

Secondary SENCO leadership: a universal or specialist role?

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the tension in the role of mainstream secondary school special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs). A review of legislation and literature around SENCO leadership has suggested that divergent forces are acting on the role, and in-depth interviews with SENCOs in two local authorities were undertaken to gather data on this. It was found that SENCOs consider leadership to be highly relevant to their role for reasons dominated by the team that they lead and the influence of more senior staff. Combined with little influence at a whole-school, universal level, it is suggested that this finding is evidence of divergent forces in operation. The distribution of leadership in schools and pressures around SEN pupil achievement are proposed as causes and this is presented in a model. Potential problems emanating from this tension are explored and solutions are proposed for future consideration in theory and policy.

Key words: special educational needs, SENCOs, leadership, inclusion

Introduction

Since the formal inception of the SENCO position in schools, the role has undergone considerable development. Initially responsible for the day-to-day operation of a school's special education needs (SEN) policy, SENCOs today are expected to lead teaching and learning as well as coordinate provision for pupils. Although the shift in language, from 'operate' to 'lead' is a subtle one, in the wider context of national policy on SEN and school leadership, the change has been significant. This study seeks to explore the tension caused by these factors. A gap in the literature following recent changes to legislation indicates that this is highly timely research. Furthermore, the perspectives of SENCOs themselves, especially those who work in secondary schools, have not been explored. With the continuing eminence of school leadership and SEN policy, it is crucial that the role of those who are often the nexus of these phenomena should be investigated.

Background

The position of SENCO was made statutory by the 1993 Education Act and the Code of Practice set out its purpose (DfEE, 1994). Early research drew attention to the administrative and managerial demands of the SENCO role and its different purposes to stakeholders (Bines and Loxley, 1995; Farrell, 1998; Wedell, 2004). The notion of the SENCO role as a leadership one was first conspicuously introduced by the National Standards for SEN Co-ordination (TTA, 1998) and was reinforced when the Code was revised (DfES, 2001a).

The Green Paper provided new direction for SEN and further advocated the leadership role of SENCOs (DfEE, 1997). They were given "...permission to be assertive and fulfill their roles as advocates for children" (Roaf, 1998, p.114) and should aim to influence whole-school practices concerning teaching and learning, aimed at high achievement for all children (Crowther, Dyson and Milword, 2001). SENCOs should thus be taking a

greater leadership role, although the literature did not explicitly explore the leadership concept as an issue. The Green Paper also set the tone for future legislation around access and equality of opportunity for pupils with SEN (DfES, 2001b). This rights-based approach to providing for SEN placed SENCO leadership in tension, however, as the need for a 'champion' seemed contrary to this.

Three key policies further raised the leadership expectations on SENCOs. Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004a), had far-reaching implications "...because it is such a wide, complex, ambitious and far-reaching educational agenda" (Cheminais, 2005, p. 17). Removing Barriers to Achievement (DfES, 2004b), the government's strategy for SEN, recommended that SENCOs should be part of senior leadership teams, and set high aspirations for pupils' learning, achievement and participation. Finally, the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007) raised expectations of pupil outcomes, emphasizing that the achievement of children with SEN should be brought in line with their peers'. Each piece of legislation gradually added to the tension around SENCO leadership though, as the outcomes for pupils should be secured through effective universal practice in schools.

As these wide ranging policies took hold, there was a call for SENCOs to take up formal leadership positions (Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005). One study explicitly addressed the leadership role and concluded that *all* school leaders need to embrace issues around pupils with SEN (Layton, 2005). In an investigation of the experiential learning of SENCOs, however, it was found that few received any opportunity to experience leadership (Kearns, 2005). A significant step towards developing this capacity was taken with the requirement that new SENCOs obtain the qualification 'National Award for SEN Co-ordination' (DCSF, 2009a). Leadership and management comprise half of the content of this qualification,

thus reinforcing the relevance of leadership and marking a significant advancement of the SENCO role.

