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‘It's the best job in the world, but one of the hardest, loneliest, most misunderstood roles in a school’ Understanding the complexity of the SENCO role post SEND reform

Abstract

In schools the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) could be considered a key policy implementer of special educational needs and inclusive policy. Issues related to time, status and the effective facilitation of the SENCO role have been reported on extensively, yet literature has predominantly focused on the role prior to the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms in 2014.

This article reports on research which explored the SENCO role post reform. The research aimed to understand how widely the role varied across differing educational settings and phases, whilst also exploring the breadth and depth of the role, post SEND reform. The research design was mixed methods and had two-phases: online focus groups (n = 15), followed by a national online survey (n = 1903).

The findings suggest that the facilitation of the SENCO role remains problematic post reform. Constraints include the time to undertake responsibilities, the increasing breadth of the role and how the role is understood by others. This combined with increased external bureaucracy, budgetary constraints and a lack of consistency nationally has led to a situation where only approximately one third of SENCOs intend to remain in the role in five years’ time.

Introduction

The role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) holds what may be considered a challenging position within mainstream schools in England. The SENCO is the named person in a school or educational setting, for example a nursery school, who is responsible for the coordination of provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) within their setting (Soan, 2017). The statutory guidance for organisations in England, The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years’ (Department for Education (DfE) and Department of Health (DoH), 2015 hereafter referred to as the 2015 SEND Code), states that all mainstream schools, including free schools and academies, must ‘ensure there is a qualified teacher designated at SENCO for the school (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 108). The guidance further states that this statutory role ‘has day-to-day responsibility for the operation of SEN policy and coordination of specific provision made to support individual pupils with SEN’ whilst also having ‘an important role to play with the head teacher and governing body, in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and provision in the school’ (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 108). This indicates that the SENCO is expected to be a key influence on the implementation of both local and national SEN policy in schools (Curran, 2019); policy which is based upon principles of inclusive education (DfE and DoH, 2015). Yet despite this expectation, there is often conflict with how the role is understood and facilitated in schools, leading to variances in the effective execution of the role (Hallett and Hallett, 2017).

Inclusive education, from a current legislative perspective, means that the majority of children in England with SEN are educated within mainstream schools (DfE, 2020); the exception to this may relate to children who require a needs assessment or are in receipt of an Education, Health and Care

Plan (EHCP) for whom, from a legal perspective, there are options for mainstream, special or alternative provision (Children and Families Act, 2014). Yet the concept of inclusion is greater than the physical space within which the child is educated. Avramidis and Norwich (2016) suggest that inclusion should have an emphasis on belonging, stating that inclusion can be viewed as a social construct which seeks to move away from the notion of educating children with SEN in separate, specialist settings. From a practical perspective, inclusion can be defined as a school making a radical set of changes, through a systematic review, to ensure all children are embraced (Liasidou, 2012: Frederickson and Cline, 2009). The concept of inclusive education, which is 'responsive to diverse needs' (Florian, 2019 p 692), is recognised internationally (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018), yet the implementation of national policy can be considered problematic (Hodkinson, 2020). Despite policy developments in relation to SEN and England's educational systems since the publication of the Warnock report in 1978, Hodkinson (2020) argues that progress in the area of inclusive education is not as advanced as may be reported; a view substantiated by the recent publication of the House of Commons Education Committee Report into Special Educational Needs (2019).

In schools the SENCO is a key policy implementer of SEN and inclusive policy (Curran, 2019); policy which is deemed to be widely interpreted and enacted differently (Glazzard et al., 2015). In addition to this, the contradiction for the SENCO arises because within school structures the SENCO role is typically a solitary role often lacking in time and status (Qureshi, 2014; Smith and Broomhead, 2019), which, it could be argued, may impact on the collective responsibility and implementation of inclusive practice across the school (Burton and Goodman, 2011).

