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# Spotlight on the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO): Why Are SENCOs Indispensable in Today's Schools and How to Support Their Middle Level Leadership

**Claudio Girelli, Alessia Bevilacqua and Daniela Acquaro**

**Abstract:** *Middle level leaders play a key role within school and educational networks. Their function can be more effective if they are enabled to act in a distributed leadership perspective. This is particularly evident with the role of the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO). The rise and prominence of SENCOs in coordinating whole school approaches to support students with special needs has resulted in their visibility as leaders. The evolution of the SENCO role has seen the need to recognize their unique position as middle level leaders in developing and overseeing special needs care. A proposition which remains largely foreign in many countries. What remains undeniable is that a SENCO's positioning within a school can significantly impact on their legitimacy and effectiveness. This paper examines the results of a qualitative research project, aimed at reconstructing an interpretative framework of the SENCO's middle level leadership functions. The study highlights on the one hand their management and leadership functions, and on the other, the elements that facilitate or hinder their role. The study also highlights the emergence of widespread leadership through the creation of a third space where SENCOs join together through the creation of networks which function as communities of practice.*

**Keywords:** Leadership, middle level leadership, distributed leadership, special educational needs, Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO), educational fragilities

## Introduction

Numerous studies (Cerini 2002; Domenici & Moretti 2011; Drago 2007; Summa 2012) highlight the various attempts to articulate, specialize and differentiate the role of teachers with instrumental functions to face the needs and challenges emerging from school autonomy

(Cerma Cycja 2016). The changing educational landscape has resulted in the need to consider roles and responsibilities which sit outside the traditional structure of leadership to a more distributed approach. Although contemporary literature on middle management includes a multiplicity of roles, positions, and perspectives (Irvine & Brundret 2016), as Agrati (2018: 49) clearly states: ‘the middle management role and professional profile are not subject of frequent investigation by educational research’. The research carried out on this topic takes into consideration the rich literature that testifies how much this topic is deeply felt both at the institutional level, as well as among the professionals working within educational institutions. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to highlight how the effectiveness of the SENCO can only be achieved by going beyond a mere juxtaposition of its functions, but rather trying to pursue a middle level leadership perspective that recognizes the SENCO role as educational leadership (Gurr & Drysdale 2013) necessary for school improvement.

### **Middle Management in Schools: A Theoretical Framework**

At a theoretical level, middle level managers are considered high responsibility figures (Fitzgerald & Radford 2017); they are also recognized and supervised by the school principal and can, therefore, contribute significantly in conducting effective and stable school management (Paletta & Pisanu 2015). Middle level management figures have the power and the responsibility to change systems and reallocate resources to improve so-called best practices. Relating and collaborating in the pursuit of excellence are the core competencies of the middle manager (Trethowan 1991). According to Mintzberg (2009), it can be said that intermediate-level managers act as a liaison and facilitator for the flow of information downwards, through communication and control, and conversely, transmitting information back to senior leadership regarding activities and results.

It can then be useful to resort to the concept of distributed leadership, which could be articulated both on the subjective level and on the operational level (Paletta & Pisanu 2015). Concerning the subjective dimension, the authors report how distributed leadership must include all those skills that are developed bottom-up, even informally. On the operational level, it is important to make a distinction between two different approaches: ‘progressive delegation’ and ‘widespread influence’. The first implies the use by the school leader of collaborators for the planning and the realization of school improvement; therefore, this approach presupposes the involvement of teachers in the decision-making process to promote changes (Birkinshaw 2013; Hargreaves & Fink 2005) albeit not formally recognised. The second one aims at promoting a collaborative school environment, strongly oriented towards improving teaching and learning, through a culture of mutual support. In this latter framework, the leadership of the school leader is exercised through the promotion of ‘interaction’ (Hallinger & Heck 2010; Harris 2004; Neumerski 2013; Spillane & Diamond 2007).