Whilst the seeming relevance of leadership to the SENCO role has grown, so too has its cachet in schools generally. One study into the impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes concluded there were "...statistically significant empirical and qualitatively robust associations between [the two]..." (DCSF, 2009b, p. 1) and the ever-growing remit of the National College has further purported the government's commitment to leadership. Others have been more tentative though: Swaffield and MacBeath (2009) suggest that the connections between leadership and learning are elusive and lack empirical evidence. Similarly, Harris (2009) debated the relationship between distributed leadership and pupil outcomes, concluding that "the evidence about impact is limited" (p. 13). Furthermore, Harris suggests that "the leadership field is particularly susceptible to new theories or labels for leadership" (p. 11, *ibid.*).

In spite of these differing positions, there are some areas of agreement around leadership in schools. The first is that leadership is no longer based on an 'heroic' model, where a few unique individuals possess inherent characteristics. Instead, it can be learned since it concerns self-discovery and self-reflection and applying the outcomes of these processes in a context (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008). There is consensus that leadership involves relationality to other people, in so far as leaders necessarily have followers, and entails making sense of a 'bigger picture' for them (Simkins, 2005). Finally, leadership involves tasks, goals and decision-making, all based on moral values (Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher, 2005).

A second area of agreement is that leadership in schools is increasingly distributed. Distributed leadership facilitates "...a plurality of analyses that may be positioned somewhere on the continuum from concentrated to dispersed..." (Gronn, 2009, p. 198). More practically, it implies that more than one person can lead change and it indicates the confidence and trust of the headteacher (Day, 2009, p. 129). Distributed leadership continues to dominate secondary schools today, as headteachers move from an individualistic model to one of sharing responsibility across leadership teams (Pascal, 2009).

The implications of these theories and practices of leadership for SENCOs are fundamental. Firstly, SENCOs are operating in a climate where leadership is perceived as a means for improving schools, though perhaps with limited evidence for its impact. Secondly, if SENCOs are to demonstrate good leadership, it is unlikely to be heroic, but grounded in practice, where they make sense of the context for others, are reflective and people-focused, but also determined on taking action and making change. Most importantly, SENCOs are undoubtedly working in schools where distributed leadership is the trend. This may have a significant influence on their views on the relevance of leadership to their role.

Summary and research aims

Although legislation has failed to resolve whether or not leadership is relevant to the SENCO role, policy guidance aimed at SENCOs continues to suggest that it is. Concomitantly, the expectations on the progress of students with SEN, removal of barriers to achievement through effective teaching, and also the equalities agenda could all suggest that the relevance of leadership to SENCOs is diminishing. Meanwhile, the leadership model being employed in secondary schools has developed to one in which it is

often distributed. With respect to SENCOs, this may exacerbate the tension by reinforcing their leadership role, though not necessarily as a formal senior leader.

It is therefore possible that divergent forces are operating on the relevance of leadership to the SENCO role and placing it in tension. Research into this role is limited, especially around secondary SENCOs. There is therefore a gap to be filled on three accounts. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which mainstream secondary school SENCOs consider that leadership is relevant to their role. These insights will inform future policy and practice by providing evidence of the reality of leadership for them. Our key aims, which provide a leitmotif for the research instrument, data analysis and discussion, are:

1. to explore SENCOs' understanding of leadership;
2. to investigate the extent to which SENCOs consider leadership is relevant to their role and the reasons for this.

Methodology

A qualitative design was chosen for the study and interviews were identified as the most effective method for obtaining the detailed, complex data that would provide insight into SENCOs' views. Ten mainstream secondary school SENCOs were approached after obtaining permission from their respective headteachers. Table 1 outlines their main characteristics. To improve the validity of the findings, the sample comprised five SENCOs in each of two local authorities, which represents just over half the total SENCO population. The size of the sample takes account of the qualitative approach since interviewing and thematic analysis are time-consuming procedures. Mainstream

secondary school SENCOs were chosen given the gap in research and the research questions.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Semi-structured interviews were used so that the researcher could respond flexibly to issues raised by the participants and probe for clarification of meanings. The interview schedule comprised three key sets of questions, the majority of which were open ended: the first set obtained contextual data about the interviewee, the second explored their concepts of leadership and the third investigated their views on the relevance of leadership to their role. A key question in the third set was: “to what extent is leadership relevant to your role as SENCO?” and after each SENCO had answered this, they were asked to summarise their answer as it would be referred to frequently thereafter. The schedule was piloted with a former SENCO and revised accordingly.

