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Herding cats or getting heard: The SENCo–teacher dynamic and its impact on teachers’ classroom practice

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Abstract:

This article is based on two key findings of doctoral research into the impact that Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) in England have on teachers’ skills when addressing the needs of children with SEN in main- stream primary schools. I use data from questionnaires and interviews with SENCos, teachers and headteachers to argue that key indicators for successful teaching of children with SEN include SENCos skilling teachers in their roles as ‘agents of change’ in relation to SENCos’ views of their teaching colleagues, as well as the evolving nature of their own professional identity.

Key words:

Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), inclusion, mainstream, roles.

2014 is a significant year for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) in England, as it is the 20-year anniversary of the creation of the role. The SENCo role in England was established in the first SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) which stated that all mainstream schools must have a SENCo responsible for co-ordinating services around children with SEN and helping teachers develop and implement appropriate provision for these children. Since 1994, the SENCo role in England has changed, as various policies have continually redefined SEN provisions (DfES, 2001a; DfES, 2001b; DCSF, 2004).

The issue is timely as intended legislation, the Children and Families Bill (DfE, 2013a), lays out landmark reforms to SEN provision which are further under- pinned by a new SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2013b). Both legislative articles were expected to receive Royal Assent in Spring 2014, after which they will be implemented in schools from September 2014. Essentially, the impact that these new initiatives will have on the role of the SENCo is the introduction of a family-centred system in which support services collaborate across education, health and care services to support the early identification and assessment of children with SEN from birth to 25 years (Petersen, 2011; DfE, 2013c). This research project is therefore constructed within the past, present and future of SEN initiatives in England as the principal guidance for the inclusion for children with SEN in mainstream schools undergoes a major overhaul.

Since SENCos are central to supporting children’s inclusion and achievement, the key research question that I shall address in this article relates to how SENCos enhance teachers’ abilities in becoming effective teachers of children with special educational needs. I will argue that SENCos are increasingly seen as ‘agents of change’, having a marked impact on the practices of their teaching colleagues.

SENCOs have been documented as ‘agents of change’ in relation to schools’ visions and values, and as primary advocates for the needs and rights of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools (Cole, 2005; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; Morewood, 2011). As opposed to the more tacit role that SENCOs initially played around the early 1990s – as conceded by Garner and Davies (2001), Szwed (2007a), Cowne (2008) and Tissot (2013) – the SENCO role is currently evolving into one that is not only more empowered at the senior management level, but also has a greater degree of recognition by teachers and other members of school staff.

This paper draws upon my doctoral research data, gathered through questionnaires and interviews, relating to the impact that SENCOs have on teachers’ capacity to address SEN in their classrooms. This study investigated how SENCOs enable teachers to take ownership of SEN teaching in their class- room, and to what degree teachers feel that SENCOs’ support enables them to ‘successfully’ and independently meet the needs of children with SEN. The study also explored whether the teachers’ views are shared with the views of the SENCO in question in each setting.

Methodology

The theoretical framework within which I conducted my research is that of interpretivism, as I began ‘. . . with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them. . . (and) particular situations’ (Cohen and Manion, 1998, p. 37). I also believe that through an interpretivist approach, I acknowledged the various ‘relative-ness’ of diverse elements and social issues that impact upon my research findings. As Robson (2002, p. 24) maintains, ‘(the) behaviour, what (people) actually do, has to be interpreted in the light of (their) underlying ideas, meanings and motivations’.

The study applied a mixed-method approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2002) discuss the significance of using mixed methods in research projects that pertain to complex educational or social contexts. Mertens and McLaughlin (2004), while focusing specifically on the importance of mixed methods research in SEN, reiterate that mixed methods have the potential to contribute to addressing multiple purposes and thus to meeting the needs of multiple audiences in terms of the results. In the context of the research project within which this article is set, the methods used referred to the qualitative and quantitative questionnaire surveys, as well as the qualitative interviews that were conducted for the purposes of data collection.

It is however pertinent to note that the basic quantitative aspect of the current project pertained centrally to the collection of demographic data, and that aside from that information, the research was essentially a qualitative project with regard to the study of SENCO impact on teachers. Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Schwandt (1998, cited on p. 118 in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), Mertens and McLaughlin (2004, p. 96), Silverman (2010, p. 117) and Creswell (2012, p. 204), all key authors in the field of qualitative methodological domains, emphasised that there should be diversity and richness of qualitative data collected to paint a descriptive and informative picture of complex educational issues. It was thence within that context that my project sat as a qualitative study.

