

Nobody tells you how to be a SENCo

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The ways in which SENCos identify themselves and how they enact the SENCo role is the focus of this research by Sarah Rosen-Webb, an associate tutor and course coordinator at Middlesex University. Who becomes a SENCo and how different individuals develop their SENCo role is explored through the study of the career pathways of nine SENCos in nine secondary schools in England. Data from semi-structured interviews and completion of Diamond Nine activities were coded and analysed using grounded theory procedures. Recommendations arising from this research indicate that recruitment initiatives and development programmes need to be alert to the dynamics between management and teaching roles of SENCos, and to be careful in maintaining a balance between management training and specialist teacher training.

Key words: SENCo, professional identity, values, professional roles.

Introduction

In England, the SENCo is the 'named person responsible for ensuring the meeting of needs of school children with special educational needs' (*Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs*, DFE, 1994) (henceforth the 1994 Code). The SENCo enacts a role which emerged out of social and political developments shaping practice and provision for meeting special educational needs in mainstream schools further to the seminal reconstruction of special educational needs documented in the Warnock Report (1978). The role of the SENCo continues to be significant in special educational needs development at both national and local levels in England. Regulations enacted in September 2009 (DCFS) amended provisions of the Education Act 1996 and placed a duty on governing bodies to ensure SENCos are qualified teachers and that newly appointed SENCos undertake mandatory training leading to the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASCO). The Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability* (March 2011), reinforces this commitment to SENCos' role, status and training. While the Green Paper raises many concerns about future security of funding for children with identified special educational needs, it makes it clear that the SENCo will continue to have the day-to-day lead in managing support for these pupils.

Despite the importance given to the role, there is little research regarding SENCos' perceptions of their identity,

values and roles during the period from the publication of the 1994 Code to the present. The research reported here was developed to explore relationships between SENCos' interpretation of their experiences and reflections on aspects of their identities which impact on their values and their role enactment.

The research sought to understand the social reality of the participants from a phenomenological perspective, considering their perceptions of their roles, and endeavouring to make sense of information outcomes. Participants' narratives revealed how they perceived events in their past, provided evidence of how they perceived influences on their progression and development and enabled them to give meaning to their experiences.

Background

The SENCo role is unclear in both policy contexts and in the research literature. Given a historical tendency to take constructs of special educational needs and systems of provision for granted (Bines, 1995), sometimes little attention is paid to the complex social forces and vested interests locally, nationally and globally which all influence development and enactment of special educational needs policies and practices (Tomlinson, 2005). A historical review of the policy contexts below is followed by a critical review of research literature.

The Warnock Report (1978) emerged out of social and political developments shaping practice and provision for meeting special educational needs. This report heralded the way for improved and better integrated services for meeting special educational needs. The 1994 Code was the first national document on the management of special educational needs provision. It significantly raised the profile of special educational needs in all schools and formalised the SENCo role. Since the introduction of the 1994 Code, the responsibilities and demands of the SENCo role have increased substantially (Mackenzie, 2007).

During the period 1994 to 2004, the policy discourse about special educational needs progressively shifted towards inclusion, as legislation and guidance which promoted the meeting of special educational needs became incorporated in a more general drive to improve standards (DfES, 2003; Dyson, 1998). Implications of promoting inclusive education in accordance with what the Salamanca Framework called 'child-centred approaches' (UNESCO, 1994), for example, has led to the reconstruction of SENCos' roles in some radical ways. The introduction of the revised *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001)

(hereafter the revised Code) provided greater structure and practical guidance on how to identify, assess, record, meet and review special educational needs. At the same time, the revised Code led to greater variability in interpretation of the SENCo role (Mackenzie, 2007). By prioritising leadership and management expertise over good knowledge of special educational needs, the revised Code managed to contribute both to clarifying and to muddying the role of the SENCo.

Since 2004, attempts to reaffirm special educational needs policy have been complicated by difficulties surrounding efforts to reframe and formalise the meaning of inclusion. While *Removing Barriers to Achievement: the Government's strategy for SEN* (DfES, 2004), reaffirmed commitment to partnership and offered a programme of sustained action to improve education, health and childcare for children with special educational needs, *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) focused attention on improving the life chances of all children, focusing on equality rather than equity, and thus, possibly unwittingly, had the effect of creating social exclusion rather than promoting social inclusion of children with special educational needs.

