'Small successes make it worthwhile': The rewards and challenges of the SENCo role in a primary school in England

Item Type	Article (Version of Record)
UoW Affiliated Authors	Solvason, Carla , Sheehy, Amanda , Osuki, Amaechi
Full Citation	Solvason, Carla , Sheehy, Amanda , Osuki, Amaechi and Winwood, J. (2024) 'Small successes make it worthwhile': The rewards and challenges of the SENCo role in a primary school in England. Support for Learning. pp. 1-12. ISSN 0268-2141 (print); 1467-9604 (web)
DOI/ISBN	https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12473
Journal/Publisher	Support for Learning Wiley-Blackwell on behalf of NASEN
Rights/Publisher Set Statement	© 2024 The Authors. Support for Learning published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of National Association for Special Educational Needs. Open Access Article This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY license, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. You are not required to obtain permission to reuse this article.
Item License	CC BY 4.0
Link to item	https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9604.12473

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

nasen
Helping Everyone Achieve

'Small successes make it worthwhile': The rewards and challenges of the SENCo role in a primary school in England

Carla Solvason[1] | Amanda Sheehy[1] | Amaechi John Osuki[1] | Jo Winwood[2]

[1]Institute of Education, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

[2]SERCO, Hook, UK

Correspondence
Carla Solvason, Department for Children and Families, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK.
Email: c.solvason@worc.ac.uk

Abstract
Previous research by the authors of this piece hinted at the heavy workload of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) within settings in England, and their ever-mounting challenges in the context of reduced local government services and cuts in funding to schools for their children with Special Educational Needs. As a result of these findings, the aim of this research was to focus exclusively on the lived professional experience of the SENCo in primary schools in England. Through anonymous survey, we asked SENCos to share with us their perception of their role and the responsibilities that it included. Although our sample of 20 was relatively small, it provided rich data about the preparedness and the perceived competence and confidence of those in this role. Workload, and the erosion that excessive demands caused to the well-being of SENCos dealing with complex systems, was prominent in the data we collected, in line with most recent investigations of the educationalist's experience in England. However, our data also raised questions about the status, or lack of, of the SENCo in settings, the way in which the nationally recognised qualification associated with the role is delivered and sources of support available to those in the role.

KEYWORDS
confidence, SEN, SENCo, training, well-being

Key Points

- This research explores the experience of professionals in schools in England who hold the role of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) in primary schools (children aged 4–11).
- Previous literature has recognised considerable ambiguity in the status of those holding this role, as well as the mounting challenges of reduced funding and ever-increasing workloads.
- Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through an online survey. Questions were asked about recognition and responsibilities, preparation and support for the role, but we also sought to understand the impacts that the role had upon the SENCOs health and well-being, using validated measures.
- Our data demonstrated considerable variation in the status of this role and the time allocated to complete it, as well as indicating that excessive demands significantly impacted the mental and physical health of SENCOs. Finally, it raised questions about the way that the qualification for this role is delivered and the sources of support available to SENCos.

INTRODUCTION

This research emerges from previous research carried out by the authors which identified issues related to gaining support for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in primary and early years educational settings in England. In our 2020 research (Solvason et al., 2023), maintained nursery school staff explained the many ways that they endeavoured to support the diverse, and in some cases significant, needs of their children whilst government funding was repeatedly cut. Two years later an investigation into the well-being of teaching staff (Solvason et al., 2023) revealed the enormous pressures and challenges that school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) were facing in the denuded education landscape in the UK. This latter research raised serious concerns, as multiple SENCos shared that they felt that they were 'fighting a losing battle' and that their workload was insurmountable. Multiple references were made to a lack of funding and the unreasonable expectations placed upon SENCOs, with one respondent concluding:

> There are not enough hours in the day to do the job expected of you. You are never 'on top' of your work as a teacher and this just seems to spiral as the terms go on. There isn't really a 'work life' balance (it is very difficult to find any kind of balance).

> (Solvason et al., 2023, p. 11)

Several respondents in the 2023 research questioned how much longer they would be able to perform such a demanding role.

The education landscape in England is one where the number of children recognised as having SEN has risen year on year since 2016. This figure comprises children who receive extra, or different help from that provided as part of the school's usual curriculum (Gov.UK, 2023). Over 1.5 million children in England are now considered to have specific learning needs, yet in January 2022 just one-quarter of them were receiving specialist help through individualised education and healthcare plans. With the magnification of needs caused by the pandemic, it would be reasonable to assume that government investment in this area would have been prioritised when 'normal' education resumed, yet our findings last year suggested that this was far from the case, with SENCos struggling to meet children's needs with ever diminishing resources. The inevitable impact upon those in the role was one of reduced morale and a feeling that it was time to leave the profession (Solvason et al., 2023).

Whilst in both of our previous studies the views of SENCos were collated as part of a wider data set which explored the more general experiences of education practitioners, the aim of this research project was to gain a fuller understanding of the lived experience of SENCos in primary schools in England *specifically*. As authors we bring multi-layered perspectives to the research, as schoolteachers, parents of young children in the schools' system and even a SENCo advisory role. And as such we were fully aware of the many pressures upon these professionals, and the limited time available for them to respond to our requests; we are, therefore, extremely grateful to those 20 individuals who took the time to share their thoughts and feelings with us.