Whilst issues related to time, status and the effective facilitation of the SENCO role have been reported on extensively (Mackenzie, 2007; Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012), literature has tended to focus on the SENCO role prior to the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms in 2014. The reforms were hailed as the most significant in the area of SEN for thirty years (DfE, 2014), which Hellawell describes as having 'the stated intention of ensuring coherent, transparent and uniform provision for some of the most vulnerable in society' (2019 p. 15) adding that concurrently the reforms sought to promise choice through personalisation. Whilst the intentions of the SEND reforms have not been realised (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019) it is also notable that there has been a lack of nationally gathered information pertaining to the effective facilitation of this crucial role during this significant period of policy reform.

In response to the aforementioned issues, the research reported upon in this article sought to explore the current demographic of the SENCO population; specifically, in relation to workload. A key aim for the research was to understand how widely the role varied across differing educational settings and phases, whilst also exploring the breadth and depth of the role, post SEND reform. Through understanding the primary activities SENCOs engaged with, as well as exploring the time allocated to the role within schools, the research sought to understand how SENCOs were currently facilitating the role. A survey was conducted in 2018 received over 1900 responses, from SENCOs across different phases and settings. This article seeks to report the key findings from the research with the primary aim of exploring the current demographic, the time and support available for the role, the key tasks SENCOs are predominantly engaged with, perceived barriers to the role, and the future of the SENCO role.

The findings suggest that the practical facilitation of the SENCO role remains problematic post SEND reform. Constraints relate to the allocation of time to undertake responsibilities and how the wider

school understands the remit of the SENCO. Additionally, the increasing breadth of the role impacts on the ability for the SENCO to effectively fulfil their duties. This combined with increased external bureaucracy, budgetary constraints and a lack of consistency nationally has led to a situation where only approximately one third of SENCOs intend to remain in the role in five years' time, further evidencing the problems of inclusive policy implementation.

The purpose of the SENCO role

The role of the SENCO was first formally introduced in the 'Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs' (DfE, 1994, hereafter referred to as the 1994 Code) following the 1993 Education Act. The SENCO role has remained in existence since this time and was last re-affirmed within the revised statutory SEND guidance to schools, the 2015 SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015).

Mainstream maintained schools and academies must appoint a SENCO (DfE and DoH, 2015). The SENCO must be a qualified teacher, with the expectation that they, working alongside senior leaders, determine the strategic development of provision for children with SEN (DfE and DoH, 2015). The SENCO remains one of two positions that a school must appoint: the other being the head teacher (Dobson, 2019). The 2015 SEND Code is emphatic that children and young people with SEN should have their needs identified early, with access to high quality provision, to enable them to 'achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes, preparing them effectively for adulthood' (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 19). This empathises a central part of the SENCO role in terms of meeting the principles and responsibilities outlined by the 2015 SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015). Additional responsibilities include, amongst others, coordinating provision for children with SEN and advising on the graduated approach, with Griffiths and Dubsky (2012) highlighting the importance of the SENCO in ensuring appropriate support and access to the curriculum for children with SEN.

In addition to ensuring provision, the SENCO has further elements to their role, including one of advocate for children, families and teachers (Curran, 2019) and consultant (Cowne, 2005). Rosen-Webb (2011) describes the SENCO as a practitioner who can balance the day to day demands of the role, whilst strategically planning and concurrently reacting as needs arise. This indicates a balance between operational and strategic roles (Rosen-Webb, 2011) although Griffiths and Dubsky note that SENCOs may not necessarily be involved in the practical implementation of provision. They caution that a narrow focus on operational elements can negatively impact on the furthering of wider school inclusive policy (Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012). It can also be argued that accountability in respect of inclusion, progress and school agendas, such as value for money, has made it imperative for the SENCO to develop the strategic side of their role to ensure that they have influence (Tissot, 2013).

Yet despite the statutory guidance the role, since its inception, has historically been considered to be complex (Cole, 2005; Pearson, 2010; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Robertson, 2012; Tissot, 2013). Whilst the 2015 SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015) states the key responsibilities of the SENCO, it could be argued that a key barrier with role facilitation is the way in which individuals, settings and wider policy have interpreted these responsibilities.