The project consisted of two phases. The first involved a survey of a purposive sample of 223 primary school SENCOs from the National Award for SEN Coordination Course, a mandatory professional development for all new-to-role SENCOs and those who had been working in their respective schools in the SENCO role for less than 12 months prior to September 2009 (DCSF, 2009). The questionnaire, to which 42 SENCOs responded, gained a deeper insight into SENCOs' views of their roles in relation to teachers, and formed a basis for in-depth interview questions. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews of 18 SENCOs and 18 teachers. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with SENCOs, teachers and headteachers, and document scrutiny of school SEN policies and other related documentation.

The selection of the research cohort therefore occurred as a result of both convenience and purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2007), as I took into account not only my ability to access the participants but also the fact that these SENCOs possess the particular characteristics that I required for the purposes of my research – that is, they were actively working in the SENCO role at the present time.

The triangulation of data (Creswell, 1994; Bell, 2005), so as to try to ensure the data's verification and validity (Silverman, 2010), is accomplished through a three-pronged methodological approach including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document scrutiny.

The research was conducted in accordance with an ethical code informed by the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2004) and specific recognition of the requirements of the University of Northampton's Research Ethics Committee's guidance: after review of the resources made available on the university website (University of Northampton, 2011), an ethical code and research participation consent form were developed for the purposes of the project and the specific research instruments implemented. All participation was voluntary. Informed and written consent was obtained from all the subjects participating in the study. They were informed of the aims and nature of the research through both the written information sheet and the ethics code, which was also explained to them verbally.

Following a comprehensive review of the literature, the administration of questionnaires and interviews with SENCOs, it became apparent that SENCOs' impact is related to a more complex system of school hierarchical structures. To illustrate this contention, it is useful to refer to Giangreco's (1997, in Rose, 2001, p. 148) summary of what he considered to be the eight key interrelated features of successfully inclusive schools:

- Collaborative teamwork
- A shared framework
- Family involvement
- General educator ownership
- Clear role relationships amongst professionals
- Effective use of support staff
- Meaningful Individual Education Plans (IEPs)
- Procedures for evaluating effectiveness.

In discussing the features set out above, Rose (2001, p. 148) drew out how SENCOs in mainstream schools were regarded as the 'first port of call in dealing with pupils who present teachers with a learning challenge'. This therefore, Rose argued, led to the abdication of responsibility by the teachers with regard to those pupils with special educational needs in their classrooms.

However, concurrently, a question could be raised about whether or not SENCOs possibly get in the way of what might be considered optimal SEN provision. To answer this question, it was important to consider Dyson and Gains' (1995, p. 51) now relatively historical research in which they maintained the implicit role of the SENCO, as well as

'the SENCOs' necessity of managing contradictions. . . as special teachers in ordinary schools, they have to be, at one and the same time, the advocates of the new movement toward inclusion and part of the traditional apparatus of separate education. . . (and hence) beset by uncertainties about the role, subject to a wider range of conflicting expectations.'

This assertion underwent a plethora of variations over the years: for example, Wearmouth (1997, p. 124) maintained that in her view, SENCOs' SEN provision offering was 'in essence, discriminating positively against some children'; meanwhile, Barnes' research into the multiagency aspect of SENCOs' roles highlighted the debate about how 'the initial identification and screening process within many schools is based upon the individual SENCO's perception of need' (2008, p. 237).

This debate has been more recently addressed in the Green Paper Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Needs and Disability (DfE, 2011), which referenced a concern about the issue of over-identification of children with SEN through the inappropriate labelling of children with SEN from an initial stage, thereby engendering a culture of low expectations.

It is therefore within the framework of complex inclusive systems that I examined the SENCO-teacher dynamic, so as to enable the development of a distinctive picture of how SEN provision can be optimally ensured, with participation and a constructive underpinning formulated by all parties involved in the support around children.

Findings and discussion

Findings from the questionnaire, which were used to develop the basis for questions that formed the semi-structured interviews in the second phase, indicated a wide range of similarity of codes converging from the data. It is evident that SENCOs who possess Senior Leadership Team status reported differing experiences of impact on their teaching colleagues, as well as of the support they received within their schools to undertake their role (Layton, 2005; Szwed, 2007b). This is reflected in the literature, and further supports the detailed exploration of this topic within this research.