The role and responsibilities of the SENCo

Government figures suggest that the number of pupils with SEN in England increased by 87,000 between 2022 and 2023, and that 17.3% of all pupils had educational needs which required additional support (Gov.UK, 2023). The proportion of pupils with what used to be called a statement of SEN, now referred to as an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, was 4.3% of all children in England and 33% of all pupils with SEN in June 2023 (Gov.UK, 2023). Although some schools may need to support the specific learning needs of a very small minority of their pupils, for others, where a significant proportion of children have additional needs, it is core to their functioning.

Expectations for the education of children with SEND altered significantly towards the end of the 20th century, when the Warnock Report (1978) advocated that the needs of some pupils currently taught in special schools would be better met in mainstream schools. The 1981 Education Act legislated these recommendations, and, at this time, head teachers were tasked with ensuring that appropriate provision was put in place with the support of additional school staff. It was another 16 years before the SENCo role was fully established through the 1994 SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 1994). At its origin, the remit of this role was to take responsibility for monitoring the services provided for children with SEN and to support teachers in tailoring adequate provision, yet it was another 14 years before appointing a SENCo became a mandatory obligation for schools in England (DCSF, 2008). Since the inception of the SENCo role, it has developed to become more focused on strategic employment of policy (Curran et al., 2017) and in 2014 the SEN Code of Practice (DoE and DoH, 2015) recommended that SENCos should form part of a school's leadership team.

With each stage of legislative change, the responsibilities of the SENCo role have expanded; however, ambiguity persists in the expectations of the post. In 2005, Kearns suggested that the SENCo role had no firm identity but was

highly reliant on the individual practices and values of the practitioner, a viewpoint supported by subsequent research (Pearson et al., 2015; Pulsford, 2020). It is significant, therefore, that personal experiences often motivate teachers to take on the role (Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Lin et al., 2023), and this subjectivity inevitably influences the form that the role takes. In the wake of the 2014 legislation (DoE and DoH, 2015), rather than further clarifying the role there were even wider discrepancies in the responsibilities that SENCos were given – both in the scope of their activities and in the range of pupils and practitioners they support (Esposito & Carroll, 2019). And more recently, Kay et al. (2022) discussed that although some SENCos continue to take a more traditional, monitoring and supporting role, others have responsibility for a more strategic approach, making up part of the senior management team at the setting. Despite the vast disparities in the implementation of this role, the collaborative nature of the responsibility remains key.

Working with colleagues

If a key aim of the SENCo role involves upskilling teachers to support their pupils with SEND (DoE and DoH, 2015), then effective communication and positive working relationships with colleagues are a vital feature of the role. Yet Qureshi (2014) notes that there is wide diversity in SENCos' perspectives, and their skills in these areas, explaining that the individual SENCOs own professional identity, as well as the nature of their role within the context of their setting, will significantly influence their relationships with colleagues. Despite the legislative changes driving the SENCo role in a more strategic direction, within some settings the role continues to lack status and seniority (Kay et al., 2022).

Hallett (2022) stresses that the role of the SENCo should not be administrative but concerned with leading pedagogical practice, and Qureshi (2014) suggests that the SENCo takes responsibility for developing a school's overall ethos towards inclusion, both significant tasks. Yet Clarke and Done (2021) note that despite this ostensibly overseeing role, with responsibility for advising, and training colleagues, in some settings a reductionist conception of inclusion persists, which in turn diminishes the status of the SENCo role. It is perhaps this which subverts SENCos willingness to recognise themselves as leaders, regardless of their position with a school's structural hierarchy. As Kay et al. (2022) questioned, how can a SENCo be a leader if they do not recognise leadership as an aspect of their own professional identity? Interestingly, Pulsford (2020, p. 831) proposes that some of the dynamics between SENCos and their colleagues may be down to gender, with this position viewed as 'particularly gendered' due to its care and nurture focus, yet this seems somewhat irrelevant within the highly gendered context of primary school teaching. During the school year 2021–2022, just 14% of primary school teachers were male (Gov.UK, 2022).

Beyond immediate colleagues, the SEND Code of Practice 2014 (DoE and DoH, 2015) also recommended that a wider range of professionals, including those based outside of the immediate setting, work with the SENCo to support the needs of children with SEND through effective liaison. Although the premise of this collaborative approach, providing the range of expertise required by the child, is commendable, this suggests a rather idealised view of what is in realit an often-strained situation. Our own research (Solvason & Winwood, 2022, p. 118) found multiple barriers that prevented effective multi-professional working, most of these being the result of differing professional agendas. Respondents mentioned 'Ego, greed, and selfishness' and 'Too many professionals and too many egos and agendas' in their reasons for the failure of collaborative working, yet, to the child and family, the SENCo is often viewed as the individual holding sole responsibility for the quality of provision received (Barnes, 2008).

Ackers (2021) describes the frustration that SENCos can feel at the amount of time consumed by multi-professional meetings and by their lack of efficacy. She uses the term *empty chairs* to symbolise the absence of key workers or lead professionals at such meetings, often resulting in delays to the process of identification and support, or EHCP assessment. Curran (2019, p. 87) notes the varied levels of accountability felt by SENCos in accessing support, reporting that they often felt 'in the middle' when having to convey messages between schools, families and the Local Authority.

Working with families

Government policy (DoE and DoH, 2015) outlines the relationship between professionals and the parents or carers of children with SEND as one of liaison and shared responsibility. When Maher (2016) explored the power (or lack of) held by parents in decisions made about their child, he concluded that consultation with parents was largely held in high regard and not viewed as tokenistic, but that ultimately final decisions were most often made by the SENCo. Truss (2008, p. 366), writing from her own experience as parent of a child with SEN, paints a harsh picture of minimal collaboration and cooperation between professionals and families, resulting in parents feeling a need to 'fight the system rather than engage with it'. Likewise, Barnes' (2008) interviews with parents of children with SEND identified teachers' and SENCos' limited empathy with families' circumstances leading to poor communication and information

sharing. Research by Murray (2019) and Green and Edwards (2021) indicates that families can easily become 'othered' in the process of decision-making about their child's education, leaving them feeling side-lined and powerless.