## **The SENCO as a Middle Manager**

According to Ruding (2000), who stresses the necessary presence of factors pertaining to the area both of leadership and management to perform effective middle management, Rosen-Webb (2011) and Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) report in order to fulfil the role of the SENCO, it is essential to exercise both dimensions. The two dimensions appear to be certainly complementary, but there is general agreement regarding the importance of considering them in a distinct way. According to Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley and Beresford (2000), the leadership dimension essentially points to the process of maintaining a vision within the organization, while the management area regards the actions of coordination and monitoring of organizational activities. Similarly, Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) highlights how leadership is connected to the vision and the mission of an organization, together with the ability to inspire others to work to achieve these goals, while management functions concern the daily practical implementation of these aspects.

An interesting perspective for the development of the role of the SENCOs in the direction of strengthening their middle level leadership functions could be, therefore, working in terms of distributed leadership (MacBeath 2007). This would allow them to focus on dynamic activities aimed at organizations and staff strategic development (Fitzgerald & Radford 2017; Fleming 2014). As Hallet and Hallet (2018) suggest, international literature shows that it is necessary to act both on the professional development level of the teaching staff (Hughes, Chitiyo, Itimu-Phiri & Montgomery 2016), and on the strengthening of a school mandate oriented towards change (Malmqvist 2015) to respond to the needs of students with special education needs through a clearly defined leadership role. Objectives and strategies to be adopted to pursue these needs must be planned adopting an open, not pre-ordered approach (Szwed 2007): the action of the SENCOs may be indeed as effective as they will be able to adopt a reflective posture, both to manage the change in their own role and to establish at the same time an authentic and meaningful dialogue with colleagues and students' parents, to develop those skills and attitudes that make ordinary schools special places for all students (Cowne 2003).

## **Searching for a Third Space to Cope With Educational Fragilities**

The hypothesis formulated by Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) regarding the construction of a third space where to relocate the action of the SENCO can be considered interesting. It is an emerging territory, a starting point, where the SENCOs can not only perform all their functions (Kearns 2005), but also reflect and share their practices, as well as face dilemmas and challenges. A common space characterized by fluidity, flexibility and creativity, in which dynamics can be exploited in a positive way and can help members to build professional profiles and unique and creative solutions (Whitchurch 2008).

This could be the space where SENCOs can work together to support students with educational fragilities. The expression 'educational fragilities' is here adopted to focus

attention to all students whose special education needs cannot be limited to the horizon of physical disabilities and learning difficulties. Their difficulties can be rather traced to non-specific disorders, threshold cognitive functions, economic, socio-affective, linguistic, cultural, and behavior regulation problems. In most cases, there is no clear psychological and/or medical diagnosis, since their dysfunctional elements do not correspond to signs or symptoms attributable to specific diagnostic profiles (Girelli & Bevilacqua 2018). In this regard, it is urgent to highlight how students with educational fragilities are considered a group at risk of educational failure and school dropout (OECD 2013). The international guidelines highlight the need to strengthen inclusive strategies in the educational paths (European Commission 2017). Implementing a 'whole-school approach' (European Commission 2015) is a priority as it includes not only primary, secondary and tertiary prevention measures, but also the creation and the strengthening of educational networks within those contexts where these students daily live.

Several national and international documents attest that the SENCOs to be of central importance in the activation of changes with a view to greater inclusiveness (Abbot 2007; Lindqvist 2013; Perla & Agrati 2018). The complexity of this role, together with the significant administrative burden, often prevents the SENCOs from taking on more strategic and promotional tasks. Their functions, if not well defined, end up being confused in a multiplicity of tasks which are not clearly identified by the SENCO, who ends up dealing with activities 'most often of a strictly operational type, more similar to routine actions, in order to relieve the school leader of the day-to-day management' (Paletta & Pisanu 2015: 169). This role is often perceived as low level and of a purely operational nature (Cole 2005; Szwed 2007), little time is consequently devoted to the exercise of leadership, in the direction of promoting experimentation and change (Hargreaves & Fink 2005) and setting the vision for a special education needs agenda. As Fitzgerald (2017: 464) argues: 'SENCOs had little agency to effect changes to whole-school inclusive practice'.

