

## INTRODUCTION

This report will follow the development of educational provision for children that have experienced challenges learning alongside same-aged peers in mainstream settings, due to social, emotional, mental, physical or behavioural difficulties. This report will focus not on the specific type of difficulty experienced by the child, but how their educational needs have been provided for.

This report will begin by defining the terms “Special Educational Needs” (SEN) and “Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator” (SENCO) before detailing the role of the SENCO, as it is currently understood and discussing challenges that SENCOs are believed to face in 2017.

Blum (2014, p12) observed a major limitation in writing his own paper to be that “the research that is currently available is invariably carried out from an outsider’s perspective looking in. By that I mean that non-teacher researchers are trying to make sense of the world of the teacher SENco in a school, rather than having the SENco speak with their own voice”. This point should be considered when reflecting on presented views bearing in mind at least four of the referenced sources for this report were authored by persons who were either currently or previously formally undertaking a mainstream school SENCO role at their times of writing.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND CO-ORDINATORS**

This assignment makes reference to populations who have been formally identified as having SEN and to professionals working in the position of SENCO. In the context of this assignment, a child or young person is referred to as a 'learner' and deemed aged between 8 to 16 and attending full-time, educational provision. Direct references to legislation are annotated as [ ].

Within the education sector a range of terminology is assumed as understood amongst professionals. Working within schools and around populations of SEN this is perhaps experienced more, as learners may have complex needs associated with specific terminology and they may receive intervention and support from a range of stakeholders representing various professional fields. In addition, SEN learners are protected and supported by governmental legislation, which require specific definitions to support the mandates being carried out. Chapter 3 of the *Children and Families Act* (2014) provides the legislation for children and young people in England with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the joint Department for Education and Department of Health *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years* (2015), herein referred to as CoP, provides details of legal requirements and statutory guidance, to which all providers to SEN children must adhere to.

Curran (2017, p47) wrote: "The Code states that the SENCo has an 'important role to play' regarding the strategic direction of SEND in schools... the SENCo is typically responsible for the operational management of the SEND policy. Therefore the SENCo may be regarded as a key implementer of the SEND reforms".

**Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

The Children and Families Act 2014 [20] and the CoP [xii, xiv] both define a child having SEN as someone of compulsory school age who has a learning difficulty or disability that requires a special educational provision to be made for them. The learning difficulty or disability may be observed through the child experiencing significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of other same-age children, or, their disability hinders them from making use of the same facilities as their peers. The CoP [xv] states that special educational provision is additional to that which the child's mainstream school provides.

**Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)**

Section 67 of the Children and Families Act 2014 [2] requires the appropriate authority in the mainstream school to “designate a member of staff at the school (to be known as the “SEN co-ordinator”) as having responsibility for co-ordinating the provision for pupils with special educational needs”. The qualifications and the experience of the SENCO are dictated [49] in addition to the provision's functions and duties that relate to the SENCO [50].

Furthermore, the CoP [6.2] mandates that within all mainstream schools, academies that are not special schools, alternative provision academies and pupil referral units (PRUs), a teacher must be designated as “responsible for co-ordinating SEN provision – The SEN co-ordinator or SENCO”. In the summary of definitions (CoP, p285) the SENCO is referenced as a qualified teacher, that in a small school a headteacher or deputy may take on the role, or that a larger school may have a team of SENCOs. The CoP [6.84-6.94] describes the SENCO's role in detail.

## **THE SENCO ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

UNESCO (2008) cited in Tissot (2013, p33) commented on global SEN provision beliefs reporting that “most countries largely agreed that all children should have access to education; children with disabilities are often highlighted as a group overlooked and ‘strongly associated with being out of school’ “ Tissot researched that in the United States of America, SEN assessments and provision are provided through external staff, often at the equivalent of a UK Local Authority (LA) level in contrast to the preferred approach in Hong Kong (similar to the UK), that a skilled teacher oversees all learners with additional needs. The role of the SENCO in the UK has evolved numerous times since it was established in the 1994 SEN Code of Practice published by the Department for Education. Governmental policies in 2001, 2004 and 2015 have continually redefined the position.