Thus, the SENCo role can be an emotionally loaded one. Orphan (2004, p. 98), herself a mother of a child with multiple needs, explains how although all parents can experience extreme feelings 'such as uncontrollable rage, sorrow or a deep sense of joy' these can be 'even more intense and … fairly constant' when coping with a child with disabilities. Likewise, Truss (2008, p. 372) explains how battling to gain support for your child's needs can result in exhaustion and fractiousness. The specialist teachers interviewed in Solvason and Proctor (2021) recognised these factors and emphasised the need for kindness when interacting with parents who are coping with the often complex and demanding needs of their child. However, whilst encouraging families to feel that staff in school are 'on their side' in their struggles, SENCos may have to work against school systems. When prioritising the needs of children and families, SENCos are not always willing to make decisions based solely on educational outcomes, which can place them in a difficult position within a results-driven system, and potentially lead to feelings of isolation within the wider school team.

Challenges: Workload, resources and recognition

Robinson and Cottrell (2005), Buckley et al. (2020) and Hellawell (2019) all refer to problems of confidentiality and the practical sharing of information across multi-professional teams. Other researchers, however, identify lack of time, resources and professional hierarchies as the primary challenges of interagency working (Clarke & Done, 2021; Kortleven et al., 2019; Solvason & Winwood, 2022). In Curran's (2019) research, 71% of the SENCos interviewed reported that they spend the majority of their working week completing administrative tasks, leaving little time for the strategic and consulting role advocated by the Code of Practice (DoE and DoH, 2015) and the SENCos in Ackers' (2021) research shared how they found the workload involved in multi-professional meetings unsurmountable. Our most recent research findings (Solvason et al., 2023, p. 11) highlighted the issue of the continued depletion of resources available to the education sector, with an experienced SENCo explaining that 'Schools are being asked to do everything from supporting medical conditions, families, children with significant SEN without the staff, funds or support previously available'.

The positionality of SENCos within professional hierarchies is concerning. Although it is ten years since policy recommended that SENCos be part of the senior leadership team to provide them with the required time and status to fulfil their complex role, Dobson's (2023) recent research found that just 36% of SENCos are 'senior or strategic' leaders within school settings, and that just over 40% of SENCos do not technically have *any* leadership responsibilities. This inevitably places strain on SENCos to combine both their teaching and heavily bureaucratised managerial roles. Subsequently, it comes as no surprise that SENCos generally report a heavy workload, with administrative demands proving burdensome and preventing the effective execution of their role (Kay et al., 2022). Curran and Boddison's (2021) research found that the result of unmanageable workloads was that tasks were often completed beyond SENCos' paid working hours, a situation that is not sustainable.

The inception of the SENCo role was to provide a champion for pupils with SEND; however, if this advocate is working under insurmountable pressure, then both their own, and the well-being of the children in their care are at risk, hence the need for a clearer picture of the experience of a primary school SENCo in England, in order to consider the sustainability of the role and implications for policy.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to bring about 'good' (Bloor, 2010), whether that be through the small-scale catharsis of the individual SENCo sharing their own story, or through our highlighting significant findings to a wider audience. Inevitably 'inquiries are influenced by the inquirer's values' (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 137) and each of the four authors, with their own personal experiences of SEN, as well as long careers in teaching, lecturing, researching and even an advisory role within SEN, brought their own ideas and presumptions to the research. True objectivity is impossible 'for human perception is by nature and definition subjective' (Ely, 1991, p. 122), and it was our existing knowledges that originally prompted the research, and influenced our approaches to the data collected. Therefore, we can only provide the reassurance that, as McGrath and Coles (2013) advise, we approached this research with an 'open' mind as to what we might discover and that we held our existing knowledge 'lightly', open to what the data would tell us, and to the possibility that we may, in fact, be mistaken (McNiff, 2010).

Because of a wish to maximise the reach, and minimise the intrusiveness of our research, we chose an anonymous online survey to collect data. This was sent out as a link via social media and via email through our existing contacts at university and in schools, and gave total autonomy to the respondent to opt in or out. It invited any

primary school teachers in England with SENCo responsibilities to take part, and to pass on to others who may be interested.

The survey was designed with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions for several reasons, the most pragmatic being the type of data that we wished to collect. There were many quantifiable aspects that were of interest to us, such as the age and gender of the respondent, the length of time in role, the amount of time they had to complete their role, the number of children with SEN in their setting and so on. In addition, closed questions were suitable for respondents who might find five minutes to tick some boxes, but not have time to write lengthy answers. However, as researchers who realise the importance of 'why' rather than only focusing upon 'what' we believed it was vital to also include open-ended questions, as 'there are areas of social reality which… statistics cannot measure' (Silverman, 2001, p. 32). We were eager to discover how the respondents viewed their role and their responsibilities, how things looked from their perspective (Crotty, 1998). The open-ended questions often followed on from multiple-choice questions, asking the respondent whether they could explain their selection. So, for example, after asking whether their SENCo role impacted upon their mental health (requiring a yes or no answer), we then asked if they could explain how. Other open-ended questions included SENCos describing the key challenges of their role and the most rewarding aspects of it. The survey was piloted as part of the ethical approval process.