Grounded thematic analysis was applied to the data to draw out the key findings. We abstracted patterns in the data and synthesized them to generate theoretical constructs for each research aim. Any theme outside the research aims was also noted because it was grounded in empirical data and was thus of value. The analysis proceeded from open coding via axial coding to selective coding. To facilitate the coding processes, the first three interviews were fully transcribed using software to convert them to text. The remaining seven interviews were analysed in terms of data of significance (usually a new code). Constant comparison, theoretical sampling and negative case analysis were used to improve validity (Robson, 2002).

Results

In order to elicit the SENCOS' concepts of leadership, they were first asked a series of questions about leaders, leadership and the differences between the two. The question "what makes someone a leader?" generated five categories, which either concerned 'what leaders do', that is, activities in which they engaged, or 'what they are like', that is, their personal characteristics. Themes are presented in Table 2, accompanied by the number of respondents and examples.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

SENCOS struggled with the question that sought their understanding of the term 'leadership' and many answers resembled those offered for the first question. Responses related to new themes are listed in Table 3 below.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

The difficulties in distinguishing leader and leadership were further demonstrated by responses that differentiated between the two concepts. The clearest distinctions were that being a leader involved status or meant having the title 'leader', whereas leadership concerned what leaders do, or the process of leading. This is illustrated by the following answers:

"A leader is someone who is controlling or orchestrating an idea from the front and driving it, whereas leadership is enabling that goal to be achieved" (S6)

“leadership is where you have that ability to make people want to follow whereas being a leader is more a title, a status or a position” (S5)

SENCOs were next asked to explain the extent to which they considered leadership was relevant to their role. Nine of the ten declared it was fundamental, with a range of adjectives and phrases applied, including: “important”, “crucial”, “a massive part of my role”, “very relevant” and “absolutely fundamental”. The reasons provided for this could be split into three broad categories, each of which could be further disaggregated into themes. The first category of answers, ‘Leading the SEN team’ was the most significant in terms of the frequency with which it was discussed and the emphasis it was given by all. For some it was the size of the team that made leadership important, whilst for others it was the fact they had to lead a team at all. Evidence for this includes:

“as a SENCO you’re managing an enormously large team, at least I am, so immediately you’ve got to manage those people, lead those people” (S7)

“if you’re not capable of leading a team, then you cannot do the job” (S10)

Table 4 details the themes that arose in the category of ‘Leading the SEN team’. Although many of the responses were positive comments about developing the team, there were a few answers that referred to problems. For example, one SENCO explained that she had to “...sort out the SEN Department which had had various personnel issues and was therefore not functioning” (S3). This example overlaps with the category ‘Challenge and support’.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

The second category of school factors was 'The influence of more senior staff' and the themes in this category are presented in Table 5. Headteachers featured frequently, with over half the SENCOs expressing that they were an empowering force. Only one SENCO criticised the senior staff in the school:

"We fight our corner to deliver it [performance] on behalf of the children but there are occasions where it's seen as...not improving quick enough therefore you're failing"
(S2)

The trust of senior staff (often the headteacher), especially having their ear, made SENCOs feel that leadership was highly relevant to their role. The responsibility placed on SENCOs was also perceived as encouraging their authority.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

The third category 'Challenge and Support' was less significant, but provided some interesting insights (see Table 6). Challenges emanated from the pupils, the SEN team and the teachers in the school. 'Championing SEN pupils and their needs' was a key theme, sitting on the borderline between challenge and support and SENCO 6 talked about being an "ambassador" for pupils. His use of this word could reflect the inference from other SENCOs' comments that senior leaders are not interested in SEN, as it suggests having to compete for attention. The final theme was 'Supporting teachers' and could sub-divided as being reactive or proactive. These answers often followed the SENCOs' responses about their own team's work; this could imply that the SENCOs

considered themselves less as whole-school, universal leaders. SENCOs gave the impression that they *supported* teachers rather than led them.