The positioning of the SENCO is still critical. Researchers still continue to stress the need to formally define this role (Cole 2005; O'Gorman & Drudy 2011; Szwed 2007), and, as evidenced by Fitzgerald and Radford (2017), a significant lack of coherence of the SENCO role appears evident in different contexts and over time (Layton 2005; MacKenzie 2007; Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti 2015; Wedell 2006), indicating therefore how to perform such a role appears to be generally difficult (Cole 2005; O'Gorman & Drudy 2011; Oldham & Radford 2011). Considering the evidences outlined at the theoretical level, the research questions are, therefore, the following: a) What are the actions that identify the functions of the SENCOs concerning students with educational fragilities? b) How do they promote their inclusion within the school? c) What are the elements that favor or hinder their actions? d) What is considered appropriate and useful to best perform this function?

## The Empirical Research

The study presented in this paper stems from a broader research project which adopted a mixed method research design undertaken in 2017 in the province of Trento, Italy. The objective of the research was to formulate an interpretative framework regarding students with educational fragilities in elementary and secondary schools by surveying 92 SENCOs across the province of Trento. The research set out to map how students with educational fragilities are supported in the education system and what structures are in place which advocate or hinder their progress. Results from this large scale project revealed that, at the level of the school system, the SENCO functions as a middle level leader, with a fundamental role in the promotion of a professional culture with respect to inclusion and in the overseeing of operational aspects required for ongoing support for students with educational fragilities (Girelli & Bevilacqua 2018).

Emerging from this large-scale project, a subsequent project was developed which sought to further understand the work of the SENCOs who participated in the initial research project. This paper draws upon the data collected in this subsequent project. The focus questions driving the research are:

1. What actions make up the role of a SENCO?
2. How does the role of the SENCO promote inclusion in this school?
3. What factors support your role?
4. What factors inhibit your role?
5. What would assist you to perform your best in this role?

The sequential qualitative research design (Morse 2010) was conducted in two stages.

Stage 1 consisted of a qualitative survey with open questions distributed to all 92 SENCOs who participated in the initial project. Of the 92 surveys distributed, 45 survey forms were completed by 43 SENCOs which resulted in 49 percent of the population (in two cases the form was filled in by two SENCOs working at the same school or institute).

Stage 2 consisted of focus group interviews. In order to understand and deepen the results emerging from the surveys, the 42 SENCOs who completed the surveys were invited to participate in focus groups. These were carried out in the local communities, where networks of local SENCOs had been created and consolidated over time. All 42 SENCOs participated in four focus group discussions.

The inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs 2008) was carried out on the 45 surveys and on the transcripts of the four focus groups.

## The Results of the Study

### ***Exploring the SENCO's Management Functions***

The management function of the SENCO in educational settings is considered essential in meeting the needs of students with educational fragilities. Exploring the SENCO's perspectives highlights the various ways they negotiate their role, in an alternation between setting the school's strategic direction to support students with various special needs, and performing the day to day work which includes supporting staff and responding to the emergent needs of students:

You are daily very exposed to the emergent needs of students; this in some cases has a seasonality. Stages of the school year are more complex and demanding than others. Dealing with human resources to negotiate the needs and complexity of the role. Then [prior to the start of the new school year] we start with routine meetings with the services, to allocate the human resources on the classes, to think about teams that have to be called immediately because there are urgent situations. In short, [we need two months] to start the support. [...] When you come back after Christmas, it's a crazy race to make documents, and you must have thought about it before. (FG02.02)

In this regard, it is essential on the one hand to set priorities, and on the other to activate strategies in advance to avoid being unprepared for the urgencies that arise:

What do you do as SENCO? What I can, according to what I consider a priority, to what I have contracted with my school leader and to what seems to be the main things. And I close my eyes to everything I see but can't do. (FG01.03)

I have always been advised to make a substitution plan. If a support teacher or educator is missing, I predict that a particular support teacher or another educator can leave his office to cover another explosive situation. (FG02.01)

From the survey forms and the focus groups, it was possible to understand how the SENCOs, who are called to preside over the wide sphere of educational fragilities, not only deal with the management of everyday life and emergent situation arising but also include a complex range of leadership functions. Their duties include specific attention to the creation of a vision and a mission aimed at promoting a culture of inclusion within and outside schools. This includes identifying the needs of the students, creating a strategic action plan and communicating and working with all stakeholders to effect change. In exploring the SENCO's leadership functions, the following areas have been identified.

