The multi-faceted identity of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in an English Primary school as an Administrator, Teacher, Manager and Leader.

(overview essay)

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Abstract:

This review paper is the final one in a series of three which critically reflect upon the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in English primary school settings. Its focus is on the SENCO's 'place' in the school in the context of their professional identity and multiple-role as a teacher, administrator, manager and transformative leader.

Keywords*: Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), leadership, manager, administrator*

1. Introduction:

This review paper follows on from two previous papers on the English primary school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) (Smith, 2020 and Smith, 2021) and is designed as a companion piece. It identifies key issues around how a SENCO usually has to take responsibility for a range of other whole-school functions, including class teaching, in addition to their SENCO duties; by how their status as transformational leaders is acknowledged and encouraged by their headteachers and school governing bodies and how the sheer volume of their professional work creates significant difficulties related to their work-life balance and well-being.

1.1 Aims

The aim of this review paper is to further explore the role of the English mainstream school SENCO, their responsibilities, their multiple roles and their key duties in relation to managing and leading provision for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) across their school community. This paper is designed for comparative study into the management and leadership of provision for Special Educational Needs and is open to critical interrogation and commentary.

1.2 Context

The Department for Education/Department for Health (2015) Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs: 0 to 25 years, states that the Governing bodies of maintained mainstream schools and the proprietors of mainstream academy schools (including free schools) 'must ensure that there is a qualified teacher designated as SENCO for the school' (p 97). In their position within the school, the SENCO became central to the policies, provision, funding and practices related to meeting the needs of pupils with SEND. In the DfE/DH (2015) Code of Practice it states that the SENCO *should* be provided (note: not *must* be provided) with sufficient time and resources to carry out their role. All maintained schools, academies and free schools accept that they must have a named person as the SENCO (Cowne et al, 2015), however many SENCOs are also full or part-time teachers and these responsibilities are additional to their normal class-teaching (primary school) or subject teaching (secondary school) work-load. This dual identity is difficult to define as the SENCO job and role are both embedded within their identity as, first and foremost, a teacher; but this is not just specific to SENCOs as other teachers in primary schools combine a range of duties with their whole-class teaching commitments.

2. Methods

(a) Differentiating 'Power' and 'Leadership' in a School

English schools are, in the main, still fairly hierarchical structures with systems of status and power. Mullins (2005) defined 'power' at a broad level and stated that *'power can be interpreted in terms of control or influence over the behaviour of other people with or without their consent'* (p 843). However, the differentiation between domination, as identified by Mullins, and strong leadership which is motivational and empowering sits at the heart of what it means to be an effective strategic leader, a key component within both a headteacher's and a SENCO's role in the school.

In much of the research and literature relating to management and leadership it has been identified that effective leaders are those individuals who have the ability to direct, influence and motivate others, communicate effectively and work in collaboration to achieve an organisation's goals (Kotter, 1998; Mullins, 2005; Owen, 2009; Northouse, 2013). Before an appraisal of the SENCO as a leader can be made, there is the need to briefly explore the issues relating to the power-relationship between SENCOs and their headteachers and the SENCO's underpinning role as a teacher.

(b) Power-relationships and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator as a 'good Teacher'

Wilding (1997) explored teacher professionalism from the position that all teachers have deeply held values which shaped how they performed their varied roles and that, due to the deeply personal nature of teaching, professional reflection can be emotively interrelated with the teacher's individual persona. Sammons et al (2007) presented the view that identity should not be confused with role as it is how teachers self-define and define themselves to others, however Mayson (2014) stated that identity and career are often intrinsically intertwined with the job feeling like an integral part of who a person is and how they define '*self*'. Sikes (1985), Ball & Goodson (1985) and Huberman (1993) all agreed that this structure of identity evolved and changed over time and over the duration of a teacher's career in unpredictable ways as various factors, incidents and happenings impacted upon it. Primary school SENCOs view themselves as teachers first and specialists (the SEN coordination part of their work) as a secondary/specialist function which they have to do alongside their class teaching; anecdotal evidence gained through informal conversations with SENCOs seems to indicate that they are not always happy as they feel that both roles are time-consuming and challenging with a lack of time available to do either role well. As a result, their view of themselves as effective/good teachers is affected by this careful 'balancing act' between teaching and SENCO duties where time is a finite factor.