With regard to changes in legislation, Ellis et al (2011) cited in Blum (2014, p26) concluded from their research that “there is not the expected timely link between the issuing of government policy and guidance for SEN through to changes in classroom practice in schools. The exception is when the changes are statutory or directly to be inspected by Ofsted”. Ellis et al (2011) were making their comments in direct reference to teachers being more proactive in their work with SEN learners when they were subjected to scrutiny, such as from Ofsted. However, I believe that the comment could also be valid in relation to the method(s) by which new legislation is introduced, how it is presented for interpretation and the timeframe in which it must be implemented.

As a point of interest, Quereshi (2015, p85) captured evidence that pre-1994, “the [SENCO] role was taken on by parent volunteers, and then later transitioned into a more official role, in which a paid member of staff, most usually a Teaching Assistant, executed the SENCO-related responsibilities”.

### Role Descriptor

“The role of the co-ordinator has been described as a teacher, consultant, enabler and manager, and above all an advocate for pupils with special educational needs” Bines (1992) cited in Rosen-Webb (2011, p160). Mackenzie (2007, p215) additionally referenced that “some felt that there was an expectation that behaviour management was also part of the SENCo’s role”. Ellins and Porter (2005, p188) observed a difference in SEN attitudes between school subject departments.

Duncan (2013, p33) suggested a SENCO needed to be a “reflective practitioner with the ability to be self-evaluative”, whilst Quersshi (2015, p.64) published the view that “both SENCOs and teachers must possess the attributes of empathy, working within boundaries and with challenges, maintaining positive relationships and being transparent in communication so as to ensure optimally inclusive settings”.

A practicing SENCO as recorded by Done et al (2016, p18) described:

*My role as SENCo is to ensure that the SEND Code of Practice is implemented across the school. As a teaching SENCo, it is imperative that good practices with regard to supporting SEN-designated pupils can be modelled to staff and evidenced in high-quality provision. This includes removing barriers to learning through: early identification, a range of teaching*

*strategies, high-quality teaching, differentiation for individual pupils and high-quality learning environments which are well resourced.*

The Children and Families Act 2014 [50] and the CoP [6.84-6.94] describe 'appropriate authority functions and duties relating to the SENCO' and the 'role of the SENCO in schools' respectively. Both Cheminais (2015, p29) and Ekins (2015, p58) listed core roles of the SENCO in their 'handbook' publications:

Ensure the Equality Act is met	Cheminais Ekins
Identify SEN learners	Cheminais
Inform Parents/Carers their child has been identified with SEN, liaise with and provide information to them on a regular basis	Cheminais Ekins
Advise on a graduated approach to providing SEN support	Cheminais Ekins
Co-ordinate SEN provision, including those with EHC* plan	Cheminais Ekins
Promote whole school inclusion of SEN learners	
Be aware of provision in the local offer	Cheminais
Liaise with, be a key point of contact and work closely with all stakeholders to secure relevant SEN services	Cheminais Ekins
Ensure SEN records are maintained and current	Cheminais Ekins
Ensure all relevant SEN information is transferred to new settings	Cheminais
Liaise with stakeholders to ensure a planned, smooth progression	Cheminais Ekins
Oversee daily operation of SEN policy	Cheminais Ekins
Prepare and review the SEN policy and SEN provision information	Cheminais
Advise on SEN budget deployment to meet SEN learner needs	Cheminais Ekins
Liaise with relevant designated teacher of LAC** SEN learner	Cheminais Ekins
Select, supervise and train Learning Support Assistants (LSAs)	Cheminais
Provide professional guidance to colleagues	Cheminais
Advise teachers about differentiated SEN appropriate teaching methods	Cheminais
Contribute to in-service training for teachers	Cheminais

\* Education, Health and Care Plan

\*\* Looked After Child

Despite being a legislated role, numerous studies make reference to the SENCO role being 'different' depending on the educational setting. Hallet and Hallet (2010) cited in Curran (2017, p47) noted that the role is "as varied as the schools and settings in which the post-holders are employed and the role is delivered". Quereshi (2015, p52) believed "the degree to which SENCOs scope of action could be clearly defined depends largely on situational factors which were specific to the respective SENCO workplaces". Pearson et al (2015, p50) observed pilot projects to "reflect school-led decisions related to contextual needs". Tissot (2013, p33) argued "despite guidance from the Government there is a high degree of local interpretation at school level. Tissot (2013, p39) further observed that "the position is a legal requirement, but the law does not specify how schools embed this duty into practice" and presented concerns around the variations of role fulfillment.