The varied interpretations of the SENCO role

Pearson (2010) suggests that there is a difference between the description of the SENCO role at a national level and school level arrangements, inferring that practice does not reflect policy. Yet compounding this interpretation is the varied settings within which the role is executed. Hallett and

Hallett note that the position is 'as varied as the schools and settings in which the post-holders are employed (2017 p. 1).

Given the breath of role interpretation in terms of responsibilities, setting and time, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is equally disparity regarding the seniority and status of the role within the setting; there have been long held tensions regarding whether the SENCO should be on the senior leadership team (SLT). The purpose of the SENCO role, as stated above, could be considered both operational and strategic in terms of overseeing provision for children with SEN (DfE and DoH, 2015), which suggests that the SENCO role is both a management role, as well as a leadership role (Girelli, Bevilacqua & Acquaro, 2019). The 2015 SEND Code emphasises this point further by stating, 'They [the SENCo] will be most effective in that role if they are part of the school leadership team' (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 108) although does not explicitly state that the SENCO should be part of the SLT.

Yet, a further complexity is that the role has been 'perceived as low status and operational rather than as a senior, strategic management level' (Cole, 2005 cited in Tissot, 2013 p.34). This was reflected in the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report (2006), which acknowledged that the role of the SENCO did not have the status which was required to execute strategic influence. This is echoed by the research undertaken by Pearson (2008) who suggested at the time that fewer than 50% of SENCos were on the leadership team. This remains problematic when consideration is given to the wider intention of the role; to strategically further inclusive policy in schools. Whilst the requirement to be a qualified teacher was significant, it was the introduction of the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NA SENCO), a mandatory postgraduate qualification, through the SENCO regulations (2009) that sought to raise the profile and significance of the role (Rosen-Webb, 2011; Robertson, 2012), and in turn give the SENCO the necessary authority to undertake the role. However conversely undertaking the award itself can present issues as the SENCO becomes a postgraduate student, placing further workload demands on the individual (Brown and Doveston, 2014).

Whilst the 2015 SEND Code (DfE and DoH, 2015) is clear that provision for children with additional needs is a collective responsibility, it has been highlighted that to have a sole person responsible for SEN in a school may be considered non-inclusive (Layton, 2005; Oldham and Radford, 2011) and this may further compound the issue of role disparity and status. Hallett and Hallett suggest that 'it is clear that best practice has the role of the SENCO at the heart of the education processes occurring within a setting' (2017 p. 2), with the SEND Code of Practice clearly stating the responsibility for all children remains with the class teacher. Yet, some view the SENCO as an 'inclusion expert' (Maher, 2016 p. 11). Equally a potential lack of teacher engagement with SEND policy (Ellis and Tod, 2014) and the possible conflicting and uncomfortable emotions teachers may experience regarding the daily practice of inclusion (Norwich, 2008) could present challenges in terms of delivering the principles of the SEND Code of Practice.

As a result, due to the disparate nature of the role (Cole, 2005; Layton, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Pearson, 2010) it could be considered that meeting the responsibilities of the SENCO role, as well as delivering the intended policy outcomes, may be challenging. Despite the role being in existence for over twenty five years, the role remains complex and misunderstood. Therefore, it is feasible to suggest that the long reported challenges associated with the role may be further impacted by the introduction of policy reform.

Research design

The purpose of the research was to explore the nature of the SENCO role, post SEND reform, from the perspective of the SENCO. Specifically, the researched aimed to explore the current SENCO demographic, in terms of other roles held in school, time in role, as well as the breadth and extent of the role. The aim was to look at the varying experiences of SENCOs in terms of workload, and the impact that this may have on the individual as well as their setting.