### ***Collaborating and Participating***

Collaboration was considered to be an important aspect of the SENCO role. This includes working together with teachers and various professionals involved in their educational network on activities focused on the management of specific cases of fragility or general planning. SENCOs identified various activities including:

Taking part in team meetings or class councils for particular situations. (SC25.1.11)

Participation in the weekly class council planning. (SC36.2.23)

Participation in the local SENCOs network. (SC1.1.10)

For effective action, collaboration is essential not only with the teachers but also ‘with the school leader. ... and with the other system figures of the institute’ (SC40.1.08) or with ‘entities such as the Education Department and Culture, as well as Iprase for research and experimentation activities’ (SC3.1.10).

### **Coaching and Supporting**

It is the responsibility of the SENCOs to provide daily support to all the people involved in the educational network: first, the students, to make them feel included in the school environment and planning; to teachers, to promote a culture of inclusion and suggest methods and techniques to address any critical issues; all the professionals involved in the implementation of educational projects. It is furthermore essential to ‘encourage the collaboration of the class to involve the student’ (SC29.4.07), as well as ‘create a climate of trust and collaboration between the several figures – teachers, assistant educators, parents – who revolve around the children’ (SC25.3.25).

### **Documenting**

Among the priorities of the SENCOs, there is the need to ‘keep constantly up-to-date the individual files and the registry of pupils with special education needs’ (SC3.1.05), as well as ‘to collect the requests/needs to be brought to the attention of the school leader, such as individualized transport, reduction of school time, integrated projects, practical laboratories ...’ (SC8.1.02).

To that aim, it is important firstly ‘to work in close contact with the secretariat and the school leader to monitor the documental part, such as personal files, requests for individualized transport, agreements for projects, circulars related to the special education needs area’ (SC8.1.16), secondly ‘to update the PEI, PEP and PDP models based on the reflections made annually, after an evaluation of these tools’ (SC34.1.03), realizing where necessary ‘a review of the procedures and forms to standardize the operating model, linking up with the other professors with instrumental functions’ (SC28.1.08).

Finally, additional tasks often attributed to the SENCOs include ‘completion of various documents, professional assessments and interpretation of statistics’ (SC35.1.05).

### **Monitoring and Evaluating**

Among the priorities of the SENCOs, it is first of all possible to find the need to monitor the situation of individual students, activities aimed at inclusion, as well as the management of the related bureaucratic aspects:

Monitoring and supervision of the situations of individual students and contexts through observation and interviews. (SC19.1.02)

Regularly meeting students to check their 'well-being' within the school environment. (SC32.3.17)

Control of effective compliance with the special education needs legislation and the adoption of the tools and strategies that those student needs. (SC3.1.09)

Supervise the pre-established work phases: who does what, how, and for what. (SC40.4.24)

Dealing with outcome monitoring that sometimes solicits discomfort and avoidance because it can lead to an additional workload among colleagues. (SC40.3.21)

Monitor the routes implemented, make changes and design new ones. (SC14.1.11)

Control of delivery of reports and minutes of meetings. (SC17.1.12)

### ***Managing Training and Information***

If on the one hand it is important to plan and promote training courses concerning educational fragilities and special education, on the other it is a SENCO's task to supervise the transfer of top-down information – from senior leadership to the teaching staff and the educational network – and bottom-up, or from the students and the educational network to the school board:

Collaborate with the school leader for the organization of teacher training on special education needs. (SC3.1.11)

Taking care of the institutional library with specific texts for differentiated teaching. (SC24.1.13)

Promote the use of new technologies and tools to promote learning. (SC14.1.13)

Update the school leader on the needs/strengths of the students and the school-services-family system. (SC34.1.02)

Present the several situations of fragility to the class councils. (SC14.1.05)

Promote the dissemination of national and local legislation on SEN. (SC34.1.06)

### ***Managing Resources***

Among the tasks entrusted to the SENCOs across elementary and secondary schools, it is also possible to include the management of resources, both material and temporal:

Prepare spaces and materials for the SEN students. (SC25.1.05)

Define the number of hours of assistance or support for each SEN student. (SC27.1.08)

Elaborate the schedules in collaboration with the managers of the timetable. (SC31.1.07)

## **Leadership Functions**

From the survey forms and from the focus groups, it was possible to understand how the SENCOs, who are called to preside over the wide sphere of educational fragilities, do not deal only with the management of everyday life and emergent situation arising. Their duties also include specific attention to the spread of a vision and a mission aimed at promoting a culture of inclusion within and outside schools.