Pearson (2015, p50) found "the common areas of which SENCOs take sole responsibility are managing and timetabling TAs [Teaching Assistants], managing the allocation of SEN resources, writing and reviewing SEN policy, managing students' transition to specialist provision, and bidding for funds".

### The Hierarchical Role of a SENCO

The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report (2006) cited in Curran (2017, p48) acknowledged that ‘the role of the SENCO did not have the status that was required to have strategic influence’. Cowne et al (2015, p16) observed (as have multiple researchers) that, “despite continuing government recommendation that members of the school’s SLT is advisable for SENCOs, this has not become statutory”. In response, Tissot (2013, p34) was quite direct in her views:

*The failure to make this a requirement leads to deviation in practice and supports a tension between the theoretical agreement that SENCOs are senior leaders and the day-to-day work done when making school-wide decisions on priorities and practice.*

Research completed by Quereshi (2015, p3) indicated that, “SENCOs have a complex role... influenced by whether or not they are members of their School Leadership Teams”. Quereshi’s (2015, p51) personal experience working as a SENCO was that “the SENCO role had been and continued to be more developed and exceedingly recognised as a key part of the senior management team”. Simply holding an ‘SLT title’ however, does not appear to ensure SENCO role success. As a practicing and experienced SENCO, Blum (2014, p11) opted to move out of his SLT where he had been both a deputy and assistant head, to a “cross curricular middle management position” as he felt he would better suited to help teachers develop their SEN teaching skills from this position. In further support, Weddell (2006) cited in Rosen-Webb (2011, p160) observed that SENCOs who were in post did not necessarily believe that it was vital to be a member of the SLT and that “either professional or hierarchical status with appropriate financial reward (but not necessarily both) was appropriate in order for

the SENCO effectively and efficiently to carry out the roles and responsibilities of the position”.

Perhaps even more crucial than being a member of SLT, is working with a headteacher that fully understands and proactively supports implementation of SENCO the roles and responsibilities. Duncan (2013, p54) reviewed research by Belbin (1996:82) that noted “Head teachers of large settings could lead, block or delay change”. Mackenzie (2007, p213) recorded in her research that some respondents felt “headteachers expect them to assume a management role... whilst overlooking the support that SENCOs required if management was to mean involvement in strategic decisions”. Only 9 of 27 SENCO respondents (via questionnaire) regarded their headteacher as a significant source of support.

Layton (2005) cited in Pearson et al (2015, p50) reported approximately 70 SENCOs (48% of the study population) believed ‘head teachers regard SENCOs as primarily concerned with administration and managing TAs’. This could perhaps suggest that there are many headteachers that do not fully understand the complex SENCO remit. One headteacher that did understand the support required was described by Dwyfor and Lee (2001, p266); following their primary school being placed in special measures, the headteacher took on the additional role of SENCO. However this was short-lived, as the “dual demand of roles of headship and SENCO proved almost intolerable”. It is worth noting however, that the CoP (Glossary of Terms, p285) states that, “in a small school, the headteacher or deputy may take on this role”.

Oldham and Radford (2011, p126) believed that literature (for example *The Green Paper* published by the then Department for Education and Employment in 1994) “did not explicitly explore the concept of leadership”.

Pearson et al (2015, p48) developed the SLT/SEN discussion further, by describing three different types of leadership they felt necessary to distinguish between:

- 1) Positional; e.g. a member of the SLT
- 2) Managerial; maintenance of performance in a lower position
- 3) Relational; productive connecting by any member of the community

Kearns (2005, p138) described five ‘priority learning demands’, interpreted as five roles of a SENCO role as “advisor, rescuer, auditor, collaborator and expert”. He argued (2005, p1) that “for too many SENCOs, their experiential learning remains confined within selective school functions, rather than part of a planned exposure to school leadership in all its forms”. It could be argued therefore, that depending on their status and the role that they are performing, a SENCO may not feel as though they have “the formal authority to lead” Pearson et al (2015, p50).