Full institutional ethical approval was obtained before data collection began. When respondents clicked on the link to the survey (through our emails or posts), they were first taken to a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) which set out the ethical parameters of the research, as required by the British Educational Research Association (2018). The PIS included information concerning the anonymity of all responses through the JISC survey system that was used, as well as the confidentiality of all data collected. All anonymised data were stored within secure, password-protected systems accessible only by the research team. Before proceeding with the survey, respondents were requested to indicate that they had read, and were happy with the details laid out in, the information sheet and that they were over 18 years of age. It was made clear that respondents could skip any questions that they were not happy answering.

Response was slow, as we anticipated, and it took several 'reposts' to reach 20 responses. Clearly, the resulting sample is smaller than we had hoped, and although we cannot make any claims to these data representing the wider population, there is also no reason why it might not. A wide variety of experience is represented within the richness of this small sample and valuable insights shared.

Data analysis

As with all interpretive approaches to research, our aim was to understand and analyse the richness of varied experiences that our data offered us (Zahavi & Martiny, 2019). Despite the size of the sample, the variations demonstrated through responses to the quantitative questions proved surprisingly valuable, and headlines from this are used to structure the findings section. The qualitative data were more challenging to analyse and benefitted from the multiple psychoanalytical sensibilities (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008) that the team of four researchers brought to the data. Each took time to read and interpret the text, allowing their individual situated experiences and knowledges to constructively colour their understanding. The team then came together to share the conclusions that they had reached and to further explore, through dialogue, suitable themes for further analysis. Data related to these themes were extracted and triangulated through a data reduction process, with each researcher taking responsibility for a different theme. Although, in line with Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) method (2022), we recognise that the subjectivity of the researcher will inevitably have influenced this process, individual researcher perspectives were tempered by the multiple sensibilities brought to the review stage. All conclusions reached were reviewed by *all* researchers, the multiple lenses of varied age, gender, teaching and parenting experience, and even cultural origins, making the focus sharper.

FINDINGS

What was immediately of note within the data was the vast variation within the SENCo experience, including preparation for the role, time given for it, and how confident those in the role felt. The full range of quantitative data, and an explanation of the codes used below, can be found in Table 1. All respondents were female, and two-thirds of these were in the 40–60 years age bracket. Over half of the respondents had been teaching for 10+ years, suggesting that this role is particularly suited to those with considerable experience. The additional responsibilities of SENCos were diverse, ranging from non-teaching senior managers, to class teachers, to teaching assistants. Reasons for taking on the role varied from personal and professional interest in the area, to a new challenge, to a desire to make a

SOLVASON ET AL.

TABLE 1 Overview of qualitative data.

ID/role	% of time for SENCo role	Number of children with SENDi	Number of children with IEPs in place	% of those with an EHCP in place that need one	What training/ preparation for role	Did they feel prepared for role?	Do they feel confident in the role?	Do they receive support?	Do they have time to complete their role?	Own time spent on role per week (hours evening and weekends)	Impact on mental health: Yes or No	Impact on physical health: Yes or No
330 PT	10%–20%	25%	24%	20%–40%	Q	Partially	Fairly	Some	Sometimes	10–20	N	N
007 FT	Less than 10%	56	24	40%–60%	Q	Not at all	Not Very	Some	Never	10–20	Y	Y
372 FT	10%–20%	25	5	60%–80%	Q	Partially	Not Very	Some	Sometimes	0–5	Y	N
992 SMNT	50%–60%	60	7	40%–60%	N	N/A	Very	Well supported	Most of the time	10–20	Y	Y
027 SMT	40%–50%	42	6	40%–60%	Q	Not at all	Confident	Sufficient	Most of the time	0–5	Y	N
458 NT PT	100%	30	5	40%–60%	N	Adequately	Very Confident	Not Very Well supported	Sometimes	0–5	Y	Y
498 PT	50%–60%	8	1	60%–80%	Q	Partially	Fairly	Sufficient	Rarely	0–5	Y	N
893 FT	10%–20%	5	1	100%	Q	Well	Fairly	Well	Never	20+	Y	Y
648 SMT	10%–20%	18	3	60%–80%	N	N/A	Not Very	Not Very Well supported	Never	20+	Y	Y
176 PT	100%	52	6	80%–100%	N	Partially	Confident	Not Very Well supported	Always	0	Y	N
740 SENCo FT	70%–80%	60	13	60%–80%	Q	Partially	Confident	Well	Sometimes	5–10	Y	Y
848 SMNT	70%–80%	90	52	80%–100%	N	Partially	Confident	Well	Most of the time	5–10	Y	Y
151 SMNT	70%–80%	49	3	40%–60%	Q	Not at all	Fairly	Sufficient	Most of the time	5–10	Y	N
192 SENCo FT	100%	86	14	40%–60%	N	N/A	Fairly	Well	Sometimes	5–10	Y	Y
382 SENCo FT	100%	28	1	Less than 20%	Q	Well	Very	Well	Most of the time	0–5	Y	Y
070 SMT	60%–70%	71	13	80%–100%	Q	Partially	Very	Sufficient	Sometimes	5–10	N	N
266 FT	10%–20%	25	5	60%–80%	N	N/A	Fairly	Sufficient	Rarely	0–5	Y	N
584 PT	60%–70%	40%	8	40%–60%	N	Adequately	Fairly	Not at all	Sometimes	0–5	Y	N
315 SMT	50%–60%	65	13	60%–80%	N	Well	Very	Some	Rarely	10–20	Y	Y
528 HLTA	20%–30%	30	1	Less than 20%	Q	Partially	Not Very	Some	Never	10–20	Y	y

Note: FT full-time teacher and SENCo, PT part-time teacher and SENCo, SENCO only (F and P Time), SMNT senior manager non-teaching, SMT senior manager teaching, HLTA higher-level teaching assistant. What training or qualification for role? Q=qualification, N=none.

difference. One respondent explained 'My daughter has SEND and I am passionate about all children with SEND in mainstream getting the best education possible to meet their needs' (992 SMNT), whilst others candidly shared that it fits with a change in working hours, or even that they were the only one willing to take on the responsibility. Across the responses, the satisfaction found in having a positive impact, and making a difference in the lives of children was mentioned throughout the data.

