



Intrinsic and extrinsic tensions in the SENCo role: navigating the maze of ‘becoming’

Virginia Kay , Marlena Chrostowska, Amanda Henshall, Anne Mcloughlin and Fiona Hallett 
Edge Hill University

Key words: SENCO identity, SENCo role, Special needs educator, SENCo leadership, SENCo tensions.

The purpose of this narrative literature review is to provoke new ways of understanding the plethora of research around the role of the SENCo. Specifically, the aim is to use four themes as lenses to explore how SENCo identities are formed, and reformed, by intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The four themes have been distilled from a list of standards that underpin the learning outcomes of the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination in England and are: change; culture; influence; and challenge. Although these themes stem from a given place and time, they mirror policy directives, and subsequent practice, across national boundaries and are visible in much of the research around the SENCo role and its equivalent. Whilst each of the themes is considered individually, areas of overlap are identified enabling both a focused, and wholesale, view of the literature in order to highlight areas of opportunity, conflict and tension that serve to shape SENCo identity.

Research over the past two decades has indicated a wide variety of dilemmas and conflicts present within the role of SENCos (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (Burton and Goodman, 2011; Cole, 2005; Cowne, 2005; Curran, 2019b; Dobson and Douglas, 2020; Kearns, 2005; Szwed, 2007) and much of this research indicates that there remains a huge variation in both the types of responsibilities that SENCos hold and the expectations of what the role of SENCo *should* entail (Pearson and Ralph, 2007). The role of SENCo has been shown to be one that lacks status and seniority (Burton and Goodman, 2011; Curran, 2019b), with SENCos often reported as feeling “under-valued and unappreciated” (Mackenzie, 2007 p. 217) and unclear as to the expectations of their position (Cowne, 2005; Layton, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007) although taking responsibility for implementing rapidly changing

SEN policy in a “confused and contested” role (Curran, 2019b p. 90).

Qureshi (2014) recognises the evolving nature of SENCos’ own professional identity as the role slowly continues to become one of greater empowerment and growing recognition but the focus on leadership and management continues to dominate research regarding the SENCo role. Examples of this in the English context can be seen in research conducted since the significant round of legislative reforms in 2014 wherein the Children and Families Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2014) introduced the notion of integrating Education, Health and Care provision. This was enacted by, among other things, the introduction of Education, Health and Care Plans in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 0–25 years (DfE and DoH, 2015). Responses to this legislative shift have been offered by Whalley (2018) who explored the specific experiences of SENCos with regard to the 2015 reforms and, more recently, by Boesley and Crane (2018) who reported SENCo responses around the degree to which Education, Health and Care services are working together for the greater good of children and families. Overall, the picture in England portrays a system riddled with legislative hurdles that the SENCo must navigate if they are to impact on educational settings beyond fulfilling administrative duties. This appears to be mirrored in practice internationally, as SENCos continue to fulfil largely operational roles (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017), hampered by the discourse of managerialism (Done, Murphy, and Knowler, 2015; Szeto, Cheng, and Sin, 2020), with “little time for strategic school development” (Klang, Gustafson, Möllås, et al., 2017, p. 391).

Kearns (2005) provided a key piece of research regarding variations in the ways that SENCos perceive themselves and their role, concluding that in-service training for SENCos is vital in order to challenge their thinking and their professional practice, but that teacher development which is “linked to the performance of functional tasks, rather than to the growth of understanding through leadership” (Kearns, 2005, p. 148) may lead to SENCos facing “increased disillusionment” (*ibid*). Many researchers have

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since used Kearns' work to explore factors that impact on SENCo identity, not as fixed characteristics of those in the role; rather, his study, and many that followed (for example, Morrissey, 2021; Pearson, Mitchell, and Rapti, 2015; Pulsford, 2020) highlight a complex web of circumstance, individual values and imposed practices.

Intrinsic and extrinsic factors have been shown to affect individual SENCo's enactment of the role (Hallett, 2021; Lin, Grudnoff, and Hill, 2021a), and therefore their understanding of what it means to 'be' or 'become' a leader; as Rosen-Webb argues, "continually becoming a SENCo while being a SENCo" (Rosen-Webb, 2011, p. 165). Over ten years ago, ratifying what it means to 'become a SENCo' in England was the 2009 legal requirement for those SENCos who are new-to-role to complete a master's level National Award for SEN Co-ordination (NASC). The NASC was designed to address the enhanced focus on SENCo's strategic leadership responsibilities, laid out in Special Educational Needs and Disability Codes of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015; DfES, 2001). Although each institution offering the qualification has a different approach to the content and structure of their curricula, central to all institutions is the DfE requirement that the course be built around 49 SENCo Standards published by the National College for Teaching and Leadership in 2014 (NCTL, 2014).