*Although legislation has failed failed to resolve whether or not leadership is relevant to the SENCo role, policy guidance aimed at SENCOs continues to suggest that it is.*

Oldham and Radford (2011, p127)

### The SENCO's Mandated Requirement to be a Qualified Teacher

Perhaps seen as providing more credibility towards the SENCO role in schools, when the CoP was revised in 2015, the SENCO was mandated to be a qualified teacher, in England. At the time of writing, Duncan (2013, p62) confirmed that, “the [revised] Welsh framework allowed for the role of SENCo to be undertaken by a non teaching member of staff, including teaching assistants. It made no statutory requirement for SENCos to be qualified teachers, or to participate in any mandatory training programme”.

Whilst it may be argued that there are benefits to the SENCO role being undertaken by a professional who understands how, and is competent to deliver educational programmes within schools, critics may question whether this requirement guarantees the best qualified, experienced and suitable person has opportunity to perform the role. Hodkinson (2008, p277) made a bold statement that “since the 1970s the training of pre-service teachers with regards to special educational needs has seemingly changed very little”. Hodkinson further described how mandatory teaching standards published in 1998 referenced three requirements related to understanding and working with SEN learners, in order them to formally qualify, updated in 2002 and 2007:

*Q18 – understand how children and young people develop and that the progress and well-being of learners are affected by a range of developmental, social, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic influences*

*Q19 – know how to make effective personalized provision for those they teach including those for whom English is an additional language or who have special educational needs or disabilities, and how to take practical account of diversity and promote equality and inclusion in their teaching*

*Q20 – know and understand the role of colleagues with specific responsibility including those with responsibility for learners with SEN and disabilities and other individual learning needs*

Teacher Development Agency (TDA) (2007)

Hodkinson reviewed that “newly qualified teachers (NQTs) often felt ill-prepared to teach children with SEN and/or disabilities”. Both observations may indicate that whilst holding a formal teaching qualification may suggest that SENCO is suitably qualified and experienced to advocate on behalf of SEN learners, they may in-fact have had very limited training or relevant exposure to support them in carrying out their role. Historically, a ‘non-teacher-qualified’ member of staff that was highly experienced in working with a wide range of SEN learners, associated stakeholders and policies, e.g. a Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) may have undertaken the role to huge effect. There could be a cause for concern that this mandatory qualification requirement may not ensure the best possible co-ordination for all SEN learners. It may also be worthy to note, that the current teaching standards (Department for Education, updated 2013), make only one very specific reference to SEN “have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs...”, however, the standards clearly mandate a theme of providing and differentiating for *all* learners throughout.

Co-ordination/or is perhaps a key part of the SENCO title, as the revised CoP does allude that the SENCO is not necessarily required to be one direct person at school undertaking all duties. The CoP [5.55] describes how “Local authorities often make use of Area SENCOs to provide advice and guidance to early year providers on the development of inclusive early learning environments” and [6.92] states that “it may be appropriate for a small number of primary schools to share a SENCO employed to work

cross the individual schools...". In 2006, The Education and Skills Committee (cited in Mackenzie, 2007) published that "although it would be a "highly exceptional case" where a school appointed a non-qualified teacher to the role of SENCo, it did not rule out the possibility that this could be appropriate in some cases...". It is unclear however, if this view was retained when the revised CoP was published, or, if a school has ever attempted to use this statement to support a SENCO appointment.

A further argument negating the requirement for a SENCO to hold qualified teacher status (QTS) could be that concurrent to when the teaching qualification proviso was made, SENCOs were also mandated to hold "The National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination" (The Children and Families Act 2014 [49, 3]), within three years of being appointed to the role. The *National Award* is clearly prescribed as being a post-graduate qualification that can only be awarded by a recognised body. No studies have been referenced for this assignment that support or condemn either the requirement that a SENCO must hold both post-graduate qualifications, or, that a SENCO should be deemed suitably qualified should they successfully achieve the *National Award* qualification, independent of holding any teaching credentials.

Noted as a concern in the majority of referenced studies, balancing teaching (and potential SLT) commitments with the role are additional factors to consider when considering personnel that may be most effective in the SENCO role. Derrington (1997) cited in Mackenzie (2007, p212) described balances between teaching and performing the SENCO role believing it could be interpreted by one of the following three ways:

- 1) keeping a substantial teaching timetable and completing administrative tasks outside of those hours;

- 2) having a reduced teaching timetable and undertaking full responsibility for implementing the CoP;
- 3) maintaining a substantial teaching timetable but sharing CoP duties with other colleagues.