The vision of what constitutes a 'good' teacher and of a 'vision' for teaching is significantly influenced by governmental comment and direction and so, the Department for Education still maintains a strong monitoring role in regard to research in education as they stated, *'We need to know how well the profession is adapting to the challenges of a changing education system.'* (DfE, 2013. p 8). This was a laudable statement but it must be viewed alongside statements such as those previously made by Her Majesty's former Chief Inspector for Education, Chris Woodhead who wrote in his annual Ofsted (2000) report for 1998/99:

> 'We know what constitutes good teaching and we know what needs to be done to tackle weaknesses...Why then is so much time and energy wasted in research that complicates what ought be straightforward...If standards are to continue to rise we need decisive management action, locally and nationally, that concentrates attention on the two imperatives that really matter; the drive to improve teaching and strengthen leadership...The challenge now is to expose the emptiness of education theorising that obfuscates the classroom realities that really matter.'
> (p 21)

It seemed that Woodhead attempted to control any dissent through his use of emotive and negative language. Educational research and theorising were targeted as being a restrictor rather than a facilitator unless it was purely focused on what he considered to be the only things which mattered. This attack on '*educational theorising'* was adopted by the former Education Secretary Michael Gove in his blanket attack upon university departments of education and the academic staff who worked within them, calling them guilty and responsible for the failure of poor educational performance in children over the years (Gove, 2013).

This view of educational research linked to teacher effectiveness was firmly bound up within a greater package of policies and practices systematically pursued by the Government which were the product of a well-developed, Right-Wing, market-led ideological position (Bartlett and Burton, 2010). However, the research priorities listed by the Department for Education in 2013 included key questions relating to leadership:

- What are the most effective models of leadership in the school system?
- How are those models of system leadership delivering improvements to the quality of teachers and teaching?
- How do different models of leadership succeed?
- Is there sufficient supply of school leaders? How effective are the mechanisms which support supply?
- How are school leaders using their freedoms to employ and deploy teachers differently, and what is the impact of doing so?'
  (p 10)

Although seemingly focused on school leadership and the role of the headteacher, these questions are completely transferrable to the SENCO.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 SENCOs as School Leaders: A mis-match between their training and what happens in practice in their schools

'Leadership' appears as an area of expertise presented in the Teaching Agency's (2009) National Award for SEN Coordination learning outcomes which shape the legal contract for what a SENCO has to do according to legislation, linked with a required understanding of theory and how it relates to practice in both managing and strategically leading SEN provision. Training, delivered by approved accredited organisations, using the National Award for SEN Coordination learning outcomes, was (and still is) the main procedure where new SENCOs are introduced to the frameworks which forge their professional role. The aim is for the SENCO to carry these frameworks forward, to explore them and then develop them in their own practice. This compulsory training also encourages SENCOs to adopt strategic leadership approaches in their schools. However, it is understood that the vision and priorities of each individual headteacher and the organisational culture of their schools could negatively impact upon a SENCOs' own ability to work with some degree of autonomy and act with influence as a policy-maker. Thus, some SENCOs would only be able to engage in a veneer of the role, operating on the periphery of the school if their vision for developing provision for special educational needs did not match the headteacher's priorities for the whole school. This situation has the potential to undermine the professional identity of the SENCO as their personal interpretation of 'self-in-role' becomes determined by others who occupy power-positions within the school. Williams (2002) made the point that,

> 'the notion of top-down decision-making processes – autocratic – is mainly reserved for labour-intensive industries. In schools the notion of the leader as sole decision maker should now be virtually obsolete. Even in the case of headteachers who appear to make only autocratic decisions, it is immediately the result of multiple input from senior and middle management layers.' (p 26)

However, the experiences of many SENCOs who do not have the status as members of the senior or middle management layer in their schools are determined by this imbalance of power.

3.2 The Identity of the SENCO as both Leader and Manager: Theorising Leadership and Management in the school

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) stated that most theories of leadership suggest that leadership cannot be separated from the context in which it is exerted with leadership being contingent on the setting, the nature of the organisation, the goals being pursued, the individuals involved, the resources and the timeframe with almost all of the definitions of leadership having the underpinning concept of 'future direction and moving the organisation forward.'*;* strategic leadership being seen as 'a process and a perspective as much as being about a plan and outcomes' (p9). In this context, leaders are often seen as those who inspire and motivate and managers as those who implement and oversee the tasks and duties imposed by the executive function. Davies (2009) recognised this in the field of education when distinguishing leadership from management:

