Exploiting Computer-mediated Communication to Support In-service Professional Development: the SENCO experience

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ABSTRACT The focus of this article is a case study of the project set up to support special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in schools in England and Wales. Following a discussion of the professional imperatives placed upon SENCOs in order for them to perform their role in mainstream schools, there is an overview of some current practice in the United Kingdom (UK) and overseas, including examples of in-service support for teachers in schools using computer-mediated communication (CMC). Evidence is then drawn from the case study to show how CMC, in the form of a mailing list and access to email, has been used to support the professional development of SENCOs. Preliminary conclusions are drawn about the extent to which CMC elements of the project meet certain indicators for success, through reference to the literature and evaluations of the project.

Background: the challenge for SENCOS
Publication of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in 1994 brought special educational provision in mainstream schools to the forefront of the political and educational agenda in England and Wales. The Code, provided for in the 1993 Education Act (part 3) but not a part of it, offers practical guidance for schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in carrying out their responsibilities towards children and young people identified as having SEN.
The Warnock Report (1978) and subsequent Education Act (1981) suggested that approximately 20% of pupils have SEN at some time in their school life. This figure has been accepted in general terms to represent the needs of a significant minority of pupils in all maintained schools. The status of the Code is unusual in law in that “all those to whom the Code of Practice applies have a statutory duty to have regard to it; they must not ignore it” (Department for Education, 1994). This novel status has resulted in a wide-ranging response in practice at school and LEA level across England and Wales since 1994.

Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) are crucial to the successful implementation of the Code. Every mainstream school in England and Wales has a SENCO, who may be an individual member of the teaching staff or share responsibility with a team in the school (Lewis et al, 1996). The notional 20% of pupils mentioned above are not a static group; some learners will have special needs throughout their entire life whilst others may have difficulties that are transitory or need relatively low levels of support in order for them to meet their learning targets in a mainstream school.

There is a wide range of causes which contribute to a child or young person experiencing difficulty with learning. The extent to which changes can be made in educational provision range from full-time mainstream placement without additional support to full-time separate provision in a small teaching group with additional support. Trends towards integration mean that the vast majority of children and young people identified as having SEN will attend mainstream schools with varying levels of support. This places tremendous demands upon the SENCO in terms of organising suitable classroom support and activities, liaising with external specialist support services and colleagues in school, maintaining Individual Education Plans (IEPs), communicating with parents and carers, assessment, monitoring and review of learning, and record-keeping.

**What Are the SENCOS’ Professional Development Needs?**

A survey undertaken by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA) reported that 62% of all schools were meeting the requirements of the Code “with difficulty” within current budgets (Marshall, 1996). Against this bleak statistic we can set the evidence of how much LEAs, schools and in particular SENCos have achieved over two years to implement the Code. Although there is evidence that training in the basic tenets of the Code since 1994 is generally considered to be adequate, SENCos have identified poor progress being made in respect of in-service training (INSET) sessions at the implementation level (Lewis et al, 1996).

The Code assumes a ‘whole-school’ approach to the wide-ranging responsibilities for provision to meet the needs we have described above of
pupils identified as having SEN. Dyson & Gains (1995) suggest that the SENCO role in carrying out these responsibilities is “difficult, if not impossible” (p. 51). Their paper offers a model (Figure 1) describing a dynamic perspective of the SENCO’s role. At the centre is the core purpose which is the same for all pupils: “to enhance children’s learning”. Beyond this are the internal and external dimensions of the explicit role of the SENCO surrounded by an implicit role. Dyson & Gains note that in order to carry out the role successfully, SENCOs need to have access to or be part of the senior management hierarchy in a school. Frequently, lack of management authority or power is a major impediment to the SENCOs in carrying out their duties. In their conclusion, the authors offer three possible solutions: senior managers take on responsibility for the wider role, leaving the SENCO to work at the margins; senior managers provide strategic support so that SEN becomes a whole-school responsibility; or the SENCO becomes a member of the senior management team. The SENCO may not always be in control of which option is open to him or her. This will compound feelings of isolation in tackling the responsibilities of the task before them.
It is not surprising to find that SENCOs report varying degrees of isolation depending on local circumstances. The whole-school responsibility implicit in the role can be very challenging to the individual unless there is effective senior management support and access to appropriate professional development. As noted by Dyson & Gains above and in the case of the physical education (PE) teachers cited later, SENCOs have a significantly different role within the school’s management structure than many of their colleagues. Additionally, they are expected to have an enormous range of professional knowledge and experience to draw upon in order to support colleagues, as more pupils with SEN are included in mainstream schools. In many instances, the SENCO does not have this breadth of knowledge and experience to undertake their duties. Moreover, access to appropriate training can be limited or non-existent. In some LEAs the networks of advisory and support services have diminished or disappeared, making access to support an even greater problem for the SENCO. There is a consensus on the urgent need for more training and support for SENCOs and classroom/subject teachers in primary and secondary schools in England and Wales, in order to enable them to carry out their responsibilities under the Code (the Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED], 1996; the Teacher Training Agency [TTA], 1997a; Dyson, 1996; the Special Educational Needs Training Consortium [SENTC], 1996; Garner, 1996). Findings from the report cited earlier (Marshall, 1996) indicate that in primary schools, only 18.1% of teachers have SEN qualifications (this compares with 24-30% having qualifications in the National Curriculum core subjects of English, mathematics and science). Whilst 54.2% are confident with SEN teaching, 27.7% of primary teachers lack confidence (compared with 2-15% lacking confidence with the core subjects).