INSERT TABLE 6 HERE

A further noteworthy set of responses are those around leadership being relevant (or not) to the SENCO role because of status in the school. One SENCO asserted that leadership was relevant to her role “because I am a head of department” (S8), whilst another described how “I have actually pulled rank” (S4). The latter suggested that her position in the leadership hierarchy was important. Status and job title, on the other hand, were used elsewhere as justification for leadership *not* being relevant to the SENCO role: “I don’t know that it’s important to be a leader in my role...I don’t think you have to be seen as a potential leader to take you seriously” (S5). These were interesting comments in light of the SENCOs’ views on the difference between leaders and leadership.

Discussion

SENCOs’ concepts of leadership

The first key finding is that the SENCOs recognise that being a ‘formal leader’ and ‘demonstrating leadership’ have different meanings. For some, being a leader means having status, but not necessarily demonstrating leadership, and for most, leadership can be demonstrated when someone is not formally a leader. Figure 1 illustrates these perspectives: a leader who demonstrates leadership and is also a formal leader could be deemed an ‘ideal leader’, shown where the circles overlap.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

This model does have its limitations, however: status alone *does* have some bearing on the extent to which an individual demonstrates leadership. Meanwhile, being a formal leader and demonstrating leadership cannot be separated. Whilst this debate could be a semantic one, it exemplifies the following issue “...there have always been close relations between power, influence, authority and leadership.” (Gronn, 2009, p. 210). This finding has potentially important implications for schools concerning whether SENCOs should be formal leaders and if it should be a statutory requirement. By making SENCOs formal leaders, the profile of pupils with SEN would be raised and SENCOs would have more influence. A SENCO who also demonstrates leadership would therefore be an ‘ideal leader’.

The second key finding is that SENCOs share a common understanding of leadership, which aligns with current theoretical models. All but one of the SENCOs mentioned vision and most acknowledge the notion of change. Their shared understanding resonates strongly with the emergent ‘leadership as practice’ model (Carroll et al. 2008), featuring relationality to other people, understanding context and tasks, goals and decision-making. An additional dimension, not covered by the model, is the theme that leadership involves strength and confidence. This suggests that the historical ‘heroic’ leadership model still has some relevance.

There is, however, one noticeable absence in the SENCOs’ descriptions of leadership when compared to the ‘leadership as practice’ model concerning the lack of values. Only one SENCO demonstrated such awareness, stating that leadership is relevant to the SENCO role because of its moral impact. This contrasts with writings on school leadership which describe moral values as being at its core: indeed as Sergiovanni (1999) states, “Excellent schools have central zones composed of values and beliefs that take on sacred

or cultural characteristics” (p.14). This absence has important implications for the SENCO leadership as it suggests a potential gap in their understanding. Preventing the exclusion of the most vulnerable in society and promoting equality access to education are values that infuse the SEN field.

The relevance of leadership to the SENCO role

A key finding is that SENCOs consider that leadership is highly relevant to their role. Leading the SEN team and the influence of more senior staff are the most significant reasons given. With respect to leading the SEN team, SENCOs spoke frequently about developing the team and dealing with personnel issues. This clearly reflects their views on ‘what makes someone a leader’, namely that leadership concerns leading others towards a vision and dealing with relationality. The immediacy of the relationships and accountability for the work of up to twenty-six people in some cases undoubtedly combine to make leading the SEN team prevail. They clearly assume that the team should be a force to raise achievement for pupils with SEN.

Similarly, it is not surprising that the influence of senior staff features as important. The power of the headteacher and accountability mean that SENCOs feel pressured by more senior staff. SENCOs talked about the responsibility placed upon them. The influence of senior staff may also back up the importance of the role of formal leaders and leadership explored earlier: SENCOs were no doubt influenced by formal leaders and/or by leadership demonstrated by them. There were some comments, however, that require examination in light of this: some SENCOs felt left ‘to get on with’ SEN provision and were not supported by senior leaders. These views have implications for the influence of senior staff and are explored below. The other theme, (Challenge and support) seems to bear less weight than leading the SEN team and the influence of senior staff. It could be

surmised from this that SENCOs consider leadership less relevant to their role at a whole-school, universal level.