> 'Leadership is about direction-setting and inspiring others to make the journey to a new and improved state for the school. Management is concerned with efficiently operating in the current set of circumstances and planning in the shorter term for the school.'
> (p 2)

Davies expanded this idea further by identifying that leadership was not set in isolation but was set in the context of the whole school, it not being just the provenance of one individual but of a group of people who provided leadership, support and inspiration to others in order to achieve the best for the children in their care. Leadership in this context is to do with relationships with leadership being a communal process. Wheatley (1992) stated that, 'Leadership is always dependent on the context, but the context is established by the relationships we value' (p 144) with a Relational Leadership Model focusing on creating a process informed by inclusion, empowerment and purpose, undertaken in an ethical manner.

But what happens if the school does not operate such a collegiate approach and only restricts the leadership function to a small number of senior staff directed by the headteacher (or Chief Executive if it is an Academy Trust)? This could create potential tension, or a mismatch, if a SENCO with their own set of ethical factors driving their Psychological Contract (their own idea of what is best for the pupils they teach; in short, the SENCO's own set of values, knowledge and empathy) contrasts with the organisational school culture as determined by the headteacher and governors, if the school is a particularly hierarchical organisation which imposes its culture/ethos on the whole learning community in regards to admissions, behaviours, further professional training, the support and working conditions of the staff, the content of the curriculum and how it is taught and assessed. This could lead to a working atmosphere which damages professional relationships, as considerable difficulties might emerge in that the intellectual capital of its staff could narrow so much that the school would not be able to adapt effectively. Winch and Gingell (2009) posed the question whether authority for educational leadership should be collective or individual and if it could actually allow for any 'charismatic leadership', arguing that school leadership required someone who 'embodies a certain amount of charisma and that 'collegiate governance is ill-suited to the emergence of such a person' (p 114) while Mortimore et al. (1998) and White and Barber (1997) discussed whether collegiate leadership (which is frequently interpreted as a process/model where a team works, plans and delivers together in a supportive relationship with a set of shared values towards a shared vision) can be inter-related with such a charismatic form of leadership.

This model of charismatic leadership has been teamed with the theory of transformational leadership (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Hunt, 1999; Conger, 1999) where followers are influenced and motivated by the leader making events meaningful through the use of praise and rewards in order to create an

environment where people make self-sacrifices, commit to difficult objectives and achieve more than was initially expected. Bass (1985, 1988) and Bass and Avolio (1993) stated that transformational leadership contains four components: Charisma or idealised influence (the setting of high ethical/moral standards); inspirational motivation (providing challenges and meaning for engaging in shared goals and undertakings); intellectual stimulation (a dynamic process of vision formation, implementation and evaluation); and individualised consideration (where the leader treats each person as an individual and provides coaching, mentoring and opportunities for development). By adopting these four components people identified with the charismatic leaders' aspirations and wanted to follow them. If the leadership is transformational, where leaders and followers do not follow their own self-interests, high standards are set together with a strong ethical and moral underpinning (Kanungo and Mendonca, 1996). Donalson and Dunfee (1994) saw the core of the moral legitimacy of transformational/charismatic leadership depending on the granting of the same freedoms and opportunities to others that the leader claims for his/her self, on having integrity, on keeping promises, distributing what is due and employing valid and appropriate incentives in a transparent and honest manner. Howell and Avolio (1992) stated that leaders, no matter how 'charismatic' they were, could not be true transformational leaders if they were only concerned about themselves; if this was the case such manipulative or deceptive behaviours created what Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) called *'pseudo-transformational leaders'* (p 186) resulting in destructive outcomes and an abuse of power in organisations. Howell and Avolio (1992) further stated that authentic transformational leaders needed to be committed to a code of ethical conduct supporting an organisational culture with high ethical standards.