During the course of all these developments, the role of the SENCo in England has been shown to be progressively widening to include aspects of whole-school strategy development and management. Marked lack of SENCo role consistency is notable across time and in different contexts (Wedell, 2004; Mackenzie, 2007).

Ambiguity has been shown to be a dominant feature inhibiting the establishment of a secure and productive SENCo identity (Pearson & Ralph, 2007). It is interesting to note that practising special educational needs managers expressed concern about a possible conflict between their previous training and experience and their current role enactment; they felt that in order to understand the nature of their job, they needed to consider the nature of their teaching responsibilities within the context of their management role (Blandford & Gibson, 2000). Findings from a study of emotion and identity in teaching indicated that teacher identity is in a constant state of '*becoming* in a context embedded in power relationships, ideology and culture' (Zembylas, 2005).

The role of the co-ordinator has been described as teacher, consultant, enabler and manager, and above all an advocate for pupils with special educational needs (Bines, 1992). For the SENCo attempting to straddle discourses concerned with different descriptions of the SENCo role and work with colleagues who use different discourses, the questions of 'what are special educational needs?' and 'why do certain people see special educational needs in different ways?' have been crucial to developing their identity and role (Dyson, 1993).

In a study seeking to identify patterns of growth and change in the professional lives of SENCos in Northern Ireland, Kearns (2003, 2005) considered SENCo experiential learning in the light of role conflict in the management of special

educational needs. Using a framework developed by Clarke and Hollingsworth (2001, cited in Kearns, 2003, 2005) for modelling teacher professional growth, Kearns considered how SENCos responded to defining events in their professional lives by adaptive change, self-change and/or personal growth. From his analysis of findings from narratives of 18 SENCos, Kearns (2005) developed four models of differing performing styles which SENCos adopted in their work. Kearns described his different SENCo roles models as 'arbitrator', 'rescuer', 'auditor' and 'collaborator'.

Arbitrator SENCos saw themselves primarily as arbitrators focused on helping teachers and parents clarify their concerns and on helping them feel positive about inclusion. Rescuer SENCos characteristically focused intensely on individual pupils with special educational needs, planned work for them and showed great empathy, commitment and enthusiasm; they lacked interest in management and had difficulties with time management, and seemed to have limited capacity to involve other staff in the work of identifying and meeting needs. Auditor SENCos saw their role as primarily managerial and administrative; they emphasised the monitoring of pupil progress, management of individual pupil plans, record keeping and maintaining a focus on legal procedures. Collaborator SENCos tended to have strong links with classroom teachers, were interested in sharing practice and were keen to engage with colleagues in curriculum development and new approaches to teaching and learning; they worked in schools which promoted distributed leadership and where meeting special educational needs was seen as integral to the work of the school.

Ambiguity about the status of the SENCo has been clouded by attempts to clarify both professional and hierarchical status as if they were one and the same. The SENCo's professional status at school varies according to institutional interpretation (Mackenzie, 2007). There is a significant reservoir of power available to those who possess appropriate professional expertise (Bush, 2008), and the status awarded to the SENCo, as a measure of power, may indicate how the SENCo is valued in terms of what Bush (2008) calls 'authority of expertise'.

In terms of the hierarchical status of the SENCo, the overarching question is whether or not the SENCo should be a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Key findings in research commissioned by nasen on the working life of SENCos highlight the lack of additional funding, unrealistic time allowance and lack of status as the most significant factors inhibiting SENCos' performance, identifying that only 33% of secondary school respondents were members of a SLT (Pearson, 2008). Practising SENCos indicated that it was not vital to be a member of a SLT, and that either professional or hierarchical status with appropriate financial reward (but not necessarily both) was appropriate in order for the SENCo effectively and efficiently to carry out the roles and responsibilities of the position (Wedell, 2006).