To meet the standards (NCTL, 2014), SENCos must provide evidence of their knowledge and understanding in key areas: the regulatory context, leadership, strategies for improving outcomes, working strategically, challenging senior leaders, implementing systems and structures, and ensuring a school-wide culture of high expectations. Although Kearns' (2005) model centred on the intrinsic identities of SENCos within his typology, we argue that individual identity is somewhat negated within the standards. Rather than an experiential lens of learning, as suggested by Kearns (2005), the standards focus upon a mechanistic audit of skills and attributes, with words such as 'coach...lead...manage...mentor' (NCTL, 2014) and a presumption that such complex constructs and ways of being can be quantified through the provision of evidence and achieved in linear progression. Kennedy (2014) categorises such standards-based models of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as transitional rather than transformative but recognises that even within CPD which could be categorised as transformative, the parameters of the activity are often defined by an "external party, usually in a position of power" (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003: cited in Kennedy, 2014, p. 349).

In response, this review offers an exploration of the interplay between extrinsic tensions, their impact on intrinsic SENCo identity and the subsequent facilitators and barriers to the enactment of the role as articulated in the externally imposed standards (NCTL, 2014). The "dynamic nature and multiple interpretations of professionalism

make any analysis of it as a static, homogenous concept somewhat difficult" argues Kennedy (2007, p. 98), drawing upon the work of Sachs (2001), highlighting two contrasting perspectives of CPD - 'managerial' (valuing effectiveness, efficiency and policy compliance) and 'democratic' (valuing social justice, fairness and equality). This literature review seeks to bring together Kearns' consideration of individual perspectives within the SENCo CPD context and the ways in which SENCo identity interacts with the tensions of being/becoming a strategic leader/SENCo; culminating in recommendations which seek to achieve a more 'democratic' (Sachs, 2001; cited in Kennedy, 2007, p. 98) and holistic model of SENCo professional development. We examine the tensions present within four key threads running through the SENCo standards (NCTL, 2014) – Change, Culture, Influence and Challenge – through the lens of intrinsic and extrinsic effects upon SENCo identity, to distil the factors which may be helpful or unhelpful to the enactment of the SENCo role. It is hoped that this will be of value to all SENCos, special educators and every level of school management.

Methodology

This review adopted a narrative (sometimes called integrative) form, the purpose of which Snyder (2019, p. 336) describes as "advancement of knowledge and theoretical frameworks, rather than an overview or description of a research area". As such, this approach foregrounds the importance of critiquing the literature in ways that enable new perspectives to emerge (Torraco, 2005).

The initial search was conducted *via* Scopus, an abstract and citation database that contains over 24,000 journals from 5,000 publishers. The term 'SENCo' was searched in: Title; Abstract; and Keywords with a date range from 2005-present in order to capture studies published since the seminal Kearns article. In addition, the inclusion criteria were for original articles published in English and in peer-reviewed journals which excluded: book reviews; editorials; a column in the British Journal of Special Education entitled 'Points from the SENCo Forum'; conference papers; and theses resulting in 339 items for further analysis.

For the purpose of this article, these items were then filtered by the term 'identity' leaving 74 full-text publications which were considered for inclusion. Additional studies were then added *via* reference harvesting of the retrieved articles, resulting in 95 articles overall.

The final list was then critiqued by the aforementioned categories which, although selected from the central tenets of the National Award for SEN Co-ordination standards (NCTL, 2014), are relevant to those adopting the role of the SENCo in any national context. As a consequence, the scope of this review does not attempt to cover all aspects of the role of the SENCo; rather, it

provides scope for deeper thought about extrinsic, and intrinsic, factors that impact upon SENCo identity.

Change

Since the SEN reforms of 2014, SENCos in England are increasingly expected to drive forward changes leading to more inclusive school cultures (Done et al., 2017) which place the family at the centre of the SEND system, bringing systemic and cultural change to SEN provision (Curran, Mortimore, and Riddell, 2017), and leaving many SENCos feeling overwhelmed (Boesley and Crane, 2018). This aspect of the role presents considerable challenges, as SENCos must negotiate how to lead change within a shifting policy landscape, although simultaneously responding to the changes that same landscape is forging within the expectations of their own role and the evolving processes with which they must also engage (2017). There are parallels in the Republic of Ireland, with Fitzgerald and Radford (Done et al., 2017) referring to the “seismic change” (p. 452) of the education system as it responds to an increasingly diverse school population through the recent introduction of the role of SENCo; with scant official guidance creating a great deal of challenges for schools as they attempt to embed the role within practice.