So, how does this impact on the SENCO particularly when the current compulsory SENCO training is geared towards moving the SENCO from a teaching role into a strategic, transformational leadership role? Perhaps this strategic leadership role and how it relates to the management function inherent with the SENCO range of responsibilities does need 'unpacking' in this context. A clarification between management as an established discipline with a separate body of functions as distinct from the application of the principles of leadership is important to explore as the comparison between leadership and management forms a significant and on-going discussion amongst those researching and writing in the field (Northouse, 2004; Kotter, 2011; Kotterman, 2006). There has always been a difference of opinion, for example Mintzberg (1990) defined a manager and a leader as one and the same whilst Bass (1990) provided a more finely balanced and transmutable relationship,

> 'Leaders manage and managers lead, but the two activities are not synonymous…management functions can potentially provide leadership; leadership activities can contribute to managing. Nevertheless, some managers do not lead, and some leaders do not manage.'
> (p 383)

Northouse (2013) described the process of management as a function which was primarily designed to produce order and consistency in an organisation. He further sub-divided management into planning and finance/budgeting with setting timetables and allocating resources, organising and staffing relating to deployment/placing of staff, providing structure/establishing protocols and problem-solving through generating incentives/creative solutions and taking action. Leadership and management seem to have a significant overlap as they both involve influencing and working with others with effective goal management and planning as key factors, so how are the two distinguished? Northouse (2013) presented a comparison of management and leadership competences in the form of a table:

Table (i) A Comparison of Management and Leadership Competences

Management Produces Order & Consistency	Leadership Produces Change & Movement
• Planning and budgeting • Establishing agendas • Setting timetables • Allocating resources	• Establishing direction • Creating a vision • Clarifying the big picture • Setting strategies
• Organising and staffing • Provide structure • Making job placements • Establishing rules and procedures	• Aligning people • Communicating goals • Seeking commitment • Building teams and coalitions
• Controlling and problem solving • Developing incentives • Generating creative solutions • Taking corrective action	• Motivating and inspiring • Inspiring and energize • Empowering subordinates • Satisfying unmet needs

After Northouse (2013. p 10)

In Northouse's model there is a clear difference between management and leadership but the overlap is equally clear particularly where managers are engaged in influencing individuals and groups to meet specific goals but motivating others is perceived as being a competency within the 'leadership strand'. Similarly, when leaders are engaged in planning, organising and controlling they perform functions within the 'management strand'; all competences across both strands involve, to a lesser or greater degree, influencing people. These competences are theoretically embedded within every management role within a school and sometimes appear as key responsibilities within SENCO job descriptions and are all essential factors in getting things done effectively and efficiently.

In a wider school context, Hardy (1984) identified that there are general principles of management which can be applied to all organisational settings. This is particularly apt in the current educational climate which has been developing since the re-emergence of the Capitalist market in English education from the 1980s (Gunter, 2001) with headteachers now being responsible and accountable for resourcing, attracting income streams, attracting 'customers' (i.e. pupils) and for establishing a distinctive presence, even 'brand', in an increasingly competitive marketplace where Local Authority (LA) responsibility and influence is being 'rolled-back' in favour of private enterprise running Academy Trusts and their equivalence, including Free Schools. Gunter (1997) presented the view that it was private sector management in education which determined to shift the identities and behaviours which underpinned the growth of leadership in educational settings and which led to the enhancement of performance leadership

This shift from educational to performance leadership did have a significant impact on SENCOs' realisation of the management function inherent within their role set within the concept of performativity (Marshall, ,1999; ; Ball ,2000, 2003 and 2010; Perryman, 2006 and; Murray,2012). The daily behaviour of the SENCO based on the social norms and habits within their school involves management as a practical activity as it is an integral part the successful operation of the school. It is also about operationalizing strategy at different levels of behaviour from classroom, to middle to senior management, the SENCO having to work at all of these levels. Mullins (2005) called management the cornerstone of organisational effectiveness as it is concerned with arrangements for 'the carrying out of organisational processes and the execution of work' (p 34). For a SENCO this would mean planning, provision management, managing people (e.g. teaching assistants), constructing in-house training, overseeing administrative and tracking operations, manipulating budgets, resource procurement, monitoring teaching and establishing/maintaining relationships with external agencies/parents and evaluating practice. These are all activities and factors for action, which Bell (1999) identified as management actions which needed underpinning by educational values and guidelines on how to behave as leaders and managers.

This is further complicated by the subjectivity of each SENCO's perceptions about his/her professional role which influences the levels of autonomy available to them, the ways in which they respond (Vincent & Warren, 1997) and how the SENCO role influenced their identity and concept of self (Haslam & Reicher, 2005). However, this is not the sole causal link between individual perception and autonomy as this is only one aspect of what allowed for autonomy, the key aspect being how the school is led by the governors, headteacher and senior leadership team.