Findings presented by Wedell (2006) accord with the view that role conflict in the management of special educational

needs is the most inhibiting factor working against the professional development of SENCoS (Kearns, 2003). Participants considered that lack of clarity surrounding their dual followership and leadership positions increased the stressful nature of carrying out their complex range of responsibilities and roles. There was also some divergence between participants with a dominant teaching orientation and those with a dominant management focus. Findings relating to ambiguities in policy (Kearns, 2003), ambiguities in status (Mackenzie, 2007) and role conflict (Kearns, 2003), along with Kearns's (2005) findings regarding SENCo model types, all reinforce the view that the development of SENCo models may benefit recruiters and trainers by providing them with examples of different ways of enacting the SENCo role.

Method

This study employed an in-depth, predominantly qualitative, approach with nine participants to explore the themes of SENCo identity and roles, exploring with them their pathways to becoming SENCoS and their perceptions of their role and activities.

The methods used for the research were:

- semi-structured interviews with each of the participants, providing narrative accounts of their recalled experiences;
- Diamond Nine activities: coding and analysis of the first interviews generated questions for the second 'filling in the gaps' interviews and the development of adapted repertory grids for Diamond Nine activities as a component of the second interviews;
- participant feedback and validation: second interviews provided an opportunity for participants' further comments and reflections.

Two interviews were thus carried out with each of the nine participants. Findings from the first interviews informed second interviews and fuelled the iterative process of using the result of one stage of data collection as the input for the next. During the second interviews, participants had the opportunity to give feedback and fill in gaps from their first interviews. Diamond Nine activities were also completed during the second interviews. Use of narrative analysis techniques, including allowing time for reflection between interviews and giving participants the opportunity to validate and amend their coded data during second interviews, helped to elicit participants' recalled perceptions so that they could better recapitulate past experiences (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, cited in Mishler, 1986). The approach allowed for a wealth of subjective data to be gathered and developed to produce a rich data base for interpretation.

Participation

Nine SENCoS in nine secondary schools in one local authority in England volunteered to participate in the research; eight of the volunteer participants were SENCoS in mainstream secondary schools, and one was the SENCo in the local authority's designated specialist secondary school for

children with moderate learning difficulties (MLD). Participants and their schools were anonymised as Amy of School A, Barbara of School B, and so on (the use of names rather than numbers or letters to identify participants allows readers to relate more directly and emotionally to data; Beck & Irons, 2011).

The local authority, a geographically mixed area of urban, suburban and rural communities situated in an outer metropolitan area of a major city in England, is one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the country and has a socioeconomic make-up similar to that of other metropolitan areas. Participants' mainstream schools ranged in size from 880 students to 1,499 students, and the school for students with MLD had 134 students on role. The percentage of students included on the special educational needs registers at the mainstream schools ranged from 8.7% to 32.1%, varying considerably on either side of 'Warnock's 20%' (1978).

As a SENCo in a mainstream secondary school within the same local authority as the research participants, I was an insider as well as the researcher for this study. I recognised the potential weaknesses of interpretative approaches and was careful to view situations through the eyes of participants as much as possible, paying attention to the dynamics of information and interactions as they unfolded (Geertz, 1973) and endeavouring to remain alert to possible bias arising from my own agenda and views. Internal validity was maximized by the restriction of the research group to a single local authority, acknowledging that there were likely to be more commonalities than differences in the way SENCoS within one local authority comprehended the SENCo role. Confidence in external validity was enhanced by the knowledge that the local authority is unexceptional as it is neither one of the most proactive nor one of the least proactive local authorities in the country in terms of its promotion of inclusion (Rustemier & Vaughan, 2005).

Procedure

Interviews

First interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 minutes and one hour; they took place with the nine volunteer participants between June 2004 and October 2005, during school term times. The stimulus probes, which were open-ended and exploratory, were intended to offer as much scope as possible for interviewees to reflect on and describe both the formative experiences that led them to their current role as a secondary school SENCo and their professional training and progression. The probes were:

- I need you to reflect first on your early experiences and try to identify and describe a particular event that stimulated your interest in helping individuals with special educational needs.
- I need you to describe for me the studies you have undertaken prior to your becoming a teacher and how your pathway to becoming a teacher developed,

- Can you tell me a bit more about your training/ Continuing Professional Development (CPD) since becoming a SENCo?
- Can you tell me what particularly you have found both most and least useful in helping you to develop your skills and practice as a SENCo?