### **Listening and Talking**

A common characteristic of all the SENCOs is to assume an open and welcoming posture towards the needs of the other, be they students, parents, teachers, but also all the members of the educational network:

Listen to the needs of every single student, trying to help him/her both from a scholastic, emotional and relational point of view. (SC7.2.07)

Willingness to listen and be able to listen to the requests of families to give them useful indications that vary from situation to situation. (SC17.2.16)

Ability to know how to communicate effectively with teachers. (SC17.2.14)

Bring educators closer and listen to their needs, problems and successes. (SC26.3.05)

It is fundamental to encourage and facilitate mediation, acting as a bridge where there are communicative-relational difficulties:

Researching debate to bring out critical issues and strengths of everyday classroom work. (SC37.2.07)

Discussion with the school leaders and their collaborators for the effective realization of the projects. (SC28.3.14)

Subscribe with the student a 'contract' so that what is decided can be honored by him/her. (SC2.4.27)

Mediate, if necessary, contacts with the families of the special education needs students and the agencies involved in the integration and inclusion project. (SC39.1.03)

Mediate between curricular teachers and support teachers and/or assistant educators, linking the school proposals, the needs of children and their families, and the requests of clinicians and social workers. (SC12.2.15)

This aspect is particularly important because 'facing together the difficult and problematic situations [...] allows to calm the spirits, dampen the tones and make the student feel supported and not alone' (SC32.4.29).

### **Coordinating**

The SENCOs are called to guide the professionals involved in the educational network and in particular the disciplinary departments, the special education needs commission (SC3.1.07), team meetings (SC18.1.04), network meetings (SC22.1.03), and extraordinary class

councils for pupils included in the special education needs area (SC24.1.09). In addition to the meetings, it is sometimes a SENCO's task to coordinate specific work groups ('Preparing reflections and actions in the Support Group and the INAgio – Inclusive Education Group' – SC40.2.12).

It is, as one respondent points out, 'work that starts from thinking about the activities and projects that can help the students, that goes through their organization and continuous monitoring, and that ends with the final evaluation' (SC12.2.13).

### **Promoting Educational Networks**

Working together – with students, with teachers and with all the professionals involved in their care – turns out to be one of the central issues in supporting the project of life of students with educational fragilities:

There is a great harmony with the work of mediation with the parents, who start out frosty, but then they realize that there is someone who is looking after their child. A dynamic alliance with the school can be developed. This is our first goal, the fact that they are on our side. (FG03.07)

It is necessary to be present, to amalgamate the group [of the teachers] ... Coffee at the machine, the planning that has to be done in a reasoned, mediated way, some small conflict management, knowing that all this is aimed at a better inclusion. This creates a team that is able to modulate and manage itself. (FG02.02)

Maintain contact with organizations or professionals outside the school: doctors, psychologists, law enforcement, courts, etc. (SC2.1.07)

### **Planning**

The SENCOs are usually asked to plan and manage educational paths which can involve both student groups, as well as individual students, with educational fragilities:

Detecting students' needs and coordinating educational processes, compulsory education, early school leaving and educational success for pupils with special education needs. (SC28.1.01)

Organization and management of laboratories. (SC32.1.08)

Creating educational paths or strategies to be implemented, in agreement with the teachers, the family and the student himself. (SC2.2.13)

SENCOs are also often required to 'promote activities and experiments' (SC18.2.22) concerning both educational projects and bureaucratic-administrative requirements which need to be followed to meet the needs of these students:

To be able to read new needs and promote new projects. (SC20.1.10)

Create a library room, with furniture for group work, LIM, and trolleys with tablet and notebook, headphones. (SC8.4.32)