The research adopted a mixed methods approach, due to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, thus combining the strengths of both data collection methods (Punch and Oancea, 2014). This was particularly relevant for the management of large data sets, whilst 'bringing the strengths of sensitivity to meaning' (Punch and Oancea, 2014 p. 339). The position taken was interpretivist; the research was concerned with how individuals made sense of the world around them (Bryman, 2012; Newby, 2014). This was particularly relevant given the identified disparate nature of the SENCO role, and in particular how each context where the role is enacted is different (Hallett and Hallett, 2017).

A two-phased approach was taken to the research:

- Phase One: Online focus groups
- Phase two: A national online survey

Initial online semi-structured focus groups were undertaken, with fifteen SENCOs from both primary and secondary schools participating. Focus groups explored key issues related to SENCO activities, time to complete the role, enablers and barriers to facilitating the role and seniority. The groups were moderated by the research team (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Data from the focus groups were coded completely and thematically analysed; with this related to previous literature and policy (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Complete coding focuses on identifying all the elements of data that are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). This analysis informed the content of the second phase, the wider online survey, by providing the perspective of current SENCOs in post to enable the shaping of the survey through providing insight into this specific topic (Bryman, 2012).

The survey was piloted twice prior to release to ensure it was suitable for purpose (Bryman, 2012). Initially piloted with twenty-one SENCOs from various educational settings and latterly with a further three educational professionals. The purpose of two pilots was to ensure that content and technical aspects were addressed, and a breadth of opinions were sought, not just those who are in the SENCO role. Feedback from pilot participants predominately related to technical aspects, including layout or clarity of phrasing. However, some additional questions, specifically around leadership, were included as a result of the pilot.

The survey focused on exploring the SENCO demographic, including the collection of data relating to the setting where the SENCO worked (primary, secondary, multi-academy truest etc) and time in role. The survey also explored the nature of the SENCO role, exploring concurrent roles held in school, time attributed to the SENCO role and support available. Finally, the survey sought to explore how the SENCO spent their time, how they felt others understood their role, barriers and enablers to the role and what they considered might be their future as a SENCO.

The survey opened on Monday 17th September 2018 via the an online survey platform and closed on Wednesday 10th October 2018. The survey was distributed through various channels including via

mailing lists of those who had expressed an interest in the research, providers of the NA SENCO, wider SEN related organisations and social media, predominantly twitter and Facebook.

Ethical approval was granted by the author's institution. The research project followed BERA guidelines (2018) as part of the Association's Code of Conduct. Potential participants were signposted to, and had access to, information and consent documents; with a summary provided within the survey. Prior to completing the survey participants were asked to provide their consent for their response data to be used and reported as part of the research project. SENCOs were made aware that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time up until the submitted their responses, without reason. No identifying data was collected, either regarding the individual or their school. All data related to the SENCO role was requested in broad terms, such as broad location, type of school. All responses to the survey have been contributed and reported anonymously

The same approach used for analysing the focus group data, thematic analysis, was also used with the data from the open questions within the survey (Braun and Clarke, 2013), with the benefit that using such an approach helped to explore the occurrence of specific issues across all data sets. Extracts are used illustratively (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Participants

In total, of the 1940 responses received, 1903 SENCOs stated that they were currently practising as a SENCO and consented for their data to be reported as part of the survey. The findings reported are only drawn from data for which consent has been given. In order to capture the breadth and depth of the SENCO role in varying contexts, SENCOs where the role is non-statutory were also asked to contribute. Therefore, SENCOs who work in early years, specialist provision and the independent sector, amongst others, are included within this survey in addition to those who work in settings where the role is mandatory.

The majority of respondents, 91%, worked in mainstream settings, with 3.7% in Early Years settings and 3.9% working in specialist settings (including special schools, alternative provision and pupil referral units). The 2019 SEND statistics reported that there were 20,217 primary and secondary schools in England (DfE, 2019). Therefore, the survey is reporting on just over 8% of all SENCOs nationally. SENCOs who worked in primary settings, including first, infant and junior schools, accounted for the majority of respondents, with 67% stating this was their current context. A quarter of SENCOs (25.5%) stated that they worked in a secondary setting, including middle and upper school contexts.