Participants were also requested to add any information that they wished regarding their development as a SENCo.

Grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used for coding first interviews in this research. The analytic tools of open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were employed to interrogate and code the narrative data from interviews. Forty-two categories, which emerged from the coding of the first three interviews, were then used for coding the rest of the interviews.

Five clusters of categories were developed, as shown below, and were organised into two main themes, labelled 'values/identity' and 'role' with an additional cluster of 'emotional and personal development':

- early family and school experiences
 - career development and training
 - school-based matters
 - role enactment and activities
 - emotional and personal development
- Values/identity
- Role

Second interviews were carried out for eight of the nine participants between June and July 2006 (one participant, Amy, left the local education authority and could not be located). At these interviews each participant read through the transcript of their first interview, making minor corrections and/or updating information. They also used the opportunity to fill in gaps, resulting in more data being added to the five themed clusters. One SENCo, for example, added data about her early family and school experiences which augmented her first interview and helped to contextualise her later career development and progression.

Diamond Nine Activities

The Diamond Nine activity is a mechanism for prioritising information which offers a 'ready reckoner' for seeing relationships between factors and analysing and interpreting data (O'Kane, 2000; Hopper & Rossi, 2001; Cowne, 1993). Statements based on commonalities identified in first interview data were developed and supplied to participants by the researcher for each of the Diamond Nine activities used in this research (after Bannister & Mair, 1968, cited in Cohen et al., 2001). Diamond Nine exercises are used in teaching and research settings to help draw out people's views on priorities and to enable them to develop hierarchies of relationships between related ideas or information. The conversational nature of Diamond Nine activities complemented the narrative approach, allowing participants readily to see patterns and relationships

between their selection of statements and to display relative rather than absolute responses.

A set of 12 supplied statements drawn from the interview data concerning 'role' and another set concerned with 'values' were offered to each participant. By selecting nine statements for inclusion in their response and discarding three statements, each participant developed his or her own pattern of relationships within each set (where line 1 represents the most important and line 5 represents the least important) to form a Diamond Nine relating to the question 'How do you construe yourself as a SENCo?', as shown in Figure 1. The supplied statements are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Diamond Nine display proforma

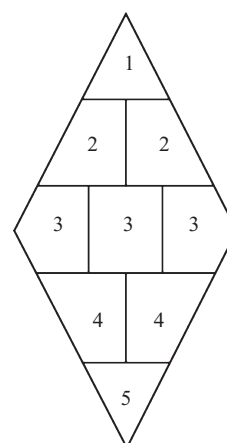


Table 1: Role Diamond Nine statements

1. The SENCo has a responsibility to monitor inclusion.
2. The SENCo has a responsibility to provide INSET for other teachers.
3. The SENCo's role is essential to strategic planning.
4. Negotiating timetable is a significant part of the SENCo role.
5. The SENCo role is to maximise academic progress for students with special educational needs.
6. The SENCo has a responsibility to be knowledgeable about different areas and aspects of special educational needs.
7. The SENCo role is to ensure access to the curriculum for students with special educational needs.
8. The SENCo is a key player in teaching and learning development at the school.
9. The SENCo has equal responsibility for educational, behavioural and needs of students.
10. The SENCo is part of a team.
11. The SENCo's main role is as a manager.
12. The SENCo role is different from that of curriculum teachers.

Gina's role Diamond Nine activity placements are shown in Figure 2 to illustrate how the Diamond Nine activity works. Gina placed the statement 'The SENCo's role is essential to strategic planning' (3) on line 1 for the role Diamond Nine.

Table 2: Values Diamond Nine statements

1. A SENCo must be optimistic.
 2. A SENCo prefers to ‘give rather than receive’ (is altruistic).
 3. The SENCo role requires honesty.
 4. SENCos need to be forgiving.
 5. SENCos must be interested in how learners learn.
 6. Integrity is important to a SENCo’s role.
 7. Social justice fuels my work as a SENCo.
 8. Empathy and sympathy are important to advancing student progress.
 9. SENCos need to be outgoing.
 10. It is important to be able to team manage.
 11. Managing stress is important to the role of SENCo.
 12. I place importance in having up-to-date subject knowledge (special educational needs).