Try to find new experiences of school-work alternation with realities in the area, to allow children in difficulty to put themselves to the test. (SC21.4.10)

Make new ideas for alternative paths to traditional teaching. (SC1.2.14)

In this regard, it is interesting for the SENCOs to be able to create new situations, which can also disrupt the daily institutional school structure, but which are highly effective with respect to inclusiveness:

A choice which had been made about 10 years ago is to have, within the special education needs resources, more time for co-teaching which is done by two competent educators to work with the class. This makes you more aware of curricular work and, if you have another colleague in the same discipline in class, I don't know if you can say 'You take these special needs students and go outside'. It is true that with the half class you can work better on inclusion and on everything ... but it is not just a question of numbers. It is just that, if you are there and you are there in two, you have greater flexibility, greater support. In primary, it works more easily; we work in corridors. There they open classes and make groups of level, interest groups ... but you can only do this when the teachers agree with one another. (FG02.02)

### **Raising Awareness**

To create a favorable climate for the inclusion of students with educational fragilities, it is necessary to activate specific communication-relationship strategies so that inclusion can be perceived as a 'felt and pervasive theme, among those priorities within the institute' (SC8.2.26). These actions concern both individual teachers and school bodies:

It is an inner attitude of the teachers that calls into question attention to the human side, managerial skills, creativity and competence concerning special educational needs. (SC23.3.10)

Raising awareness of class councils on the topic of inclusion. (SC6.2.07)

The interest in educational goals and citizenship skills by the Class Councils, as well as the disciplinary ones. (SC31.3.17)

These are often small gestures ('There is always a gap between the class teacher and us, the culture of inclusion is slowly maturing ... but if I bring the specific book with the material for the SEN students, maybe they use it. If we provide things, something moves' – FG04.08), and it is important to seize opportunities even when not expected:

I took advantage of the last teachers' board, the worst moment, but I stole 10 minutes to return the results of the research on the educational fragilities because the colleagues were still irritated by the data collection form, they didn't understand why ... even in terminological terms we could not find an agreement. So it seemed right to me, also with respect to colleagues who struggled to answer the questionnaire. I prepared a power point summarizing the important things and communicated it to

them. I can't know what feedback was given because I had 5 minutes. Instead of saying how many meetings I did, I presented the data. (FG01)

Determinants for this purpose are both to have the support of the school leader, and to adopt a proactive attitude:

A school leader that never lets a proposal fall into the void and even supports them strongly if needed. (SC18.3.27)

Testify your passion to colleagues, how important it is to train, update and practice good practices for inclusion daily in their teaching and educational action. (SC3.2.13)

### **Elements That Favor the SENCOs' Actions**

The actions pertaining to the sphere of leadership functions previously listed could be more effective, according to the SENCOs, if a posture based on availability is adopted ('To be available to teachers for clarifications' – SC3.1.01), care ('Perform with professionalism, care and attention to the tasks' – SC25.2.22) and design flexibility (SC7.3.11). In this regard, an example is particularly significant:

If I have a situation to resolve, I find the solutions, without going outside the law, but assuming responsibility for choices that I may have to negotiate with the labor union or with the class council. [...] In middle school, we tried to reduce the complexity related to a certain number of subjects and materials that the kids have to face. All the teachers recognize that in December there are always kids who haven't yet figured out how to get organized with materials. Can we simplify it? For example, we put languages, art, and technology, one for every single term. This project does not include the third classes, because students are older, and they have built a method in the meantime. In the first term, we plan six hours of German, and in the second one, only English. Also, for teachers who have only two hours per week, it is difficult to get in touch with the students, with this solution everyone can be facilitated ... seeing each other every day and not just two hours, they can enter into a relationship. It works above all with the students with educational fragilities, with whom it is a good chance to work in terms of relationships. So, on the one hand, simplify the management of the materials, on the other hand, support the relationship giving them the necessary time. And also, the results in terms of learning! (FG02.02)

In this sense, passion and energy, 'curiosity and interest in these issues' (SC30.3.10), as well as experience and personal baggage (SC14.3.27) play a key role.