Two key themes emerged:

1. SENCOs' views regarding teachers who manage a diverse variety of SEN that presents in their classrooms.

2. SENCo's sense of professional identity regarding support for teachers in the management of children with SEN.

These themes are undoubtedly only a selection of a number that have been derived, but these are the two which shall be explored in depth specifically for the purpose of this article in the sections that follow.

SENCo's views regarding teachers

SENCo's have varied interactions with their teaching colleagues, depending on their own teaching or non-teaching roles, as well as the varied school structures within which they work.

Cole (2003) discusses how the integral role played by the SENCo in cohesion with other school management personnel impacts upon the ultimate ethos and effectiveness of the school. Robertson (2003, p. 100) elaborates on the collaborative significance of a SENCo's role via a 'Collaboration Scale that can be used in a variety of education contexts, and as part of school improvement planning and practice'.

This was reflected by one SENCo who, when asked about difficulties or situations in which the nature of the role is tested, said with regard to a staff meeting:

'... during that meeting, there was (sic) arguments, questions toward me; what do I do when a child is under a table; how on earth am I going to do all those things that you are suggesting. . . (and) another argument started, there is the resistance but not everybody, there are some fantastic teachers here, and many are excellent, but there are some challenges. . . (so) this meeting where this happened last week that was like lancing the boil. . . I knew that would happen, I was expecting the response that I got, so that's what. It started from now we start to see some shifts, and some cracks in those attitudes and slowly, slowly throughout the year.'

Perhaps the phenomenon described above is best illustrated by Kearns' (2005, pp. 137–144) recommended 'Five SENCo Roles with Priorities for Continuing Professional Development'. Kearns delineated the following role types and associated opportunities for learning:

- SENCo as Arbiter: with a focus on negotiating, rationalising and monitoring the use of SEN resources.
- SENCo as Rescue: with a focus on supporting pupils with learning difficulties and planning appropriate programmes.
- SENCo as Auditor: with a focus on helping teachers to meet codified procedures for the identification and assessment of pupils with special needs.
- SENCo as Collaborator: with a focus on the meeting of large and small groups of teachers and pupils for review, planning and evaluation activities regarding staff as well as curriculum development.
- SENCo as Expert: with a focus on specialist qualifications in teaching pupils with specific or severe disabilities.

Despite all these obvious aspects of or related to the multifaceted SENCo role, time constraints remain a key factor impacting upon all the above-mentioned opportunities. Cole

(2005) further elucidated this issue by maintaining that despite the revision of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice in 2001, many SENCoS are still overwhelmed by the operational nature of the role, with little support, time or funding to consider more strategic aspects of inclusion or SEN. Indeed, this was alluded to by another SENCo interviewed for this project, who is also a deputy headteacher in her school, when she elaborated on her views of teachers who manage a diverse variety of SEN that presents in their classrooms:

'Just talking through with you I can see that maybe the role's become blurred and it might be easier for somebody who's just SENCo to talk about SEN actually, but I do think I have got an advantage of having, as the Deputy as a member of the Senior Leadership Team. . . I think they (SENCoS) are often left out of the loop, and I am not really. . . I'll be honest, I mean I do think that staff can struggle with SEN, and I can't plan for everybody so I really have to, there is a case of having a regular look at the SEN books, looking at the planning for SEN and having difficult conversations sometimes to say actually, you're not differentiating well enough for those children.'

While I do recognise the potential impact of the above-mentioned matters relating to the operational and functional constraints upon the role of the SENCo and the ability to carry out duties effectively, I can only reiterate that in order to fully comprehend SENCoS' influence upon their teaching colleagues, the broader elements of school hierarchical structures must be taken into careful consideration.

SENCoS' sense of professional identity

The continuing debate about where SENCoS position themselves (or are positioned) with regard to their teaching and non-teaching school colleagues means that their sense of professional identity is ever-evolving. Szwed argues 'the limited nature of the role', as indicated by various government publications (TTA, 1998) which emphasise the more functional models of the role in terms of leadership and professional identity, as opposed to one that is more 'socially critical' (Szwed, 2007c, p. 438).