Figure 2: Example of Diamond Nine statement placements for role (Gina)

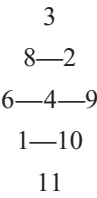


Figure 3: Tabular display of Diamond Nine role data summary for statement 3, ‘The SENCo’s role is essential to strategic planning’

Line	Gina	Barbara	Olivia
1			
Line 2	Pam		
Line 3	Annabelle	David	
Line 4	Victor	Lorna	
Line 5			

As shown in Figure 3, this statement was equally highly valued by two other SENCos (Barbara and Olivia). Other participants placed the statement variously on lines 2, 3 and 4. Presentation of Diamond Nine findings in tabular form offers immediate visual impressions of the clustering or lack of agreement surrounding each statement.

Findings

Presentation of data has been organised into sections on SENCo identity and values and on SENCo roles.

Identity and values

The first two clusters of interview findings, ‘Early family and school experiences’ and ‘Career development and training’, highlight effects of family and early school experiences on participants and the participants’ subsequent career decisions and pathways. While participants’ comments on their aspirations in relation to their individual family backgrounds revealed a range of backgrounds from traditional working-class families to families where education and professional roles were taken as the norm, all participants felt that their own families had promoted and valued learning. Data from first interviews indicated that there were no discrete training routes for participants to follow as they progressed towards becoming a SENCo, and data from second interviews reinforced the notion that SENCo career development and training was seen as a hotchpotch. Entry-level education and qualifications of participants prior to appointment as SENCos ranged from Teaching License to university degrees in English, European Languages and Science. Prior to their appointment as SENCos, participants had taught English, Science and French language. Their previous non-teaching experiences included working as a science technician, an unqualified teacher of English abroad, a housing officer, a textiles business manager and a turf accountant.

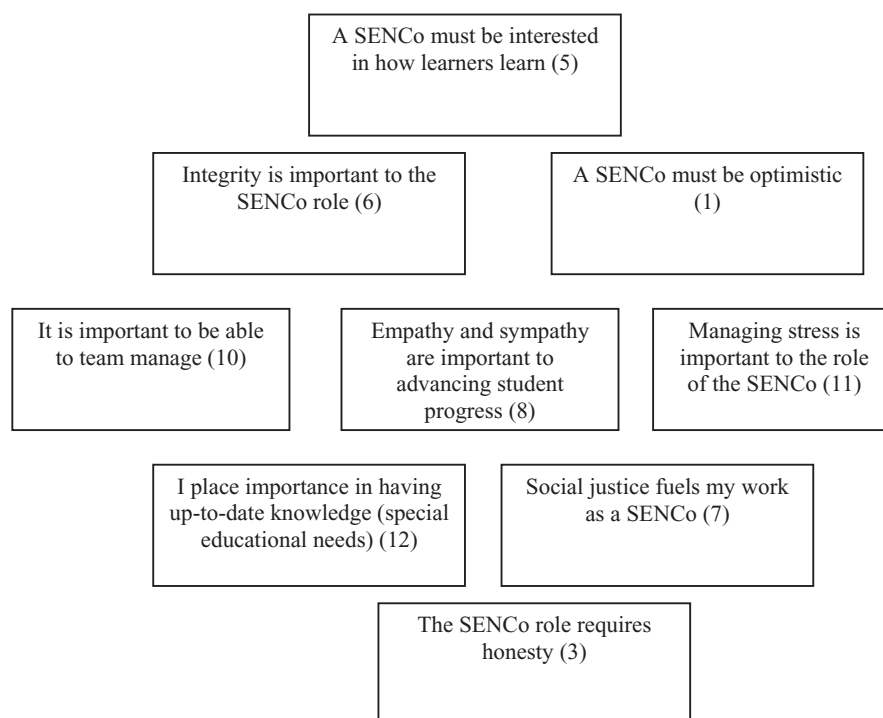
Identification with teaching and bridging from non-teaching experience is illustrated in comments from participants regarding their positive decisions to pursue teaching as a career change from other work. David noted that he felt increasing identification with and satisfaction with special educational needs work as a way to enhance social justice, and Lorna remarked pragmatically that she was employed as an Instructor and went on from there (interview, 6 July 2004).