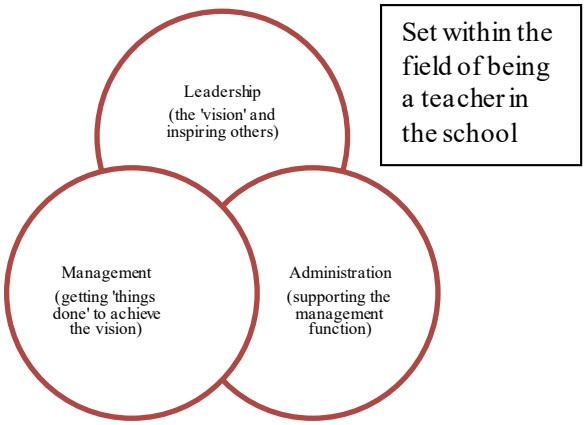
Perhaps another difficulty in enabling the SENCO to develop an identity as a specialist and a school leader with a level of autonomous freedom is through the profusion of texts and literature/sources designed to help the new SENCO; the differences between job and role and manager and leader are blurred: Edwards (2016) mentioned SENCOs as 'whole-school movers and shakers' (p 84) but then wrote about them as '*managers* of relationships' (p 85) and *managing* the training and deployment of additional adults. Sydney (2010) provided a SENCO competency checklist which contained a suggested audit for things such as reflecting on practice or as a basis for a performance management conversation, the list provided a useful collection of administrative and management tasks/duties but nothing relating to specifically *leading* SEN provision within the school. Cowne (2015) provided a wealth of useful information for SENCOs, particularly relating to supporting teaching colleagues and running the Teaching Assistant team, some mention of leadership was made but this was consumed within an overriding accent on management. Shuttleworth (2000) meshes management and leadership together but only presents and discusses the management functions of the SENCO role. Ekins (2012) helpfully draws attention to the learning outcomes of the National Award for SEN Coordination but does not expand on the sub-section relating to '*Leading, developing and supporting colleagues'* (p 189-190) and NASEN's (2015) SEND handbook provided in-depth guidance linking the SENCO function and the positive actions of the school to comply with the legislative requirements of the 2015 Code of Practice with no (or very little) mention of the SENCO as a leader.

3.3 The SENCO as an Administrator

If the relationship between management and leadership within the role presents some confusion for a SENCO perhaps this multi-identity is further complicated by adding a third factor, the SENCO as an administrator creating an inter-relation of leadership, management and administration within the wider field of being a teacher. These three parts are inter-linked and inter-woven and cannot be separated but with the understanding that, at different times, one factor may have more relevance than another. Although related to headship this multi-role does have pertinence for the SENCO, the implication is that a SENCO engages in all three functions as they are permanently inter-related and executed at the same time. This model provides a good example of the SENCO role with the 'administrative' nature of the third sector (when done efficiently) providing a significantly positive effect on morale and attitudes within the school. However, being a good administrator is not essential to being a good SENCO, but understanding what is good administration and the ability to ensure that the right staff and systems are in place are essential. The SENCO needs to have had significant experience in dealing with the administrative function as it underpins planning and action.

Now that this third factor (the SENCO as administrator) is introduced, the role of the SENCO can be summarised in the form of a diagram.

Fig (i) **The inter-relation of Leadership, Management and Administration: Illustrating the SENCO role**



3.4 The SENCO as a 'Changemaker'

At its most strategic level the SENCO leadership function involves forming a vision for special educational needs provision within the overall vision for the school based on values relating to the aims and purposes of education and then transforming all of this into significant and effective action. Bell (1999) advocated that leadership involves the articulation of this vision and its communication to others and argues that the prevailing dichotomy between leadership and management is inappropriate in education because they are fundamentally linked together in schools where school leaders have to balance being assessed on their compliance with central government requirements with their emergence as transformational change-makers. If this is perceived to be done effectively, leadership across the school at all levels can be then associated with those who can bring about this change; Sergiovanni (2001) stated that.

