

“Increasingly broad shoulders”: The changing role of SENCOs

Paper presented at the SENCO Network Meeting, University of Leeds, 11/07/14

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Abstract

The Coalition Government has promised a systemic overhaul of services for pupils with Special Educational Needs (DfE 2011). Although the precise implications for SENCOs are not yet known, the draft proposal indicates the government’s intention for increased parental choice over provision and ‘sharper accountability’ in schools. Drawing on data from national surveys of SENCOs in 2007 and 2012, this presentation explores the changing profile of SENCOs, and their divergent aspirations and concerns about forthcoming changes to their role.

Key words: education policy; educational management; SENCO; special educational needs

Background of the study

This presentation draws on national SENCO survey research led by Sue Pearson conducted in 2007 and 2012 with the support of nasen and the University of Leeds (Pearson 2008; Pearson & Mitchell 2013; Pearson et al. 2015).

- 2007: 266 responses (postal)
- 2012: 326 responses (online)

The design and methods of the study are reported elsewhere (Pearson et al. 2015), and the survey instrument is reproduced in Pearson (2008).

Changes in the profile of SENCOs

The study reveals both changes and continuities in the profile of SENCOs. The proportion of SENCOs who are members of Senior Management Teams (SMTs) has increased by around 10%, to more than half of those surveyed (see Table 1). Marked differences exist between the phases; while almost three-quarters of primary school SENCOs are members of their school’s SMT, less than 1/3 of secondary SENCOs are on the SMT. However, the percentage of secondary SENCOs on the SMT almost doubled in the five years from 2007-2012.

Table 1. Changes in the profile of SENCOs

	2007	2012
Member of Senior Management Team	45.5% Primary : 68.4% Secondary: 17.3%	56% Primary: 73% Secondary: 30%
Receive allowance	83.4%	67.3%

Internal appointment remains the most common route into the post of SENCO, however the proportion of external appointments has increased (see Table 2). More than double the respondents in 2012 reported having no qualification related to SEN at the time of their appointment, a fact which may reflect the introduction of the National Award for SENCOs (TDA 2009; Peterson 2010), a course designed for SENCOs recently appointed to the role. Only 3% of SENCOs reported having received no induction whatsoever, down from 14% five years previously.

Table 2. Recruitment and induction of SENCOs

Internal appointment	Primary: 85.5% Secondary: 67.2%	Primary: 74% Secondary: 57%
No qualifications relating to SEN/Inclusion (at time of appointment)	27.2%	54%
No induction	14%	3%

The survey also asked about SENCOs' career intentions over the next 5-7 years. There was a notable decrease in the number of SENCOs planning to retire at both primary and secondary levels, and work-load rather than retirement became the most commonly reported factor affecting SENCOs' decisions to leave the post (see Table 3). However, the percentage of SENCOs intending to stay at their current school remained constant – again, with consistent differences between those working at primary and secondary levels.

Table 3. SENCOs' plans over the next 5-7 years

	2007	2012
Plans to retire in next 5-7 years	Primary: 37.5% Secondary: 43.8%	Primary: 15% Secondary: 25%
Stay in current school as SENCO	Primary: 52.9% Secondary: 39.1%	Primary: 50% Secondary: 39%
Factors affecting decision to leave role	1. Retirement 2. Heavy workload 3. Ready for new challenge	1. Heavy workload 2. Retirement 3. Ready for new challenge

The changing role of SENCOs

The survey asked SENCOs to comment on how they predicted their role changing in the short term (1-5 years). Responses from this section of the survey are treated at length in Pearson et al. (2015), where they are considered alongside the Department for Education’s ‘Green Paper’ (DfE 2011). SENCOs’ responses reflect predicted changes at the level of the organisation as well as the post (see Table 4).

Table 4. Predicted changes for schools and SENCOs

Organisational context	Implications for SENCOs
More inclusive schools - Achievement for All - Inclusive pedagogies - Collective responsibility for SEN	- Providing vision for inclusion - Supporting professional development across the school - Less direct teaching
“Sharper accountability” - Increased responsibility for pupil progress according to narrowly-defined performance measures - Increased <i>external</i> accountability	- Role is more “data driven” - Responsibility for tracking pupils’ progress - Increased paperwork
Increased parental involvement - Parental input on funding decisions	- Developing relations with parents - Informing and advising parents - Increased time commitment
Reduced resources - Local Authority cuts - Reduced funding for schools - More pupils with ‘complex needs’ - More self-reliant	- More expertise needed, using networks for knowledge/skill sharing - Seeking support from external/voluntary sector - Intensification of role as resources are spread thinner

Adapted from Pearson et al. 2015

SENCOs saw their role intensifying in a climate of increased pressure for data-driven accountability and reduced resources. They anticipated a need for additional knowledge and skills to support greater numbers of students with complex needs, however they saw SENCOs as engaging in less direct teaching and more leadership and staff capacity-building activities (c.f. Norwich 2010). Many anticipated trends towards more inclusive pedagogies in schools, and increased collective responsibility for students with SEN.

Acknowledgements

For the invitation to present this paper I am extremely grateful to Sue Pearson, whose work with SENCOs at the University of Leeds over the years has greatly enriched research and

practice in the field. Thanks also to Maria Rapti for her work on the SENCO 2012 survey. Any errors in this paper are my own.

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