In summary, the difficulties faced by many SENCOs fall into four categories:
1. lack of professional expertise and experience;
2. isolation from colleagues facing the same professional challenges;
3. lack of confidence in undertaking their management role;
4. limited access to specialists in particular aspects of SEN.

This article reports on a project designed to support SENCOs in their work through computer-mediated communication (CMC). The project was managed by the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET, now known as the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency [Becta]). Before discussing the SENCO project in detail, we will consider some of the research evidence to indicate why we felt that CMC could limit
feelings of isolation and support the professional development of SENCOs in meeting the demands of the Code of Practice.

An Overview of CMC Projects and the Literature
The SENCO project, which we discuss in detail later, is one of many CMC networks throughout the world. By providing an overview of a range of these projects, we hope to illustrate how groups of educators with similar interests and needs, who are unable to come together owing to restrictions imposed by geography or finance, can meet and develop professionally in electronic communities.

These examples provide indicators for successful networks both in terms of supporting professional development needs and in applying and managing the technology. From these indicators, a set of key factors has emerged. These factors can be applied to a CMC network to help determine its likely success.

Using Email to Link Isolated Rural Schools: the Northamptonshire Distance Learning Project
The advent of the National Curriculum in England and Wales in 1988 has posed particular problems for small, rural primary schools (OFSTED, 1995). Difficulties experienced by curriculum coordinators are similar to those of SENCOs in terms of isolation and lack of professional expertise and knowledge. Clustering (the practice whereby schools in a geographical locality work together) can provide a mechanism for pooling resources and subject expertise, and for planning the curriculum (Lunt et al, 1994). In the past this has sometimes been an effective solution. However, the costs of travel and the disruption to classes, combined with extensive after-hours meetings to manage the process, can make such initiatives self-defeating.

By combining email and traditional INSET sessions, findings from the Northamptonshire project in a rural LEA indicate that a cost-effective means to support clustering and deliver staff development has emerged through the use of CMC. This has led to pupils experiencing an enhanced curriculum and an improvement in teachers' information technology (IT) competence (Manning, 1996).

Personal Computing for Teachers: the Toshiba Scholarship
The 'office in a box' is common practice in business, where the benefits of mobile computing are well understood. The Toshiba Scholarship, conceived in 1994, set out to examine what the benefits of personal access to computers and the Internet might be for teachers. Scholars were given notebook computers, with Internet connection and office software. They were also offered the chance to participate in an on-line course on the
potential of CMC for course delivery, run by the Institute of Education, University of London.

The first four scholars came from contrasting schools but had a common interest in original and analytical classroom practice. They recorded changes in their attitude to IT and their working style, concluding that ownership of state-of-the-art portables was important to self-esteem. Colleagues became curious as to what scholars were doing and keen to benefit from the portables themselves. Liaison with other teachers and students across the world developed broader perspectives on teaching and learning.

These scholarships are showing that portables with Internet access make training and reflective conferencing with colleagues an ordinary part of the teachers’ working lives, rather than an isolated experience. The on-line system provides a forum for interaction, support for class teachers, students and newly qualified teachers (Preston, 1996). It seems likely that similar benefits would accrue for SENCOs.