The summary of participants’ responses to the ‘values’ Diamond Nine activity (through applying a numerical figure to each participant’s positioning of statements, then adding and collating these), shown in Figure 4, indicated very strong agreement that ‘A SENCo must be interested in how learners learn’ (5), ‘Integrity is important to the SENCo role’ (6) and ‘A SENCo must be optimistic’ (1). ‘Being interested in how learners learn’ was seen as critical; this finding was well matched to participants’ reports of the impact of events along the developmental pathways which led to their becoming SENCos.

Role

The third and fourth clusters of interview findings, ‘School-based matters’ and ‘Role enactment and activities’, highlight school-based matters that the participants felt had affected their career development and activities that participants felt had impacted on their role enactment. Participants cited constraints of the school curriculum as actively presenting difficulties for students with special educational needs and

Figure 4: Values: participants' rankings of SENCo value statements (summary)



providing barriers to progress. In particular, they noted time-table constraints as impeding the fitting in of basic skills teaching sessions. Participants raised concerns about management structures and commented on how lack of clarity negatively impacted on their ability to carry out their work to best advantage. Lack of time, funding and resources were all recognised as impediments to planning for special educational needs provision and development of the SENCo role.

Participants concurred in their praise for the support they received from the local authority. They spoke about their concerns that changes in inclusion policy at national level might impact on SENCo role and activities and amplified their views on the delicacies inherent in balancing individual students' needs and those of the whole school. Reflecting on their own development as SENCos, participants offered a variety of thoughts about how differently, individually and contextually the role of SENCo is played out. Gina commented that her *'current role is very wide [and that] managing the learning support unit is just one part of it'*, Victor that his role was *'a sort of a lynch pin for the whole school'*, and Olivia that:

'the SENCo role demands many different people skills [that] being a SENCo was equivalent to running a small school [and that] the SENCo role was to promote the whole person'.

Responses to the role Diamond Nine activity indicated less agreement between participants. Selection of the most important role descriptor as 'being a key player in teaching and learning development at school' helped to inform understanding of the frustrations and confusions that participants

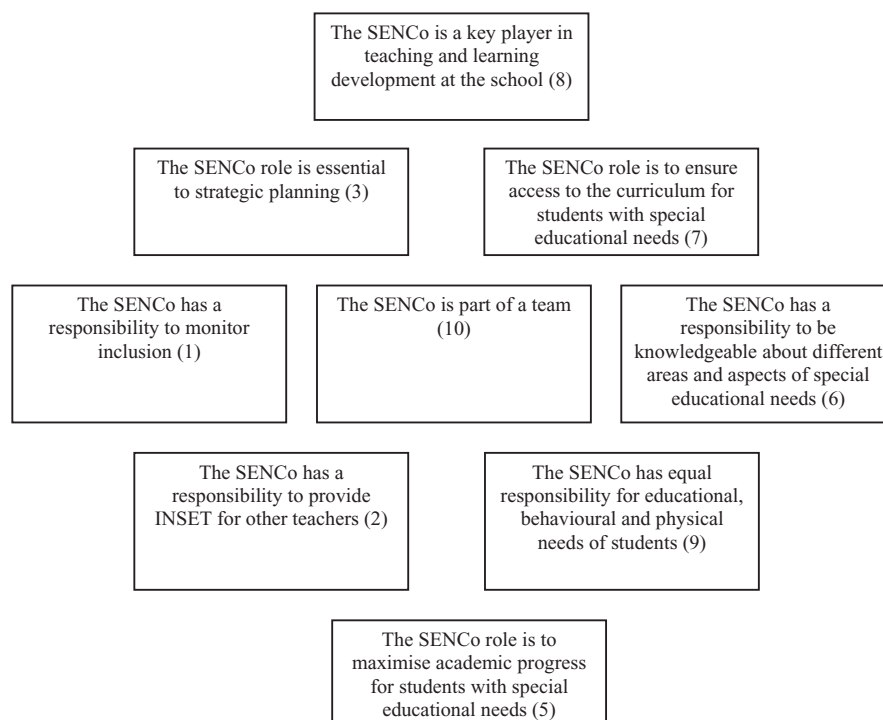
expressed in interviews as relating to gaps between the theoretical SENCo role and their actual work. While this statement was selected by all participants for placement at or above the mid-line of their role Diamond Nine, the spread of placement of other statements was considerable.