> 'Equating leadership with change is an idea that finds its way deep into the educational literature. In today's world it is the leader as change agent who gets the glory and the praise. But leadership should be regarded as a force that not only changes, but protects and intensifies a school's present idea structure in a way that enhances meaning and significance for students, parents, teachers, and other locals in the school community. This enhancement provides a sense of purpose, builds a culture, and provides the community connections necessary for one to know who she or he is, to relate to others, and to belong. Think of leadership force as the strength or energy brought to bear on a situation to start or stop motion or change. Leadership forces are the means available not only to bring about changes needed to improve schools, but to protect and preserve things that are valued. Good heads, for example, are just as willing to stand firm and to resist change as they are to move forward and to embrace change.'
> (p 44-45)

Here, Sergiovanni presents a positive model for inspirational leadership in schools rather than the model where headteachers are viewed as transforming the school through employing approved and measurable outcomes which are legitimised through official documentation and legislation. This narrow 'performativity-driven' leadership model creating a political goal where the power lies in the hands of a leadership elite rather than in a collegiate sharing of leadership structures and goals which sit at the heart of a transformational leadership model supporting and protecting a valued school culture even if it means the headteacher resisting imposed political/ideological change. If leadership at the strategic level involves the movement of the school's vision into aims and long-term plans it is at the

organisational level that the strategic view is translated and modified into medium-term objectives with a delegation of responsibility for decision-making, implementation, review and evaluation. This, in turn, drives activities at the managerial/operational level where resources are deployed and used, tasks are completed and activities are coordinated and monitored. Bell (1999) stated that these three levels of management: strategic, organisational and operational must work in harmony towards a common purpose which can only happen if the values and vision are shared by all members of the school community.

This model of leadership/management relationship between the headteacher and the SENCO was set out in both the DfE (1994) and DfES (2001) Codes of Practice with authors such as Griffiths (2001) and Jones, Jones and Szwed (2001) picking out the management nature of most of the SENCO's responsibilities. Cowne (2000) stated that the SENCO may be a catalyst for change but change cannot be expected without the full support of the headteacher as many SENCOs were not (or did not feel to be) empowered to become involved in policy and resourcing issues. 'They may not have access to information or feel they can ask. In these cases the strategic SEN coordination is in the hands of the head and governors.' (p 15)

Cowne's comment was made over twenty years ago so a key question arises if this is still the case? A range of research studies over the following years report that this situation remains still prevalent in schools (Smith and Broomhead, 2019; Pearson, 2013; Hallett and Hallett, 2010; Szwed, 2007; Kearns, 2005) while Layton (2005) commented on school leaders who were,

> 'ten years after the 1994 Code of Practice, still failing to invest appropriately in their SENCOs. This was evident wherever SENCOs did not have control of budgets, where they had limited authority in relation to school policies and where they felt isolated because their purpose was either erroneously or wilfully misunderstood. Most especially, however, the greatest barrier to achieving their moral purpose as SENCOs was identified as not being a member of the senior leadership team.' (p 59)

Liasidou and Svensson (2014) stated that SENCOs are positioned as having a strategic role in leading and coordinating SEN provision across schools and that they have been increasingly seen as the 'enforcers' of transforming change, as they are expected to lead a whole school process of development and change with a view to responding to the needs of students designated as having SEN/D in inclusive mainstream settings.' (p 2) But this concept of the SENCO being expected to be a strategic lead for a whole-school process of development and change is not fully realised in practice as being empowered to be transformational/strategic leaders is inconsistent across schools. This was highlighted by Tissot (2013) who believed that the lack of SENCOs on school leadership teams, 'is stifling the vision of the role as well as its implementation in practice. This constrains the good work that SENCOs can do, and instead keeps this group of skilled practitioners immersed in paperwork.' (p 39)

3.5 The SENCO as 'free or captive': Advocating a collegiate approach to leading and managing.

SENCOs have the responsibility for the day-to-day coordination of provision for learners with SEND and supporting other members of school staff in their continuing professional development (CPD) in the field of SEN; both of these form part of the SENCOs' 'vision' for the development of quality provision which supports positive outcomes for vulnerable learners. Garner (2001) identified that the amount of administrative duties required to be undertaken by many SENCOs prevented them from engaging with such a leadership role even with the DfES (2001 p.51) identifying the need for their status as leaders to be recognised through having membership of the senior leadership teams within their schools, a positive factor which was not always realised in practice. Ekins (2012) highlighted the tensions in the SENCO role and said that,

> '…it is widely accepted that, to be effective, the SENCO needs to be a strategic leader…the reality in practice is that many SENCOs are still not senior leaders within their schools, and that in some schools there is a continuing situation where the Senior Leadership Team within the school actually undervalues and limits the SENCOs' opportunities to effect real change and development within the school.' (p 77)

The SENCO has to work within the restrictions set by their school and thus becomes significantly influenced by them. This raises questions around what kind of SENCO does a school community want and how much freedom to act independently should they have? Should the SENCO be an 'independent' professional who can work within a national strategy/climate but with a powerful 'SENCO voice' in the realisation of their role in the school; or should the SENCO be a professional who still works within the national strategy but is significantly restricted by the control of a dominant school leadership which is not willing to share power collegially? This might be far too 'binary' an interpretation as there is, of course, a spectrum between the two extremes of being a 'free' or 'captive' SENCO.