**Teacher Networking through Email**

This project, based at Ohio State University, has examined the impact of email and newsgroup use on a group of physical education teachers. The aims were to assess the impact of CMC on the teachers, the problems they encountered and their perceptions of its value (Tannehill et al., 1995).

A key concern of the teachers was their professional isolation. Physical education teachers experience a lack of companionship and interaction since they are often the only physical education specialists in their schools and are perceived differently from their classroom colleagues (O’Sullivan, 1989). This is also a commonly expressed concern of SENCOs, particularly those in primary schools.

Developing CMC skills was far from problem-free. The biggest issue was lack of time. All of the teachers worked a full day, often extended by pre-school or post-school programmes. They generally communicated during evenings and weekends and most attempted to form a regular pattern of use. Findings from the SENCO project, discussed later, are similar in many respects.

**Creating an Australian Place – OZTeacherNet: a model for the UK?**

OZTeacherNet provides Australian teachers with an infrastructure allowing the Internet to support curriculum and professional development. A team based at Queensland University of Technology is collaborating with teachers to implement a number of Internet-based services. The project is a response to these teachers’ need for on-line tools to help them make better use of the opportunities the Internet offers.
The services include:
- a World Wide Web (WWW) site where teachers share a collection of on-line curriculum projects and resources with other teachers;
- an electronic magazine where teachers write for teachers, to provide an on-line journal;
- electronic mailing lists where teachers talk to each other to facilitate discussion and sharing by groups of educators.

The principal mailing list, 'oz-teachers', is very active and has an international membership. One consequence of this is collaboration between schools and individuals that would be difficult to sustain without CMC.

The UK Virtual Teacher Centre

In May 1997, the incoming Labour Government made a firm commitment to increasing the competence and confidence of teachers in the United Kingdom (UK) to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to support teaching and learning. There was recognition both of the need for targeted training for in-service teachers and a detailed curriculum for pre-service training in ICT, as well as the role of CMC to support continuing professional development. The Government consulted on a number of challenging targets (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997) and in January 1998, as a first step towards realising these, David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education, launched the prototype Virtual Teacher Centre (VTC) (for on-line information see http://vtc.ngfl.gov.uk/). Evidence from the SENCO project amongst others has informed development of the VTC, which will be at the core of the National Grid for Learning (for further details see http://www.ngfl.gov.uk/).

What Makes a CMC Network Successful?

The facilitators of LabNet, a CMC community for science and maths teachers in North America, summarise the criteria for successful networks as “the purposeful use of a telecommunication network by a teacher that contributes to his or her teaching practice and/or professional development”.

The projects described above indicate that CMC can be effective in supporting the professional development, both of educators with particular needs and in a more general setting, which may contribute to improvements in teaching practice. Each of the projects has something constructive to contribute to our knowledge about what makes electronic networks successful. From them it is possible to identify a set of conditions, both individual and group, that indicate the likely success of an electronic network.
Regular access to email and other services is a recurrent problem and must be dealt with if CMC is to become embedded into daily practice. Combined with this is the need to develop good habits in accessing the network. Frequent users are more tolerant of problems associated with the technology (Komansky, 1991). The evidence also indicates that users who already view IT favourably in their professional and wider lives can be expected to report positive outcomes from using CMC. In addition, they will develop good habits in respect of access and correspondence. Such users will find CMC “easy to learn” (Hiltz, 1994).

Successful groups combine individual traits with a sense of common purpose. Even if they never meet physically, there will be some mutual recognition of shared problems, expertise and expectations. Such communities may develop out of existing groups who identify CMC as a new medium for communication, such as SENCOs who have lost contact with a network that previously met on a regular basis. Alternatively, complete strangers having common needs and interests, such as SENCOs who want to learn about the needs of children with a particular learning difficulty, can flourish as a working group when they use an electronic forum for discussion.

Reil & Levin (1990) summarised the characteristics of successful CMC communities as those with a high level of use and positive reports on the value of correspondence. The results of analysis of a number of such networks enabled them to predict that success was likely if the answer to four or more of these questions was ‘yes’:
- Does the group already exist?
- Is there an explicit need for CMC?
- Are there shared goals?
- Will access to the technology be easy and effective?
- Will all members develop regular patterns of access to correspondence?
- Is there leadership to facilitate use of the network?