The greater influence of leading the SEN team and senior staff, combined with the lesser significance of a universal role provide evidence of two potentially important underpinning phenomena. Firstly, these influences suggest that there is a tendency to distribute leadership in these schools, with SENCOs being handed a very specific duty to lead their teams and have an impact on the achievement of pupils with SEN. This was corroborated by SENCOs who said that they felt the ultimate responsibility lay with them, reflecting the theory that distributed leadership, as a concept, empowers headteachers to give responsibility to others (Day, 2009; Gronn, 2009). It may also be evidence of the government's promotion of leadership to improve outcomes (DCSF, 2009).

Secondly, the limited universal leadership role of the SENCOs suggests that they are restricted in their power to influence SEN practice across their schools. Half of the SENCOs expressed an inability to influence whole school changes, for example staff structures and pay. Given the strong influence of senior staff, SENCOs' limited authority may call into question *their* understanding of SEN, or it may be further evidence of the dominance of distributed leadership. The forces that operate on the leadership role of SENCOs are presented in Figure 2. It is suggested these are divergent, shown in this diagram by the horizontal arrows 'pulling' SENCO leadership towards an extreme: one towards it being more relevant to the SENCO role (left arrow) and the other towards it being less relevant (right arrow). The leadership role of SENCOs is thus placed in tension.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The underlying reasons for these phenomena are undoubtedly complex. It could be that the expectations on schools to raise the achievement of all pupils, and the distribution of leadership, outweigh SENCO influence at a universal level. With the weight attached to achievement in Ofsted inspections and school league tables, this would be one viable explanation. Alternatively, it could be that a lack of clarity around SENCO leadership means that it is not understood in schools, certainly not at a philosophical level. This would be reinforced by the absence of values being at the heart of leadership.

These forces may, in turn, present consequences, or 'problems' for SENCO leadership if one dominates. In Figure 2, the left side suggests that the more the SENCO role becomes seen as one of leadership, the more SEN sits outside the core purpose of the school. Meanwhile, on the right, the logical consequence of SENCOs not being given opportunities to influence universal practice, and SENCO leadership not featuring either, is that SEN falls by the wayside. If SENCOs are seen as the formal leaders of SEN, yet they are not permitted to lead across the school, SEN may not be considered important. This would appear to run contrary to the growth in leadership status of the SENCOs in the last decade.

For each of these problems, a solution is proposed, shown at the bottom of Figure 2. On the left if SENCOs are to continue being championed as leaders, it would be best if it became a statutory requirement for them to be on senior leadership teams. This means that they would have a voice in the leadership of the school and formal status that communicates the importance of SEN. With SENCOs ensconced on senior leadership teams, they could champion SEN at a strategic level across the school. This solution may be better than SENCOs taking the initiative to understand the 'bigger picture' and values behind SEN and setting their own agenda (Dyson et al., 2001; Cowne, 2005). Whilst

SENCOs *should* understand context and values, the latter may actually reinforce SEN sitting outside the core purpose of a school, as warned by Armstrong (2005). A statutory requirement could be the most powerful message that the government could send to schools and society, or perhaps the best “interim” step towards SEN being a truly universal issue (Hallett and Hallett, 2010). It would build on both policy to date and the tendency towards distributing leadership.

The alternative solution, shown on the right hand side, would be that SENCOs step back from leadership and the role is returned to a more day-to-day, specialist one. Concomitantly, the SEN agenda would be taken up by the formal school leadership, placing it at the heart of the school’s purpose. The SENCO role would resemble that of the early nineteen-nineties as it returns to taking responsibility for organising the most specialist provision. With the headteacher perceived as leading SEN, the message to teachers would be that they are responsible for all pupils. Several researchers propose that it should pervade a school’s culture (Layton, 2005; Evans and Docking, 1998; Oliver, 1995). If distributed leadership is to continue, and the paradox identified by Waterhouse and Moller (2009) that the more distributed leadership there is, the more it is directed by formal leaders, then this would be all the more important.