In Sweden, the role of the SENCo was introduced in the early 1990s to lead change in order to move practice from a medical model of SEN support, focusing on individual deficits, to one more in line with a social model of disability with a wider emphasis on the entire learning environment. SENCos have faced similar issues to those in England, being viewed as low status and largely responsible for the delivery of SEN support (Lindqvist, 2013). As Klang et al. (2017) and Goransson et al. (2015) point out, the views of other colleagues and how they position the SENCo role act to shape the role itself, limiting the possibilities for leadership. Somewhat contrastingly SENCos are also seen as “enforcers of transformative change” (Liasidou and Svensson, 2014, p. 784); with the ensuing expectation that they challenge any resistance to that change within the school structures in which they work. Although this expectation is undoubtedly leadership related, only 70% of primary SENCos and 78% of secondary SENCos in England receive additional pay for undertaking such responsibility (Boddison, Curran, and Moloney, 2020) with only 68% of primary SENCos and just 34% of secondary SENCos sitting on the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of their schools (*ibid*).

Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) argue, with reference to the work of Tangen (2005), that SENCos need to develop what Tangen refers to as “change competence” (p. 61), being willing and able to act as agents of change. Yet, simultaneously, SENCos are situated in contexts where they have little agency to bring about change to inclusive practice on a whole school level (Pulsford, 2020). SENCos are often viewed, both by themselves and others, as

lacking status, which arguably weakens their influence on change (Curran, 2019b; Curran et al., 2017; Pulsford, 2020). Curran et al. (2017) highlight a further important issue for SENCos attempting to lead change, in that that they may have to enact policies that they themselves disagree with. Although this may also be true for any teacher, if one is expected to deliver whole-scale change within a school and influence colleagues’ practice, such discomfort may be especially acute.

Culture

On reviewing the literature related to the impact of culture on SENCo identity, two primary themes become evident. The first of these relates to what might be termed the bureaucratic demands of school/policy culture, even when the SENCo is highly valued and respected. The second theme is more nuanced in nature whereby the culture of an educational setting is formed around reductionist conceptions of inclusion resulting in reductionist conceptions of the role of the SENCo.

To take the first theme, many studies conducted in England have focused on the lived experience of SENCos who have voiced frustration around external bureaucracy (Curran and Boddison, 2021) and a paucity of policy directives that take account of the realities of the education system (Maher and Vickerman, 2018); leading to SENCos being busy rather than effective. Similar concerns were highlighted in 2019 by the House of Commons Education Select Committee who pointed to “bureaucratic nightmares...strained resources that...ultimately dashed the hopes of many” (House of Commons, 2019, p. 3). However, such concerns are not unique to England with a study in New Zealand reporting the need for targeted government funding to enable SENCos to move beyond ‘doing’ in order to enable strategic thinking (Lin et al., 2021a).

The flip side of this body of literature focuses on factors inherent to cultures that reduce bureaucracy, in terms of increasing professional collaboration (Malki and Einat, 2018) and the introduction of new policy directives which result in “SENCos immediately taking on a leadership role, selecting priorities, and narrating these to their colleagues...regardless of [their] senior leadership status” (Curran, 2019a, p. 78). Thus, we are presented with the juxtaposition of those SENCos, from a range of national contexts, who reported policy oppression and those who seem able to use policy to ‘give them clout’ (Curran, 2019a). This raises an interesting point for consideration; although much of the literature draws our attention to the ways in which extrinsic factors impact SENCo identity, those SENCo who decide to use policy to ‘give them clout’ demonstrate what might be seen as intrinsic motivation to work again the grain.