Case Study: the SENCO Electronic Communications Project

The SENCO project came about as the result of a meeting between Professor Klaus Wedell and the manager of the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET, [renamed Becta in 1998]) Special Needs team. Professor Wedell had been in discussion with officials at the then Department of Education and Science (DES) about how SENCOs could be supported in their work. He had offered some suggestions as to how IT might have a role to play. NCET’s Special Needs manager had some experience of CMC as a means of support to teachers. They both felt certain that SENCOs could benefit from the opportunities provided by CMC. However, for many SENCOs, gaining access to CMC would pose yet another burden since few schools had the technical expertise or indeed the hardware.

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and software to support them. Would the additional pressures be rewarded through higher levels of professional confidence and competence and reductions in feelings of isolation? In order to test the hypothesis, the DES granted funding for a pilot project, starting in 1994, to assess the extent to which CMC could support SENCOs in implementing the Code of Practice.

The SENCO project was funded by the DfEE and NCET. The evidence presented here will be drawn from three published reports. Phase I (Detheridge & Wedell, 1995) reported on the feasibility study and the evaluation of Phase II (Stevens & Wedell, 1996) included an interview study of a sample of project members meeting certain criteria, as well as a questionnaire study of all full members of the project. The final phase of the evaluation (NCET, 1997) examined two aspects of SENCOs’ use of CMC:

x the contribution being made by a number of forms of CMC: electronic mail, a mailing list (SENCO Forum), and a WWW site (the SENCO Information Exchange);

x the manner in which SENCOs gained the necessary skills, confidence and the conditions needed to encourage their use of the technology.

A small set of focus projects was the basis for an examination of the uses that CMC was being put to and this was facilitated through interviews with the focus project members. A questionnaire survey was distributed to gather data on the second aspect of the evaluation.

SENCOs’ use of CMC

The focus projects and the associated interviews established that the three forms of CMC were being used and developed in many ways. Uses for email included:

x one-to-one with individuals for both personal and professional correspondence;

x one-to-many between SENCOs and groups of schools;

x with support services and LEA departments;

x transferring information from school management information systems;

x contacting specialist sources.

The SENCO Forum mailing list was set up in 1995 and provided an opportunity to discuss matters relating to developing practice in SEN provision. Membership is open to SENCOs and the wider community concerned with SEN. In May 1996, membership stood at 190 and between February and May, 20 messages a month were being posted on average. From the autumn of 1996, membership grew rapidly with 401 subscribers by March 1997. Average postings increased to 90 messages a month. At the time of the final evaluation, membership stood at 470 and in early 1998 it had risen to over 700. Table I shows the growth in membership during 1997-98 and the number of postings to the Forum.
Evidence from the second phase of evaluation indicated that SENCOs began to see advantages in using the mailing list on a regular basis. The lists of topics discussed developed from early postings of a general nature to detailed debates on topical issues. Many of the messages contained well-considered points for informed debate. SENCOs who posted an enquiry frequently received a number of helpful suggestions within a couple of days, ranging from practical ideas to contacts outside the Forum. Success stories were often shared as well as problems. SENCOs valued the opportunity offered by the Forum to tell someone who would understand about those precious moments in the life of a teacher.

When a topic was added to a mailing list, replies developed and amplified it. The resulting discourse is known as a thread. Examples of threads on the Forum include:

- profound hearing loss;
- Downs syndrome in mainstream schools;
- ICT support for autism;
- NFER CAT tests – do they inform the assessment process?
- GLD/SpLD – what’s the difference?
- Frederick’s ataxia;
- portable computers;
- IEPs;
- SEN audits.

In the 1996 evaluation of the SENCO project, participants’ use of the forum was second only to their email use. The Forum was rated as useful or very useful by those surveyed. One subscriber commented: ‘In this group I see a lot of respect, help and care.’

The SENCO Information Exchange is a WWW site, providing among other things an archive of the SENCO Forum mailing list, links to other pertinent WWW sites and the contents pages of special needs journals. Use of this site is monitored and the number of visits over recent months is shown in Table II.

During the Autumn term of 1997, the DfEE used the SENCO Forum for consultation on the government paper ‘Excellence for all Children.’ Postings to and membership of the Forum increased dramatically and the quality of debate allowed truly ‘open’ government through lively, informed discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 1997</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1997</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1997</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1998</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Growth of membership to SENCO mailing list.
It allowed the Government to consult in a dynamic way with those directly responsible for strategy and implementation in schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Visits</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 1997</td>
<td>1802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1997</td>
<td>2417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1997</td>
<td>3286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1998</td>
<td>3187</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Visits to SENCO web site over time.