Both these solutions would place SEN into the ‘zone’ of ideal leadership, where formal status and leadership could operate. Whoever leads SEN - SENCOs as senior leaders or other senior leaders - would therefore need an understanding of the context and values that infuse the field. They would need to be able to develop a vision, bring about change and have the strength and confidence to persevere. The mandatory SENCO training and training for headteachers and senior staff would require rethinking. Solutions would also need to be considered alongside policies on SEN, achievement and school leadership.

From this study, it is clear that the forces acting on the relevance of leadership to the mainstream secondary SENCO role are complex and potentially divergent. If pupils with SEN are to really achieve in line with their peers, efforts should be made to clarify how responsibility for this should be taken.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the tension in the leadership role of secondary SENCOs. We hope that it will go a small way to filling the gap in the literature SENCOs since Layton's 2005 study. A review of research suggested that divergent forces may have been acting on the leadership role of SENCOs and this was borne out. At present, these forces have as their logical conclusion that SEN becomes absent from whole-school, universal agendas; the leadership role of SENCOs is thus in tension and the consequence, either way, is not satisfactory. Two solutions to this tension are therefore proposed: either the leadership role of SENCOs is formalised by legislation, or it is reduced, thereby returning SENCOs to managers of specialist support, whilst SEN is taken up by senior leaders at a universal level. Either solution would require the government to reconsider the leadership role of both SENCOs and headteachers in the context of achievement and school leadership.

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Table 1: Main characteristics of participants

SENCO (S)	LA	Sex	Age	Length of current tenure (yrs)	No. of SENCO position held	Member of SLT*	No. of people line managed	Undertaken leadership training
1	B	F	50-59	1	2	N	10	N
2	A	F	40-49	3 (mnths)	1	N	18	N
3	A	F	50-59	1	3	Y	5	N
4	B	F	50-59	4	1	N	23	N
5	B	F	40-49	11	1	N	8	N
6	B	M	30-39	5	1	N	11	Y
7	A	F	50-59	8	1	N	25	Y
8	A	F	50-59	2	1	N	21	N
9	B	F	50-59	7	1	N	6	N
10	A	F	50-59	2	1	N	26	Y

* SLT = senior leadership team

Table 2: What makes someone a leader?

A leader...	No. of SENCOs	Example responses
Looks and moves forward	10	<p>“someone who has an absolute sense of vision” (S7)</p> <p>“needs to keep the goals and vision in mind and not be swayed form the path” (S8)</p> <p>“sees beyond what you’re doing now, what you need to manage from day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year” (S5)</p>
Understands context	5	<p>“having an understanding of where the children are coming from” (S2)</p> <p>“be able to summarise, to look at the bigger picture” (S10)</p>
Secures and maintains followership	8	<p>“has the ability to make everyone want to come with you” (S1)</p> <p>“has the backing of the team” (S7)</p>

A leader...	No. of SENCOs	Example responses
Understands and communicates with people	9	<p>“a good communicator so you can share that vision up and down” (S5)</p> <p>“good relationships with people” (S9)</p>
Has strength and confidence	6	<p>“tough and resilient” (S8)</p> <p>“to be able to put it all behind you so that you can sleep at night” (S2)</p>

Table 3: SENCOs' understanding of leadership

Leadership description	No. of SENCOs	Example responses
Working collaboratively	3	<p>“we all work together” (S2)</p> <p>“to be able to work collaboratively” (S8)</p>
Formal team	3	<p>“a team of people who are charged with the responsibility, or responsibilities amongst them for the direction of the institution” (S1)</p> <p>“leadership [the senior leadership team] has got to decide where you’re going” (S2)</p>
Abstract	4	<p>“an ethos” (S2)</p> <p>“a process of getting a school, for example, where the person wants it to go, getting it there, the journey, the process” (S9)</p> <p>“you should be able to build something that will stand without you” (S3)</p>

Table 4 How leading the SEN team influenced SENCOs' views

Leading the SEN team	No. of SENCOs	Example responses
Developing an effective team	9	<p>“ensure that you’ve a team that are building their expertise and knowledge” (S1)</p> <p>“I’ve been able to lead my team so that they’re confident in themselves” (S8)</p>
Raising the profile of the team	5	<p>“the drive has been to get everyone in the department to get out there in the school” (S8)</p> <p>“from within this department, it’s raising the profile” (S2)</p>
Maintaining the work of the team	7	<p>“to fight for what I feel the department needs” (S5)</p> <p>“To keep everyone focussed on that common goal...on achievement” (S3)</p>

