

Specialist leader of education case study

Charlotte Sonnex, Tollgate Primary School, London

Charlotte Sonnex joined the specialist leader of education (SLE) programme in October 2012 as part of the second tranche. She has substantial experience of supporting and developing others both within her own school – Tollgate Primary in the London borough of Newham - and other schools that she has worked with in London area over the past few years. Her work in Tollgate includes membership of the senior leadership team and heading up the school's ITT provision both within the school and across the 16 school teaching alliance that Tollgate leads. Charlotte is one of 23 SLEs in the alliance. Her SLE specialism is teaching and learning, with a focus on early literacy.

Charlotte's first SLE project is to support a one form primary in a neighbouring borough. The school has recently received an Ofsted judgement that it "requires improvement". She is working with a Tollgate colleague, Emma Beattie, who is an SLE specialising in teaching and learning with a focus on numeracy. Between them they are providing the school with support over the year. This will help the school improve its leadership of the teaching of literacy and numeracy and contribute to a wider ambition of making the school outstanding.

"The school has a very similar context to ours. It's smaller but like ours it is in a deprived social area and there is a very high number of children who have English as an additional language. In our school we have children from over 40 countries, speaking 40 different languages. Their major challenge is that they have had quite a significant level of staff turnover."

Charlotte is providing the school's literacy co-ordinator with one-to-one support, looking at how to support children to make greater gains in writing and looking at the use of writing across the curriculum. This work includes introducing a new literacy structure, creating more opportunities for writing across the curriculum and marking. She is also supporting the school's senior leadership team on planning and book scrutiny and has delivered a whole-school inset on writing and marking for progress. Charlotte's colleague Emma has mirrored this approach in numeracy and both have modelled lessons for teachers and carried out peer observations.

The support has already made its mark. "A book scrutiny four weeks into our support showed that the children were making incredible progress."

Ofsted has also commented on the progress of pupils. The school recently had a monitoring visit after which inspectors commented that it was clear that writing had improved and that there was more writing across the school. They said that the children had told them that they liked literacy. The inspectors also remarked that the marking of writing work had improved.

Charlotte's feels that the SLE role has been invaluable for own professional development.

"One of the best things is going into other schools and supporting other people. Because you are supporting people who are struggling or finding things hard you have to break it down and put it in easier steps. This makes you think about your own practice. It has definitely influenced the way I deliver training and lessons and how I break it down. It makes me reflect on my own practice."

How does Charlotte think that SLEs can contribute to the development of a more school led approach to initial teacher training, including School Direct? The grounding of being a practising teacher working to support professional development in leadership within your own school and in others will be crucial to these developments, Charlotte believes. "If you are an SLE and delivering to trainees you can offer more insight if that experience and practice is coming from real, day-to-day work," she says. "If you are being asked questions about classroom practice you can give honest answers rooted in practical experience."

The value of this approach was demonstrated to Charlotte when she delivered a training course for ITT students in partnership with the teaching school alliance's university partner. Theory of teaching is important, says Charlotte, but it needs to go hand-in-hand with practice.

It's not only the schools that Charlotte and her colleagues support that feel the benefits of the SLE programme. She says:

“When you go out and support other schools you are practising your skills all the time. It means that when I come back into school I can help with the professional development of our leaders with the confidence that I know it has worked in other schools. It makes you more adaptable and more confident.”

What advice does Charlotte have for aspiring SLEs? “I would say sign up to the courses that are available and watch others deliver SLE support if it is at all possible.” Delivering your first SLE support is daunting, says Charlotte, but working closely with a colleague is a great help. “One thing I found is that when you are delivering SLE support it does help to have two of you working together,” she says. “I think it is good to have somebody to talk to about how we should handle a particular challenge.”

Is the SLE role now understood by the schools that use Charlotte's expertise? “I think so,” she says.

“As the SLE role is focused on supporting professionals on leadership and enabling others I think it is distinct enough to be understood that it is a different role to that of an AST and a different level of support. We are working with leaders to make sure they have the tools to continue this over time. I am supporting their development as leaders. That's the big difference.”

It's clear that the role offers a range of benefits both to personal professional development and to the development of others. There must be challenges as well? “It is time consuming,” Charlotte says. “You need to be specific when you start working with a school as an SLE. You need to be careful not to go away and prepare it because there isn't the time. We will put together the support with the school.

“You need to write an action plan at the beginning. It should set out what the key things are that you need to achieve and the key steps you need to take to get there. You need to be clear at the beginning about what you're not there for. I have had situations where I've been asked about the intricacies of guided reading and phonics so you need to restate the focus.”

Further training would be useful to support SLEs on the more challenging aspects of their role, Charlotte believes. “The SLE training was largely about developing facilitation skills and it was a good course but I felt that it needed more of a focus on how we handle the challenges of working with leaders who are less willing to engage with us.”