It is clear from the statistics and the quality of debate that the mailing list has continued to serve its purpose in supporting the professional development needs of SENCOs. Interviews in the Phase II evaluation Stevens & Wedell (1996) support this view:

I can get relevant information and feel more effective in my work ...

... discussion gives a fresh angle on issues.

You can draw on others’ experiences.

Project members felt they could contribute as well as receive ‘expert’ advice in areas such as school organisation, particular forms of SEN and ways of using CMC to support SENCOs’ work. A SEN support service head commented “I have found Senco Forum helps to short-circuit searching and creates a focus”.

SENCOs, in both their special educational needs ‘general practitioner’ roles and in their administrative function, are now conscious of the way in which CMC can keep them in touch with the developing ideas about special educational needs and give them up-to-date information. CMC also offers the support of mutual contact within a peer community of those who are willing to be of help to their fellows, and where these developments are understood and evaluated. (NCET, 1997, p. 42)

**SENCOs Gaining ICT Skills: training issues**

The questionnaire survey (NCET, 1997) sought to determine what CMC operations were being used, how competent users felt about using them and what sources of help were available. A hundred and fifty-five participants received the survey, 122 were returned and 76 of these were usable, leaving a response rate of 62%. Three sets of data were collected:

- CMC operations: the extent to which respondents felt competent to perform eight ‘core’ tasks;
- being introduced to CMC: how respondents were introduced to CMC and what on-going support they had;
- where participants received their training.
Analysis of the returns led the evaluators to a number of conclusions and identified at least one dilemma that would-be CMC users faced.

Once SENCOs and others were competent, they achieved much greater effectiveness in terms of time, effort and finance, but an initial period of time was needed for familiarisation and practice before reaping the benefits. However, the climate in many LEAs makes it difficult to provide the time and the training and as a result, the full value offered by CMC was often not attained.

In an analysis of the evaluation evidence, we can answer ‘yes’ to four of the questions posed earlier by Reil & Levin:

- Does the group already exist?
  Yes, SENCOs form a discrete group in England and Wales.
- Is there an explicit need for CMC?
  Yes, isolation and lack of confidence will be alleviated by using CMC. CMC will also facilitate access to sources of credible expertise.
- Are there shared goals?
  Yes, SENCOs have shared goals set out in the Code of Practice.
- Is there leadership to facilitate use of the network?
  Yes, the SEN team at NCET provides leadership to facilitate use.

Will access to the technology be easy and effective?

- Not always, but this can be facilitated through the project and other initiatives such as NetYear ’98 (see http://www.uknetyear.org).
- Will all members develop regular patterns of access to correspondence?
  No, for a wide variety of reasons.

We believe that both training and access are crucial determinants to the success of an electronic network. A concern expressed by the Special Educational Needs Training Consortium (SENTC, 1996) and accepted by the TTA is the low level of training for IT and SEN in pre-service teacher training courses. Naidu et al (1995) have reported on the importance of initial teacher training but add that however effective it is, it will almost certainly be insufficient. Until CMC becomes commonplace, there will always be a need for on-going technical support and help to be available. Findings from the SENCO project (Detheridge & Wedell, 1995) indicated that there were four key determinants for SENCOs’ use of computers and email:

- level of school commitment to supporting SENCOs’ use of email;
- whether SENCOs had easy access to the computer and on-line use;
- SENCOs’ competence in using the software (dependent on training, local IT support, and regular use of email);
- time to access email (most communication took place outside normal school hours).

Provision of technical and training support as an integral part of the project addressed the two questions above for which the answer was “no” or “not always”.

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Training in practical aspects of CMC was essential for members of the project from the outset. Many SENCOs had no experience of CMC, or indeed basic IT skills; they only had the belief that these systems might help them to meet their obligations under the Code of Practice. A SENCO responding to an evaluation questionnaire encapsulates this:

I would never have considered the use of CMC because the effort involved in accessing and learning its use would have far outweighed the benefits. However, I now think the use of CMC is an excellent idea and I will continue to use it.

Another member of the project persevered for four months to make the technology work. Opening her mailbox for the first time, she found the number of messages waiting a little overwhelming, but well worth the effort of overcoming technical difficulties.