85% of respondents stated that they work in a state funded, mainstream school in England. Overall, 55% of SENCOs, and 66% of primary SENCOs, reported that they work in a local authority maintained school. The majority of secondary SENCOs, 65%, stated that they work in an academy, either as a stand-alone academy or as part of a Multi Academy Trust. 4.5% of respondents reported that they work in the independent sector.

Respondents were predominantly based in England (98%), with the South East the most represented area (22%). The majority of SENCOs respondents identified as female, 94%, although in secondary schools 12% of SENCOs identified as male.

In terms of time in post, this varied. One-quarter (25%) of SENCOs reported that they have been in post for 8 or more years, with 43% in their first, second or third year. Three-quarters (76%) of

respondents have completed, or were completing, the NA SENCO; the statutory qualification which SENCO are required to successfully complete within three years of taking up their post.

Findings and discussion

The findings discussed in this report are derived from the online survey data. All data from the focus groups and both pilot studies have been discarded. For the purposes of the discussion, data reported reflects the views of all respondents, unless otherwise stated where relevant, for example, primary/ secondary settings. The data collected is predominately quantitative and has been reported as such. Questions which elicited further responses from participants has been thematically analysed and used for illustrative purposes.

The multiple roles of the SENCO

The findings illustrated that, in addition to the SENCO role, over half of all respondents (54%) held teaching responsibilities, agreeing with the work of Rosen-Webb (2011) which suggested that the SENCO role is typically given in addition to other roles, including class or subject teacher, or deputy head teacher. Within this study, representation of SENCOs who are also class teachers is slightly less than as suggested by Dobson's (2019) review of national data sets, where 61.8% of SENCOs identified as a class teacher. There was some variation between phases, with 48% of primary SENCOs reporting as having teaching responsibilities, whilst for secondary SENCOs this increased to 78%. Only 8% of all respondents stated that they had no additional responsibilities other than the SENCO role.

In addition to teaching responsibilities, the survey demonstrated the breadth of the responsibilities held concurrently by participants, in addition to their SENCO role. This included safeguarding lead, designated teacher for looked after children, and English as an additional language lead. This confirms the suggestions of Ekins who identified that for some there had been a move away from the traditional SENCO role, to one of inclusion coordinator where there was a widening of responsibilities for 'vulnerable groups' (2012 p. 59).

In terms of seniority, over 50% of SENCOs reported that they were part of the SLT, specifically due to their SENCO role, confirming the findings of Tissot (2013). Again, in terms of wider data sets, the data analysis undertaken by Dobson suggested that 38.2% of SENCOs identified as being on the leadership scale. This difference could be explained by the disparity with how SENCOs are paid for the leadership aspect of the SENCO role, whether this is via the leadership scale or teaching and learning responsibility payments. It is interesting to note that 36% of SENCOs reported that they did not receive any additional pay for undertaking the SENCO role, further highlighting disparity within the role.

There were some differences between phases, with 62% of primary SENCOs reporting that they were on SLT due to the SENCO role, opposed to 21% of secondary SENCOs. This may reflect differences in school structures, with many secondary schools reportedly having inclusion leads at a senior level or across Multi-Academy Trusts. It could also be argued that the distinction, and interpretation, of the terms *school* leader as opposed to *senior* leader may compound how the role is position within a school leadership structure (DfE and DoH, 2015). Yet, while other school leaders, for example, the governing body and the head teacher, have a central role to play regarding developing inclusive policy in their schools, without an advocate for SEN and inclusive policy from within the school, there is a 'potential loss of a strong voice for inclusive strategic school-wide practice' (Tissot, 2013: 34). Ekins would suggest that the risk of a not being part of SLT is even greater, stating that this could limit 'the SENCOs opportunities to effect real change and development within the school' (2012 p. 66). Given

the difference between primary and secondary colleagues membership, this could suggest that strategic development of SEN policy is specifically problematic in secondary phases.