Participants emphasised leadership aspects of role, highlighting *'being interested in how learners learn'*, *'integrity'* and *'optimism'* as most important, and identifying more with the leadership than the managerial aspects of their role. Confusion about work expectations of SENCos was highlighted by Amy's rhetorical question, *'Are special educational needs and teaching separate?'* emphasising her view that a SENCo is a special type of teacher, but still a teacher. Participants' placements of role statements are summarised in Figure 5.

Participants indicated that, while they see a workable repositioning for the SENCo as desirable, they saw the SENCo position as neither clearly aligned to that of a designated middle manager nor to that of a senior manager. Participants saw the SENCo post and role as both complementary to and different from that of the middle manager. As co-ordinator, the SENCo role was not designated as leader or manager; yet it has evolved as a role that straddles the divide (or perhaps the 'join') between leadership and management.

Diamond Nine placements indicated that participants also agreed that optimism and integrity were indispensable qualities for a SENCo. Examples include David's assertion that you *'need to believe that what you put in will register some-time'*, Annabelle's comments about enjoying the challenge, and Victor's *'looking forward to each day and its challenges'*.

Figure 5: Role: participants' rankings of SENCo role (summary)



Linking values and role

The fifth cluster, 'Emotional and personal development', helped to fuse values and role through linking aspects of participants' self-reported emotional and personal development. Participants' explanations of how they became SENCos ranged along the 'accidental to planned' continuum. Participants felt that their learning had been to a great extent self-initiated. Participants constantly spoke of their work as child-centred and person-focused, about enhancing teaching and learning skills and about helping learners become more confident and competent.

Discussion

Participants saw their role developing progressively as more varied and widening in the approach and expectations of their work with pupils, parents, teaching colleagues, learning support assistants/teaching assistants and outside agencies. They saw their work as multi-faceted and described it as, among other things:

- direct work with students and parents;
- advisory and developmental in providing information;
- materials and 'sign-posting' for teaching colleagues;
- managerial and administrative in dealing with bureaucratic demands in relation to funding;
- provision and consultative in working with professional colleagues in health and social services.

Participants felt that in becoming a SENCo they continued to develop insight and build skills amidst changing agendas in social policy. They cited previous and different (non-teaching) work experiences, local authority structures and personnel, changing government and social policies and choices of further training as influences along their different

developmental pathways. They valued support from their local authorities and their SENCo cluster groups, which were seen as essential for maintaining social identity in a context of 'ever-changing development' (Cowne, 2005). Participants considered that change in operational context was the only constant in their evolving SENCo role and felt that they were continually *becoming* a SENCo while *being* a SENCo.

Participants' development and role enactment relied on an identified core of a self-efficacy arising from their aspirations, identity, values and personality. While individual participants identified themselves more with either management or specialist teacher dominance in their work, all participants concurred in the view that the barriers of lack of status, inadequate training and insufficient time to fulfil the role (Derrington, 1996, cited in Blandford and Gibson, 2000) stood in the way of the SENCo's successful management of the tripartite manager– administrator–teacher role described in the *National Standards for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators* (TTA, 1998; Blandford & Gibson, 2000).

Whether speaking of their pathways as being somewhat accidental or involving more deliberate moves towards becoming a SENCo, participants recognised that serendipity played a part in their developmental pathway. All participants emphasised the impact of the love, support and encouragement they received in their early years on shaping their later career development. While participants did not recognise themselves as having the strong empathetic, sympathetic and moral concerns associated with altruism, their unfolding narratives indicated that their concerns were characteristic of people who care about and act on behalf of

others and revealed participants as self-interested altruists whose empathetic feelings and altruistic actions linked back to the nature of their upbringing (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Schaub & Tokar, 2005). David's identification of having a strong personality factor '*to fight for social justice*', for example, is representative of these self-interested altruistic characteristics. (It is interesting to note that in government recruitment materials for teachers 'people who want to contribute to society and the community, but at the same time want something back for themselves' (Lepkowska, 2006) have been targeted.)