Whilst one SENCo had less than 10% of their timetable to support 56 children with SEND, another had more time (10%–20%) to support just 5 children and another 100% to support 28 children. All three are full-time

Within different settings there was a wide disparity in the time allocated, and thus, the priority given, to the SENCo role. One senior manager said 'The… role is never ending and there is always something to do. I am lucky that I don't have a class responsibility' (151 SMNT), yet almost half of our respondents indicated that they also taught, some for much of their week. One respondent, who has SENCo responsibility as a fraction (20%–30%) of her higher-level teaching assistant role, was clearly struggling to cope with the demands placed upon her within the limited time that she had, she said:

> There just doesn't seem enough time built into my day to achieve all I need to do. I need to balance planning activities for SEN children, liaising with teachers, contacting the school with transition requirements/arrangements, picking up messages from parents with issues that have happened over the weekend/evenings which may affect the child in school, planning for and updated IEPs in readiness for EHCP meetings, guiding support staff who have not been trained on how behaviour strategies for individual SEND children, liaising with speech & language therapists and occupational health therapists on how to extend their work in the classroom, keeping accurate and up to date records of conversations and achievements for IEP updates and EHCP meetings… the list is endless.
>
> (528 HLTA)

When asked to outline their responsibilities during 'an average week', all respondents sketched a similar picture to the responsibilities outlined above, with one new SENCo sharing her trepidation at the 'enormity of the job' (192 SEN FT). This calls into question the expectation that such demands could be completed in one half day, or even one full day per week (the time indicated by six of our respondents).

Two respondents spent over 20h a week, in their own evenings and weekends on their SENCo responsibilities. Half of the 20 respondents worked an additional 5–20h per week above their paid hours

When asked to share the greatest challenges of the role, a lack of time dominated responses, with eight clearly stating that they did not have time to complete the many demands of the role. Others referred to the excessive workload and the administrative burden that accompanied the position.

Respondents also specified: the limited budget and lack of staff, the lack of support provided by the Local Authority and the long waiting lists for support, the breadth of skills now needed to fulfil the role (as external support services diminish), a lack of support from colleagues and managers, the demands of parents and the lack of responsibility taken by the government as schools pick up societal issues. This respondent summarised her key challenges thus:

> Work load, time to do all of the jobs, lack of support from LA. Services overwhelmed and are therefore asking schools to do more and more, when we lack the time and skills to do this. Lack of money to support children adequately.
>
> (498 PT)

9 of the 20 respondents had received no training for the role, and only 3 had felt well prepared to take it on

Several respondents referred to the inadequacy of the delivery of the formal qualification required for this role, commenting that it did not prepare them for the practicalities involved. This senior manager explained that the SENCo

qualification is interesting research and discussion, but we are not academics, we are working in schools supporting children' (070 SMT). In contrast to this, several respondents commented on how valuable the advice of fellow SENCos was to them when feeling lost in processes. It was apparent that this was not available to all, however, with one SENCo mentioning how helpful it would be to be able to connect 'with other SENCO or SEND professionals [for] knowledge exchange' (528 HLTA). One respondent commented that a training day specifically for those new to the role would really have helped her confidence enormously when embarking on the role (192 SENCo FT).

Only five respondents felt 'very confident' in their role, whilst four said that they were 'confident'. Again, a lack of time was stated as chiefly impacting upon their confidence in being able to fulfil their responsibilities, but other comments referred to complications and inconsistencies in systems (007 FT), changes to processes (027 SMT) and 'Constantly changing needs and resource options' (848 SMNT). One senior manager (315 SMT) said that they were confident that they could get their workload completed, but it took them working many additional hours each week to do so, thus raising the question of sustainability.

Of our 20 participants, seven were part of the Senior Management Team (SMT). Three of these individuals were non-teaching SENCos, while the remaining four also taught. Some of the participants who were not part of the SMT highlighted the importance of the relationship that they had with the leaders, with one stating that 'having a supportive S[M]T has helped hugely' (740 FT). Others resented the constant queries of their SMT, explaining that their job would be far easier if they 'Let me do my job without being questioned and having to justify what I am doing and prove progress all the time' (458 NT PT). One participant mentioned the challenge posed by 'colleagues who do not share the same vision' (893 FT), and another that she did not feel supported 'at all' (584 PT). Likewise, another respondent indicated that 'increased communication with S[M]T' (176 PT) would help them to carry out their role more efficiently. A closer alliance with the SMT might empower SENCos to lead their colleagues more confidently, and address instances such as colleagues 'passing the buck' (584 PT) rather than taking on responsibilities.