Whilst Smith and Broomhead (2019) have suggested that there should be locally or nationally agreed policy regarding SLT membership for SENCOs, a pragmatic approach would be to accept that the seniority of the role is mixed and to ensure that both approaches are supported. When the SENCO is not part of SLT, Done, Murphy and Watt (2016) would argue that the SENCO needs to understand the process and landscape of senior management, which further highlights the importance of focusing on leadership within the NA SENCO. Equally attention needs to be given to the way in which the SENCO, and SEN, is understood and integrated within school structures and systems (Ekins, 2012).

Wider understanding of the SENCO role

SENCOs were asked to consider whether they felt their role was understood by colleagues. 53% of primary SENCOs and 46% of secondary SENCOs felt that senior managers understood their role. SENCOs felt that colleagues perhaps did not understand their role as well, with only 19% of secondary SENCOs stating that they felt colleagues understood the SENCO role in schools. This may be linked to the size of the school, and the fact that the secondary SENCO may be dealing with multiple teachers at multiple times. Much of their work may go unnoticed by colleagues. This reflects international policy regarding the SENCO role, nothing that leadership reflects the position of the leader, as well as how that position is perceived by others (Struyve et al., 2018). Certainly, this also indicates a need to investigate the role of the SENCO in secondary settings. A pervading theme from the qualitative response related to the limited understanding of the breadth of the role, against the competing priorities which need to be managed in school.

'My role is understood by the head, but not understood by governors and leaders of the MAT. They want me in class teaching, rather than trying to meet the needs of SEND pupils.'

It is interesting that early years SENCOs felt that their role was more widely understood by colleagues, with 34% responding that they agree or strongly agree that colleagues understand their role. This may reflect the different way of working in the early years. Early years SENCO have reported on the necessity of close communication between all early year's colleagues, particularly in relation to identifying SEN, and therefore this could indicate a potential closer relationship between colleagues (Curran, 2019).

Perception of role, by others, is an important consideration as this leads to differing expectations of the SENCO. For examples, the notion held by colleagues and parents of the SENCO as an expert, may not only contrast with the SENCOs' view of themselves (Smith and Broomhead, 2019), but also may increase workload for the SENCO. In particular parents may seek to directly liaise with the SENCO, rather than the class/ subject teacher, or indeed the teacher may see SEN are the sole remit of the SENCO, thus creating additional workload for an already pressurised role. Yet equally, SENCOs themselves may hold different positions regarding what they perceive to be the overall function of their role.

Current SENCO workload

Given the reported issues with holding concurrent roles, including teaching, the survey sought to understand the current landscape in terms of how the role is facilitated. The SEND Code of Practice states that SENCOs are required to have 'sufficient time' to undertake the role (DfE and DoH, 2015 p.

109). However, participant responses illustrated that time allocated to the role varies significantly. Primary SENCOs cited 0.5 – 1 day per week was the most common amount of allocated time (19%) whilst secondary colleagues stated 3 – 3.5 days per week (18%). Such variance echoes the suggestion of Hallett and Hallett (2017) regarding the disparate enactment of the role. 70% of all SENCOs felt that they do not have enough time to fulfil their role, with nearly three-quarters (74%) stating that they frequently feel frustrated by the lack of time to undertake the role, supporting the findings of Smith and Broomhead (2019) who suggest that the phrase 'sufficient time' within the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 109) needs to be more specific. The recommendation is that there should be locally or nationally agreed time allocations. This is not a new phenomenon. Concerns regarding the allocation of sufficient time to the role was highlighted when the role was first introduced (Garner, 1996). Since then, concerns regarding how SENCOs manage the role have been widely reported (Ekins, 2012; Smith and Broomhead, 2019).