In many schools, CMC was new for all staff and the ‘IT experts’ in school and LEA support services were also learning how to harness and exploit the new technology. In order to provide the level of support and training needed to embark on the project, participating SENCOs were often brought together for whole-day workshops in local groups, with the emphasis on working collaboratively. Areas of activity included:

- establishing and sustaining on-line links;
- simple fault diagnosis;
- reading, responding to and managing email.

These sessions were truly mixed-ability, the more seasoned practitioners happily working with newcomers. A bonus was the chance for SENCOs to meet face-to-face. We feel that it is important to stress, in the context of using CMC for professional development and support, that there remains a need for face-to-face interaction. Training was provided by members of the SEN team at NCET and local consultancies, LEA support services or commercial Internet service providers.

**Why are these forms of CMC appropriate for SENCOs?**

CMC may be described as ‘fit for its purpose’ in instances where traditional forms of communication are less effective. Use of CMC can be independent of time and place. The asynchronous nature of CMC means that it is more appropriate than the telephone for communication between SENCOs and, for example, peripatetic support services. Graphs reproduced from the feasibility study (Figures 2 & 3) indicate the various times that SENCOs choose to communicate. Comments from SENCOs include:

I can communicate with people who aren’t always in the office (such as) Educational Psychologists.
I got (the report) the day after, I didn’t have to wait for it to be published.

I’m on the road a lot and without CMC people cannot contact me. (Stevens, 1996)

The SENCO only has to develop a limited set of new skills – users can get going with little training. Also, CMC services and tools are becoming more robust and user-friendly.

Figure 2. Communications by time of day, January – May 1995. Source: Detheridge & Wedell (1995).

The setup and on-going costs were considered reasonable. In the feasibility study (Detheridge & Wedell, 1995), there were clear indications that CMC can offer cost-efficient links between SENCOs and other support services. This area was considered in the final phase of evaluation. Only one set of equipment and software was needed, which could often be made available to a SENCO in school at low cost.

CMC is becoming more widely available. There are initiatives in UK higher education institutions to develop on-line courses. SENCOs will be able to access training on-line to support their professional development. The VTC will provide a focus for professional development using CMC. Some LEAs are connecting their schools and support services to the Internet and establishing local Intranets. This will facilitate communication
between SENCOs locally, regionally and nationally as well as with the numerous support services they work with.

Figure 3. Communications by days of the week, January - May 1995. Source: Detheridge & Wedell (1995).

Conclusions

We are confident that there is sufficient evidence to assert that CMC is a valuable communication medium to support the professional development of SENCOs, to make their workload more manageable and to reduce their feelings of isolation. It can provide a forum for expert debate and access to information not available through traditional research routes. The asynchronous nature of CMC suits the pattern of the SENCOs' working day and those with whom they may wish to communicate. It facilitates the quick transfer of information and opportunity to exchange reports prior to meetings, making the time spent face-to-face more productive. It puts SENCOs in touch with a wide community of colleagues undertaking similar roles, tackling similar problems and sharing success. Discussion and rehearsal of contentious issues within the security of the mailing list reduce feelings of isolation and provide SENCOs with the confidence they need to challenge practice in their own institutions.

In January 1997, the TTA recommended that “the potential of information technology - more particularly the use of electronic
communication – to help teachers to meet SEN requirements and challenges should be investigated” as a key area for development. We believe that this recommendation has been informed by the successful use of CMC developed through the SENCO project.

In July 1997, the draft National Standards for SENCOs were published by the TTA for consultation, confirming the TTA’s commitment to using CMC to support professional development.

SENCOs should have knowledge and understanding of how information technology can be used...as a means of communication between those teaching pupils with SEN. (TTA, 1997b, p. 12)

SENCOs should be able to use IT as a means of gathering and disseminating information about pupils with SEN. (TTA, 1997b, p. 14)

In conclusion, we would like to assert that SENCOs are not unique in their feelings of isolation and lack of expertise in schools. CMC can offer the opportunity to all educators to develop effective teaching and learning strategies through questioning, challenging values and sharing experiences in a much wider forum than traditional methods can support. As the technology matures alongside developments in open and distance learning, CMC will become the accepted medium for continuing professional development for all teachers. The experience of SENCO project participants can provide a lead for strategic planning and inform developments on the VTC and National Grid for Learning.

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