18 of the 20 respondents said that the role impacted upon negatively on their mental health and 11 on their physical health

When asked about the impact of the SENCo role upon their health, ten respondents said that the role increased their anxiety and 13 that it raised their stress levels. Eleven respondents stated that the role left them feeling inadequate. One respondent highlighted the particular predicament faced by those in smaller schools, explaining that 'Small schools rely on all staff having many different roles, as well as SENCO I am a full time class teacher, Deputy Head, leader of PE, PSHE, Music, Oracy, Vulnerable groups, Early Reading' (893 FT) indicating that even with fewer students, there was no reprieve as demands significantly widened.

It is important to note that nine respondents shared the satisfaction they felt when they successfully obtained support for children had a positive impact upon their mental health. Respondents valued their role as advocate for the child, using such phrases as 'championing the needs of all learners' (458 PT NT), having 'a positive impact on their lives' (498 PT) and 'being part of a child's journey to success' (893 SMNT) as some of the many benefits experienced in the SENCo role. The data strongly suggested that this was a key reason that staff persisted with what could be such a challenging role. In this respondent's view: 'The rewards are numerous, pupils who start to achieve and attain because of the support you put in. Helping impact on a pupil's self-esteem and confidence. Making a Difference' (992 SMNT).

Of concern was the fact that even those who shared that they 'loved' their job because of the satisfaction they obtained from it, still recognised it impacting negatively upon their health. Respondents described no longer having time to exercise or to prepare healthy meals as the job dominated their lives, even when physically away from the setting. They described struggling with sleep, increasing alcohol intake and a decline in their social lives. One respondent shared how they were in the habit of waking 'at about 2am and go[ing] over all [t]hat I haven't yet done or conversations I need to have with different people' (528 HLTA). Responses relating to the difficulty of the role ranged from 'balancing work and homelife is tricky' (382 SENCo FT) to 'Work life balance is impossible, even though I work part time. I dread Mondays' (458 NT PT). This respondent explained:

> When I feel like the work is mounting up and I can't get on top of it, I become anxious which affects my stress levels. Not being able to complete all that I need to because I am teaching or because I have family responsibilities before and after school means I cannot spend the extra hours, outside of teaching, that I need to, to get all the jobs done. This makes me feel inadequate. The role was busy before, but post covid there have been greater demands on my time as there are higher numbers of children starting school with SEND.
>
> (528 HLTA)

One might assume that the stress outlined by the respondent above was influenced by their status, the result of a teaching assistant being given disproportionate responsibility, but our data suggest that the seniority of role made little difference. These senior managers in the SENCo role with no teaching responsibilities also shared how 'Insufficient funding makes the job role impossible at times and this causes feelings of inadequacy' (151) and how 'I work many additional hours and rarely feel my work is completed to relax' (315).

DISCUSSION

Our findings reinforce the many challenges that SENCos face, but positive aspects of the role are also identified. Although the theme of a personal interest in SEN, as evidenced in the literature (Dobson & Douglas, 2020), was visible in the majority of our response, with SENCos sharing that they had always been interested in SEN and wanted to make 'a difference', for several it simply fitted into reduced working hours, it provided an avenue for professional development or there was no one else to take on the role. Regardless of original intent it was clear that all respondents were invested. Two respondents used the word 'passion' with reference to their role whilst several others spoke of their desire to make a difference for pupils with SEND, and enable them to progress and succeed. These findings reflect the findings of Rix (2021), who demonstrated SENCos commitment to inclusive ideals and their willingness to support staff across the setting to move towards inclusion.

Kay et al. (2022) suggest that SENCos place considerable importance on developing and maintaining relationships with staff in order to ensure pupils do receive the help and support they require, and our data reflect that, whilst also suggesting that this can sometimes be challenging. Although the SEN Code of Practice (2014) states that *all* teachers are teachers of SEN, some staff do not have the depth of understanding needed to feel confident to do this in the classroom. This will inevitably, and understandably, have a negative impact upon their attitude towards inclusion, with SENCos bearing the burden of this. As a result, there was evidence that our respondents frequently struggled with the challenge of balancing the needs of pupils against broader educational demands, as they dealt with reluctance from those colleagues 'who do not share the same vision' (893 FT) of inclusive education. Clarke and Done's (2021) 'reductionist conception of inclusion' was apparent in some of the comments that referred to SENCOs experiencing 'constant questioning' from senior managers about their decisions, and in the comment that it would make a huge difference if they could simply 'teach in the way children need without worrying about SATs' (848 SM NT).

Integral to SENCos' endeavours to support pupils with SEN is the need for them to work effectively with families and other agencies, as well as their colleagues. All respondents reported liaising with parents and external agencies on a weekly basis. Although different professional agendas and egos had emerged as key barriers to collaborative working in our previous research (Solvason & Winwood, 2022), there were very few mentions of inter-professional working in this data set. Two respondents referred generally to a 'lack of support from the Local Authority' and two to waiting for specialist reports and long waiting lists for specialist support. Instead, issues related to working with families and colleagues were mentioned far more frequently. Winwood (2011) explained that SENCos endeavours to proactively engage with families and colleagues to make meaningful changes to the educational and social experiences of pupils with SEN can often involve pushing against the neoliberal measures of accountability placed upon teachers and schools. Likewise, Richards (2022) described how SENCos take a central role in attempting to balance the sometimes conflicting ideals of parental choice and educational outcomes, within a context of reduced funding and increased expectations on schools to meet diverse needs. Within this context, it is no surprise that so many of the SENCos shared feelings of inadequacy with us, and a view that their challenges were insurmountable.