The SENCo role has been variously described as teacher, consultant, enabler and manager, and above all an advocate for the pupil with special educational needs (Bines, 1992). The role has been categorised as four different SENCo types: 'arbitrator', 'rescuer', 'auditor' and 'collaborator' (Kearns, 2005). Analysis and interpretation of findings from this study reinforced these descriptions and highlighted the SENCo's role as being that of a teacher-leader practitioner with good analytic skills who can balance 'on the job' activity, strategic thinking and planning proactivity and 'fire-fighting' reactivity.

Ideally, a SENCo is a trained and experienced teacher who has:

- the professional skills to direct and co-ordinate provision;
- the management skills and expertise to enact positive change;
- the personal skills and commitment to engage, enthuse and lead others.

Conclusions

Participants' journeys to becoming SENCos have been shaped and modified as career opportunities have appeared and were taken up or cast aside; their awareness of the interweaving of their doing and understanding was heightened as they reflected on becoming a SENCo. Participants indicated by the identified values and role descriptors shown in analysis of interviews and Diamond Nine activities that they all had the best interests of their pupils at heart. This research has found that participants have held steadfast to the attributes of empathy, working within boundaries and with challenges, maintaining positive relationships and being transparent in communication, described by Visser (2005) as eternal verities essential to all good teaching practice.

Participants felt that lack of clarity surrounding their roles and position increased the stressfulness of carrying out their complex range of leadership responsibilities and other roles. Findings accord with the view that role conflict in the management of special educational needs is the most inhibiting factor working against the professional development of SENCos (Kearns, 2003); they point to the importance of clarifying how the duality of followership and leadership can

be best harnessed to advance clarification of the SENCo role (Thody, 2003; Kerry, 2003); and they suggest that systemic change in leadership models in schools to include SENCos as part of senior management might be advisable (Layton, 2005).

Throughout the period of this research, it remained unclear whether the role of SENCo was separating into two distinct roles (one as a teacher-leader and the other as an administrator) or coalescing into one professional post with dedicated support. In the early years of the SENCo role, activity centred directly on meeting individual pupils' special educational needs. Since the introduction of the 1994 Code, responsibilities attached to the role of the SENCo have progressively shifted towards a more prescribed and less clear one as SENCo job descriptors have shifted further towards the direction of management and away from the specialist teaching role (Mackenzie, 2007). The SENCo role has become more concerned with supporting pupils through identification and actions within and outside the school and focused more on monitoring of teaching, removing barriers to learning and assessment for learning (Lewis, 2005; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006; Coventry, 2008; Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001; Robertson, 2008).

This research contributes to the growing literature lending insight into the development and enactment of the SENCo role and helps strengthen relationships between the theory and practice of meeting special educational needs. Findings from this study indicate that training in both specialist teaching skills and management skills seem to be important to the enhancement of SENCos' ability to develop and support good practice at school, best deploy specialist teachers and ancillary staff and monitor pupil progress.

This study suggests that SENCos bring together the core of SENCo values, 'being interested in how learners learn' and the core of SENCo role, 'being a key player in teaching and learning development' in their work. This study further suggests that SENCos need to maintain dual foci on the strategic development of the learning environment and on the operational management of activities at the individual level in order best to meet special educational needs in mainstream schools.

The introduction of NASCO, the National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination, in September 2009 provides a structured framework for training for new SENCos. This one-year course is structured to cover a mixture of strategic and managerial training, essential knowledge of particular special educational needs and practical skills. This important advance supports the development of SENCos and recognises the significance of the SENCo role in maintaining quality education for all in schools. Future SENCos will hopefully no longer feel as Olivia did when she mused during interview that '*Nobody tells you how to be a SENCo*'.

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