Blandford and Gibson (2000) cited in Rosen-Webb 2011, p.160) recorded practicing SENCOs to feel “they needed to consider the nature of their teaching responsibilities within the context of their management role”. This could be interpreted that in order to perform their role, a SENCO requires their teaching, management and SENCO time and responsibilities to be very clearly identified within their setting.

### The SENCO Providing Direction for Staff

Pearson et al (2015, p49) stated that “SENCOs are responsible for influencing organisational culture, practice and policies... role of advisor, a specialist who may be called upon to advise more senior colleagues”. Holding mandatory qualified teacher status (QTS) may be seen as advantageous in a SENCO performing these roles and specifically in meeting the criteria outlined in The Children and Families Act 2014 [50]:

*3c – selecting, supervising and training learning support assistants who work with pupils with special educational needs;*

*3d – advising teachers at the school about differentiated teaching methods appropriate for individual pupils with special educational needs;*

*3e – contributing to in-service training for teachers at the school to assist them to carry out the tasks...*

As a practicing SENCO and experienced school professional holding prior roles within the SLT, Blum (2014, p.13) queried “what the real issues around mainstream teachers and differentiation for special needs pupils really are. How far is it possible for every teacher to be a teacher of Special Needs pupils? In what ways can the SENCO support that agenda”? I formed an opinion that Blum was both the most experienced and senior (in hierarchal school position terms) SENCO that had authored studies I read in researching this report. Blum’s concerns and interests lead me to believe that the classroom skills that an experienced teacher holds, can positively contribute advising and training of teachers.

In his paper, Blum (2014, p.38) made reference to a study whereby the teacher was interrupted, numerous times, by pupil comment, which “spoilt lesson flow and led to off task behaviour”. Blum concluded “such disruptions make the teacher tired and less likely to take risks in experimenting with new teaching methods”. I would suggest it was Blum’s personal teaching experiences, which led him to form this conclusion, having similar classroom experiences throughout his own career. Serving teachers may be more open to receiving feedback, support and direction from a colleague who is seen to ‘understand’ and have had similar experiences to them, as opposed to a professional appointed to the role that has not experienced (or is not qualified to) undertake their role. This was further supported by Mackenzie (2007, p.216) “being a qualified teacher was felt to give credibility and authority to the SENCo role, particularly when relating to and working with other teaching staff”. Cole (2005, p.298) quoted one SENCO as her “most difficult challenge is ensuring that the changes are wholly embraced by all class teachers, including the head teacher”.

Done et al (2016 p.23) surveyed one SENCO who identified a personal action point to “visit each classroom for triangulation purposes: to confirm through observation which resources are evident and which need further development”. I would suggest that this SENCO’s teaching status and classroom teaching experience would make them more welcomed into the teaching environments, being seen as a quality support, as opposed to someone ‘completing checks’.

Ellins and Porter (2005, p195) highlighted the importance of supporting and advising throughout the whole school, as they identified staff attitudes and SEN learners’ progression to vary between academic subjects within one school. Participants within

their study suggested that, “more obvious support for special educational needs from senior management would help to raise its profile within the school”.

### Recruiting and Retaining

Pearon (2008, p.96) described a potential ‘*recruitment crisis*’, persons moving away from the teaching profession, as is a global concern. Pearson surmised this “may apply to SENCOs, as they are experienced teachers who are, therefore, nearer to the end of their careers”. Cole (2015, p.107) supported this stating, “there [are] also long serving, highly experienced SENCOs, some with more than 20 years of experience”. Cole further noted that “this survey [again] found that a high proportion of SENCOs plan to leave their current post in the medium term”.

Rosen-Webb (2011, p.165) noted “numerous study participants’ explanations of how they became SENCOs ranged along the ‘accidental to planned’ continuum”. The current requirement for SENCOs to hold both QTS and the *National Award*, alongside potential intentions to leave their post, may require schools to be more proactive in ensuring that suitable staff are developed to effectively undertake the role within their setting.

It is perhaps comforting, to end with a conclusion formed by Cole (2005, p.106):

*Despite the workloads the potential lack of status including appropriate financial reward and the possible professional isolation, there are many individuals who continue to find aspects of this role sufficiently attractive, to wish to continue as SENCOs. They relish the challenge, opportunities and rewards.*

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