In terms of the second theme – cultures that stem from, or produce, reductionist views of the role of the SENCo

– significant attention has been given to the importance of SENCOs being on senior leadership teams (e.g. Clarke and Done, 2021; Dobson, 2019; Done, Murphy, and Watt, 2016). Although much of this research is specific to England, the need for formal recognition of the strategic importance of the SENCO has been reported in a range of national contexts (Liasidou and Antoniou, 2013; Malki and Einat, 2018). The degree to which leadership enables respect for the role is interesting. On the one hand, it could be argued that it is the duty of the SENCO to expose, and “resist” (Woolhouse, 2015, p. 144) inequality thus demanding respect and gaining authority. However, this requires permitting circumstances, such as a leadership team willing to concede or devolve power. If a mandated requirement to appoint a SENCO to a leadership position is resisted, it is unlikely that equality will follow. Indeed, if the role is ever to be seen as both “strategic and senior” (Curran, Moloney, Heavey, et al., 2020, p. 4) it is difficult to see how this will be achieved without membership of the SLT.

In addition, the link between reductionist views of the role of the SENCO and reductionist notions of inclusion has been noted for some time (Liasidou and Antoniou, 2013). Consequentially, it is interesting to note that what was described in 2010 as “conceptual unpreparedness for inclusion” (Paliokosta and Blandford, 2010, p. 179) remains at the forefront of discussions around SENCO identity (Esposito and Carroll, 2019; Lin et al., 2021a). Examples of this can relate to the unrealistic expectations that staff, parents and pupils have of SENCOs (Smith and Broomhead, 2019) that, ultimately, tame the potential for SENCOs to become “vanguards in changing an educational system from primarily focusing on an individual perspective to a broader focus on the entire learning environment” (Lindqvist, 2013, p. 198).

In all, the literature illustrates a number of possible drivers for the establishment of cultures that could be seen to limit the capacity of SENCOs to create, and occupy, emancipatory spaces. Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) explored this notion from a context that, as mentioned earlier, formalised the role of the SENCO in recent years, arguing that:

Steps to develop the SENCO as specialist teacher, collaborator and leader within an integrated inclusive special education system will require, in the case of Ireland, formal conceptualisation and recognition of the role deeply embedded in processes of school self-evaluation.
(2020, p. 13)

This argument is not new. In 1971, Skrtic argued that “the institutional practice of special education (and the very notion of student disability) is both intensified and legitimised by the institutional practice of educational

administration” (Skrtic, 1991, p. 153). Although the similarity between these statements is clear, the way out of the cultural maze is less so.

Influence

Although the SENCO is often referred to as an ‘agent of change’ (Cole, 2005; Ekins, 2015; Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017; Hallett & Hallett, 2017; Morewood, 2012); who or what the *subject* of that influence might be is somewhat open to interpretation and will vary widely for individual SENCOs, depending on a number of factors. Influence is considered as a duality within the NASC standards, SENCOs are expected to “work strategically with senior leaders to influence...promote...and establish...” (NCTL, 2014, p. 7), the development of inclusive practice within their setting on a whole school level and to “model effective practice, coach and mentor colleagues” although leading the “professional development of staff” (*ibid*). Notwithstanding the issues already discussed under the theme of culture, the ability of SENCOs to achieve such influence over whole-school policy although supporting the individual practice of colleagues is a significant challenge, especially given that the majority of SENCOs feel that their role is not understood by either senior leaders or other school staff in their settings (Curran, Moloney, Heavey, et al., 2018). SENCOs are expected not only to work *with* senior leaders, but also to work *as* senior leaders – even if they are not on the SLT, presenting a tension in both the levels of influence they *can* affect and on the types of influence SENCOs may *seek* to affect.

Although many SENCOs feel that completion of the NASC raises their leadership profile (Brown and Doveston, 2014), a significant proportion still feel constrained in their ability to influence whole school policy, seeing their identity as more akin to a middle manager than a strategic leader (*ibid*). As special needs educators (SNEs) express values in relation to their identity which are more in line with occupational professionalism where they have autonomy (Goransson, Lindqvist, Klang, et al., 2019; Lindqvist and Nilholm, 2013), being part of the SLT could enhance SENCOs’ involvement in strategic decision-making (Lin et al., 2021a) and therefore increase their influence. However, the time and increased workload of SLT duties unrelated to SEN could prove counter-productive for many SENCOs (Smith and Broomhead, 2019).