Leading the SEN team	No. of SENCOs	Example responses
Dealing with people-based issues within the team	5	<p>“because of the different needs and the different abilities of those I’m working with” (S2)</p> <p>“I do a lot of line management of people because they take time off, because they don’t do their role as they should do” (S10)</p>

Table 5: How senior staff influenced SENCOs' views

Theme	No. of SENCOs	Example responses
Being empowered by the headteacher	6	<p>“I’ve found her [the headteacher] empowering and also demanding and so making clear that leadership is a very important aspect of this particular role” (S3)</p> <p>“being able to take and make big decisions and take them to her [the headteacher], have her sanction them makes me feel like she’s clearing a path for me” (S1)</p>
Being trusted (often by the headteacher)	7	<p>“myself and the [headteacher] looked at each other in the eye and we said “we both mean this don’t we?” (S1)</p> <p>“I’m left to meet the students’ needs with the money that comes in as I see fit. I have to justify it, but there’s no-one of the SMT telling me how to do it...I’m allowed to do what I think is right” (S10)</p>

Theme	No. of SENCOS	Example responses
Being listened to (often by the headteacher)	4	<p>“My line manager always takes stuff immediately to SLT” (S4)</p> <p>“the SMT make it clear that anybody on the [wider] management team...has an equal voice so I feel that whatever’s said is heard and discussed and respected and given a chance” (S6)</p>
The responsibility placed on the SENCO	4	<p>“the single most important factor was the responsibility I was given to lead SEN” (S1)</p> <p>“it’s seen that this department is pivotal in making sure that everyone is seen to be achieving” (S2)</p>

Table 6: How 'Challenge and support' influenced SENCOs' views

Theme	No. of SENCOs	Example Responses
Challenges in SENCOs' circumstances	5	<p>“we have such a high amount of children who are on the SEND register” (S2)</p> <p>“there was no cohesion in the department...everyone was just doing their own thing” (SENCO 8)</p>
Championing SEN pupils	3	<p>“you're representing special needs kids, the special needs department and actually any underdog in the school” (S7)</p> <p>“a middle person between meeting the needs of the pupils and getting that information to the staff members to enable them to be able to understand how to best support them” (S6)</p>

Theme	No. of SENCOs	Example Responses
Supporting teachers	4	<p>“They value that they have someone to turn to because....senior management, they don't have that knowledge and they don't have that expertise” (S2)</p> <p>“my skills were better used getting things happening in classrooms and happening around the school rather than me doing that myself” (S8)</p>

Figure 1: Venn diagram showing SENCOs' concepts of a formal leader and leadership

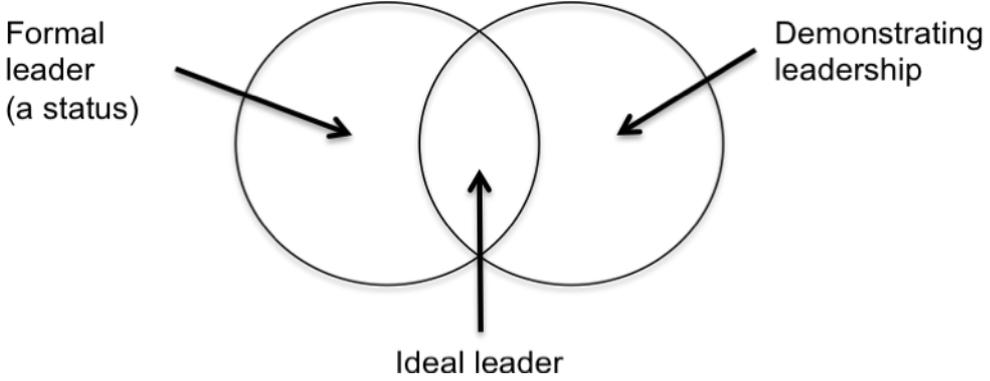


Figure 2: Forces acting on SENCO leadership, consequent problems and potential solutions