Despite challenges with facilitating the role within the allocation time, support for facilitating the role also varied significantly. 32% of secondary SENCO reported that they had support from an assistant or deputy SENCO, in contrast to 9% of primary SENCOs. Only 15% of SENCOs stated that they had access to regular administrative support, despite this being the most commonly cited time consuming activity in the average week. Only one quarter (26%) felt that the role was manageable for one person. This in part again suggests that the role is greater than one person and should potentially encompass a team. Morewood suggested, prior to the introduction of the SEND reforms (DfE and DoH, 2015) that 'we need to find ways of increasing SENCO capital and support growth; this has to be a collective task' (2012, p. 76). Certainly, the development of a team around the SENCO could help develop such capital but may be problematic if there is a lack of understanding in relation to the role itself.

The majority of SENCOs (71%) reported that administrative tasks, including data analysis, completing referrals and annual paperwork, accounted for the majority of the allocated SENCO time in the average week. Meetings, including holding annual reviews meetings, meeting with external agencies and parents, were cited as the second most time-consuming activity in the average week. Boesley and Crane (2018) argue that, despite the increased focused on joint commissions and joined up services with the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) there is a sense that Educational, Health and Care plans firmly remain the remit of education, and therefore the remit of the SENCO. This combined with a lack of clarity and transparency regarding paperwork requirements (Boesley and Crane, 2018) may contribute to the focus on administrative duties reported within this research. Certainly, the data is consistent with the challenges reported by Boesley and Crane (2018) and it could therefore be considered that the lack of nationally standardised statutory processes and required paperwork may contribute to an increased workload for the SENCO role.

When asked how the SENCO managed their role, given the apparent lack of time and support, SENCOs responded that they were working extra hours in addition to their allocated SENCO time. 50% of all respondents stated that they approximately worked in excess of an additional nine hours per week, on SENCO tasks. When secondary SENCOs were considered this increased to nearly three-quarters (71%) stating that they spent an additional nine hours or more per week on SENCO activities, in addition to the time they had officially allocated to the SENCO role in the week. However, it is important to note the impact on those SENCOs who held part time contracts. Further responses illustrated that such SENCOs were working on their non-workdays to fulfil the role, with one SENCO stating,

'I am meant to be part-time, working three days a week, but I also work on my two days off without any payment.'

It is notable that the SENCOs 'are overwhelming likely to be women, with a large proportion working part-time in this role' (Dobson, 2019 p. 456), indicating that schools will not be able to access a SENCO at some point during the working week. This potentially highlights how the focus of the SENCO role tends to be on the operational aspects, with the SENCO focused on the 'day to day responsibility for the operation of SEN policy and coordination of specific provision made to support individual pupils with SEN' (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 108). Given the above challenges it is a consideration as to how workload impacts on part time SENCOs, but equally the wider, strategic development of inclusive policy in schools.

The impact on children with SEN; the SENCOs' perspective

Whilst it could be argued that a lack of time prevents the SENCO from fulfilling their SENCO duties, it is notable that competing priorities also impacted on the efficacy of the role. SENCOs reported that other activities often pulled them away from their SENCO focused work. 78% of SENCOs stated this is a concern, citing the need to support staff with '*behaviour management*' as well as responsibilities from other roles taking priority thus potentially detracting from strategic time allocated to the role. For example, tasks related to their roles as designated teacher for looked after children or safeguarding lead, with one SENCO stating,

'I rarely get my allocated SENCO time as it gets used covering classes or dealing with behaviour management.'

'Dealing with children with challenging/disruptive behaviour. I get called to help deal with these situations as first response on my SEN days.'

However, in addition to the impact that this has on the SENCO facilitating their role, it does also raise questions regarding the linkage between SEN and behaviour. The data suggested that the SENCO was often called as the first point of contact to support behaviour issues, regardless of whether there were identified underlying SEN. Prior to the SEND reforms, Burton and Goodman (2011) reported that the responsibility for the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties often fell to the SENCO, with the data from this survey suggesting that this situation has not changed post SEND reform. This could relate to how the SENCO role is understood, but equally may highlight issues with how behaviour is understood and supported in schools. Equally this may further exemplify the advocating role the SENCO often plays in supporting children and families, highlighting the communicative skills SENCOs develop in relation to working alongside families (Burton and Goodman, 2011).