How SENCOs are viewed by others and the way in which they view themselves can either impede or strengthen their ability to formulate a strategic vision. In the UK, Brown and Doveston (2014) report frustrations felt by SENCOs who were not perceived as strategic leaders; thus, unable to influence whole-school SEND policy. Curran et al. (2020) found that almost three-quarters of SENCOs spend they are not on the SLT, spend the

majority of their time undertaking administrative tasks, which SENCOs themselves viewed as a hindrance to providing support to children, their families and the other teachers with whom they worked. This administrative burden is therefore a barrier to SENCOs' ability to influence practice. They operate in a third space, the positioning of which is dependent on their personal motivations. In terms of intrinsic motivation, some SENCOs are drawn to the role as there is potential opportunity to become involved in whole school development (Takala and Ahl, 2014), others because they strongly align their values with 'caring' and 'fighting' for the rights of those who they see as marginalised by the education system (Pearson et al., 2015; Woolhouse, 2015, p. 139). SENCOs represent a dichotomy within the system; they embody equity and social justice in a climate which is largely focused on outcomes, league tables and results. When SENCOs are committed to inclusion and find themselves in a setting which engages in exclusionary practices for children with SEND, they find themselves in an untenable position, straddling a discourse between the inclusion and standards agendas (Done, Knowler, Warnes, et al., 2021; Kearney, 2017). Although they may be able to influence individual, or perhaps even school-wide, practices the system itself lies outside their reach. Pearson et al. (2015) explore SENCOs' insights into their changing role in a changing policy context, against a backdrop of resource cuts and increased need for intervention around mental health (Curran et al., 2020) requiring SENCOs to show increasing self-reliance and imagination. Although influencing colleagues' views of children with disabilities may be seen as achievable by many SENCOs (Gäreskog et al., 2020) the question remains as to whether SENCOs are to be viewed by their colleagues as leaders or specialist advisors (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2022; Oldham and Ralph, 2011; Pearson et al., 2015). This leads to further tension within SENCO identity – it has been argued that very few SENCOs see themselves as experts (Kearns, 2005) and many question their own knowledge and capability in the field of SEN (Smith and Broomhead, 2019), despite expectations from others that they will hold such specialist knowledge (Takala and Ahl, 2014).

Challenge

Given the ubiquity of 'challenge' across each of the themes discussed so far, this theme will be explored through two lenses: challenges affecting SENCOs' identity and enactment of role; and factors affecting SENCOs' ability to challenge others. The NASC standards make mention of only the latter, specifically that SENCOs will "challenge senior leaders" (NCTL, 2014, p. 7).

There are discrepancies in the literature between external expectations placed on SENCOs and the way SENCOs perceive the enactment of their role, which consequently challenges their identity. Lin et al. (2021a) point out that agreement at the interlink between personal identity and

SENCOs' understanding of their role is crucial for a strong professional identity to be formed and this is most effectively enacted by SENCOs who can perform their role on a full-time basis, released from any teaching responsibilities, which is not a reality for the majority of SENCOs (Curran et al., 2018). SENCOs often feel unable to challenge exclusionary decisions made by senior leaders (Done et al., 2015) and therefore could be argued not to hold a sufficiently influential position to affect the development of such exclusionary practice within the SLT in the first instance.

Several studies point to a divergence between policy intent and the realities of the SENCO role in day-to-day practice; Lin et al. (2021a) argue that membership of the SLT did not seem to be a crucial factor impacting on SENCO identity; similarly, Poon-McBrayer (2012) found that SENCOs in Hong Kong fulfil management roles but are not successful at leading their schools in shaping special educational needs provision. This pattern has continued during the pandemic with Middleton and Kay (2021) and Clarke and Done (2021) expressing concerns around the degree to which SENCOs have been able to inhabit leadership roles.

In addition, it has been argued that the lack of clearly defined responsibilities, which is the case in Ireland where the SENCO role is not formally recognised, hinders the formulation and development of a strong identity among special educational needs teachers (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017). Such complexities present challenges around the conceptualisation of the role and the way it is performed (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2017). The key factors that challenge a SENCO's identity, recognised in the literature reviewed for this article, relate to disparity between perceptions of the SENCO's role by different stakeholders and SENCOs' active role on the Senior Leadership Team, where that is the case.

For example, SENCOs' views of their own role often contrast with that of other school staff and parents, leading to a challenge in the formulation of SENCO identity (Smith and Broomhead, 2019). Being viewed as the 'expert' may not only lead to a view of the SENCO, both to themselves and to others, as being solely responsible for SEN provision, but may also lead to SENCOs experiencing significant pressures to behave as a specialist advisor rather than a leader (Pearson et al., 2015). This is concurrent with other studies in international contexts that suggest limited understanding of the special educational needs educators' role. Writing in the Swedish context, Magnusson and Goransson (2019) discuss two types of special needs educators (SNE), namely special education coordinators (SENCOs) and special education teachers (SETs), who have distinct roles. The separate training programmes prepare SENCOs for the development of organisations and counselling of key stakeholders although SETs are prepared for work with pupils with