In terms of a collegiate approach within a school, Ekins (2012) expressed a particularly positive message around the need for innovative change with all staff working together and being part of the whole-school development process and that,

> 'Staff need to be provided with an environment and culture where reflective questioning of existing practice is encouraged, where there are opportunities for different staff members to put forward new and innovative ideas about ways to develop and improve practice, and where outdated practices that are not impacting directly on practice and improved outcomes for pupils are identified and re-examined.'(p 9)

Ekins argued that the principles around collaboration and innovation within a culture which embraces improving practice fitted within a theory of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) where teachers take part in the decision-making process in their schools and engage in a shared sense of purpose through collaboration. This is particularly evidenced for some SENCOs who work closely with other mainstream, special schools and with external agencies to ensure a holistic model of support for children with increasingly complex needs (Petersen, 2012). This collaborative/collegiate decision-making process which encompasses both shared implementation and leadership for change presents an ideal environment for a SENCO to flourish. However, this could be said to be at odds with the increasingly 'dominant organisational culture' model which does not call for a collaborative input from staff unless it aligned closely with the particular beliefs and stance of the senior leadership team.

3.6 The Isolated SENCO: Risk-taker or conformist?

SENCOs do not exclusively report negatively on their professional role; Pearson (2013) identified this when presenting the commentaries from SENCOs engaging in the National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen) 2012 autumn survey which collected data on their recruitment, induction, professional development and future aspirations. SENCO commentaries included such statements as:

> 'I am happy with my role as my school places a high value on the role of SENCO and is always willing to put into place measures that support me' to 'Being valued would be nice'. A theme in some of the responses was the sense of isolation that some SENCOs continue to experience. 'This is a very lonely job. I have set up informal networks in my area to support this but you are mostly on your own doing it, which I think is a big factor for people leaving/feeling like they are not equipped to do the job.'(p 25)

However, the theme of SENCOs wanting to feel 'valued' and their 'isolation' were important as they impacted directly on their well-being and ability to feel able to do their job. Hargreaves and Sachs (2003) explored the idea of professional learning communities with teachers working together focused on improving teaching and learning and using evidence and data as an underpinning for informing improvements in whole-school development. They also agreed that teachers needed to 'take risks' in order to develop their professionalism as there is no creativity without risk (p. 19). The question is posed, how does this very positive action sit within the constraints of a school where the SENCO who takes this kind of risk can be viewed as a 'maverick' who operates outside of the accepted behaviours

set by the headteacher? Haggarty and Postlethwaite (2003) identified this form of constraint as a factor contributing to teachers' perceptions and their belief that the circumstances under which they worked, together with forms of control such as Ofsted inspection and the demands to conform to centrally defined government regulations, made such risk taking exceptionally difficult. These forces do shape the perceptions and professional scope of SENCOs as strategic leaders in their schools as they are restrained within the walls of the 'performativity compound'.

4. Conclusion

A range of literature and research dating back over forty years provides a consistent critical interrogation of the evolution of both special educational needs teaching in English primary schools and the professional evolution of the SENCO. However, it is impossible to view the teaching of pupils with SEN and the evolution of the SENCO role in isolation as they form a key part of the change in schools fuelled by the politically and ideologically driven climate in Education since the introduction of the National Curriculum, the creation of OFSTED, the introduction of national testing and performance league tables, placed schools firmly in the 'quasi-marketplace'. Zucker and Parker (1999) writing during a period of significant change identified that the overwhelming majority of teachers whilst questioning the validity of some of the 'more spurious facets of new policies' (p183) and how the collective psyche of teachers up and down the land has been bruised by the onslaught also stated that in the face of this imposed change, teachers continued to teach and put these same policies in place, persisting in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

This is what contemporary SENCOs 'do' - they persist in exceptionally difficult circumstances, particularly in our post-Covid-19 Pandemic climate with its associated challenges for the future.

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