategies to each.

Prepare

The team researched each condition, identified common classroom challenges, and developed at least three high-quality teaching strategies per need. Training materials included immersive activities—such as simulating visual impairment during fine motor tasks—to help participants experience the barriers faced by pupils with SEND. Trainers were recruited based on expertise and experience.

Implementation (continued)

Deliver

Two formats were trialled:

- Two full-day sessions, covering all four areas.
- Four half-day sessions over six weeks, with gap tasks between sessions.

Each session included:

- National context and data profiles
- Specific difficulties linked to each condition
- Practical strategies and immersive activities

Sessions were monitored through feedback forms.

Sustain

Resources were adapted based on feedback and updated to reflect the latest SEND Census data. Five additional cohorts were delivered, and experienced participants from earlier cohorts were invited to co-facilitate future sessions, building capacity and sustainability.

Outcomes and Impact

The training had a significant impact on both confidence and practice:

- SENCos reported feeling empowered to influence teaching and learning for pupils with SEND (average rating: 6.7/7).
- Training in smaller blocks helped manage cognitive load and improve retention.
- Participants gained practical strategies that were adaptable across a range of needs.
- The programme fostered collaboration and networking, strengthening communities of practice.

Key Learning

- **Training must be immersive and research-informed.** Activities that simulate pupil experiences deepen understanding and empathy.
- **Universal strategies are powerful.** Many approaches can be adapted to support a wide range of needs, making them scalable across settings.
- **Trainer expertise is essential.** Facilitators must have deep knowledge of SEND and pedagogy to ensure fidelity.
- **Flexible delivery models work.** Offering both full-day and half-day formats allows schools to choose what suits their context.
- **Ongoing reflection and adaptation sustain impact.** Regular updates to materials and feedback loops ensure relevance and effectiveness.

Conclusion

The *High Quality Teaching: Train-the-Trainer* initiative offers a scalable, impactful model for professional development in SEND. By equipping SENCOs with practical, research-informed strategies and the confidence to lead change, the programme strengthens inclusive practice across schools.

As pupil needs continue to evolve, this model provides a sustainable way to build capacity, foster collaboration, and ensure that all learners—especially those with SEND—receive the support they need to thrive.