specific diagnoses. Despite this, one of the biggest challenges faced by the Swedish SNEs identified by Magnusson and Goransson is the lack of understanding of the role and responsibilities of those professionals among school leaders and other school staff (Gareskog and Lindqvist, 2020). Due to those misunderstandings, both types of special needs educators believe that they are expected to undertake tasks which lie outside of their jurisdiction. Similar challenges relating to the role of the SENCO in English schools are reported by Curran and Boddison (2021) who found that, although responses differ between primary and secondary settings, SENCOs feel that some educational professionals did not understand their roles. Curran and Boddison (2021) strongly argue that perception of the role of the SENCO is an important matter as “it leads to differing expectations of the SENCO” (p. 44) and therefore presents challenges to the enactment of the role.

Dobson and Douglas’s (2020) survey of SENCOs provides an interesting insight into the professionals’ motives for becoming a SENCO with specific focus on their interests and needs, finding that “leadership voice and status” (p. 311) as well as the desire to develop “high-quality provision” for children with SEND were among the reasons why people decided to move into the role of SENCO. Much of the research suggests that this may be somewhat of an idealised notion of what it is like to ‘be’ a SENCO, which can be in conflict with the real-life execution of the role in practice.

Returning to Kennedy’s (2007, p. 98) reference to Sachs (2001) and the two contrasting perspectives of CPD, we argue that how SENCOs view their role and identity could have significant impact on the aspects of the role which they prioritise within their own professional development. SENCOs who align themselves more to the ‘managerial’ constructs may value compliance with processes and imposition of structures which seek to maximise results and cost-effectiveness of provision. SENCOs who identify more with the ‘democratic’ notion of CPD may position inclusion, pupil voice and social belonging as having more value. There is a tension here as these two notions of CPD are not distinct and separate, many SENCOs experience a contention within their own “ethical responsibility” (Morewood, 2012 p. 74) and this can leave them experiencing polarity of position - challenging the system and their own SLT although serving the needs of individual children and staff members who support and teach them. As Done et al. (2021) argue,

speaking out carries a significant personal risk. In a school context, given the professional interests at stake, a SENCO may feel unable to challenge a head teacher’s engagement [even] in illegal exclusionary practices.
(p. 70)

Done et al. make specific reference to Popkewitz’s (2020) “paradox of good intentions” (p. 14) in terms of SENCOs having to simultaneously defending the actions and decisions of the SLT although struggling with the expectation that they will take the lead on social justice within their settings. Thus, the real challenge for many SENCOs can be a sense of powerless responsibility.

Conclusion

Although the themes discussed here clearly overlap, it is important to acknowledge that they cause tensions for various reasons. So many actors have an input into shaping the role that the SENCO may find their identity swamped by the understandable agendas of those around them. This is not new; research published over more than two decades reflects frustration over: the practicalities of the role (for example, Boddison et al., 2020); whether SENCO are on leadership teams; the difference between leadership and management; and so on.

In contrast, this literature review highlights the space beyond the practicalities of the role as currently reported in much of the literature. Given the increased emphasis in England, since the 2015 reforms, on SENCOs’ driving forward inclusive practice at a whole school level, the desire to take a social justice approach to enacting the role requires the aforementioned ‘third space’. In this regard, recent studies have focused on identities as constructed through emotions (Lin, Hill, and Grudnoff, 2021b) which moves towards a deeper understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic identity markers.

An important, but often overlooked, point here is that leadership is a position of identity, not necessarily formalised in the managerial hierarchy of a school. The questions remain as to whether or not it is possible for a SENCO to be a leader if they do not recognise leadership as an aspect of their own role identity. Problematizing identity and its interplay with ‘becoming’, by drawing out the themes discussed here, might be a way forward. Becoming a leader however will require more than SENCOs being included within the SLT; their identity will always impact on their ability to influence.

In conclusion, this review offers an exploration of the interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic tensions, their impact on SENCO identity, and the subsequent facilitators and barriers to the enactment of the role as articulated in externally imposed standards. Further research is necessary if we are to maximise the potential of third spaces in which SENCOs can negotiate their way through the maze of ‘becoming’.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Address for correspondence

Virginia Kay,
Edge Hill University,
St Helens Road,
Ormskirk,
Lancashire,
L39 4QP
UK.
Email: kayv@edgehill.ac.uk.

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