Research (for example, Haglund, 2019) suggests that the 'caring' aspect of the SENCo does not come naturally to all, and for some teachers, dealing with SEN is not what they 'signed up for'. This contrasts starkly with what our respondents reported valuing in their role. Whilst most commented on the stressful nature of the role, they continue to 'love' it. As invested advocates for the children that they supported, they took pleasure in the 'small successes' that they orchestrated that had a significant impact on these pupils (and their families). Although the needs of pupils' post-COVID have meant teachers are increasingly dealing with social and emotional, as well as educational needs, adding to the demands on their roles (Rice O'Toole & Soan, 2022), our data suggest that the exhausting nature of our respondents' role is temporarily eclipsed when they see pupils with SEN 'flourish in all aspects of their lives' (266 FT).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our data highlight the ambiguity that still surrounds this vital, and ever expanding role within schools, and in our concluding thoughts we consider what approaches might be taken to make the SENCo role more manageable. As the range of specific needs, and thus demands upon SENCOs mount, we avoid the most obvious 'solution' of more government

investment in the area, leading to more resources and more available hours, as these changes are not within most head teachers' power to implement. Instead, we consider steps that might reasonably be taken by schools, and SENCo training providers, in the far more likely situation of funding remaining scarce. Below we consider the key issues raised by our data and how might they be made more equitable and more manageable within the current context.

Fairer allocation of time dedicated to the role, based upon the number of pupils with recognised needs

Our data suggest that the current inequality that exists in terms of time allocated to the SENCo role is stark, and needs to be addressed with some urgency. One respondent (648 SMT) made the very practical suggestion of changing any teaching responsibilities of the SENCo to PPA (non-contact time that teachers are given for preparation, planning and administration) cover role. This would enable SENCos to gain wider knowledge of the pupils' needs within the school through working with a range of classes whilst reducing their workload in terms of planning and assessment. All school leaders need to consider the reasonable expectations of the workloads of their SENCos and not allow a school culture to pervade where administrative responsibilities eat into home lives.

More accessible quality support

Several participants shared how they valued the support of communicating with other SENCos through networks – therefore, it is important that senior managers review the availability of this, or similar support, to their own staff. In addition. as one of our respondents noted, it is also vital that the quality of support staff is considered, and acknowledged, as they are often the staff responsible for making a difference to the school experience of our most 'complicated and vulnerable children' (070 SMT).

Improved status

Our data suggest that satisfaction in the SENCo role was enhanced by the support of others and, in particular, through strong relationships with the senior leadership team. As a role with significant, strategic, school-wide responsibility, it is imperative that more schools follow the guidance (that has now been in place ten years) suggesting that SENCos be part of the SMT. The culture of the setting, and the balance between the meeting of individuals needs and the meeting of wider school targets needs to be carefully considered by leadership teams.

Needs assessed training delivery

We had not foreseen that our data would contain criticism of the National Award for SENCo training experience; however, this level seven, mandatory qualification for new SENCos was viewed by some as an academic exercise with little practical use. This needs to be considered carefully by those delivering this award, and ways of making the content of this qualification more accessible to individual professionals. It is also clear that many in the role had not undertaken this (or any) training, a factor that needs more careful monitoring.

Streamlining of processes

As one respondent commented, although the amount of paperwork cannot be lessened, as 'levels of need have risen and the complexity of these needs continues to rise' (740 FT) needless obfuscation and frequent changes in systems and processes can. Whilst SENCos endeavour to tackle many obstacles to obtain a fairer experience for children who struggle, even to the detriment of their own health and well-being, it seems only fair that central and local governments consider what they might do to lessen the load.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, it will be held by the authors. Any enquires about the data can be made to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All research was carried out in strict coherence to the BERA Ethical Guidelines, and all participants were fully informed before opting to participate.

ORCID

Carla Solvason (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3072-0079

REFERENCES

Ackers, H. (2021) Multi-professional meetings; SENCOs' reflections on the empty chairs at the table. In: Beaton, M., Codina, G. & Wharton, J. (Eds.) *Leading on inclusion: the role of the SENCO*. London: Routledge.

Barnes, P. (2008) Multi-agency working: what are the perspectives of SENCos and parents regarding its development and implementation? *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(4), 230–240.

Bloor, M. (2010) The researcher's obligation to bring about good. *Qualitative Social Work: QSW Research and Practice*, 9(1), 17–20.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2022) Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

British Educational Research Association. (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*, 4th edition. https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018

Buckley, L., Martin, S. & Curtin, M. (2020) A multidisciplinary community level approach to improving quality in early years' settings. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 18(4), 433–447.

Clarke, A. & Done, E. (2021) Balancing pressures for SENCos as managers, leaders and advocates in the emerging context of the Covid-19 pandemic. *British Journal of Special Education*, 48(2), 157–174.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2017) *Research methods in education*, 8th edition. London: Taylor and Francis. Available from: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Crotty, M. (1998) *The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: SAGE.

Curran, H. (2019) "The SEND Code of Practice has given me clout": a phenomenological study illustrating how SENCos managed the introduction of the SEND reforms. *British Journal of Special Education*, 46(1), 76–93.

Curran, H. & Boddison, A. (2021) "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. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 21(1), 39–48.

Curran, H., Mortimore, T. & Riddell, R. (2017) Special educational needs and disabilities reforms 2014: SENCos' perspectives of the first six months. *British Journal of Special Education*, 44(1), 46–64.

DCSF. (2008) *The Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations 2008*. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2008/2945/made?view=plain [Accessed 14 October 2023].