Indeed, this is further touched upon by Garner and Davies (2001), Szwed (2007a) and Cowne (2008), all of whom concede that the SENCoS' current role is evolving from what was a rather 'taciturn role' during the early 1990s into one that is not only more empowered at the senior management level, but also has a greater degree of recognition by teachers and other members of school staff. This aspect of SENCoS' evolving professional identities in terms of being harbingers of SEN provision was raised in the following comment made to me by a SENCo:

' . . . in any classroom observation I comment on differentiation, is the differentiation for the SEN appropriate. Now I will be honest, often it's not, sometimes not, and I can see that with my SEN hat on, because I know what they need. And not every teacher – especially the less experienced ones – I think sometimes do find it quite difficult to get that. . . So that does happen, so that would be in their feedback, we'd have a discussion about that, and then I might offer, I often offer my help, I say look if it's a little struggle for you, for a while, give me your planning, and we'll talk through how you can bring that for the special needs, and they know that, and people will come and say I am really struggling with this, I need your help with this.'

Further, as regards those SENCOs who wear multiple professional hats – for instance, being a classroom teacher or even an existing member of the SMT – there is a further associated impact with regard to their own sense of professional identity. Indeed, recent research indicates that SENCOs increasingly perceive their role as a ‘managerial post dealing with whole-school issues’; Cowne further elaborates on this phenomenon by recommending that SENCOs be viewed as ‘agents of change who aim at improving teaching and learning of all pupils, but especially those with diverse and different needs’ (Cowne, 2005, p. 67).

The above-mentioned dilemma is reflected in a comment made by a SENCO interviewed for this project. This particular SENCO is also the deputy head of the school, and as such already a member of the SMT:

‘Yes, it’s very hard to separate things with me because the SENCO should be part of the Leadership Team, but I often find it very difficult to separate the two roles, or I would say [my impact] is as a SENCO, as I am the Deputy, I am very much the needs of the SEN and the “Vulnerables”, so that’s what I am particularly looking at because I can’t help it.’

Furthermore, related to the issue of SENCOs undertaking their diverse roles is research which has yielded the fact that a SENCO’s ability to carry out the role is dependent on the level of support provided by the School Management Team or Senior Leadership Team (NASEN Special 2010; Mittler, 2000) and the number of contact versus non-contact hours specific to the role. Without doubt, the degree of the SENCO’s involvement at leadership or management levels and continued opportunities for CPD will also enhance or hinder their ability to perform the role effectively (Mittler, 2000; Cowne, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; NASEN Special, 2010).

The role of the SENCO, as illustrated above, thus has developed greatly in a short period of time. This speed has meant that development has not always been as intended by the strategies driving it, as continued research demonstrates.

Indeed, my opinion is that while the development of SENCO status, in terms of a role within the senior management team, has seen a logical and incremental widening of SENCOs’ responsibilities, recent legislative developments have created uncertainty over the SENCO’s role, particularly in the face of the current ‘dysfunctional’ system with regard to support for children with SEN (Robertson, 2012, p. 78).

Conclusion

Data illustrates that SENCOs have a complex role, involving impacts on teachers’ practices which utilise a wide range of skills, knowledge and expertise across different contexts and social interactions, which vary from school to school. This is influenced by whether or not they are members of their school leadership teams. Further, SENCOs’ time management is a constant concern in balancing competing priorities and demands, which include liaising with and arranging external support, the current trend away from IEPs toward provision mapping, and upcoming legislative changes which impact the documentary requirements of the role. These include the development of a ‘Local Offer’ of Services – by both the school

and the Local Authority – which details what services are locally available for SEN children both with or without a Statement (as per current legislation, which will be phased out in the three years following implementation of the new legislation in September 2014) and the upcoming ‘Education, Health and Care Plans’.

There is evidence that SENCOs do have a positive impact on teachers’ abilities and primary data indicates that this impact varies from school to school, as the SENCO–teacher dynamic is influenced by a number of other factors, such as mutually convenient meetings on a regular basis, teacher openness to change, target-setting and IEPs, empowerment of teachers by SENCOs through upskilling and training, decision-making by SENCOs, dissemination of information to all parties and the formal and informal channels of communication that exist within a school structure.

It is a fact, thus, that the increasingly dynamic nature of the SENCO role brings with it a plethora of challenges in the face of a dynamic SEN support system. Davies, Garner and Lee (1998) alluded to the policy-related challenges facing SENCOs in the years to come and issues of the practicability of the SEN Code of Practice within the current environmental contexts. The SENCO is referred to as ‘the hub – even if the wheel is falling off’ (Davies, Garner and Lee, 1998, p. 40). Indeed, one teacher participant in this research project, when asked to describe the impact that the SENCO had on her teaching practices, asserted that the SENCO in her school was ‘like a cog in a wheel’, helping to ensure that differentiation was taking place while simultaneously ensuring child-specific and appropriate SEN provisions were also undertaken.

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