The stability of the SENCO role is also highlighted as essential for effective and continuous action over time:

A strength is that being here for many years, I know the territory better, I know who to address to cope with different situations within the local community. This can also lead to new proposals, new consultancies ... and this has speeded up the process of taking charge problems over the years. (FG03)

If you look at the acknowledgement, you won't do it [the SENCO], but then you do it as well because who can tell these stories to those who come next, in the future? As SENCO, you know the story of the families, of the teachers, of the students and act as a spokesperson in times of darkness when everyone – school leaders, teachers, and secretaries – changes. (FG04)

It is also essential to create a work team to support one another through the various demands of the role:

We need SENCOs across the different schools who can cope with everyday life, deadlines, and to collaborate when dealing with emergencies, because a SENCO who works alone risks losing ... I meet the other SENCOs almost every day for the organizational dimensions of my role and to work together in any emergencies because otherwise you risk losing your mind. (FG02.02)

When I worked in South Tyrol, the coordination work was divided between two or even three people. Because it is usually an assignment that is entrusted to the teacher of literacy or mathematics, but maybe there are also many other teachers who would have resources in terms of relational skills, but they don't feel like leading a class group that they see very few times. (FG02.06)

### ***Elements That Prevent the Effective Action of the SENCOs or That Must Be Further Developed***

An element that is considered indispensable by all respondents to act as effective middle level leaders is the recognition, by all the subjects of the educational network, of the role and function of SENCO. The issue of trust is transversely recognized. On the one hand, the SENCO is a 'point of reference for any explanations or clarifications' (SC15.1.02), on the other, it is necessary 'to have the trust and availability of the colleagues and the school leader' (SC25.3.23) to then be able to implement the strategies and actions that had been proposed. The school leader is 'called to trust his own collaborators and to grant them a certain degree of decision-making and intervention freedom' (SC25.3.24):

If you invest time and resources in figures like ours, I can lighten the workload of the school leader. I can do more because the school leader is burdened. At least 10 leaders of local organizations and services have my private phone, and it is easier and faster for me to manage situations ... It is a direct less formal relationship. Even when we allocate resources, I have the pulse of the situation because I deal daily with this. The school leader has 100 things to manage while I have one. If there is a relationship of trust, I also help him in this because I see the teachers in the field. (FG04)

Concerning this topic, it is important to stress how the delegation process is not formalized:

I am delegated to the simplest situations, in collaboration with the school leader on the more complex ones. (SC8.1.10)

Each SENCO has a different recognition and different functions because it is something that is carved out by a reflection inside one's own institute. (FG01.03)

In general, the SENCOs' request is that of 'a very clear and defined institutional mandate' (SC20.7.21). This recognition should move on multiple levels, for example, in terms of temporal, material, and economic resources:

Having more time is a fundamental step to increase our action in qualitative terms. (SC8.3.29)

I physically need an office with a telephone, computer and continuous access to all data. (SC27.7.27)

An economic recognition would be important to play such an important and delicate role. (SC17.7.32)

Nevertheless, alongside these items, different opinions are beginning to emerge:

We must not always want resources. We need to get involved, we have resources, we need to make the most of them [...] I want to be flexible at school, so I can better build and manage the resources I already have, and I go further in using the resources I have ... building creatively, working on hours, on the activities ... it takes a great responsibility starting from the school leader first of all because they are the ones who have then the responsibility of the resources and of their creative use. (FG02.02)

In any case, I would leave the SENCO with a small part of contact with teaching activities in the presentation of some activities, in the collaboration ... because this is what makes your colleagues feel close to you. Because there's the risk that they see you as a distant, privileged figure. (FG04.09)

Concerning the SENCOs' management functions, results highlight, firstly, a general difficulty in collaborating among teachers of class councils, with support teachers and with the family. Secondly, the great commitment, in terms of time and energy, determined by the 'huge amount of documentation to be managed, organized and organized' (SC27.5.22) and, at the same time, by the perception of the documentation, by teachers, as a mere bureaucratic fulfillment and not as a meaningful action (SC38.5.24). An additional critical element concerning students with educational fragility deals with assessment:

The strong and repeated question is still that of assessment. Because in our classes there is a lot of comparison among students: Why did you get 8 answering three fewer questions and I got 6? Here too, there is a lot of work to do first, but the crux of the matter is the assessment one. (FG04)

Finally, there is a strong need for training on the issue of educational fragility ('Project compulsory training path on SEN for all the class teachers' – SC17.7.26; 'Need of training on Special Educational Needs for Class Councils' – SC31.7.22).