DfE. (1994) *The education (special educational needs) code of practice*. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1994/1414/made

Dobson, G. (2023) The 2022 SEND Green Paper and the SENCo: more evidence on demographics, qualifications and leadership status. *British Journal of Special Education*. 2022 SEND Review. 50(2), 219–237. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12454

Dobson, G.J. & Douglas, G. (2020) Who would do that role? Understanding why teachers become SENCos through an ecological systems theory. *Educational Review (Birmingham)*, 72(3), 298–318.

DoE and DoH. (2015) *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dcb85ed915d2ac884d995/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf [Accessed 14 October 2023].

Ely, M. (1991) *Doing qualitative research: circles within circles*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Esposito, R. & Carroll, C. (2019) Special educational needs coordinators' practice in England 40 years on from the Warnock report. *Frontiers in Education*, 4(75), 1–9.

Frosh, S. & Baraitser, L. (2008) Psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 13(4), 346–365.

Gov.UK. (2022) *The school workforce in England*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england/2021

Gov.UK. (2023) *Special educational needs in England*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england

Green, H. & Edwards, B. (2021) Working in partnership with parents. In: Beaton, M., Codina, G. & Wharton, J. (Eds.) *Leading on inclusion: the role of the SENCO*. London: Routledge.

Haglund, L. (2019) The need for care: a study of teachers' conceptions of care and pupils' needs in a Swedish school-age Educare setting. *International Journal for Research on Extended Education*, 7(2), 191–206.

Hallett, F. (2022) Can SENCOs do their job in a bubble? The impact of Covid-19 on the ways in which we conceptualise provision for learners with special educational needs. *Oxford Review of Education*, 48(1), 1–13. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2021.1898357

Hellawell, B. (2019) *Understanding and challenging the SEND code of practice*. London: Sage.

Kay, V., Chrostowska, M., Henshall, A., Mcloughlin, A. & Hallett, H. (2022) Intrinsic and extrinsic tensions in the SENCo role: navigating the maze of 'becoming. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 22(4), 343–351. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12572

Kearns, H. (2005) Exploring the experiential learning of special educational needs coordinators. *Journal of in-Service Education*, 31(1), 131–150.

Kortleven, W., Lala, S. & Lotfi, Y. (2019) Interprofessional teamwork in decentralized child welfare in The Netherlands: a comparison between the cities of Amsterdam and Utrecht. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 33(1), 116–119.

Lin, H., Grudnoff, L. & Hill, M. (2023) Navigating personal and contextual factors of SENCo teacher identity. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(7), 819–833.

Maher, A. (2016) Consultation, negotiation and compromise: the relationship between SENCos, parents and pupils with SEN. *Support for Learning*, 3l(1), 4–12.

McGrath, J. & Coles, A. (2013) *Your education research companion*, 2nd edition. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

McNiff, J. (2010) *Action research for professional development: concise advice for new (and experienced) action researchers*. Poole: September Books.

Murray, J. (2019) Hearing young children's voices. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27(1), 1–5.

Orphan, A. (2004) *Moving on: supporting parents of children with SEN*. London: Fulton.

Pearson, S., Mitchell, R. & Rapti, M. (2015) I will be 'fighting' even more for pupils with SEN' SENCos role predictions in the changing English policy context. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 15(1), 48–56.

Pulsford, M. (2020) 'I could have been the caretaker in a suit': men as primary school SENCos in an era of change. *Education 3-13*, 48(7), 820–832.

Qureshi, S. (2014) Herding cats or getting heard: the SENCo-teacher dynamic and its impact on teachers' classroom practice. *Support for Learning*, 29(3), 217–229.

Rice O'Toole, A. & Soan, S. (2022) Is the employment of pastoral support staff (PSS) working with students with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs changing the role and responsibilities of teachers in London and south East England? *Pastoral Care in Education*, 40(2), 197–216.

Richards, H. (2022) "It was tough making sure it happened": SENCo experience of the reality and risk of education and health care plan implementation. *Educational Review*, 22(1), 1–23.

Rix, J. (2021) Inclusive relationships: creating the space for each other. In: Beaton, M., Codina, G. & Wharton, J. (Eds.) *Leading on inclusion: the role of the SENCO*. London: Routledge.

Robinson, M. & Cottrell, D. (2005) Health professionals in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams: changing professional practice. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 19(6), 547–560.

Silverman, D. (2001) *Doing qualitative research: a practical handbook*. London: Sage Publications.

Solvason, C., Allies, S., Hodgkins, A., Weston, R. & Malomo, M. (2023) 'Occasionally there are moments of light': the challenges of primary school teaching in England, and the factors that motivate teachers to stay in the profession. *Education 3-13*, 1–15. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2023.2287547

Solvason, C. & Proctor, S. (2021) 'You have to find the right words to be honest': nurturing relationships between teachers and parents of children with special educational needs. *Support for Learning*, 36(3), 470–485.

Solvason, C. & Winwood, J. (2022) Exploring drivers and barriers: working in multi-professional teams to support children and families. *School and Community Journal, School Community Journal*, 32(1), 105–126.

Solvason, C. & Winwood, J. (2023) Keeping the child in mind in multi-professional working: valuing the viewpoints of children and their parents. *British Journal of Special Education*, 00, 1–9.

Truss, C. (2008) Peter's story: Reconceptualising the UK SEN system. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(4), 365–377.

Winwood, J. (2011) Feminism, the ethic of care and professional roles within care settings. In: Waller, T., Whitmarsh, J. & Clarke, K. (Eds.) *Making sense of theory and practice in early childhood*. London: McGraw Hill.

Zahavi, D. & Martiny, K. (2019) Phenomenology in nursing studies: new perspectives. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 93, 155–162.