In addition, this may go some way to explaining why 74% of SENCOs stated that they do not feel that they have enough time to ensure that pupils identified as requiring SEN support are able to access the provision that they need, with only 14% of all SENCOs, and 9% of secondary SENCOs, stating that they are able to ensure provision at this level in their setting. For children with an EHCP, 59% of all SENCOs stated that they did not feel that they had enough time to ensure the children were able to access the provision their required. This leads to key questions regarding the monitoring and review of provision for children who have a statutory plan. Whilst the class/ subject teacher 'is responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class' (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 99), the 2015 SEND Code states that part of the SENCO's responsibility is coordinating specific provision

for pupils, including those who have an EHCP. The findings from this survey suggest that not enough time, and a focus on administrative activities, is impacting on the capacity for the SENCO to monitor and ensure appropriate day to day provision for those with SEN; something which is fundamental to the role (DfE and DoH, 2015).

The future SENCO role

Despite the discussed challenges with the role, 71% of respondents stated that they enjoyed their role most, or all or, the time. Yet, there were clearly issues which impacted on the SENCO, and as a result the way in which they envision the future of their role. Frustrations with the role were evident, including feelings of isolation and an inability to meet need were paramount.

'Socially, within the workplace, I feel that SENCOs are often isolated from the staff, whether through choice or situation. I feel that since taking on the SENCO role I feel less inclined to attend social gatherings and lunch with other staff members. The quality of life when I am at work is poor compared to other staff. I also feel that I spend a lot of time worrying about tasks I haven't managed to complete.'

As a consequence, only one -third (34%) stated that they intended to be in the role in five years times. Reasons for this were mixed, with nearly half (49%) citing workload as their reason for leaving. Just over one quarter (27%) were looking to move into a different, senior role. This supports the work of Pearson (2008) who suggested that SENCOs may not remain in role due to career progression. This could potentially positively impact on future SENCOs if their senior leaders previously held a SENCO role. It is also noteworthy that according to Dobson (2019) approximately one quarter of the SENCO workforce are currently over 50, and as a consequence may be considering retirement at some point during the next ten years. Nevertheless, this does indicate that there are factors which may be influencing SENCOs to move onto a different role.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The survey suggests that there is potential for change, related to for both policy and practice, to enable the SENCO to effectively facilitate their role:

- SENCOs need time to effectively manage the demands of the role. This needs to be protected time and should be in addition to time allocated to other responsibilities which the SENCO may hold.
- Head teachers need to consider how they can structure and protect the SENCO role to afford the SENCO the necessary status and seniority to influence school policy at strategic level.
- There is scope to explore how schools can work with their SENCO to build capacity, distribute responsibility and enable support. Where funding/ resourcing allows, it is recommended a team is developed around the SENCO, for example through department SEN champions, assistant SENCO support, administrative support and /or wider SEN teams.

Concluding Comments

The survey reported within this article was the first of its kind and scale to be undertaken since the introduction of the SEND reforms; reforms which marked a significant moment for all those concerned with inclusive education. Whilst the impact of such reforms are beginning to be realised (House of Commons, 2019), it is clear that historical challenges with the SENCO role have pervaded

and, from the perspective of the SENCO, this is impacting on their ability to ensure children with SEN are able to access the provision that they require.

Whilst the primary aim of the SENCO is documented in the 2015 Code of Practice (DfE and DOH, 2015), the role remains disparate in practice. There are a number of factors which have impacted on such variance, but most specifically it has been the local interpretation of national guidance (Dobson and Douglas, 2020a) which does not detail how to specifically facilitate the role (DfE and DoH, 2015; Lehane, 2016). Despite these reported challenges, the findings from this survey demonstrate that whilst the SENCO has the potential to be an agent of change and to have a positive impact on developing and furthering inclusive practice in their school settings, crucially this is based not only on the notion of positional leadership, but also ensuring that SENCOs are allocated 'sufficient time' to fully meet the demands of their role (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 109).

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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