Concerning the SENCOs' leadership functions, widespread criticality is determined by many teachers and families who assume rigid and closed behavior towards the pedagogical-didactic strategies that have been proposed to them:

Little collaboration from a family who feared that, within a specific project, the difficulty of their child was noticed by their mates and referred to the families. (SC5.6.13)

Some teachers demand full assistance of special education needs students, while it would be enough to change their teaching approach to optimize resources. (SC26.6.08)

Partial or passive collaboration of teachers in applying the PEP module. (SC38.6.26)

General difficulties in promoting and managing the educational network determined by different times and languages are also detected:

Different timing of school and health services. (SC40.6.29)

Difficulties in interpreting observations formulated by health specialists may hinder the identification of useful actions. (C28.5.25)

In the special education needs area, I would see a lot of contaminations with other figures, in particular on the word 'project', which may involve not only school figures, but also health, engineers, communication experts, to make people understand how vast the opportunity is to get better. (FG04.06)

In this regard, the creation of a network between SENCOs is a hope widely expressed:

We would like to network with each other, meet to talk about specific things, so we would need a place where we can meet to optimize our work. I think about the fatal fatigue of creating a team and the partial frustration of some meetings that remain formal. Then let's see how to improve them in managing and accompanying them. (FG02.02)

Concerning the figure of the SENCO, the need for more training on the specific role and functions was finally highlighted:

I would consider it appropriate to train the SENCOs, in particular, to increase our personal well-being, to understand who we are and to work better with others. (FG04.01)

Specific training for system figures dealing with SEN. (SC38.7.27)

Specific training concerning the managerial and consulting skills required by this function. (SC34.7.31)

## Conclusion

This research explores the middle management role and leadership functions of SENCOs, who are called upon to set the special needs strategic plans for educational institutions to support and meet the needs of a broad and highly varied range of students with special needs.

Without their role, students with educational fragilities run the risk of educational failure and early school leaving.

The study led researchers to identify the central role of the SENCOs, as ‘figures that act as a frame and as a bridge’ (SC27. 2.14) inside and outside the school in the promotion not only of inclusive actions at school level but to favor the complex project of life for students with educational fragilities. Their action can be placed in what Whitchurch (2008) and Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) define as a ‘third space’, where the SENCOs can implement collaborative practices – exercising functions which include both management and leadership functions – to create a common ground from which they can evolve.

This promoting action, centered on the role and functions of the SENCOs, would be framed within a distributed leadership model in which school leaders act in a progressive delegation (Hargreaves & Fink 2005), trying to involve the teachers with instrumental functions in decision making and planning activities, as well as in the promotion of change. Even if there is a broadening of the sphere of influence on decision-making power within schools, the perspective of progressive delegation mainly includes management and organizational approaches based on hierarchical principles of vertical coordination (Birkinshaw 2013 as cited in Paletta & Pisanu 2015). In the geo-political areas where it was possible to establish and consolidate networks between SENCOs, distributed leadership seems instead to be timidly looming as a widespread influence. In these contexts – which we could presumably lead back to the aforementioned ‘third space’ – the SENCOs, although always requiring the approval of the school leader to implement a specific choice or project, have the possibility of interacting both within and outside school for sharing requests and problems, as well as for formulating proposals and operational solutions.

Now local services have involved us as SENCOs to build the social plan of the local community, which I do not know if it has happened previously [...] We are in the school, but we manage to bring the voice of the school out to know other local referents and therefore over time to work better in the territory. (FG04.03)

The role of the SENCO will only strengthen through progressive delegation through the perspective of widespread leadership (Harris 2004; Hallinger & Heck 2010; Neumerski 2013; Spillane & Diamond 2007). The SENCOs’ primary need is to acquire greater formal recognition and consolidation of their role to design, promote, and realize more efficient and effective opportunities for growth for students, families and communities.

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